

# THE NEVER-AT-HOME

Inspired education means letting kids lead the way

BY PATRICIA ZABALLOS

**DECIDE TO DO IT.** Lurk on Internet message boards. Read the homeschooling FAQs. Post the questions that scroll across your mind at 4 a.m.: *How do you know they're working at grade level? What about socialization?* Read the books of educator John Holt. Read *Home Education* magazine. Don't think of lunch boxes or Halloween parades or any of the other fripperies used to make school look like fun. Be Alice stepping into that rabbit hole—falling, falling, not knowing what waits below.

Read the research and feel bolstered by it. Learn that homeschoolers get higher SAT scores and more acceptance letters from Stanford than the general population. Print copies of the articles. Save one set to convince your in-laws; make paper airplanes with the rest and call it a physics lesson. Once you've begun homeschooling, the experts stop mattering. The experts don't know your children. *You* know your children.

Get to know them even better. Notice what gives them glee. When your son is six, find him books on pirates; when he's twelve, on the Romans. When he's obsessed with Pokémon at seven, go with it—let him create math problems involving Diglett and Polyraths. Let him

dictate stories with lines like "Charizard fire-spinned Machoke and he almost knocked him out!" Write it all down and tell him you find his work fascinating. Roll your eyes only when he isn't looking.

Go to the library. Introduce yourself to the children's librarian. Guide your kids to the New Books display and *ooh* and *ahh* as if standing before a candy counter. Explore beyond the fiction section. When your kids want to learn about dinosaurs, check out nonfiction with lots of graphics for your son and a book of dinosaur poems for your daughter. Check out biographies of dinosaur sculptor Waterhouse Hawkins and young paleontologist Mary Anning, and a book that shows how to make a *Parasaurolophus* hat. Check out as many books as the library allows and your family's arms can hold.

Hike in the woods, visit goats, sail on a Tall Ship. Look for Picasso in the Museum of Modern Art; look for clusters of monarch butterflies in winter eucalyptus. See Chinese acrobats and *Kiss Me, Kate* and a Mark Morris dance based on a typewriter. Take homeschooling classes in Spanish, drama, carpentry. Ignore your husband when he asks, "If you're home-

