

*If you are new to homeschooling, thinking about homeschooling, and especially if you are unhappily homeschooling - read this book. It will save you hours of time, tons of frustration, and a backpack full of money. **Deschooling Gently** is an intelligent, practical, frank, and fearless guide on how to take the "school" out of homeschooling in order to raise children who are happily educated, life-long learners. Tammy Takabashi gently shows you how to redefine curriculum and other schoolish concerns as a set of goals and tools with limitless possibilities that will help your children be the best they can be. Buy several copies and sprinkle them around the house as constant touchstones to maintain balance, flexibility, fun, heart, and meaningful purpose in your family's homeschool life. **Deschooling Gently** is one of the best homeschool books I've read and destined to become a classic for homeschoolers in the 21st century!*

- Diane Flynn Keith

Author of Carschooling, Editor of Homefires.com, Founder of UniversalPreschool.com, and Publisher of ClickSchooling

***Deschooling Gently** highlights all the "biggies" new home educators are concerned with; socialization, curriculum, schedules and records. Tammy has a gentle way of speaking. She is good friend who is familiar with our secret fears. She shows us that all these fears are the "monster under the bed" and keeps us company while we gather the courage to chase them away. **Deschooling Gently** has advice for the newbie and the seasoned home educator. It is a "must" for every home schooling library.*

- Melissa Zawrotny

Over my 30+ years of homeschooling advocacy, I have noticed that the biggest issue faced by parents is the need to deschool themselves – to shed the trappings of school that so often impede learning rather than support it. The idea that children are natural learners who can be trusted to interest themselves in arithmetic, reading, science and history is foreign to those of us who are products of learning institutions. But Tammy Takabashi found her way to that trust and has provided a very useful roadmap for the journey.

- Wendy Priesnitz

Editor of Life Learning Magazine & Author of School Free and Challenging Assumptions in Education

An absolute must read for parents who are just starting homeschooling as well as experienced homeschoolers who feel they are stuck in a hamster wheel. If you are worried about doing everything the 'right' way sit back, relax, and read
Deschooling Gently.

*- Summer Minor
www.MomIsTeaching.com*

Transformational! Tammy Takahashi delivers the goods. She deftly guides her readers from Point A-- unhappy schooling--to Point B--happy and successful homeschooling--by talking them through eleven readily understood and do-able steps. Thinking readers who follow the steps will alter their understanding of homeschooling and true learning forever. Bravo!"

*- Ann Labrson Fisher
Author, *Fundamentals of Homeschooling and
Homeschooling in Oregon**

Deschooling Gently

Deschooling Gently



A Step by Step Guide to Fearless Homeschooling

Tammy Takahashi



**Hunt Press
Los Angeles**

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INTRODUCTION

Discovering Deschooling

I first heard the term “deschooling” five years ago on the Homeschool Association of California (HSC) Yahoo! Group e-list. I was new to homeschooling, and I didn’t think the concept of deschooling really applied to me, since my kids had never been in school. Over time, I found the deschooling discussion to be, in fact, the most valuable of them all.

Whenever someone would voice their concern about “doing things right”, or when their kids were reluctant to study, I would read the discussion with rapt attention. I am a perfectionist, and I wanted to do things right. I wanted to avoid potential homeschooling pitfalls. Repeatedly, the advice these parents received was, “take time to deschool.” I was curious about it. Why did the questions that I felt the most inspired to read always lead to a discussion about deschooling?

Commonly, the suggestion offered was to take one month off for every year the child was in school, and basically do nothing. This time frame was about how long experienced homeschoolers said it took them to find their educational sea-legs, and for their kids to feel good about learning again. It was often referred to as a time to detox from school.

As you might have already experienced, this suggestion wasn’t always met with enthusiasm. Spending a few months letting the kids do “nothing”, sounds great coming from the other side of experience. As a new homeschooler, this sounded to me like educational suicide. I wasn’t alone in my fear, as other new homeschoolers would respond hesitantly to this advice, “Do “nothing” for six months? Sit around and watch TV and hope and pray that my child will spontaneously jump up and ask to do school work? How is that going to help my child to love learning again?”

It was intimidating, yet strangely exhilarating, to imagine educating my children in a way that didn't look like school. Could I do that? Was it possible? What *was* our life going to look like if it didn't reflect my own education? I wasn't confident in the idea of not having my own experience to fall back on. Even though I did want to do something different than school, the opposite extreme of no school at all left me looking at my hands wondering, "Well, if not school, what then?"

I noticed that not everyone had the need to find an alternative to the school-at-home approach. For some families, replicating their own school experience at home was an effective and enjoyable approach. Although that worked for others, my husband and I knew right away that this approach wasn't going to work for us. We decided to homeschool because we wanted freedom and opportunities. Why make the decision to teach our children differently, and then do exactly what they'd be doing in school? I wanted to create a more personalized learning experience for my children.

Yet, since I had never experienced education any other way, I was reluctant to fully embrace a life without it. I was on a journey to find a balanced way to deschool.

