Our journey to gifted homeschooling was filled with our own folly and a slow learning curve. By sharing some of our struggles and insights, I hope others will benefit or find solace in knowing they are not alone when their square peg children don’t fit into round holes. Sure, if you hammer a square peg long enough, it will fit into a round hole—but aren’t there more effective construction methods?

Why Homeschool?

A question most frequently asked of homeschooling families is, “Why do you homeschool?”

Everyone has their own stories and reasons but, ultimately, families choose homeschooling with the hopes of providing a learning experience more suited to their children’s needs.

For us, our gifted son was unchallenged in his traditional school setting. This led to excessive talking, doodling on schoolwork while waiting for others to finish, and losing recess privileges for these behaviors. In third grade, he ultimately came home from school feeling like a “bad kid” and “hating school.”

Our efforts to advocate for challenge and differentiation involved the teacher, the principal, and the school board. All three avenues were a dead end for us. Repeatedly, meetings ended with the administration’s stated inability to change the school program and their suggestions for us to supplement our son’s education with...
evening and summer coursework. We decided this was not an option for us, as we feel gifted children shouldn't be expected to spend additional time working to make up for deficits in their regular school day.

Over time, the answer became clear. We asked ourselves, “If we were going to provide our son some of his education, why shouldn’t we provide all of it?” So, after a lot of research, soul-searching, scheduling, and family conferences, we decided to homeschool. And, eventually, all three of our children, in their varying ages and abilities, were withdrawn from public school and brought home for their education.

Know the Laws

It is essential you know your state’s laws regarding homeschooling before making any decisions. As parents, you are responsible for knowing the homeschooling laws. However, you might have to do the research yourself, as we found that most people are not familiar with the laws, including the local school district. We also discovered that policies differ by state. Some states require testing and/or documentation of student progress while other states simply require written notice of withdrawal. Other states require schools to provide curriculum to homeschooling families while some do not. Websites by the Home School Legal Defense Association and A2Z Home’s Cool provide overviews on state-by-state laws. However, before proceeding, don’t simply rely on website information. Always confirm current homeschooling requirements with your state department of education and your state’s homeschooling association.

Possible Questions You Might Have

WHAT ABOUT SOCIALIZATION?

The most frequent concern we heard was, “What about socialization?”

We have found homeschooling to be as socially isolating as we choose it to be. One plus is that homeschool has provided more opportunity—and more free time—to join as many activities as we see fit. Taking courses at local community colleges, homeschool cooperatives, community centers, and libraries allow gifted learners to excel in areas of personal interest, regardless of grade. As a homeschooling family, we are busier than ever as we’ve discovered the many amazing opportunities available to our children.

Some gifted learners are socially advanced well beyond their years and may feel isolated with their age-peers in traditional school settings. Through homeschooling, my eight-year-old son was able to participate in the Model United Nations program with a group of middle school-aged homeschoolers, and flourished in this setting because he was surrounded by academic and socio-emotional peers instead of age peers.

Homeschooling Tips

Here are some helpful tips from Dr. Gwen Olmstead as you explore homeschooling for your child:

Connect with as many homeschooling groups as possible. They are out there. Perhaps there isn’t a formalized group yet, but you can create one by networking with others. Expect to drive. Learn to “car-school.”

Continue open conversations with your school leaders. There may be opportunities to create a “blended” format for your child, by mixing and matching public or private school, online, community college, and tutoring options.

Know your local resources and let them know you. Be sure your local libraries, museums, conservatories, artists’ guilds, and state and local parks know you are a homeschooling family. Often, they provide services for homeschool families at off-peak times. Additionally, they can help connect you to other homeschooling families.

Gather materials everywhere you go. Don’t hesitate to pick up free gallery guides at local museums. Sign up for every free online educational resource you come across. Hit library book sales, especially on their reduced price final days.

When purchasing curriculum, choose wisely. It’s very easy to get carried away when planning ahead. Also be ready to ditch materials if they aren’t working for you or your child.

Lastly, be ready to be spoiled by never having to wait in line or fret over when to schedule a doctor’s appointment. Off-peak errands and field trips are wonderfully addictive. In turn, be ready for the inevitable question, “Why aren’t you in school today?”
PARENT AS TEACHER?
“Can I do this?” Yes, you can.