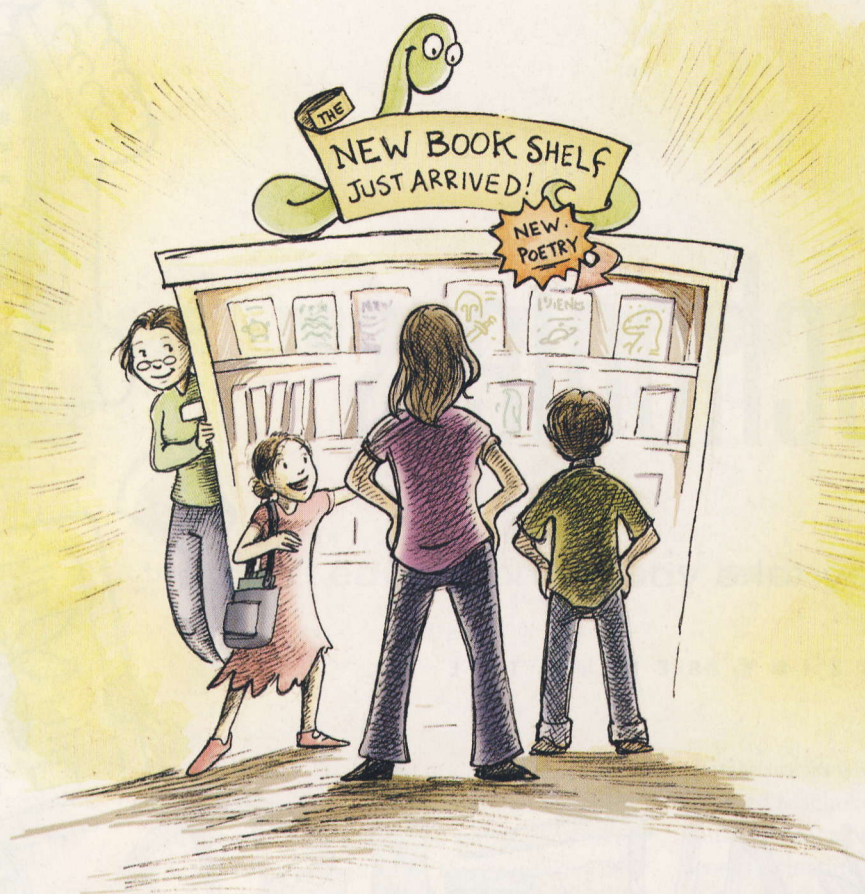


# homeschoolers

wherever that may take you.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY BEN HATKE





JUST AS  
YOU SHOULD NEVER  
WAKE A SLEEPING BABY,  
**NEVER  
INTERRUPT  
A READING  
CHILD.**

schoolers, why are you never home?"

Stay home. Make things. Relinquish the kitchen table to walnut-shell ladybugs, cardboard castles, Epsom salt crystals, balsa-wood stables, plaster-headed puppets, and armies of clay Redcoats. Abandon the scale model of the Parthenon when the task proves tedious. When your son is six, let him make a cardboard model of a Daniel Boone rifle, despite your issues with firearms. Help your daughter stitch a quilt and forgive yourself when the colonial doll's dress is still waiting, in pieces, to be sewn. Ignore your husband when he asks why the cupboards are filled with egg cartons and empty yogurt containers.

Don't panic when your daughter doesn't read at six. Read to her. Check

out beginning readers with puppies and ballerinas. Leave them lying temptingly on the coffee table, as your grandmother left out bowls of Jordan almonds. If she doesn't pick them up, read them to her. Ask her to try out a word here or there. If she glares at you as if she's suddenly 15, don't ask again for at least three weeks.

And don't holler when she's eight and sprawled across the couch, unable to pull her nose out of *Ramona the Pest* to empty the dishwasher. Just as you should never wake a sleeping baby, never interrupt a reading child. Empty it yourself. When she slams the book shut two hours later, notices the dishwasher has been emptied, and says, "I'm sorry, Mama, I was just so immersed in my book," hug her twice: once for noticing that you've emptied



the dishwasher, and once for correctly using *immersed* in a sentence.

Read aloud. Read about the goddess Artemis, read *Artemis Fowl*. Read about shells, read Shel Silverstein. Read until you're hoarse. Read Roald Dahl and discuss irony; read *Lemony Snicket* and discuss humor—when you're not guffawing. Keep reading aloud even when your kids can read themselves; keep reading aloud when they're 12. As you and the kids drive from place to place, develop an obsession for books on tape. Even *Treasure Island* enthalls when read by a professional and you're captives in the car. Try not to careen into the median strip at the shock of hearing your six- and nine-year-old passionately critique Stevenson's development of the character Long John Silver.

When you try to show your son how to subtract double-digit numbers by lining up columns and borrowing tens and he screams that what you're saying makes no sense, remember that it made no sense when you were seven. Let him continue computing in his head. It's faster anyway, and he doesn't need a pencil.

When, at 11, he sends the math text skittering across the floor, shouting that it's inane and has nothing to do with real life, search the Internet and homeschooling catalogues for math that *does* relate to real life. Find problems about savings accounts and architecture; find histories of Arabic numerals and Archimedes. Learn about the Pythagorean theorem with a Geoboard; learn to divide fractions

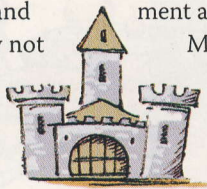
using strips of construction paper. Give him a book of origami geometry and watch the blossoming of his gift for transforming that which is flat into three glorious dimensions.

