

Homeschooling Education Strategies

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An Excerpt from Homeschooling in High School for Higher Education by David P. Byers Ph.D.

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When I was about 12 years old, my brother in-law gave me a chess set for Christmas. He then spent several hours teaching me how to play. As we played our first match, he told me that I was doing really well and that I was actually winning. I remember looking at the board and the pieces and wondering how I could possibly be winning when it was all I could do to remember the names of the pieces, how they moved, and how they captured one another. I wasn't even clear on how to actually win the game, which is probably why I ended up losing the first few (several) times.

However, as feeling muddled gave way to feeling like I was beginning to understand, I found myself being able to focus on the next level of learning about chess—strategy. Again, I had to start from the beginning and learn about basic strategy, such as controlling the middle of the board and the relative value of each piece before I could learn how to plan more than one move at a time. Eventually, I learned how to plan several moves in advance and to anticipate my opponent's moves, as well as how to re-calculate my strategy when my opponent didn't do what I thought he was going to do.

In many ways, starting to homeschool your children is like learning how to play chess. When we first start teaching our children at home, many of us probably experienced feeling muddled as the majority of our efforts were undoubtedly focused on trying to remember what we needed to do and how. Focusing our attention on the end result or “winning” the game, so to speak, was probably the furthest thing from our minds—we just wanted to survive! If someone told us that we were doing well, we were probably glad to hear it, but may have wished they would be a little more specific so we understood more about what we were doing. We may have wondered when we would really understand the game so we could learn to plan a strategy.

When my brother in-law helped me to develop my strategic skills for chess, he cleared the board of all but a few specific pieces. He gave me a knight, a bishop, a rook, and my queen while he had a comparable group of pieces and a king; my job was to learn how to use my pieces together to checkmate the king before he captured everything I had. Once I was successful and had “won”, he gave me different pieces in different combinations so I could learn to use them effectively too. Eventually, we put it all together using all of the pieces in a real game. Even when I lost, I learned!

If you are new to homeschooling, you may be still learning the basics of the game. Perhaps you've tried different teaching approaches in your homeschool program, such as textbooks, tutors, group classes, or distance

learning. Perhaps you've tried different schedules. Perhaps you've settled on one approach that seems to work well or perhaps you've adopted a little bit from a variety of sources and consider yourself eclectic!

If you've been homeschooling for a while, perhaps the fog is beginning to lift as you've figured out the "rules" of the education game and you've started developing your own strategy. Perhaps you feel as if you are still in a fog and employing a trial-and-error method of educating your children while you try to learn how to make all of the pieces work together. If you feel more like the latter than the former, don't worry, you're normal. Even if you've been at "it" for a while and still feel too overwhelmed to strategically plan your child's education, you're normal too!

Actually, the steps for learning how to strategically teach your child at home are in many ways the same that my brother-in-law used to teach me chess: learn a little bit at a time, practice what you know to become more proficient using the tools at hand, and then put it all to work with a better understanding of the big picture and the end goal. In chess, the goal is to "capture" the king, but what's the goal in education?

Truthfully, education has many goals although experts continue to try to agree about what they are. For your program and your children, only you can really determine what the end goal is. Have you ever thought about why you teach your children at home and what you want to ultimately achieve by doing so? If not, it might be worthwhile to spend a few minutes jotting down your thoughts. Sometimes defining the goal makes it easier to achieve it. And, it's perfectly okay to have more than one goal!

Once you have the end goal(s) in mind, you can then develop your strategy for each move and countermove along the way. In other words, knowing what you really want to accomplish by homeschooling your children, you'll find it much easier to plan your lessons and to determine what's important and what's not in your educational chess match. Happy learning!

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