As I became an experienced homeschooler myself, I discovered my own answers to the many questions about how to learn as a family. I was then able to respond to new homeschoolers' questions with confidence and empathy—I identified closely with what they were going through. The more experience I had as a homeschooler, the more I would help other new families find their way, primarily by relating my own stories and describing some of the effective tools and approaches that other families used. I found myself in the position of being the one who started responding with, "take time to deschool", because it works.

I have asked myself if there was a way to learn to work together at home without deschooling. I wanted to be sure that I wasn't moving from one "this is how you do it" paradigm to another. I didn't want to follow advice blindly simply because I didn't know what else to do. Time taught me that while deschooling isn't necessary for successful homeschooling, it does come with many benefits. The main benefit of deschooling is that we go through the process of learning how to

educate our children one on one within the context of our family and the world, rather than using strategies best designed for group instruction in a school setting. We learn that whatever teacher role we take on at home has to be different than what teachers at school have to do. There are different variables to consider than what school teachers have to deal with. Teaching at home is like running a small business, not running a large corporation.

I was also concerned because deschooling sometimes seemed like a way to run away from our responsibilities as homeschooling parents. The idea of letting the kids do “nothing” didn’t fit in with my idea of responsible parenting. After time, and careful consideration, I saw that deschooling was in fact the opposite. “Doing nothing” is really another way to say “doing more”.

Deschooling is an exploration into what’s possible. Educating our children without school allows us to see that the world is a limitless expanse of opportunity. But it does take some time and experience to see past the curtains and look outside the classroom. Pattie Donahue-Krueger, in an essay called simply “Deschooling”, describes it as similar to an astronaut re-entering the earth’s atmosphere. It might be a bit uncomfortable, but it’s worth it.

The Good School Kid

I have a Bachelor of Arts in French and one in Psychology, as well as a Master’s Degree in French.

I’m not telling you this to impress you. I’m telling you this to show how thoroughly entrenched I was in the system. My kids never went to school, so they didn’t have to make the adjustment to learning without walls. I’m the one who needed to deschool.

I didn’t plan to be an educational rebel, let alone a deschooling advocate. I grew up a poster child for the success of the American public school system. I was the teacher’s pet, earned good grades and stayed on the honor roll for most of my high school and college career. I was on the fast track to Ph.D. acquisition. I wanted to be a professor.

Then, a few weeks after obtaining my M.A. from the University of Wisconsin, Madison, a set of fortuitous circumstances forced me to make a hard choice between my family and my schooling. Although I wished at the time that I could have done both, life pulled me away from school and into motherhood. If my husband and my children hadn't pushed me to make a choice, I would probably have my Ph.D. today. Maybe I'd have two. Maybe I'd still be there. I am forever grateful for my husband's insistence that he have a satisfying job, and my children's insistence that they be born before I was done with my Ph.D.

When I was in school, I had no idea how trapped I was in someone else's idea of success and happiness. My whole value system was based on whether my professors approved of me. My grades defined how good my life was. And even as I questioned the validity of the teaching methods I was asked to perform, and I struggled against the status quo, I never once thought of breaking out and finding my true self outside of school. I was eternally happy being miserable: all-nighters studying for exams, piles and piles of reading material that I was always behind on, facts and figures I impressed professors with but which never had time to sink in because I was on my way to something else—all these things made me “happy.”

I was convinced that in order to be happy, I had to be “busy” and “challenged.” I was convinced of this because I never knew anything else in my life.

Not until I was a mom did I figure out what I had been missing.

I had been missing me.

Deschooling Mom

I was enthusiastic about being a stay-at-home mom with my first child. I knew it was the right choice for us. But it was a choice that came with consequences. I was home alone, left on my own to figure out how to fill my completely empty schedule. I spent hours in chat rooms. I walked around Berkeley and San Francisco with my son in

the Bjorn. I would go to the classes at Gymboree everyday just to have something to do. I played hours and hours of video games. I watched Oprah. I read sci-fi novels. I did “nothing”.

When my son didn't do what he was supposed to (like sleep), I found comfort with being obsessed with his schedule. I scheduled meals, my son's naps, when he nursed, when we played, when we'd go for a walk. Planning his day made it feel like it when things seemed to be spiraling out of control, it would all be OK.

But my son didn't like it. Although he was only a baby, we “fought” about what the schedule should be. He was trying to teach me how to live and let go so he could grow.

As he got older, and I had another baby, and then another, I would come to learn more and more from my kids. They didn't know the latest trends in teaching kids how to sleep, eat, read, talk, walk, or recognize colors, yet they managed to do all these things. I was looking everywhere for answers when the answers were right in front of me.

It was a time of soul searching, experimenting, laughing, crying, exploring, questioning, trusting, worrying, discovering, embracing, playing and learning to let go. I re-evaluated my point of view on education and learning over a dozen times. I swung back and forth between a strict schedule as the solution to my struggles, and a *laissez-faire* “who cares?” attitude.

