100 Top Picks for Homeschool Curriculum

Choosing the Right Curriculum and Approach for Your Child's Learning Style

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Note: Contact information and prices listed for resources in the following chapters are the most current information available from publishers at the time this book is written. You will need to confirm current price information when you make your purchases.

9 10 11 12 13 14 15 10 09 08

Dedication

To the thousands of dedicated homeschoolers who have resisted the impulse to imitate “real schools” and have chosen instead to figure out what is best for each of their children, even if it meant writing their own curriculum. You have made the world of homeschool curriculum far richer than the most well-funded schools in the world.

—Cathy Duffy

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How on Earth Do I Figure Out What Curriculum to Use?

One of the saddest sights I've ever seen was opening day of a three-day homeschool convention. Day one had been designated only for new homeschoolers. Five hundred or more raw homeschooling recruits streamed into an exhibit hall featuring well over one hundred different vendors. Where to even start? Each vendor, naturally, claimed that his or her products were absolutely essential and the best thing on the market. If the newcomers had come with unlimited resources, they could easily have dropped a few thousand dollars at the first few displays they visited. I'm certain many felt overwhelming guilt when they did not buy what they were told they needed. That's probably why so many were in tears after the first few hours of the convention.

They knew they needed to buy curriculum, but how on earth could they figure out which one to buy when they didn't even know what they needed to teach? The escape route for many beginners is to simply go to the larger companies that have complete packages for each grade level. Whatever grade the child would have been enrolled in next year at the local school becomes the grade level of the curriculum purchased.

Sometimes, but not often enough, representatives of these major publishers will take time to explain to inquirers that even if they sell a "fourth grade" package, such a package might not be the best choice for this particular child. A nine-year-old might need fifth-grade-level math and third-grade-level reading material because math comes easily to him and reading does not.

That doesn't make him a poor student or a "problem." It does mean that he's a fairly normal child, whatever "normal" means. After all, our children are not standardized products. None of them look alike (at least not much) on the outside, so why should we expect them to be alike on the inside—the way they learn, their interests, their abilities, and their temperaments?

One of the beauties of homeschooling is that it allows us to recognize and nurture each one of our very special individual children. We have the glorious opportunity to help them figure out who they are, what they want to be, and how they might get there.

In homeschooling, we can take detours unimaginable in the traditional classroom. If a nine-year-old boy is interested in rocket science, homeschooling parents can nurture that interest by allowing him to move ahead of grade level science topics into this more specialized area. They can help him search the library for biographies and other books related to the subject. They can supervise and assist him while he builds his own rockets, fiddles with fuel cells, designs recovery parachutes, estimates trajectories, and learns safety precautions.

That fourteen-year-old girl who wants to be a veterinarian can arrange her "school" schedule so that she works two days a week with the local vet, getting hands-on experience in her potential career. She'll know for certain by the end of high school whether or not she really wants to spend all those years (and all that money) in college to achieve her goal. Her other schooling can also be designed to support her budding career. She can research and write about animals, physiology, and related topics. She might study uses of and attitudes toward different animals within different cultures. Math and economics studies might include cost comparisons for animal care in traditional zoos versus "natural" parks.

I think you get the idea. Asking a supplier for a standardized package of curriculum ignores the individuality and special needs and interests of your child.

You can see this more easily if you compare feeding your child's body to feeding his mind. You don't expect all children to eat exactly the same amounts and types of food. Some have particular food allergies. All have preferences and dislikes. And some burn up twice as many calories as others.

Likewise, mental nourishment should take into consideration the strengths and weaknesses of each child—teaching to their strengths and helping to overcome weak areas. It should have extra "nourishment" for those special areas of interest. It should be provided at a pace a child can handle—not too slow, not too fast.

If you are a new homeschooling parent, and you expected to just purchase a packaged curriculum and be done with it, this sounds like bad news. Where on earth do you begin? There are far too many choices. How do you know what your child needs? How can you figure this out?

That's the purpose of this book. First, in chapter 2 we will cover some basic approaches you might wish to use: traditional textbooks, Charlotte Mason/real books education, classical education, unit study, unschooling, independent study, working under an umbrella program, or an eclectic mixture of approaches.

