

Choosing to home school

NZAGC national representative Rebecca Reckin has been home schooling her children, Caitlin, 10, and Jack, 8, for two years. She reports on the challenges of taking over as their teacher.

'Oh, I wouldn't have enough patience for that.'

That is the most common statement made whenever someone new finds out that we home educate. I am always quick to reply, 'Well, I don't have a huge amount of patience either, but you'd be surprised how rapidly you learn it!'

Previously, my daughter had attended the local school for two-and-a-half years, my son for six months. In some respects we were lucky with the school in that I had been welcomed in to initiate and teach a gifted programme there for two full days a week. The associate principal was fantastic: passionate about giftedness and gifted issues. She taught me how to teach, lesson plan and get along with a class full of children. I shared my knowledge of giftedness with her.

But regardless of how great our G&T programme was, my children could attend it for only one day a week and they still had issues within their classrooms. My daughter, Caitlin, was assessed at age four and then again at five-and-a-half as being gifted with mild dyslexia. My son, Jack, was assessed at age four as gifted. Both are very visual-spatial – which adds another dimension to my daughter's 'mild' dyslexia! Within the school environment both found it very difficult to form friendships. I attribute this mainly to the fact that in school, children are kept very much within their own age groups.

Caitlin has always been extremely mature in her outlook and in social communication. At the age of five she commented that all the other children rushed about at playtime, but she liked to 'walk and talk, and look at things'. While Caitlin was fortunate to have one or two good friends, they didn't really 'get' her and I think at times the relationships with them weren't hugely satisfying.

Educationally, because of her academic difficulties it was impossible for the school to contemplate moving Caitlin to a higher-level (older age group) classroom. She suffered from a lack of peer understanding and from the boredom that frequently set in when the thinking activities were just too slow or basic. Unfortunately, Caitlin also suffered from unhappiness and huge frustration from about five-and-a-half, because she realised that she wasn't learning to read as well or as quickly as she felt she ought to.

Jack didn't fit in with any of the other children. His 'friends' regularly ran away from him in the playground and one, whom he'd known since birth, told Jack that he'd only be his friend outside of school. Children so often find it very difficult to accept anyone even slightly different. Educationally, Jack was way ahead of the majority of new entrants. He was bored and would bring home two early readers (from a higher level than he was on in the classroom), and turn them upside down to read them.

I realise that these are not new issues for the majority of *Tall Poppies* readers. However, they affected us enough that, as a family, we made the decision to quit the public school system and go it alone.

Luckily for us, we haven't really been alone. The numbers of families choosing to home educate has been steadily

increasing over the past ten years. Between July 2008 and July 2009, the number of home schooled children in New Zealand increased by 4.4 per cent (according to official statistics). As at 1 July 2009 there were 6,787 home schooled students recorded on the Ministry of Education's database.

When we started out, there were six other families in our small beachside community in East Auckland who were actively home educating, with children ranging in age from two to fourteen years. We used to get together regularly and it was amazing to see how well the majority of these children got on, despite the vast age range. Very similar to Auckland Explorers kids! It was great to have the support and friendship of these other families and sure enough, a couple have become very close friends. When applying for exemption, their assistance and knowledge proved invaluable.

Having made the decision to home educate, a formal exemption must be obtained from the Ministry of Education for every child over the age of six before pulling them out of school. When applying, the parent needs to write a fairly comprehensive exemption application. This details exactly how you intend to teach your child; what resources you have at your disposal; what topics and subjects you plan to cover; and a brief overview of why it is that you have chosen to home educate.

A question frequently asked when people find out we home educate is: 'What about socialisation?' We have found that our children have more friends now – and a far better social life – than they ever had at school, probably in part because they have been able to mix within such a large age group. Caitlin and Jack have friends from both our local home schooling community and the school community – children they have met through after-school activities such as swimming, Keas and Cubs.

