

child exclusive

home schooling

Each year, the number of children who are learning at home grows by 15 percent. How would this option work out for you and your child?

Lessons on the kitchen table. Study buddies who are your brothers and sisters. A teacher who also happens to be Mom or Dad. Who's home-schooling today—and what's it like for families whose kids learn where they live?

A mere 150 years ago, *most* Americans were taught at home. Then school became the accepted place to learn. Only religious and antigovernment families who didn't want to turn over control of their children's education schooled their kids at home. But now, a broader base of parents is join-

ing in. Some are dissatisfied with the quality of their local public schools and think they can do better. Others have kids whose personalities or learning styles don't quite fit into the regimen at school, so home-based classes seem kinder—and maybe even smarter. And some parents use home schooling as a stay-close strategy, since concern over family breakdown is "at an all-time high," says Brad Fay, New York City-based research director of the polling group Roper/Starch Worldwide.

As recently as the Seventies, only 12,000 kids were schooled at home. But during the Eighties, a growing number of families, including many

BY MELINDA BLAU



What a cool toadstool! When you go to school at home, your classroom is the whole wide world, and your curriculum is whatever you find most fascinating within it.

evangelical Christians, became convinced that the public schools were not serving their needs. Today, there are more than half a million kindergartners to high schoolers of all faiths and backgrounds who are doing their learning at home, estimates Pat Lines, a research analyst at the federal Department of Education in Washington, DC, who has been tracking this trend for years. "Home schooling has become a legitimate option for families to consider," Lines says.

Riding a New Wave

Some parents never imagined themselves riding this educational wave. Gail Bering-Porter, who has a master's degree in education and is a mother in Albany, New York, says she'd always planned to send her only child, David, now 14, to a progressive Waldorf kindergarten that she admired. But during his admissions interview, the normally cooperative little boy was fidgety and refused to talk. "I didn't want them to take me," David, then 5, explained to his mother afterward.

Some parents might have assumed that their child would warm up to his new school over time. But Bering-Porter and her husband, Gerald Porter, Ph.D., a professor of educational psychology at the State University of New York at Albany, didn't believe that a conventional classroom was the only place to educate a child. David has done his studying at home ever since.

As the number of families like Bering-Porter's has grown, the status of home schooling has been changing. It is now recognized in every state, with some (Oklahoma, Oregon, and Washington) known to be particularly accommodating. And since home-schooling parents pay taxes, too, an increasing number of school districts around the country allow these kids to supplement their home-based lessons with some regular public school classes on both the elementary and high school levels. Some home-based students take advantage of public school sports teams and clubs, too.

But don't these families feel isolated? "No, because we have the support of other home-schooling families in the area, as well as annual conventions

and publications to help us," answers Julie Stufflebeam, 41, who teaches her four children at home in Sebastopol, California. Families like hers also benefit from new kinds of plugged-in support. A handful of private schools now offer them independent-study and on-line computer programs. "And there are plenty of on-line support groups, too," adds Brian Ray, Ph.D., president of the National Home Education Research Institute in Salem, Oregon.

Not everyone loves this new culture, however. "Home schooling can be limiting," says Janet S. Weisberg, Ph.D., a psychologist who practices in New York City. "Children need to have outside experiences with friends their age. Some of these children might have the potential for social immaturity because they're not relating to other children who are going through the same developmental stages."

Are They Learning Enough?

Some experts also question how well these children are being served academically. "Professionally trained teachers have a hard time keeping up with new developments in learning," says Jane Conoley, Ph.D., professor of educational psychology at the University of Nebraska in Lincoln. "How do parents keep up with what's new?" To pull it off, parents need to be exceptionally consistent in the quality, structure, and sequencing of their teaching. Additionally, state regulations provide little in the way of quality control, says

Right: Children who learn at home have fun raiding the dress-up box for some pretend play in between classes.

Below: Kids from different home-schooling families form a "kitchen cabinet."



One critic of home schooling asks, "Who knows if these children are being well educated and well prepared?"

Andrea DiLorenzo, senior policy analyst at the National Education Association in Washington, DC. "Most states do not require parents to have more than a high school certification, let alone teacher certification," notes DiLorenzo. "Who knows if these children are getting a comprehensive education that will adequately prepare them for the world?"

Even some home-schooling parents say that they are awed by the responsibility they've taken on. "I get panic attacks at the start of each new school year," admits Stufflebeam. "I constantly ask myself, 'Are they learning enough? Are they getting what they need?'" What helps keep her going, she adds, "is seeing the results—my happy and curious children."

Judith Coons of Lanesborough, Massachusetts, is another home-schooling mother who feels strongly about what she is doing. She first

became distressed when her middle child, Nathan, was having a rough time in kindergarten. "In his class of 12 students, there were seven boys—five with behavior problems," she recalls. "He'd come home with scrapes he didn't want to talk about. He was learning survival skills, not social skills." Coons thought she'd home school Nathan "just to get him over the hump." But eight years later, she's still teaching her son, now 13, and his 10- and 14-year-old sisters, too.

Families who want to home school have to decide whether they can afford to commit much of one parent's time to the effort. Like Coons, 88 percent of all home-schooling parents are

a guide to your child's Educational Options

Already decided that home schooling is not for you? Here are some alternatives you might want to consider:

Private Schools

- **Montessori, Quaker, and Waldorf schools** all take the approach that a child's interests should shape what's being taught more than any arbitrary curriculum.
- So-called **free schools**, holdovers from the Seventies, welcome student opinions and are democratically run.
- **Community schools**, founded by a group of parents and educators who think alike, often have student-directed learning as well as a great degree of parent involvement.
- **Independent-study programs** in some private schools allow children the time and flexibility to learn some lessons at home as well as in conventional classes at school.