I'll walk you through some questions that will help you identify which approach (or mixture of approaches) is best for you. In chapter 3, I have created examples for you as if I were filling in the charts and answering the questions in chapter 2 myself. This should give you a clear idea of how to proceed.

Then, in chapter 4, I help you narrow things down even further by identifying your children's learning styles and figuring out what features you should be looking for in a curriculum to achieve the best fit for each child.

Many parents wonder what should be covered at each grade level, especially if they choose "ungraded" curriculum. Are you doing enough? Too much? Might your child's frustration be due to expectations that are beyond his maturity level? In chapter 5 I discuss academic goals and how to figure out what you should cover in each subject area.

My purpose with these first few chapters is to help you become goal-oriented rather than "curriculum driven." Too many new homeschoolers let that grade-level package of curriculum they purchased dictate the content, methods, and even the schedule they follow. In other words, the curriculum itself drives their homeschooling.

To be goal oriented means working in almost a reverse fashion. You determine what your children need to learn. You decide what methods to use. And you set up your own schedule.

Then you find curriculum that has the content and methodology that fits *your* agenda, and you use it on your own timetable.

After you use the first few chapters to figure out what content and methods are right for your children, you will be ready to explore my Top 100 curriculum choices in chapter 6 to see what is likely to fit your situation. To make this easy, I have included charts that help you readily identify which resources have the features that you will be looking for, features you will have already identified in the early chapters of this book.

Each product featured as a Top Pick also has a complete review in the following chapters. The page number of the review is in the last column of the Top Picks charts. Select likely candidates from the charts, read the full reviews, then make your decisions. I have also included ordering and contact information in each review so you will know how to actually get your hands on each resource.

Obviously, there are many more products than the Top 100 that I have chosen for this book. You might have a specialized need or a specialized topic that is not addressed by any of these resources. If so, you might want to consult the Web site at www.CathyDuffyReviews.com for more possibilities.

Please fight the temptation to jump right to the chart of Top Picks and the reviews! Take the time to work out your own philosophy of education and discover what you really should be doing with your children before exposing yourself to the temptation of what is still an overwhelming number of resources from which to choose. I think you'll enjoy the journey of personal discovery that happens along the way.

2

“Drill and Kill,” “Real Books,” “Delight-Directed Studies” … What's Best?

Jane Jones has just shown up at her first homeschool support group meeting. One of the moms is sharing about the fantastic unit study they’ve just completed on trains. Since they live in the Sacramento area of California, they visited the marvelous train museum in Old Sacramento. A trip on the modern Amtrak train provided a contrast to the old trains her children explored at the museum. Books they read about the building of the transcontinental railroad and development of the frontier provided the historical background. The children learned a few “railroad songs” and each painted a picture of his or her favorite old train. It was great fun and a terrific way to learn history.

Listening to this, Jane feels absolutely overwhelmed. How on earth can she do that sort of study? How would she know what to do? How could she tell if her children were learning anything? What about meeting requirements? What Jane really wants to know right now is what phonics program works best. If she has to make up a unit study for every topic, homeschooling just isn’t going to work for her family!

It is so easy to be intimidated into thinking that your homeschool should mimic those of seasoned veterans. They seem to have a handle on things. Their kids are impressive. They’re obviously doing something right. But, the question you really need to consider is whether or not what they are doing is right for you.

It doesn’t take long to figure out that veteran homeschoolers are, overall, very independent and strong-minded parents. Chances are you could poll half a dozen such moms and discover they have half a dozen different ways they homeschool. There is no single *right* way to homeschool that everyone figures out after a few years.

In fact, the diversity of resources and methods is one of the beauties of homeschooling. Need a cassette tape to teach parts of the body to your child who just loves to sing all the time? Need a math program that uses colorful blocks to teach multiplication for that child who just has to *see* how math works and not just memorize rules? Need a science program that lets you teach all your children the same topic at the same time? You name it, and there's likely something in the homeschool marketplace to meet your requirements.

But how do you figure out what you need? You can try to find a professional curriculum counselor to work through this with you. That's great if there's one available in your area and you can afford it. However, if that's not practical for you, the material in chapters 4 and 5 will help you sort this out by addressing curriculum selection from the two most important

perspectives: what fits with your family's philosophy of education, and what works for each of your children's learning styles.

