

4 Important Considerations for Homeschooling

Helping to meet your child's needs for academic challenges and well-being based on the latest psychological research.

As homeschooling has become an increasingly popular option, it is important to consider multiple factors in making this educational decision. This resource is a starting point to help you make homeschooling decisions based on the latest psychological research about teaching, learning, behavior, development, and social-emotional and motivational drivers.

There are four key issues to consider as you think about homeschooling: (1) the general academic needs and well-being of your child; (2) family relationships and community resources; (3) educational resources; and (4) compliance with state regulations. You should also consider the resources available to your family such as the teaching capacity of caregivers, access to instructional materials or web-based programs, and to other community resources. Finally, state laws differ; it is important to be familiar with them.

The APA Center for Psychology in Schools and Education is invested in the social, emotional, and cognitive development of children. Our goal with this resource is to assist parents with the decision-making process and to provide information to help promote positive outcomes while not attempting to influence their choice.

Elementary school

The elementary school years focus on managing emotions and peer relationships; developing reading and mathematics skills; observing and asking questions about the natural and human-built world; and learning about American history, culture, and society. The development of high-quality language comprehension and communication skills is critical in the early elementary school years. Without strong language skills, your child is likely to face challenges later in their schooling (Ganske & Fisher, 2009).

At this age, children learn to work independently, and they acquire social skills from working and playing with their peers. Developing independent goals, planning work, and transitioning smoothly from one activity to the next become increasingly important as children progress through elementary school (Harmon & Jones, 2005).

Homeschooling can work well in elementary school when families are ready to provide the following:

- Supportive relationships and high but realistic expectations.
- Reading instruction. Learning to communicate with words in speech and in writing are foundations for your child's later learning.
- Opportunities to learn about numbers and quantities, to explore how to represent them with digits and objects, and to become fluent in the mathematical skills of addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division.
- A positive attitude about math, including the expectation that your child can learn math if they persist and try different strategies.
- Answers to your child's science questions about matter, the earth's systems, forces and motion, energy systems, and similar topics. Learning different ways to ask and answer questions will help your child in the future.
- Knowledge and experiences with culture, history, people, places and environments, relationships, family, governance, and other topics in social studies.
- Experiences with people of different ethnic, racial, and cultural backgrounds in books or in person.
- Opportunities to interact with other adults and children who are important members of your child's social circle.

Setting expectations

Resources to help you get a sense of traditional expectations for learning, behavior, motivation, and development.

- [APA Top 20 principles for pre-K to 12 education](#)
- [Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning](#)
- [National Council for the Social Studies](#)
- [National Council of Teachers of English](#)
- [National Council of Teachers of Mathematics](#)

1. General child needs

Whether you decide to homeschool your child or send them to school, children have certain needs that must be met for them to grow and flourish. Learn what these needs are and get ideas for how the homeschool environment might meet them.

Academic engagement in homeschooling environments

Children and youth will be most motivated and learn best when material is somewhat challenging or just above their current level of knowledge and skill. When the work is too difficult, students tend to become anxious and frustrated and may give up. When material is too easy, they may become bored. When material is somewhat challenging, students will feel motivated and are most likely to feel good about themselves and their accomplishments. Parents can pre-test to determine what students already know about a topic or subject and what materials might be moderately challenging for their child. Students are most likely to be exposed to moderately challenging tasks when curricula are sequential and increasing in difficulty (Ganske & Fisher, 2009; Li et al., 2014).

Because elementary school children are just developing a sense of themselves as learners, it is especially important to provide experiences of challenge and success. For example, you might have your child practice equations using fractions and then, when mastered, move on to applying fractions to real-world problems.

Managing emotions, behavior, and attention in homeschooling environments

In addition to gaining academic knowledge and skills, students also need to learn how to self-regulate their behavior and emotions to meet the demands of everyday situations (Hoerr, 2020). Self-regulation will be important throughout students' lives. Learning environments can provide opportunities for students to learn and practice strategies to calm themselves when they are frustrated or upset and pump themselves up when preparing for a task. These environments can help children resist distraction and refrain from impulsive behavior. Self-regulatory skills that predict success in academic endeavors include tackling tasks in a step-by-step manner, developing goals and

strategies before the task, monitoring progress during the task, and reflecting on what did and did not work well after the task.

Elementary school students need support to practice their developing self-regulation skills. Adults can act as coaches to remind students to engage in self-regulatory strategies such as monitoring their progress and using breathing techniques when they are stressed. They can also ensure that the environment is set up for optimal self-regulation by eliminating distractions, explicitly teaching self-regulatory strategies, and subtly prompting students to notice opportunities that require self-regulation.