Public Schools

- **Magnet schools**, sometimes called choice schools, specialize in a certain type of curriculum such as the performing arts, advanced science, or a work/study program.
- **At-risk schools** are geared to helping turn around children who are thought to be in danger of dropping out.
- **Charter schools** are publicly financed but privately operated by parents, teachers, private companies, or universities.
- **Voucher programs** allow parents to use public dollars to pay for either private or parochial school—but are rare.
- **Dual-enrollment programs** allow students who are not enrolled in public school to take certain courses there.

mothers. But a father often supplements his wife's work by teaching a specialized course like computer science to his own, and sometimes to another family's, children.

Parents interested in home schooling usually must notify their state office of education of their intentions. And once home learning has begun, many states ask that parents submit the results of standardized achievement tests, or a portfolio of work, so that they can keep track of a child's progress. But the frequency of these evaluations differs from state to state.

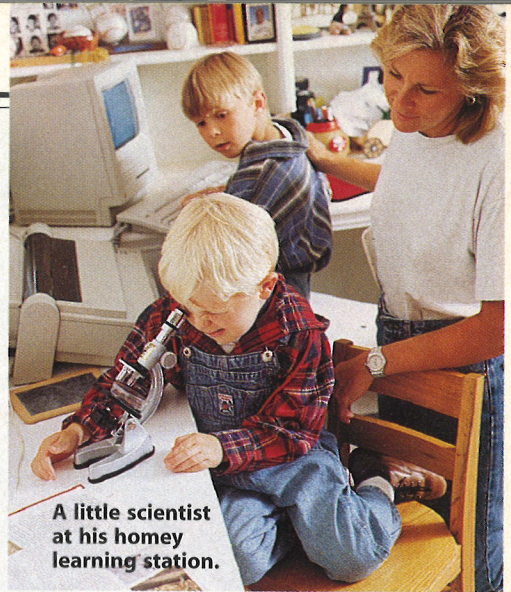
Home-schooling methods vary widely, too. Coons has chosen to operate much like a conventional teacher, using standard texts and workbooks. But some other parents—and particularly those who call themselves unschoolers—shun textbooks and other

"I ask myself, 'Are the kids getting what they need from me?'" says one teaching parent.

findings: Both elementary and high school children in these families scored at or above the 80th percentile on standardized achievement tests, compared to public school students, whose average is the 50th percentile. And more than half of all home-schooled children go on to college. With results like those, it's no wonder that many home-schooling

families are sticking with their program longer than ever. The average at-home learning stint used to be four years (typically, when a child was between 5 and 9 years of age). But now,

A little scientist at his homey learning station.



chemistry to make it all work out."

Nor are all parents capable of being so many things to their children at one time: teacher, mentor, counselor, and maybe athletic coach as well. Besides having a single-minded commitment to doing all these jobs well, they also need to put in long hours reading to their kids, researching the next day's lessons, and, if they have more than one child, playing referee among squabbling siblings. "Patience is definitely required," says Dr. Porter, David's dad.

Yet many home-schooling families are hanging in there, hopeful that they can bring out the best in their children and, yes, in themselves. Coons, for one, says she has stayed with home schooling for moral reasons. "I'm helping my kids figure out the world," she explains, "and I'm doing it based on my values."

But is that so different from other moms and dads? Don't parents who choose conventional schools want to help their

kids navigate the world and share values with them, too? "Every parent is a teaching parent," says Scott Somerville, who is a lawyer for the Home School Legal Defense Association in Paeonian Springs, Virginia, and a home-schooling father of six. "It's just that some of us do it all the time." ■

Melinda Blau is a contributing editor to Child who often writes on family trends. She is the mother of two.

What all parents can learn from home-schooling families

PAY ATTENTION. These moms and dads listen carefully to their kids in order to pick up on their special interests.

BE OPEN to new experiences that you and your child can share. It's fun when you can make discoveries together.

TREAT YOUR CHILDREN AS INDIVIDUALS. If one takes longer to learn to read, for example, trust that in time, he will catch up.

REACH OUT for the help you need. When you and your child have a learning crisis, do what these moms and dads do: Explore your options, join a support group of involved parents, consider pooling talents and resources (such as "swapping" tutoring with another family). Above all, know that you're not alone.

formal school practices altogether. Bering-Porter has used something of both approaches. She at first created a school-like space for David with textbooks on a table, a map hanging on the wall, and a pencil sharpener at the ready. But she rather quickly abandoned most semblances of school. David rarely uses textbooks and pretty much pursues whatever interests him, including reading and doing creative writing on his computer. Bering-Porter may not be a teacher in traditional terms, but her son, 14, now reads and writes at college level.

This is not unusual, says Dr. Ray, who tracked the achievements of 1,516 home-schooling families in 1990. The

Judith Coons, at right, and family: They've been home schooling for eight years.



kids 12 and older are happily staying put and continuing to learn at home.

Yet home schooling is not for all children. "Some kids need to be in school," insists Marilyn Mosley, director of a private school, Laurel Springs School, in Ojai, California, which also provides study programs to home schoolers. "Some students don't have the right personality or the willingness to do independent learning," she continues. "And sometimes the parent and child just don't have the

Where to Turn

For more information about your educational options, consult **The Alliance for Parental Involvement in Education (ALLPIE)**, P.O. Box 59, East Chatham, NY 12060; 518-392-6900; allpie@taconic.net; or **The Almanac of Education Choices**, published by Alternative Education Resource Organization (AERO), 417 Roslyn Rd., Roslyn Heights, NY 11577; 516-621-2195; <http://www.speakeasy.org/aero>.