When we decided we were going to homeschool, I read many books. I devoured them. I wanted to be the perfect homeschooling mom. I found new and improved answers in each one, with even better ideas on how to educate kids than any book I'd read before. So many great ideas, I couldn't wait to try them all. My worries would be gone, because we'd finally found the right educational approach.

And while I was going through all of this, my kids went along learning in their own way. Whatever new program I found or new perspective I had, my kids just kept on being who they were, going around me (or trying to) whenever I got in their way.

I had to go through this process of exploration to learn to trust that learning can happen without school. Because I went through my own deschooling process, with the help of my children, I discovered first-hand that people are born to learn. My children have done nothing but prove this to be true. Grades, teacher assessments, or homework – none of that tells me who my kids are, even if they were in school. I know that their truth is already in them, not hiding in school lessons somewhere.

Whether my kids are in school or not, I'm a deschooled mom. My kids deschooled me. In many ways, they continue to do so. I will always be grateful to them for that.

Deschooling, and Loving School

Even as I sing the praises of freedom from school, I'm convinced that deschooling doesn't have to mean saying "goodbye" to all that is school. Even now, there are many things I still love about school; workbooks, checklists, taking tests, being with other people who are learning things, talking with teachers and professors who are enthusiastic about their subject, trivia, writing essays, and so much more.

I use these tools differently now because I no longer feel obligated to them. I enjoy using them without being attached to them.

When I was in school, and immediately after I left, I didn't see right away the co-dependant relationship I had with scholastic tools. I was obsessed with "how I was doing". My self-worth was based heavily on my outward successes. I did many meaningless tasks simply to win approval, only to move on to more meaningless tasks in order to get that approval again.

I was reluctant to let them go and see other options as "real learning". My strict idea of what it meant to be educated diminished the value I saw in other kinds of learning. I wanted to see, and I wanted to do more. But I was afraid of letting go of the old ideas of education, and embrace something that I had never tried before.

This is a common “new homeschooler” undertone in our support groups and e-lists. The questions that come up are often related to getting children to do school work or wanting to know what out-of-the box ideas we can come up with to basically trick kids into learning what they would normally learn in a textbook. That was my perspective too, until, over time, it became increasingly obvious that education is a fluid idea, defined by our own expectations. If we change our expectations and desires, the entire meaning of education changes. What a powerful way to embrace learning at home!

Getting away from “school” doesn’t mean that we have to give up the educational tools that we are familiar with. In fact, learning to educate at home isn’t about the tools at all. Opening ourselves up to the possibilities of how we can fulfill a child’s educational needs shows us that the underlying reasons we educate, and our larger perceptions of what education is for, will have a much larger impact on our homeschooling success than whether or not we use the right tools.

Deschooling Through Wine Country

About a year ago, my husband and I went to Sonoma to take a vacation without the children. We drove up the California coast to spend a week tasting wine. We had a guidebook, which clearly spelled out how to organize a week-long vacation. All the places in the book sounded fabulous. Since there were so many wineries to choose from, we decided to follow the book’s plan.

When we arrived at the La Rose hotel in Santa Rosa, we reviewed our guidebook carefully. I wanted to make sure we didn’t have any holes in our wine-tasting learning. (Even after deschooling, I still found myself going back to my old habitual thinking.)

The information was overwhelming. In order to cover all the bases, we were going to have to get up at the crack of dawn, drive all day to six or seven wineries, and come home late. To get it all done, we would have to do this, not for one day, but for five.

As I looked at my itinerary, I started to become less interested in wine tasting. It just didn't seem fun anymore. All the hard work was going to quickly become tedium.

Before my husband had a chance to protest, I asked the woman at the hotel front desk where she thought we should go. She said, "The book is for tourists. Don't use that. You're going to do this right!"

I was thrilled that an "expert" was going to help us! She asked us what kind of wine we liked, and what kind of experience we were looking for—small and cozy or lots of merchandise to choose from; planned tours or free meandering. We told her our preferences, and she marked about a dozen places on the map.

The next day, map in hand, we headed out to the first winery, ready to go do this "right". When we arrived at the first winery, we started talking to the server, and she told us "Ah, those wineries you have on your map are good, but *these* are the ones you should go to." Then she circled some more wineries.

This scenario repeated itself at every winery we went to.

At first, we wanted to take everyone's advice. We were going to do this "right"! We were also very enthusiastic about how much there was available to do. After the first day, however, it was clear we couldn't take everyone's advice. And since everyone's advice was different, how could we determine the most important places to go?

The truth is, there was no best way. And there was no way we could cover everything and still enjoy the journey. When we realized this, we started listening to advice in a different way. We listened to what people told us, then we made our own decisions. After a bit of time and experience making some mistakes, we were confident that we would find our own "right" way.

On the third day, we took our time and visited only a few wineries. We didn't get to see everything. Instead, we got to know more about wine and the people behind the wine than if we had we tried to do things according to the book. There was no pressure to get it all done. We could stay and chat with the sommeliers as long as we liked. We could

savor a series of Syrah and not worry about missing out on the Cabernet.

