

Home Educating as a Single Parent

by Christine Waterman

How hard is it to home educate as a single parent? I found myself unexpectedly having to answer this question in November 2003 when my life changed in a direction that I hadn't anticipated.

My 12 year old son had never really been to school. Up until the sudden break up of my marriage, I had been a "stay at home mum", providing my son with an education, whilst my husband earned a living for us all. People seemed to assume that now I was a single parent I would have to find a school and a job and be like everyone else and, briefly, I considered this option. However, all my earlier reservations about school remained the same and this seemed a terrible time to suddenly be pushing my son out from his familiar world into the potentially stressful world of secondary school.

The more I considered my options the more concerned I became about managing a new job myself, alongside dealing with the practical and emotional fall out from the break up of my marriage and still having the resources to support my son through all of the loss that this would entail. Enabling him to stay secure among friends was my first objective if it was at all achievable financially.

It's during a crisis that I really see the value of home education in our lives.

Children who go to school so often seem to live the biggest part of their lives away from their families and as their life centres increasingly round their peer group, they get out of the habit of talking to their parents, especially in the teenage years. In my experience home education enables families to be closer and more in the habit of sharing their hopes and fears and day to day worries. The children are more able to trust their parents to assist them in resolving problems that seem overwhelming. The flexibility also means that you can avoid having other unnecessary stresses when feeling overloaded, can make time for treats, activity and fun and things to look forward to when in need of distraction or cheering up.

The people who supposed that I would send my son to school had two main concerns. One was money. They assumed that we could not be happy on the amount provided by income support. The other was that it would not be healthy or pleasant for us to spend so much time on our own together. They assumed that I would need the satisfaction and the social life that, in their eyes, can only be provided by paid employment, and that in some way it would be bad for a growing young man to be with his mum too much, and bad for me to be spending such large amounts of time with him without a break. They were especially concerned

that he was an only child, and so our family unit would be very small. I decided that I would keep these issues under review, whilst giving home education my best shot.

Of course, lack of money and time to yourself are major concerns for single home educating parents. Whether you work a few hours or exist entirely on benefits money is bound to be in short supply. Getting to grips with the benefit system is a complicated process and particularly horrible if you are having to do it in the middle of a crisis. I advise anyone in this situation to use C.A.B and join the single parent lists. There is a whole wealth of experience there, which is fantastic in terms of practical advice, and as a listening ear. Feeling part of a thriving group who have overcome so much between them is empowering and gives you hope for your future.

Money is more of an issue for some than others. I am aware that I am fortunate in that I have been able to stay on in my small but comfortable home in a familiar and pleasant area. It would be harder to be stuck in uncomfortable housing in unfriendly locations but being single and not tied to the school system can bring about a total rethink of your lives, and a total change of direction and some single parents have moved to friendlier inexpensive areas. I certainly found myself thinking differently about what

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was important in my life, both for me and for my son.

One of the most striking changes was that with no one getting up to go to work, or coming home in the early evening, the whole structure of our life changed. There was no routine. Mealtimes and bed times shifted around and I felt quite adrift for a while, until it began to feel like freedom. With no division between the working day and the evening we had to re-adjust. I noticed that somehow, there wasn't a natural time to get the house organised. I quickly realised that if I did all the "looking after" and

housework, I was going to end up exhausted. I needed to encourage my son to take on more responsibility. He was growing up, staying up later and I could have found myself turning into a full time servant. I haven't made a big deal of it. We don't have a rota or a list of jobs. With some encouragement he has quite naturally taken on some of the household tasks and responsibilities.

Things have changed and I think we are more like two people sharing a space and deciding together what to eat, when to shop etc. He's learned that I have more time to do what he wants if he does some of the stuff that needs to be done, and he enjoys taking a more adult role in the house. We negotiate and have agreed to a quiet time after nine, so that I can relax in the evenings.