Establishing Your Own “Philosophy of Education”

We’ll start at the family level to sort out some “big picture” ideas about education. What we come up with is actually a philosophy of education. Don’t let the word *philosophy* turn you off, because figuring out a philosophy of education is not as difficult as it sounds. Someone once remarked that philosophy is nothing more than common sense dressed up in fancy dress clothes.

We will start with some common sense questions. I want you to really think this through as you read, so there are lines on which you can write down your thoughts as you consider these questions.

Content

Let's begin with a question about the big picture—about what the overall content of “school” should be.

What do you think is most important for your children to learn?

You are not likely to come up with just one answer to this question. Instead, you will come up with a number of things you consider important. Before you start writing, here are a few more questions that might help you think about content:

1. If there were no laws requiring you to educate your child, what would you want them to learn anyway?
2. Would that list include strong academics, work skills, study habits, a love for reading, familiarity with Scripture, physical fitness, artistic expression, practical life skills, computer knowledge, ethical attitudes?
3. What else might you add?

At this point you should be writing down only broad categories rather than specifics such as “I want my child to learn to write poetry in fifth grade.” Your list might include words, phrases, or sentences. For example, you might write out a list with such items as:

- college prep academics
- strong independent study habits
- extensive reading from many genres
- Scripture study and memorization
- art appreciation and expression
- familiarity with computer programs such as Microsoft Word and Excel

Or you might write your ideas more expansively:

- I want my children to grow up to be self-directed learners who know how to teach themselves.
- I want my children to love to learn, so I want learning to be as fun as we can make it.
- I want my children to have high aspirations for both college and career.
- I want my children to have a virtuous character and a strong ethical foundation.
- I want my children to develop habits of physical fitness that will stick with them all their lives.
- I want my children to take challenging academic courses for high school so they will have opportunities to win scholarships to prestigious colleges.

Now it's time to write down your own thoughts. But make an extra copy of the blank chart that follows before you begin!

Once you have made your list, go back through and prioritize the ideas. Go through first and mark each idea with a 1, 2, or 3, with 1 identifying a top level priority, 2 a mid-level priority, and 3 a lower level priority. You might find yourself only writing down items that you would give a level 1 or 2 priority, and that's OK. Once you've made your list, if it is helpful, use the second copy of the chart to rewrite the list with level 1 items at the top of the list. You might automatically write these down with top priorities first. In that case, there's no need to rewrite them.

If you need to see what this might look like, you can jump ahead to the next chapter for a sample, but make sure to come back here and create your own list.

Priorities

I want my children to:	Priority Level

Methods

Now let's consider ideas about methods.

How do you think learning should happen?

Keep in mind that answers to this question are heavily influenced by your own children and your own experiences. If you have very compliant children who love to play school just for fun, you might naturally think learning should always happen in traditional school fashion. But that's not your only choice. If you have a rowdy group of very active children, you might already be thinking they need lots of activity, movement, and freedom in their schooling. This question might be difficult to answer at this point because you simply haven't thought about or investigated possible options. If so, jot down any ideas you have now and then come back to this question after you've read the rest of this chapter about some possible approaches you might want to use.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

How do you want to teach or "run your school"?

As you consider this question, you will probably start to see that what you believe about content and methods shapes your thinking about how you will actually do things. For example, if you consider it a high priority that your children learn structure and discipline, you are more likely to follow a predictable schedule and use tests on a regular basis. On the other hand, if you put a higher value on developing creativity and delight in learning, you might keep the schedule flexible so your child can concentrate on that project she started without stopping to complete her language workbook exercise.

The following questions will help you think through how you might operate. Make some notes as you consider each question. You might also need to come back to this section after you've read through the various approaches summarized in the remainder of this chapter and have considered which one(s) will work best for you.

1. Do you want to try to teach most or all of your children together, at least for some subjects?

_____

_____

2. How much of the time do you want (or are you able) to work directly with your children?

_____

_____

3. How much of the time do you expect your children to work independently? (Caution: Don't expect children below about age 8 to do a lot of independent work.)

_____

_____

4. Do you want to use real books (biographies, historical novels, books written about particular science topics, etc.) as part of your curriculum?

_____

_____

5. Do you want to include field trips? What type of field trips?

_____

_____

6. Do you like to "make up" curriculum as you go, adapting to the needs and interests of your children, or do you prefer things well planned out in advance?