When we looked at the tour book after our trip, we saw that we had skipped most of the suggested destinations. But to be honest, it didn't feel like we missed anything at all.

Deschooling is seeing the "official" school guidebook as supplementary material, so we can circle our own destinations. A guidebook, or a curriculum, only touches the surface of the infinite possibilities. Deschooling moves us away from being married to the standard way of doing things, choosing when and how we join the crowd, and exploring the world in a different way. That doesn't necessarily mean we have to throw away the guidebook (although we can if we want to, and still be successful.) But after deschooling, when we pick up that guide book, it is easier to know which parts will be useful.

Deschooling Is the First Step Towards Success

Disengaging ourselves from school takes time. And, if there are serious family issues or we no longer have a positive relationship with learning, it will take even more time to sort out our baggage. When we move to a new country, or change jobs, it takes a while to acclimate. Deschooling is an opportunity to move toward success, one step at a time.

You might find that this process will challenge your expectations in ways you may not have experienced before. Deschooling gives you permission to release yourself from the binds of wanting learning to look a certain way. By the end of this process of exploration, I am predicting that problems and roadblocks won't be as scary. After deschooling, you'll be stronger because you will have a new way to find options for effective problem solving.

The suggestions and questions offered in the 10 steps of *Deschooling Gently* are designed to create direction during a time that might otherwise seem aimless. And although I think being aimless is a fine way to deschool, and can be an effective path for creating an

educational foundation, we don't have to choose aimlessness during deschooling if we don't want to. Let's redefine "doing nothing" during deschooling to "doing nothing that hurts our relationships with each other, or our children's relationships with learning."

I hope to give you a lot to think about, and to help you come to your own conclusions on what's important for learning. In the end, you are the parent, and you have the American right to educate your children the way you prefer. I also hope that you will consider alternative viewpoints as well, particularly those that come from your children. Children don't generally have a lot of control in their lives in our society. Perhaps you can join me in changing that reality one child at a time.

A Note about Unschooling

I've been asked if I'm an unschooler, and if this book is about unschooling. My answer is "yes" and "no".

Unschooling is a movement that is often misunderstood. I grapple myself with the implications of what it means to have that label. There are many aspects to the unschooling philosophy that make sense to me, and there are others that don't. I don't like to limit myself to one school of thought on education, and I see value in many viewpoints. In this book, I tried to look at the bigger picture. While many of my observations might parallel the unschooling philosophy, it is important to me to give you as much space as possible to decide what's best for your family.

Deschooling has led many families to embrace unschooling, since the approaches can be so similar. But in the end, deschooling is what you make of it. I don't feel it's my place or my job to tell you what to think about education. Instead, it's my hope that some of the observations and suggestions in this book will give you a chance to reevaluate the meaning of learning at home, so that you may come to an independent conclusion of what works for your family. I've pulled from many different ideas of how to teach and how to learn to help you come up with a flexible process for finding your own educational philosophy.

All the methods and approaches out there can be confusing to sort through: unschooling, deschooling, classical, Waldorf, Montessori, eclectic, school-at-homers...they are endless. The beauty is that none of them are inherently better than the other. They are all wildly successful in their own right. Just ask the families who choose these paths. They will all tell you how great it works for them. Take this as a sign that each one has its merits. There is no requirement that you choose any particular method over the other, or that you choose one at all.

Where you end up is your choice. You may find that after doing research and experiencing life without school for a while, the freedom and flexibility that unschooling offers is attractive. Or, you may find it unsettling. Or maybe you will find yourself in a category that nobody's created yet, and you don't know if you're an unschooler or not. It doesn't matter so much whether you land in a style that has a label. It just matters that you are happy and satisfied when you get there.

So Where Do We Go From Here?

As you read this book, I encourage you to challenge my ideas, do outside research, and talk about the issues. It makes me happy to think that you'll disagree with me on some things, and agree with me on others.

There is one thing I hope you'll agree with me on by the end: Homeschooling is what you make it, not what someone else makes it. The ideas in this book, and any other information that you obtain during your family's educational process, is just part of the larger equation of what goes into how you find success. None of the authors or educators knows you, or has any direct vested interest in your family. Only you have that.

Use what works, and leave the rest. Find the part of yourself that might be afraid, but moves forward anyway. Everything you need to make homeschooling work is already inside you. It's my hope, that this book will help you find the fearless homeschooler that you have in you, and let it shine through.

Step 0: Create a Foundation before Deschooling

“My philosophy is that not only are you responsible for your life, but doing the best at this moment puts you in the best place for the next moment.”

- Oprah Winfrey

That First Tentative Step

The first few months without the established structure for school can be intimidating. I remember when I was considering homeschooling my children -- oh, how I wanted someone to hand me a to-do list to help me on my way. Even if the instructions were not perfect, they would be at least somewhere to start. I read book after book, and talked to local homeschoolers, but none of the information I found gave me exactly what I needed.

