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My Education in Home Schooling

*Teaching kids at home can be terrifying, but it's sure to grow as families demand more choice*

By [QUINN CUMMINGS](http://online.wsj.com/search/term.html?KEYWORDS=QUINN+CUMMINGS&bylinesearch=true)

I don't know how most people spend their second morning home schooling. I spent mine hyperventilating into a paper bag. After less than 24 hours of educating my child at home, I was struck by the realization that I wasn't up to the task and should move immediately to Plan B. Except I didn't have a Plan B.

Leo Acadia

For two years leading up to this I had watched my daughter convince experienced, well-meaning teachers that she was incapable of mastering long division when, in fact, she simply didn't like long division. Alice's ploy raised a larger concern: At age 9, she appeared to be cruising along in school without actually doing any work. To my sorrow, it appeared I had given birth to myself, another pleasant slacker fated to a lifetime of successfully studying for midterms between classes until barely paying attention stopped working. Alice wasn't learning how to learn, she was learning how to coast. Maybe I could wait and see if she came to learning on her own. Or maybe she needed a different kind of education.

Her father and I checked out a few middle-school programs known for their rigor. Each promised to challenge Alice academically but also promised hours of homework every night. I'm greedy. I want my child challenged, but I don't want her staying up until 2 a.m. every night translating "The Aeneid." I knew we had a small window of opportunity to teach Alice to love learning, but I also knew there was an equally small window for her to be a child. Her academic options seemed to lie on either side of a wide chasm: a fluffy pillow on one side, a jackhammer on the other. I tried home schooling because I couldn't find a better alternative.

It turns out I'm not alone. Today in the U.S., some two million children are home schooled, growing at an annual rate of 7% to 15% for over a decade, according to the president of the National Home Education Research Institute. The term "home schooler" once implied "isolationist religious zealot" or "off-the-grid anarchist who makes her own yogurt." Today, it also means military parents who hate to see their kids keep changing schools; or the family with a future Olympian who ice skates five hours a day; or your cousin whose daughter is gifted but has a learning disability. The average home schooler is no longer a sideshow oddity.

"I could never ever teach math," more than a few parents told me in horror at the very idea of home schooling. Or science. Or a foreign language. But mostly, it was math. Here's my secret: I can't teach math either. Once they start calling them integers instead of numbers, I recoil as from a fat, angry snake, which is why Alice takes an online math class, with great lashings of help from her father.

But the biggest thing people want to talk about is socialization. Everyone is worried that I keep my child in a crate with three air holes punched in it and won't let her have friends until she gets her AARP card. There's a long answer, of course, but I'll sum it up this way: Homo sapiens have walked the Earth for at least 130,000 years and, in this time, they learned to be human from their elders, not from their peers. Mandatory education in the U.S. is less than 150 years old. Learning to be a productive adult human by spending a third of every day with other kids might be a good idea, but it's too soon to tell. I'm still unsure that the people best equipped to teach a 14-year-old boy how to be a man are other 14-year-old boys.

In fact, home-schooled kids are just as socialized as other children. They certainly seem to grow up to be, and feel, fully engaged. One study, by a Canadian home-schooling group, found that 67% of formerly home-schooled adult respondents said they are "very happy," as opposed to the general population's 43%. Another study, published in the Journal of College Admission, found that home-schooled students perform better on their ACTs, have higher college GPAs and are more likely to graduate in four years.

A girl doing a homework

I shared many of the negative preconceptions before we began home schooling, but I can see now that my kid is as socially well adjusted as the dozens of other kids she hangs out with. (Her mother still needs work.)

As we approached the end of our first year home schooling, we asked ourselves whether Alice should continue the experiment or return to what many of our friends still call "real school." At this point it no longer seemed to us like a binary decision. It was less a matter of either/or than of how-much-of-each.

I suspect that many Americans will reach the same conclusion as they adapt to new social and economic realities. Online classes have already become part of an extended curriculum for many students. In the iTunes version of public education, relevant learning experiences will originate from the large redbrick building down the street, from a recreation center downtown, from a music studio in Seattle or a lecture hall in London. As our habits evolve, it won't be home schooling as we've known it, but it won't be brick-and-mortar schooling, either. I call it "roam schooling."

Imagine that your high-school junior spends half of every day at the brick-and-mortar school up the street. Two afternoons a week, he logs into an art-history seminar being taught by a grad student in Paris. He takes computer animation classes at the local college, sings in the church choir and dives at the community pool. He studies Web design on YouTube. He and three classmates see a tutor at the public library who preps them for AP Chemistry. He practices Spanish on Skype and takes cooking lessons at a nearby restaurant every Saturday morning.

Is this home schooling or regular school? Who cares? He's learning. More important, his curriculum hits the basics but also works for him. Nobody expects all young people to download the same 20 or 30 songs on iTunes. Why should they be limited to the same dozen or so classes for school? And if you think that public education will never change because it's too big, I'd point out that the music business looked like an invincible Goliath before digital technology raised its slingshot.

Some lessons are best learned at a kitchen table, others in a lecture hall, a chemistry lab or a gym. It would be nice if students everywhere had access to every option, and more of them will, I expect, over the next decade. With each passing year, the division between home schooling and institutional schooling will continue to dissolve. We will go to the education, and the education will come to us. The bad news is that it doesn't work that way yet. The good news is that we get to build it.

—Adapted from Ms. Cummings's "The Year of Learning Dangerously: Adventures in Homeschooling," which will be published on Aug. 7. Follow her on Twitter: @[quinncy](http://twitter.com/quinncy).

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