Social skill development in homeschooling environments

Social interactions are important throughout students' lives. Students need social skills to establish and maintain positive relationships with peers and friends. Strong social relationships enhance academic achievement during the school years and occupational success post-graduation.

Relationships with peers promote companionship, empathy, practice in joint problem-solving and conflict resolution, emotional support, and opportunities to engage in creative play. Learning environments can allow students to engage with peers through collaborative activities where they develop skills for active listening, clear communication, and the negotiation of mutually agreeable solutions to challenges. Optimal learning environments also provide opportunities for unstructured peer interaction, including eating together and participating in games and sports. Community activities like speech, debate, 4-H, scouts, sports, and other activities provide opportunities for youth to learn and practice the skills they need currently and in the future.

One important aspect of social development is children's appreciation of and value for others' ethnic, racial, and cultural identities. Adult models help students understand others' distinct identities and perspectives and approach those differences with interest and respect. In addition, adults play an important role in supporting students' exploration and curiosity about their own identities and the strengths and assets that come with those identities.

Elementary-age children need opportunities to strengthen their social skills by engaging with peers and adults. Parents can ensure that student schedules and environments facilitate optimal socialization by including group instruction, frequent opportunities to collaborate with peers, and unstructured supervised time with peers.

Providing a consistent, safe, and supportive atmosphere for learning in homeschooling environments

Students learn best in structured environments where they know what to expect. Consistent schedules enable them to plan and organize themselves for their learning activities. A consistent routine reinforces study skills that they will need throughout their school years and beyond (Duvall et al., 1997; Duvall et al., 2004; Guterman & Neuman, 2018). A safe learning environment that supports students' successes and setbacks will encourage them to take risks in their learning and explore new ideas and interests.

Parents of elementary-age students need to take an active role in establishing teaching and study schedules. However, students who give input into these decisions will feel more responsible for their learning. During the elementary years, when children are developing beliefs about their abilities, learning experiences must demonstrate that students can build their abilities through their efforts—known as a “growth mindset.” Adults can help facilitate students' growth mindset by praising their effort and strategies rather than commenting that they are “smart” and by focusing attention on how students approach activities in addition to celebrating the outcomes.

Physical activity in homeschooling environments

Physical activity is critical for school-aged children. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends one hour of moderate to vigorous exercise each day. This includes aerobic activity (e.g., running or riding a bike) at least three times weekly and strength-building exercise (e.g., climbing, push-ups) three times weekly. Children are differently abled, and families can assess children's personal strengths and physical abilities to support their physical development. The US Department of Health and Human Services (2018) published physical activity guidelines for all Americans, with specific recommendations for children and adolescents.

Elementary-age children can strengthen muscles by climbing trees or playing on gym equipment. Aerobic physical activity is most motivating for early elementary-age students when it is play-based (e.g., running, skipping, or group activities like tag). Students who live in rural areas may be able to incorporate exercise into daily living activities (e.g., helping with chores). Formal strength-based physical activity in a homeschool environment is not required for early elementary children. Upper elementary children can walk or bike to destinations for exercise. Families can take advantage of readily available materials, like using gallon containers filled with water for

resistance exercises. When physical activity is incorporated into the learning environment, students are more likely to include fitness as part of a healthy lifestyle (Rink, 2009).

References and Resources

Academic challenge

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Safe, consistent environment

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2. Family and community resources

Locating resources within the homeschooling family or access to others in the community who are homeschooling will be important as families get a sense of effective tools and experiences.

Questions to consider:

- What community resources are available to support your child's education? For example, are there museums, zoos, cultural centers, or summer programs that offer educational opportunities for children?
- Does your family or town have dedicated space or organized sports programs to promote physical activity?
- What computer or technology resources are available to your child?
- How comfortable are you in taking on a teaching role with your child(ren)? For example, managing their behavior during instruction and learning activities?
- Do you have access to a public library and/or books at home that will engage your child and promote learning?

Direct, in-person, active learning is most beneficial for young children. When young children first learn about topics they have not encountered in their home environment (e.g., different types of animals), they remember that information better if it is learned in a meaningful context (e.g., a zoo). Their memory will have more connections to retrieve that information in the future. Providing opportunities for children to interact with items to be learned in the "real world," and for discussing their observations with others, usually results in enhanced memory. That is why children learn more if they participate in follow-up discussions after watching an informative video. Games are a great way to practice using numbers or reading information. When children create drawings or models of their learning, they notice new things and deepen their knowledge and understanding. Finally, setting routines is important for children's learning experiences. Physical activities and play can be a regular part of that routine.