Perhaps that was a good thing, because it forced me to become self-sufficient. Since there were no magic formulas, it was up to me, and the rest of the family, to figure out what our steps would be. The transition was life changing, and empowering.

It took us a long time to come to our homeschooling decision. Not everyone has the luxury of time like we did. Many families leave the schools rather quickly, and are thrust into homeschooling due to circumstance or an extremely negative school experience. Either way, making the decision, and then acting on it, can often be an emotional experience.

To make the transition easier, there are some practical steps that can provide a solid foundation for the process of deschooling.

- Find out the state (or country's) laws and requirements of homeschoolers
- Legally withdraw the child from the school he is currently attending (if any)
- Find at least one supportive person
- Gather a notebook, statistics, and articles

You might find there are other steps you'd like to take, such as contacting local homeschooling groups, or joining online e-lists, or even setting up a room for all of your "educational" supplies. Just don't let yourself think that you can't start homeschooling because you haven't done something. The only thing you absolutely have to do before you start is to make sure that you are homeschooling legally. Everything else can be settled later if you need to.

Understanding Local Homeschooling Laws

It is critical to understand the laws governing homeschooling where you live. In the United States, educational laws dealing with home education are defined at the state level.

In California, for example, there are no homeschooling-specific laws. Instead, we have educational laws and codes that homeschoolers use. This means that officially, there are no homeschoolers in our state. To be in compliance with truancy laws, children must either be enrolled in public school, enrolled in private school, or be tutored by a certified teacher.

Some states, such as New York and Illinois, have specific regulations for homeschoolers. Other states either have no expectations of homeschoolers whatsoever, such as Texas and Alaska, or only require that they meet the same requirements as children enrolled in private schools, such as California. Alabama doesn't have laws for homeschoolers, but the educational codes are such that the easiest way to comply is to use an umbrella school. Some states, such as Arizona, define who homeschoolers are, while others do not.

For more information on homeschooling laws, consult your state's homeschooling organization. General overviews of the state laws can be found here:

<http://homeschooling.gomilpitas.com/directory/Localities.htm>

Laws are constantly evolving as our government and society becomes alternately more accepting of alternative education while pushing for more standards. The line between classroom-based education and homeschooling is becoming thinner. Charter schools and part-time schools are popping up throughout the country, making one wonder, "What exactly is homeschooling?" The answer to this question depends on a lot of variables, including the local homeschooling laws and culture.

Local and state-wide homeschooling organizations generally have the most up-to-date and accurate information on how to interpret the laws. The best way to find out if you are in compliance with the law is to do research on what the law actually says. The educational codes for your state are available online, and it is highly recommended that you read them yourself. There is also information online about how these laws have been interpreted. Sometimes, over time, even as the laws stay the same, the interpretation of those laws change. Keeping up to date on the changes can be achieved

through subscribing to state homeschooling newsletters, joining local and statewide homeschooling e-lists, and staying in touch with the informed local homeschoolers.

If you are in a situation where you think that homeschooling might potentially cause a problem, (for example a divorce or family court case) or if there is someone close to you who is a candidate for being aggressively unsupportive, it is even more important that you be in compliance with the laws and regulations in your state. In today's educational climate, a complication in cases where homeschooling shouldn't be an issue, but ends up being a point of contention, is the biggest legal risk a homeschooler faces.

There are many ways to find out about the local laws. The best, and easiest, is to seek out the statewide homeschooling group's laws and legalities pages.

<http://homeschooling.gomilpitas.com/regional/Region.htm>

<http://homeschooling.about.com/cs/gettingstarted/a/legalusa.htm>

It's important to do complete research on your laws. Find at least two or three sources for your information to assure that you haven't missed a potential inaccuracy or nuance.

Be wary of general homeschooling web sites which attempt to sum up each state's laws in a paragraph or two. They are a good place to start your research, since they allow you get a feel for the different states compared side-by-side. However, there are only overviews, which can be inaccurate or not up to date. In addition, some states have ambiguous laws, or no laws at all, and therefore many homeschooling communities have worked out a subtle (or not so subtle) understanding and a precedent of how to keep in compliance with local attendance codes which can't be explained in a short synopsis.

Also be alert to local schools, Boards of Education, and even some national support groups who claim to have a complete understanding of your local laws. They often don't have the experience of working with the details of the state's homeschooling laws. The local and state-wide homeschooling groups typically have better knowledge of how to be in compliance with your local laws, because they are living with them everyday.

There are some states where there is some disagreement about what the laws are, or how they should be interpreted. One of the common disagreements is in how much information and paperwork homeschoolers are required to file. If you find this to be the case in your state, continue to do research until you find a way to comply with the laws that you feel comfortable with.

During your research, don't hesitate to ask a lot of questions of many different people. Print out a hard copy of your laws and educational codes to have ready in case you need them. Also consider signing up for your local homeschool announcement list, to keep abreast of new and upcoming legislation, and the different ways that homeschoolers in your state interpret the laws.