_____

_____

7. Do you need a set schedule to get things done, or would you prefer more flexibility?

_____

_____

8. Do you prefer a curriculum that is thoroughly laid out with lesson plans that tell you what to do when or do you prefer just an outline to follow?

_____

_____

9. Any additional thoughts about how you want to operate?

_____

_____

Which Approach to Education Should I Use?

Writing down your thoughts about the above questions should have helped you clarify some of your goals and preferences. Now you can use the following "Approaches to Learning" chart to begin to identify which of the possible approaches to homeschooling are most likely to work for you.

The chart lists possible features and/or methods you might be looking for. When you read one that reflects your own ideas, move over to the boxes to the right of the statement and circle every number in that row. This means that this targeted feature or method is present to some extent in each approach for which there is a number. If the box is gray, that means that this feature or method is not characteristic of that approach. For example: "predictable structure" is not something you usually find in unit studies. Unit studies tend to use a variety of books and activities, often emphasizing different subject areas from day to day. So the box under unit studies across from "predictable structure" is grayed out. Some characteristics are found in resources for a particular approach some of the time, but not always. Those boxes have the number ".5". For example, Charlotte Mason methodology doesn't always translate into a

predictable structure. Some Charlotte Mason resources have predictable structure and some don't. In such cases, the ".5" gives this feature "half credit" when you add up your boxes.

I prefer:	Traditional	Charlotte Mason	Classical	Unit Study	Unschooling	Independent Study	Eclectic	Umbrella Program
predictable structure.	1	.5	1			1	1	1
that children have many real life experiences for learning—nature studies in the woods, building projects, etc.		1	.5	1	1	1	1	
children read historical novels and biographies rather than textbooks.		1	1	1	1		1	
a program that is thoroughly laid out for the teacher and provides a feeling of security.	1					1		1
a grammar program that emphasizes rules and memorization	1		1			1	.5	1
workbooks, teachers manuals, and answer keys for most or all subjects.	1					1	.5	1
children to work independently as much as possible.	.5				1	1	.5	.5
mental training and mental discipline have higher priority than stimulating curiosity and interest.	1		.5			1	.5	.5
curriculum that ensures my children cover the same things other school children might be learning.	1					1	.5	1
informal evaluation of my child by talking over what they've read and looking at their work rather than by testing.		1	1	1	1		.5	
that my young children do a significant amount of memorization, repetition, and recitation.	.5		.5			.5	.5	.5
my teen to get a strong background in the great books of western civilization.		.5	1	.5	.5	.5	.5	.5
to emphasize developing a love for learning *more than* the ability to work in a structured, methodical way.		1		1	1		.5	
that teens develop a "life of the mind" more than vocational skills.	.5	1	1	1	.5	.5	.5	.5
presenting my children with information to learn rather than having them choose their own topics to investigate.	1	.5	1	.5		1	.5	1
highly structured resources that "script" what teacher/parent and child are supposed to say and do.	.5		.5			.5	.5	.5
lots of discussion and interaction in the learning process.		1	1	1	.5		1	.5
covering subjects (e.g., history, science, religion) at the same time with the same material with as many of my children as possible.		1	1	1			1	
making connections between different subject areas, showing relationships, and viewing that as a high priority in learning.		1	1	1	1		.5	
project-based learning.		.5		1	1		.5	
to teach my children one-on-one as much as possible	1	.5	.5		.5		1	1
that my children learn grammar in a casual manner—e.g., some instruction, use of a grammar handbook, then working on mastery in their own writing.		.5		1	1		.5	
Totals for each column for this page:								