Leave the laundry. Let dust turn to velvet atop the black piano. Sure, you're home, but you're busy. Reading is more important than cleaning the refrigerator; tarantulas are more interesting than scrubbing the toilet. Make sure everyone gets fed, clean up the last meal before you start the next, and save the rest for the weekend. Kiss your husband when he doesn't comment and vacuums instead.

Make friends. Meet other homeschoolers at the park every Thursday. Sit in a knitting circle with moms and the occasional dad while the kids play freeze tag and build prairie houses from grass clippings. Realize that they get more playtime in one afternoon than schoolkids get in a week of recesses. Help them resolve differences over choosing teams and playing in groups of three. Organize a writers' workshop and a history fair and twice-yearly camping trips. Come to love the parents of your kids' friends as much as your kids love their kids.

In the dentist's waiting room, when a woman asks, "What about socialization?" suggest that your daughter describe her social circle. When your daughter is still talking five minutes later, don't stop her as the woman glances at her watch.

Don't think about grade levels. Grades are for eggs and maple syrup. Children's bodies don't develop at consistent rates; neither do their minds. Although your daughter doesn't read



**READING**  
IS MORE  
IMPORTANT  
THAN  
CLEANING THE  
REFRIGERATOR;  
TARANTULAS  
ARE MORE  
INTERESTING  
THAN  
SCRUBBING  
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at six, her conversation includes words like *clambered* and *sodden*. Although your son hasn't memorized the multiplication table at eight, he can interpret Lego building diagrams that make your eyes blur. Focus on your children's strengths, not on what the neighborhood schoolkids are doing. Let your children guide you. If your son won't write, take dictation. If your daughter won't read, give her books on tape. Aim to challenge your kids without frustrating them. You'll find the right level.

Know that some days will be hard. Your son will shout and sulk; your daughter will stomp and glare. You will nag, you will badger, you will scream. On your worst days, you'll threaten to send them to school. Take a deep breath, but don't blame home-schooling—all families have battles. Families with schoolkids bicker about homework. After a rough day, take a

field trip. See a movie. Comb a beach.

Notice that your children are learning all the time—not just in the two hours or so you work together most mornings, but all the time, with you and without you:

Before breakfast, as they build a Lego kingdom while listening to *The Phantom Tollbooth* on tape. After lunch, tearing through the back yard as Norse legends Freya and Tyr. Baking snicker doodles, writing comics, creating a terrain for tiny pewter figures from *The Lord of the Rings*. After dinner, watching *Roots* on DVD. In bed, reading *Asterix* and *Anne of Avonlea*.

Learn with your kids. Understand the Revolutionary War era as you never did from a textbook at ten. (You never wove on a loom or read *Poor Richard's Almanac* or learned the complete lyrics to "Yankee

DON'T  
THINK  
ABOUT  
**GRADE  
LEVELS.**  
GRADES  
ARE FOR  
**EGGS  
AND  
MAPLE  
SYRUP.**

Doodle.”) Feel inspired. Learn on your own. Read, at last, *Anna Karenina* and Sylvia Plath. Teach yourself to knit; to speak a little French; to espalier an apple tree. Take a pasta-making class. A writing class. Write an essay about homeschooling.

Watch your children thrive. See them walk into new situations—that first baseball practice, that first dance class—with a poise you didn’t possess until your twenties. Watch the daughter who once dreaded reading drink in entire series of books like orange sodas. See her at eight, all long limbs and grace, creating ballets about Saturn and Mars. Watch the son who despised writing at seven compose fantasy novels for sport at twelve. See him in the Parthenon Marbles room of the British Museum, describing gods and goddesses with a tour guide’s expertise as your own parents listen, agog.

Love your kids. Love being with them. Love watching them become who they were born to be.

Read a line from novelist and fellow homeschooler David Guterson

about making the decision to homeschool:

“[I]t is the fabric of your own life you are deciding about, not just your child’s education.”

Understand what he means. Know that you made the right decision.

Patricia Zaballos is a former elementary-school teacher who is still

learning how to homeschool in Oakland, California. Her best teachers are her kids, Henry (15), Lily (12), and Theo (6).



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