Legally Withdrawing a Child from School

Each school district has their own procedures for withdrawing a child from school. Generally this consists of a letter or form that the parent sends to the school stating the date that the child will be no longer attending, and if the child is transferring to another school, the name of that school. In states where homeschooling is defined in the law, or is an acceptable option for meeting the compulsory attendance requirements, the letter may state that the child will be homeschooled. In states where homeschooling is not in the official educational vernacular, the letter will more likely state that a child will be attending another

school, with the name of the new school included. You can find out more details about the best procedures for withdrawing from school from your local or statewide homeschooling support group.

Maintain as good of relationship with the school as possible when leaving. You never know when you might need to work with the school later. Playing nice with the school has helped many parents avoid truancy officers and other things that I like to call “post-enrollment issues”. The school calling up to see “how the kids are doing” is not uncommon. And it’s entirely possible to be faced with an uncomfortable moment like meeting the school secretary at the grocery store.

If you have a special situation with your school, such as an individualized educational plan (IEP), consult your local support group if you would like to decline special services. If your child has special needs, you can consult *Homeschooling the Child with ADD (or Other Special Needs): Your Complete Guide to Successfully Homeschooling the Child with Learning Differences* by Lenore Hayes for more detailed information on whether you are entitled to continued services, or have any other paperwork to do when withdrawing from public school.

You might also consider requesting cumulative files, although this step may not be necessary. For children 9th grade or lower, most items in the cumulative file are documents that parents already have, such as grades, immunization records and attendance. Another thing that might be in a child’s cumulative files are “notes” about his behavior, how often he was in detention, when he saw the school counselor, and other paperwork that the school is required to have. These things are probably not necessary in most homeschooling situations. Although, if a child had a lot of difficulty with his school, it might be useful to know what kind of paperwork he has in his file.

When a cumulative file is requested from a school, they usually send copies, not the original documents. This means that the school is not letting go of these records, merely sharing them with the school or parent that has requested them. This might serve to help make the decision of whether requesting files is necessary.

Lastly, some schools don't consider a child officially withdrawn from their school until the new school has sent a letter to request cumulative files. This is determined on a school-by-school basis.

For teens, having the cumulative file may or may not be important for college entry. It certainly can't hurt to have it. If you are planning on homeschooling a teen, I highly recommend *The Teenage Liberation Handbook* by Grace Llewellyn, as a companion book during the deschooling process.

Create an Initial Support Crew

Our homeschooling began on a Monday. We passively declared our new status by not sending our son to what would be his first day of Kindergarten. He was 5. We didn't have a party, or a flag salute. We simply kept doing what we had always done. We ate breakfast, brushed our teeth, played in the front yard.

It was a day like any other day. My husband was at work and my neighbors were all either at work or walking their children to school before going to work. Yet, here I was, an official homeschooler. After months of telling people that we were "most likely going to homeschool" our son, and of mentally preparing myself, our first homeschooling day had arrived. And it didn't look any different than it did the day before.

My extended family wasn't against homeschooling, but they weren't sitting in the glee club section either. And my

husband was still on the fence about the whole thing. This was a decision that weighed heavy on my shoulders. As we sat on the grass and my son rode his tricycle on the sidewalk, I felt the sudden rush of fear that comes when we follow through with a huge life decision. I felt totally and completely responsible.

Fortunately, I had been building my support crew. Mostly, my support came from two online Yahoo! Group e-lists, where I had forged online friendships with other homeschoolers dealing with the same concerns as I was. Long-time homeschoolers in the group also reassured me that everything I was going through was normal.

Perhaps more importantly was my good friend who I had met at the gym where I taught fitness classes. Of all my friends, she was particularly supportive. She was the kind of person who was supportive of anything I did, and trusted me. She asked me questions, but she didn't doubt me. She didn't mind when I said, "I just don't want to talk about homeschooling for a while," or when I started ranting about why my son wasn't going to go to school, even though both her sons attended public school.

My support came from other people, although they didn't know it. Grace Llewellyn, author of *The Teenage Liberation Handbook*, was one of my biggest sources of strength. Her book clued me in that alternative forms of education were possible. David Guterson, author of *Family Matters: Why Homeschooling Makes Sense* was also an early unknowing supporter of mine. He was an English teacher, whose wife taught their children at home. He was a role model for me, because I felt a kinship with him – a teacher whose main interest was learning and education, not defending a system simply because he was employed in it.

Deciding to homeschool reminded me what it was like when we brought our first child into the world. The support of my friends and family were crucial to my survival in the early months. So much so, I would often

wonder how anyone managed to get along without the kind of wonderful support I had. I knew that people did it everyday, and I was in awe that they could survive without it. It was like water when I was thirsty to have people I could talk to about my struggles and fears, joys and triumphs.

I can't emphasize enough the importance of support. If you can't find that kind of support in a local friend, seek it online. Find a local support group. Get the support you need to have a soft place to land regularly. And offer support to others as well. Connecting with other homeschooling families is at the core of educating children at home. Without it, it's like living on an island with only salt water.