I prefer:	Traditional	Charlotte Mason	Classical	Unit Study	Unschooling	Independent Study	Eclectic	Umbrella Program
to keep structure to a minimum so that my children and I are able to pursue interesting learning ideas when they arise.		.5		.5	1		.5	
to make frequent field trips an essential part of schooling.	.5	1	.5	.5	1		.5	
to give my children freedom to determine what they will study and when and how they will do so.				.5	1		.5	
An "investigative" approach that stimulates my children to pursue information and research on their own.		.5		1	1	.5	.5	
flexible curriculum and schedules so I can capitalize on "teachable moments."		.5	.5	1	1		.5	
a mixture of structured learning and experiential/discovery learning.		1		1			1	
to set my own goals and schedule rather than adopting someone else's.		.5	.5	.5	1		.5	
to select curriculum/methods that suit my child's learning style rather than curriculum/methods widely recognized and accepted by authorities.		.5	.5	1	1		.5	
that computer-based learning be a significant part of the curriculum.	.5					.5		.5
A. Total for each column for this page								
B. Totals for columns from first page								
Total for each column: add line A and B and enter total as the numerator (top number) of the fraction	11	15.5	14.5	17	17	12	18	11
Optional: Percentage for each column (divide numerator by denominator)								

After you've gone through the entire chart, add up the total in each column. Keep in mind that the column with the highest number doesn't win. The number in the denominator of the fraction at the bottom of each column is the number of possible boxes you could have checked that reflect this particular approach to education. The actual number you checked will be the numerator (top number) of the fraction—what you write in. If you look only at your total in each box, the "eclectic" approach is likely to come out on top every time since there are so many boxes (possible total of eighteen) you might check. That could be very misleading. Instead, you need to look at the fraction. Any approach with almost all the possible numbers selected is likely to be in line with your philosophy of education, and there might be more than one!

(If you're mathematically minded, divide the numerator by the denominator for each column total. You will then have percentage numbers for each column that you can easily compare.)

The goal is to identify the approach or approaches that are most likely to appeal to you. If you see that you have circled many numbers under both traditional and classical education, and few under unschooling or unit studies, you've already narrowed your likely curriculum choices dramatically.

It is important to repeat that you need not select only one approach to use. Many experienced homeschoolers blend one or more approaches. Some blend approaches so much that we call them "eclectic" homeschoolers.

Next, read the descriptions for the different education approaches to verify your conclusions from the chart. As you read through these descriptions, you will be refining your own educational philosophy.

Traditional

A traditionalist might use either textbooks or worktexts (worktexts contain both instruction and workpages to be completed by students in a single book), but there are distinct books for each subject area: math, language arts (often broken down further into separate spelling, grammar, composition, literature, and vocabulary books), history, science, etc. These books are usually written for use in regular school classrooms, although the publisher might have taken homeschool use into consideration.

When used as the publisher intends, such curricula generally help a homeschool function much like a regular day school. Children will be studying what many other students at their grade level are studying.

In most cases teacher's manuals, answer keys, and other teaching aids are available. Sometimes these are so classroom oriented that they are of little use to the homeschooling parent, but other times they are essential to the program. For example, Bob Jones University Press's language courses are designed to be taught from the teacher's manuals. Student books are simply adjuncts containing practice exercises or activities that support the course instruction found only in the teacher's manuals.

Traditional programs generally give parents a sense of security while helping establish routines and teaching methods. They sometimes make homeschooling a less frightening venture because the curriculum seems somewhat like what parents themselves used in school.

Many parents begin with a traditional approach, gradually shifting to other approaches as they gain experience. Others find a traditional approach easier for record keeping, scheduling, and accountability.

Some parents choose traditional approaches that allow their children to work independently because of time constraints or learning styles. Some students (especially those beginning homeschool past the primary grades) actually prefer this type of approach because it feels familiar and comfortable for them.

However, traditional curricula can take more time to use since they often include activities, presentations, practice, and review that are needed when teaching an entire classroom of children. Even self-paced programs such as Alpha Omega *LIFEPAC*s—not designed for an entire class to use together—target the amount of practice and review to the average classroom situation. For example, traditional grammar programs frequently reteach and review the same grammar concepts year after year.

Sometimes traditionalists are chided for recreating “school at home” because the experience varies little from that of regular day school settings. Parents who slavishly follow such a curriculum often miss out on those special moments when a child comes up with a question that begs for immediate exploration. Many parents, however, manage to find a good balance using traditional curricula while still retaining enough flexibility to respond to teachable moments when they arise.

Some parents are just “trying out” the idea of homeschooling. They figure that if it doesn’t work for them, they’ll put their children back in school next year. These parents often want to use a traditional curriculum, frequently coupled with a fairly consistent schedule similar to that of day schools, so their children can easily integrate into a regular day school classroom in the future if need be. The big caution here is that the traditional methods might make the

homeschool experience boring and unappealing, creating a self-defeating experience from the beginning.