3. Educational resources

Many factors need to be considered when choosing a curriculum and preparing for homeschool instruction. Parents will want to review outcome data or evidence to support strong learning outcomes for youth who complete the materials you intend to use. You will also want to determine how well the intended materials will meet your child's individual learning needs and will address any state requirements (Harmon & Jones, 2005; Stacki et al., 2020).

Beyond books and workbooks, consider what other resources you will use to supplement direct instruction, such as audio, visual, and other multimedia materials and exploratory and experiential activities. Community colleges often partner with local high schools to offer college course opportunities. Preparation for college testing (ACT, SAT) also begins for most students in their sophomore or junior year. Parents need to assess how prepared they are to teach all academic subjects and to manage behavior during the learning process throughout the day (Lois, 2010). Parents need to plan ahead and set both short-term and long-term academic goals for their homeschooled children.

A wide variety of resources are available, many for purchase and many as part of an online package (Hanna, 2012). Every child has a right to a free appropriate public education, and as a part of that you can reach out to your local public school and ask to talk to grade level teachers, a school psychologist, or the principal about what curriculum they are using for subjects in your child's grade level. Some districts also allow flexi-schooling in which some subjects (e.g., physical education, art, calculus) or services (e.g., speech-language, occupational or physical therapy, reading specialist, counseling) are provided by the school and other instruction is delivered at home (Kunzman & Gaither, 2020).

Here are key questions parents can consider.

What curriculum or curricular materials would you plan to use for homeschooling?

Some parents love teaching math and others will want to find more support for this subject. As you review possible curricula, ask yourself: Do you have the skills and knowledge within academic subject areas to support your child's learning? If not, who else can help you deliver the curriculum?

- Have you reviewed many materials or participated in any state convention or curriculum fairs that showcase a variety of homeschooling publications and products?
- Is there any evidence showing that children and youth learn well from completing your intended curriculum materials?
- How does your curriculum integrate different instructional experiences that promote learning, such as direct instruction (i.e., structured, sequenced, and led by teachers) and discovery learning (i.e., students construct their own understanding and knowledge of a topic through experiences and then reflect on those experiences)?
- Will your intended curriculum meet academic subject or testing requirements (if any are required) for your state?
- Will your intended curriculum meet all special learning needs your child may have (such as learning challenges or giftedness)?

What other educational resources do you have available to homeschool effectively?

- Do you have a computer and access to the internet?
- Do you have access to supplemental learning materials such as videos, interactive lesson materials online, or other forms of multimedia resources?
- Is there a platform or group of other homeschooling parents you can engage with to share educational resources? Can you partner with public schools in your district?

How long do you plan to homeschool (short-term or through completion of high school)?

- Have you set short- and long-term goals for your child's education?
- Have you developed a solid yet flexible curriculum to map out your child's school year in advance?
- Do you have a plan to assess and monitor your child's academic progress?

If you intend for your child to eventually return to a formal public or private school setting, have you consulted with school academic coordinators to help ensure that your child learns and achieves at expected grade level?

Resources

- [Public resources available to homeschoolers](#)
Check with your school district to find out what resources are available to homeschooling families. Some states allow homeschoolers to participate in public school classes and extracurricular activities. In other states, the decision is left up to individual school districts. Flexi-schooling may be an option for your child.
- [Home School Legal Defense Association. Starting strong.](#)
Includes resources on what to teach, grading, record keeping, testing and evaluation, special needs, high school, and beyond.

4. Meeting government regulations

It is wise for families considering homeschooling to be aware of their local, state, or territory regulations that govern homeschooling. For example, in the United States, regulations vary by state and by grade level. Be sure to check the regulations listed for your state; you can find some of them listed on the [Home School Legal Defense Association website](#).

Consider what your state or local government requires. Are there regulations related to any of the following issues?

- Do you need to provide formal notification of the decision to homeschool?
- Is there a mandatory age when students must enroll in some form of schooling?
- Do parents need to meet teacher qualifications to provide homeschooling?
- Are parents required to include specific subjects in their homeschool curricula?
- Is there a minimum number of hours of instruction per week?
- Do parents need to conduct regular assessments to monitor children's academic progress? If so, are you required to share these results with the government?
- Are homeschooled children required to complete standardized tests? If so, how often?
- Are homeschooled children eligible for participation in extracurricular activities?

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