Dealing with Criticism

Once a year, our local homeschool information night touches on the topic of dealing with criticism. This is one topic that all home-schoolers, new and veteran, can identify with. Homeschoolers are a curiosity in today's world. Everyone wants to know how we do it, whether it's legal, if we know what we're doing, and how many hours we teach our kids. There are also many people who have serious doubts about its efficacy.

This level of scrutiny may come as a surprise to some new homeschoolers. Veteran homeschoolers can become weary of it. Nonetheless, criticism and probing questions comes as part of the homeschooling package.

Everyone asks questions about homeschooling: family, friends, strangers on the street, the grocery store clerk, the bus driver, and neighbors. And even if you are one of the lucky few who live in a homeschool-friendly community, with a fully supportive family and plenty of accepting and loving friends, the topic of homeschooling will probably come up frequently. Ironically, the worst criticisms (and

the majority of the questions) generally come at the time when homeschoolers need the most support—at the beginning of the homeschooling journey.

When we're just starting out, we don't yet have concrete, confident answers to criticisms, and don't yet have the experience to back up our perspective. Even so, we are expected to answer questions like, "Can homeschooling work? How do kids do in college? How will they have friends?" In the beginning, we're still trying to figure out if homeschooling is even the right choice at all! We don't know the answer to the big questions. In fact, many of us are still asking these same questions to ourselves.

At the beginning of any journey, we make decisions based on the best information that we can find. But it isn't until we have experience and time to adjust our new lives, that we discover what the journey we are on really means to us, and whether we are traveling in the direction we want to go.

Most of the time, other people can identify with our life changes and choices. When we move to a new city, nobody badgers us about knowing where the grocery store is or how long it takes us to make new friends. When we start a new job, people understand that it takes a little while to get a feel for what it's like. But, with the choice to homeschool, rarely are we given this luxury. We're often expected to defend ourselves and know exactly how this choice is going to affect our future right from the start.

Like many choices people make in life, often times, the choice to homeschool just "feels" right. It makes sense from a philosophical or logical point of view. But without experience, it's difficult to explain this feeling to others who have no vantage point from which to empathize. So much of what individuals believe about education, or know about how to raise kids, come from a lifetime of experience. When others haven't gone through the

experiences we have, we're the pioneers. Instead of understanding, we get questions.

The Best Defense Is a Good Offense

As with all difficult conversations where we are being put on the spot about our decisions or opinions, there are several ways we can deal with the situation:

- Try to understand the other person's point of view
- Sit down and have a long heart-to-heart
- Shrug our shoulders and walk away
- Ask them what they think and why
- Be honest and open
- Put up boundaries about what is OK to talk about
- Move the conversation on to another topic
- Discuss the topic with enthusiasm and joy
- Share information we have on hand about the topic

When it comes to homeschooling, all of these techniques can be effective. My personal favorite, however, is having an article, magazine or other resource on hand which I can pull out and refer to during the conversation.

If a conversation turns negative, oppressive or even hostile, having books and articles with hard facts available can give something concrete for the other person to refer to. There is nothing like showing that we've done our research to make other people feel good about our choices. It also provides a good way to segue out of a tough conversation.

I discovered this technique by accident. In the early part of our homeschooling lives, I was always reading a book, or a magazine about homeschooling, and I carried my current research around with me in my diaper bag. When the topic

of education would come up in a conversation, I often shared my reading material as part of my sheer enthusiasm about what I had recently discovered.

The side effect of my eagerness to show my resources was an almost universal positive response I received because of it. The most amazing part of it was that if the conversation started turning negative, having a resource to refer to had the magic effect of either neutralizing the discussion or turning it positive. If the discussion was already positive, the other person was thrilled they had concrete information they could take home with them.

I soon found out that having these resources in my bag was a great way to feel confident and like a “real” homeschooler. I also became more and more willing to have conversations about homeschooling, because even if I didn’t feel like having a deep conversation, I had my books and magazines to do the talking for me. I could share the information without having to defend myself. It was liberating to have a backup. And to this day, I still prefer to carry something about homeschooling with me. I feel naked without a magazine, card or flyer for our local information night.

I also think there’s a certain peace of mind it brings to the person who is asking questions, that I’m serious about homeschooling, and not making a flippant decision. Having books and magazines on my person, gives people the impression that I know what I’m talking about. I find this to be particularly important to remember when I’m talking with family who care deeply about my children.

And in situations where I really don’t want to talk about homeschooling (which is rare, I must admit), I can say, “We’re doing the best we can with what we have. And oh, by the way, here’s a bunch of stuff you can read about homeschooling. I’m going to go play tag with the kids.”

I don't go out into the world with the intention to evangelize homeschooling any more than I intend to convert people to my passion for dark chocolate. Discussions about homeschooling happen naturally. And when they do, I'm prepared.