The choice is rarely all or nothing when it comes to traditional curriculum. While some umbrella programs use traditional curricula (see that category further on in this chapter), most homeschoolers are free to choose one or more traditional resources along with resources that might reflect other approaches, as I describe under the "Eclectic" approach later in this section.

Examples of traditional curriculum publishers: A Beka Book, Bob Jones University Press, Modern Curriculum Press, Scott Foresman, McDougal Littell, Houghton Mifflin, Alpha Omega *LIFEPAC* Curriculum, School of Tomorrow *PACE* curriculum, and Rod and Staff.

Charlotte Mason

Charlotte Mason was a turn-of-the-century educator who frequently used the term *twaddle* to describe much of what passed for curriculum content in traditional texts as a useless waste of a child's time and energy. For example, she warned against children's history textbooks saying, "… for this intelligent teaching of history, eschew, in the first place, nearly all history books written expressly for children … and as for what are called children's books, the children of educated parents are able to understand history written with literary power, and are not attracted by the twaddle of reading-made-easy little history books."[1]

Through her many years of teaching, she determined that there were better ways to teach children that stimulated a love for learning and helped children retain knowledge more effectively than traditional methods, all while respecting the nature of the child. She believed in a child's innate ability and desire to learn and the need for teachers to restrain themselves from controlling all learning. Mason says: "The children might echo Wordsworth's complaint of 'the world,' and say, the teacher is too much with us, late and soon. Everything is directed, expected, suggested. No other personality out of book, picture, or song, no, not even that of Nature herself, can get at the children without the mediation of the teacher. No room is left for spontaneity or personal initiation on their part."[2]

Mason wrote about the importance of nature walks and outdoor learning. Throughout her writings, she stresses how much children learn through their own senses, especially as they interact with nature. To make that happen, children must be given lots of time for exercise and outdoor exploration that should not be eliminated in favor of more hours in the "school room."

Even so, Mason was not an advocate of unschooling. She believed in directed learning as well as teaching a child self-discipline and good habits. She says, "Even the child who has gained the habit of attention to *things*, finds *words* a weariness. This is a turning-point in the child's life, and the moment for the mother's tact and vigilance…. Never let the child *dawdle* over copybook or sum, sit dreaming with his book before him. When a child grows stupid over a lesson, it is time to put it away. Let him do another lesson as unlike the last as possible, and then go back with freshened wits to his unfinished task."[3]

Mason is well known for her use of narration rather than workbooks. She outlines the idea:

> When the child is six … let him narrate the fairytale which has been read to him episode by episode, upon one hearing of each; the Bible tale read to him in the words of the Bible; the well-written animal story; or all about other lands from some such

> volumes as *The World at Home.* The seven-year-old boy will have begun to read for himself, but must get most of his intellectual nutriment, by ear, certainly, but read to him out of books. Geography, sketches from ancient history, *Robinson Crusoe, The Pilgrim's Progress, Tanglewood Tales, Heroes of Asgard*, and much of the same calibre, will occupy him until he is eight…. He should have no book which is not a child's classic; and … it must not be diluted with talk or broken up with questions, but given to the boy in fit portions as wholesome meat for his mind, in the full trust that a child's mind is able to deal with its proper food. [The teacher should read] two or three pages, enough to include an episode; after that, let her call upon the children to narrate.[4]

The child then retells what has been read in his own words.

Mason also emphasized the importance of developing the imagination and the value of making connections between topics studied to enhance memory. She says, "If the business of teaching be to furnish the child with ideas, any teaching which does not leave him possessed of a new mental image has, by so far, missed its mark. Now, just think of the listless way in which the children too often drag through reading and tables, geography and sums, and you will see that it is a rare thing for any part of any lesson to flash upon them with the vividness which leaves a mental picture behind. It is not too much to say that a morning in which a child receives no new idea is a morning wasted, however closely the little student has been kept at his books."[5]

Charlotte Mason's ideas are generally implemented in the elementary grade levels. Hallmarks of a Charlotte Mason approach to education are the use of real books rather than textbooks for reading, history, geography, and science; the narration technique; nature learning; hands-on learning; making connections between various topics; inclusion of study of the fine arts; and a focus upon development of good habits and a love for learning in children.