When we first started to home educate at the beginning of 2008, I tried a very school-like approach. Both children rebelled against such formality and so the next term I tried the complete opposite – an unschooling approach. Unschooling is when no formal 'school work' is undertaken at all. Instead, life is considered the best learning opportunity. For example, measuring, calculating, estimating and fractions can be taught when grocery shopping or baking. While I found that using only unschooling didn't work for our family, it is something that we have always done naturally and it's a wonderful complement to any form of education. Whether the kids are in the bath discussing displacement or atoms, or on a walk discussing weather or trees, life is a full-time learning opportunity. As parents, our gifted children remind us of this fact often – and usually from a very young age.

After altering my approach over several terms I found that, for us, the best method includes some formality mixed with flexibility. One of my hardest tasks as a mother/ home educator is to motivate myself in order to motivate my children every single day. It has helped to have some form of schedule so that the children have some valid expectations. Most days I still get the usual, 'Ow, do we have to?' However, because the starting time and school work are expected, this is usually a token moan from children who feel the need to keep me on my toes!

I teach both children at the same level, and fortunately for us this works extremely well. We work at a pace that is comfortable for them and as they grasp most concepts quickly, I find that we have cut out much of the 'mucking around' that's necessary in a classroom of children. Likewise, the fact that both children learn very visual-spatially means that instead of my continually drilling basic facts which they find hard to remember, or holding them back, we just continue our forward learning. I am able to teach them in ways that work well for them, and as with most gifted children, this includes letting them learn in leaps and bounds rather than have them work through each topic step by boring step!

For the children, the best part about home education is the fact that we can cover topics not normally dealt with until later in the school system. Geography is a huge hit: we learn about a new country each term. From borrowing library books, to downloading some of the many thousands of lesson plans found on the internet, home schooling

doesn't need to cost a huge amount. We can go on virtual tours of places we are learning about by simply logging on to Youtube. We create menus and cook a meal from each country; learn a dance or song; make crafts and learn some of the language. We collect stamps and currency from each country we 'visit' and so far the children have filled two A4 travel diaries. We have started psychics and science experimentation which the children also love.

We usually work four mornings a week and it's amazing how much schooling we can fit in during that time. We also volunteer at a local bird rescue one afternoon a week (when necessary); feed lambs a few times a week at our local regional park in springtime; and help out the Howick Historic Village education department with school groups. This is an all-round education for children who would have lost that spark and love of learning had they been stuck in formal education. They are learning to give back to the community and in the process have become skilled at communication with adults and children alike.

Home education is far from easy and has certainly challenged us as a family in ways unimaginable at the beginning. I often feel worn-out – even exhausted – by the constant companionship of my children (constant chatter more like). They attend school holiday programmes for one or two days during each term break and we swap our children within our local home school group so that we all have an afternoon to ourselves periodically or when needed.

I have gradually realised that my children will learn regardless of how well or how poorly I regard my teaching methods. Less and less am I concerned about keeping pace with the children's school peer group. My kids probably don't write as much as they would do in the classroom. However, gifted children are known for having writing issues so I'm not going to force it. When it is necessary they can, and do, write. This thought is reinforced by watching a good friend's home educated children – now aged 15 and 13 – and seeing how well they are doing now, even though in the past there have been similar concerns.

All in all, we are an extremely close and loving family who can communicate easily about any and all topics. I am able to instill respect, honesty and high morals while helping the children to develop and maintain their innate love of learning. Will we continue into college? I'm not sure as yet – although we certainly haven't ruled it out. If so, I may consider Cambridge exams – or not. It will depend upon numerous factors when we get to that stage. If university is required for my children's chosen career paths, one option is that they can enter as adult students from age 20 with maybe only one entrance exam required.

When we decided to pull the children out of school to home educate, our main reason was to ensure that our children's self-esteem and confidence would stay intact as they traversed the sometimes ruthless path that is growing up. When I look at my children bargaining with a local retailer, standing in front of their cub pack to teach a song, or simply laughing and playing with their friends, I know that so far we have achieved this, our main goal.