With regard to lack of money, I try to take a positive approach to the situation – I have, after all, made a choice not to send my child to school, and one thing we have plenty of is time together. Sometimes my son looks at my sister's brand new company car with all the gadgets, her exotic holidays and regular meals out and becomes envious, but the way I see it, she works really long hours, and doesn't get much time to enjoy herself. I try to be aware that we get to do so many different things that families who work and go to school never find the time to do. We visit free galleries, and museums, go to music nights in our local art centre, or to schools performances at the Opera or concert halls, or cinema now and again. We get to go to the beautiful parks and gardens and woodlands and canals in the vicinity in the sunshine, or even take a trip to the seaside on hot days when other kids are stuck in school. What could be better than a hot afternoon playing in the paddling pools at the local park during the quiet times, with friends? Being able to do this kind of thing whenever you want has got to be worth missing out on buying the latest Playstation game as soon as it appears in the shop.

It's an attitude of mind, to enjoy what you have, and not always hanker after what others have, and it can be easier for home educated children because there isn't the same pressure for the newest gadgets or the right labels. Other families around are in a similar situation, and most people need to make similar economies. My son and I discuss what is

important to each of us, and try to put money aside for the things that make a difference to our lives.

I'm always impressed by the resourcefulness of home educators, and the internet mailing lists are a welcome source of information and inspiration. People swap information about bargains, free educational resources and events, and money saving ideas, and pass on books and equipment that is no longer needed.

I'm not saying that we don't sometimes miss having more money. There are times when it is hard, when those unexpected expenses come in, or when a fantastic opportunity arises that is too far over budget, but on a day to day basis it is possible to provide a good education and have a good time on a low income.

The other concern – that it wouldn't be good for us to spend so much time together, is something we have thought about a lot, but it hasn't been a problem as such. We do both need our space at times, but this has been something that we have been able to work around. I think there are a number of issues here – the need for children, especially boys to have good male role models and the chance to do activities in a not exclusively female environment, the need for everyone in the family to have enough social contact to meet their needs, and the need for parent and child to have space from each other.

The social issues for the child are probably much the same as for any other

home educating family but it can be harder to meet the parents need for company, and time alone if the child isn't ready to be independent. We have found quite a few things we can do together that we both enjoy that have helped me feel that I have a life too. One way of finding that balance has been to choose activities that bring pleasure to us both. We've tried the cinema, an evening class, music nights, and we've made agreements with each other to try things that the other would like to do, even if it isn't something we would have chosen ourselves. This has widened both our ideas about what we enjoy and is greatly helped if other friends are with us. We have also built up our network of friends through such things as volunteer work, which has given us both a chance to make new friendships.

We both recognise that we will each want to do some things that the other doesn't enjoy so we have needed to find ways to meet our separate needs. I take advantage of the times when my son is involved in supervised sports activity with the home education group to relax and chat to my friends in the café or to get out to the shops. We've made use of holiday time play schemes and even as my son has gone into his teens we have been able to find holiday courses that he has thoroughly enjoyed and that have also given me some time to myself. In the last year he has done film making, music technology and rock school, all of which have been affordable or even free.

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What an excellent chance to develop social skills to join in with a bunch of complete strangers with an interest in common. Many of these courses have been quite male orientated, so they have been useful in providing male role models and influences for my son, and are rather varied too, as his interests span rock music, water sports, first aid and steam railways! Most areas have a range of after school or holiday clubs and classes available, and things like Scouts and St. John's Ambulance Cadets or Sea Cadets are not expensive, and give you a chance to have some time apart from each other. As my son has got older he has become keen to try new activities with other people and to do things independently of me and I can see my role changing as he matures.

So now I can answer those questions for myself. Yes, it is possible to home educate as a single parent. Money is short, but it is mostly manageable, and there are other compensations in the free time to spend as a family having fun. More importantly I haven't found that my son and I are spending unhealthy amounts of time together. It can be healthy to have a close and trusting relationship with one parent, and to enjoy a mix of activities together with other people too and it has widened our interests and social circle as by sharing a little in each others hobbies, we have opened ourselves up to new friendships and experiences.