Even though I have a Ph.D. in Curriculum and Instruction and am a certified English teacher, I still had no idea how to teach my youngest child to read or to conceptually understand subtraction. No teacher is ready to “cover” all grades and all subjects. The beauty of homeschooling is that you learn with your child. Parents develop question-making and answer-seeking skills. It’s gratifying to see the love of learning thrive as your child becomes the seeker of interesting versus “required” knowledge. These days, a combination of online courses and outside activities are available for nearly every child’s interest and level, which should ease parent concerns about the teaching process.

WHICH METHOD IS BEST?
There are countless methods of homeschooling and there’s no right or wrong approach. The needs of the child as well as the needs of the family (both time and money) will help guide curriculum and method decisions. Your homeschool might look and feel like a traditional school (often referred to as “school at home”) or be free spirited like alternative education proponent John Holt’s unschooling movement. Throughout his life, Holt advocated that children should “learn without teaching”—by doing, by wondering, and by figuring things out on their own—without well-intentioned adults forcing a particular subject at a particular time.

We’ve found that most families end up somewhere in the middle, with a bit of structured curriculum and a bit of student-directed learning.

END OF THE ROAD?
Both local school district and home situation options can change at any time, so we reevaluate our homeschooling needs for each child prior to each academic year. Ultimately, though, we’ve decided to homeschool until our “square peg children” and the “round hole classroom setting” can constructively “build” together. We know parents who homeschool anywhere from part of an academic year (to resolve a short-term situation) to several years. Many people successfully homeschool through high school; many colleges actively seek home-educated children.

Follow the Sun to NAGC Parent Day

NAGC Parent Day is a one-day event that gives parents tools, information, and networking opportunities to help them support their children’s optimal development and ensure their continued growth. This event is co-hosted with the Arizona Association for Gifted and Talented. Parents attend NAGC Convention sessions, get quality time to talk with other parents, and visit the Exhibit Hall.

Saturday, November 14, 2015
Phoenix Convention Center and Sheraton Phoenix Downtown
Convention Sessions begin at 8:00 am
Kids Program begins at 8:30 am

Register Now
Looking Back

I see now that it took me entirely too long to let go of the clock when we started homeschooling. Rather than struggling with my son for an hour to complete an assignment because “Mom said it was time to do it now,” I could wait until he was focused and ready to learn and that same concept was mastered it in minutes.

I have taken the dread out of “the dreaded worksheet.” My children and I learned together that just because it was a copied paper, it didn’t have to mean rote memorization of excessive repetition. We were in control of what was on the paper. Initially, I wouldn’t use the same sources, for fear of boredom from repetition. But even in my classroom of three students, I needed to recognize that one child needed the routine of the same source. What better place to individualize and differentiate instruction than our tiny school?

I can laugh out loud when I remember myself believing the house would be cleaner because we would be home all day and would have more time to clean. But, I can also appreciate that life’s education has taught my children how to clean just about everything around the house.

I now know that as the “primary teacher,” my relationship with my children has changed and deepened—and it’s almost unfair to Dad. Because Dad’s job requires that he work long hours and travel, we have made extra effort for the children to also see him as a teacher in his own right and not the recess playmate (though that is also important).

In looking back, I’ve had as much of an education on the homeschooling journey as my children.

Resources

Books

Websites
A2Z Home's Cool http://a2zhomeschooling.com/laws/homeschool_laws_legalities_overview/
Diane Keith's CarSchooling http://www.carschooling.com/preview/
Gifted Homeschoolers Forum http://giftedhomeschoolers.org/
Homeschool Buyers Co-Op http://www.homeschoolbuyersco-op.org/
Home School Legal Defense Association (HSLDA) www.hslda.org/laws

John Holt GWS (Growing Without Schooling)
http://www.johnholtgws.com/

Author’s Note
Dr. Gwen Olmstead is currently an adjunct professor at Western Connecticut State University in the Instructional Leadership Doctoral Program, and a homeschooling mom and farm manager. Prior, she worked as a research associate at the University of Arkansas in the National Office of Research, Measurement, and Evaluation Systems, as the director of the Cincinnati Children's Museum, and as an English teacher in an inner-city high school. Dr. Olmstead advocates for and conducts research on homeschooling, gifted, and creativity education.

Endnote