Having a ready set of resources also prepares us for our own moments of homeschooling 'freak-out's, as a blogging friend of mine calls them. Keeping a file or bookshelf of books can remind us of why we chose to homeschool in the first place. Those books or articles that gave us that initial spark and words of wisdom from authors whom we admire can be just what we need in times of uncertainty.

Some Ideas for Resources to Keep On Hand

Magazines

Home Education Magazine *Life Learning Magazine*
Aim Homeschooling *Secular Homeschooler* *The Link*
Old Schoolhouse Magazine *Live Free Learn Free*

Articles and Statistics

Benefits of Homeschooling: by Wyatt Webb, MIT alumni
<http://alum.mit.edu/ne/whatmatters/200407/index.html>

A collection of peer-reviewed articles and research about homeschooling

<http://geocities.com/nelstomlinson/research.bibliography.html>

A study of adults who were homeschooled

<http://www.illinoishouse.org/a05.htm>

A list of famous contemporary homeschoolers

<http://homeschooling.gomilpitas.com/weblinks/Famous.htm>

Other

A copy of your state or local homeschooling group's publication

What About Truancy Officers?

*“Fear grows in darkness; if you think
there’s a bogeyman around, turn on the
light.”*

- Dorothy Thompson

When I use the term “fearless homeschooling”, I don’t intend that to mean that we can, or should, get rid of all of our fears. Fearless homeschooling means that we make decisions based on facts, evidence, and personal preferences—not because we are afraid. Fearless homeschooling means to move forward and do things despite being afraid. It means that we listen to our fears, and take them seriously, but we don’t let them overcome us, or keep us from making wise decisions.

Thirty years ago and before, there was a definite risk in educating kids at home. The risks usually involved truancy officers “checking up” on homeschoolers, and even issuing arrest warrants to parents for not sending children to school.

Today, the risk factors in the United States have diminished to almost none. Being a homeschooler is no longer persecuted arbitrarily. Through the efforts of many individuals and organizations, the home education option has been established as indisputably legal in all 50 states. In the past thirty to forty years, precedents have been set, laws have been made and social perceptions have shifted. And even if there are still some negative stereotypes about homeschoolers, there is nothing illegal about educating without school.

Even so, new homeschoolers often don’t know what to expect. When people are uncertain of their future, the human reaction is to protect one’s self by putting up a preemptive defense. Because of this, even if there is very little reason to fear legal problems due to being a

homeschooler, there can be a perceived need for what some people call “homeschooling insurance.” Don’t fall prey to organizations which promise to protect you from the homeschooling boogeyman. Once you know the realities of your true risk factors, you don’t need this reassurance.

The best way to have a good defense against the fear of a truancy officer showing up at your door is to take three steps:

- Know your state laws confidently
- Make sure that you are homeschooling within the law in your state
- Join an organization that specifically supports homeschoolers in your state

The reality is that there is no such thing as homeschooling insurance. There are organizations that collect money into a pool to help homeschoolers. And there are groups who ask for money to help them promote the interests of homeschoolers. But there are no policies to hold for being a homeschooler. Giving money to a group does not guarantee that the group will uniformly protect homeschoolers in case of a problem.

Homeschooling-related incidents are rare in cases where there isn’t a pre-existing issue such as a disgruntled spouse, or meddling neighbors. Of course, we can’t be certain that nobody will ever question our legal rights to homeschool. But legally, we are doing nothing wrong, so there is no reason to buy our freedom. Supporting a group we believe is doing a good job supporting our rights as homeschoolers, on the other hand, can be a wise choice.

Even if we pay dues to an organization which supports homeschooling, money doesn’t buy a release of fear. Understanding does. It’s our responsibility to know our legal rights and it’s our responsibility to be aware of any precedents set by other homeschooling cases in our state.

We can accomplish that through researching what the various groups have done for homeschoolers in the past and through being involved with, or aware of, more than one source of homeschooling support.

I encourage you to support groups that help homeschoolers. But be wary of any group that:

- Promises to protect you from homeschooling dangers
- Makes you feel like homeschooling is basically unsafe and that you need their protection.
- Puts emphasis on saving people from danger rather than encouraging a sense of community.
- Has other political involvement. If they do, the money will be going for that too. Make sure that they are using the money in a way you agree with on all political fronts.
- Puts pressure on you to join.
- Divides the homeschooling community by saying who is a “real” homeschooler and who isn’t. Or says that only certain kinds of homeschoolers should have legal freedom.
- Has any other indication that maybe they aren’t what they say they are. Trust your instincts. Even if you can’t put your finger on it, there might be something up.

Ready, Set, Deschool!

Now that you have the supporting structure for your deschooling adventure, you’re ready to dig in and get your hands dirty. Enjoy your deschooling adventure!

Self-Discovery Questions:

- What are two URLs where you can find your state's homeschooling laws?
- Who can you ask if you have questions about homeschooling in your state? What is their contact information?
- Who is your support crew?
- Which two books will you recommend to relatives if they are interested in homeschooling? Do you have passages highlighted?
- When people ask you why you are homeschooling, what will you say?