Charlotte Mason's ideas about education are incorporated into many unit studies to varying degrees, and that would be the easiest way to get started in this methodology. However, if you don't want to use a unit study, you can still learn how to easily implement Mason's ideas by reading one or more of the following books on her methodology.

To read more about Charlotte Mason's ideas:

- *A Charlotte Mason Education* and *More Charlotte Mason Education* by Catherine Levison (Champion Press, Ltd., 4308 Blueberry Road, Fredonia, WI 53021; 262-692-3897; e-mail: info@championpress.com, Web site: www.championpress.com)—These are very practical, to-the-point books that will quickly help you understand Mason's methods.
- *A Charlotte Mason Companion* by Karen Andreola (Charlotte Mason Research and Supply, P.O. Box 758, Union, ME 04862; www.charlottemason.com)—Andreola presents an in-depth journey through Mason's philosophy of education.
- *Real Learning: Education in the Heart of the Home*, by Elizabeth Foss (By Way of the Family Press, 1090 Payne Avenue, St. Paul, MN 55101; 651-778-0287; www.bywayofthefamily.com)—This practical guide helps Catholic homeschoolers implement Mason's ideas.

Classical

Classical education is based on models of learning that go back to the Middle Ages, although its earliest roots lay in the Greek and Roman civilizations. Dorothy Sayers was one of a number of scholars who repopularized this method of learning in the twentieth century. Two current proponents of classical education, Gene Veith Jr. and Andrew Kern, tell us in the introduction to their book on the subject: "Classical education provides a conceptual framework for mastering the entire range of objective knowledge. It also offers a theory of human character development, and it contains a teaching methodology that is demonstrably effective and eminently practical."[6] They go on to tell us, "Classical education cultivates wisdom and virtue by nourishing the soul on truth, goodness and beauty."[7]

Personally, I think the greatest value of classical education is that it engages learners with the most important ideas—ideas about God, about life, about purpose. Classical education challenges the vocational orientation of most modern education by concentrating on learning that forms the inner person. At the same time, classical students learn how to think, how to learn independently, and how to present their own ideas—all of which ultimately prepares them for a wide range of vocations.

Veith and Kern also tell us, "The substance of classical education is the liberal arts curriculum."[8] Among those "arts" are three stages or categories grouped as the trivium. The trivium's three stages are labeled grammar, logic or dialectic, and rhetoric. They provide a sequential focus for education in the elementary through high school years. You start with the grammar stage and work up through the rhetoric stage.

The word *grammar* as used within classical education means much more than the nuts and bolts of a language. Rather, it is the basic structure, skills, and knowledge of any subject. Thus, in the elementary grades a child learns the grammar of math, language arts, social studies, science, and, possibly, religion and other electives.

In the logic or dialectic stage, students analyze information and make connections. Rhetoric describes the stage where the young person has assimilated knowledge, thought creatively about what he or she has learned, and now expresses his or her own ideas through speech and writing at what would likely be considered adult levels.

Some classical education proponents follow the progression of the trivium, making significant changes in methods and materials as they move through the stages. Others tend to mix the stages; for example, children in elementary grades might participate in Socratic discussions (dialectic type activity) alongside studies of basic English grammar.

A major component of classical education for dialectic purposes is the reading and discussion of real books. Consequently, "Good Books" and "Great Books" programs have been developed that use classic fiction and nonfiction titles both for knowledge and as springboards into the world of ideas and questions. Socratic dialogues are used to stimulate students to think about what they have read, to work through important questions, and to move to higher levels of thinking.

There are actual lists of the Good Books and the Great Books, with the former identifying books appropriate for younger children through adults and the latter listing books for teens and adults. Some classical programs, particularly at high school level, work with books from these

lists, while others apply the methods to their own selection of books. The following Web sites have lists or links to Great and Good Books.

Great Books lists:

- www.classicalhomeschooling.org/celoop/100.html
- http://books.mirror.org/gb.home.html
- www.anova.org
- www.interleaves.org/~rteeter/greatbks.html
- www.geocities.com/Athens/Atlantis/4360

Good Books lists:

- www.classicalhomeschooling.org/celoop/1000.html
- www.angelicum.net/html/the_good_books_in_print_list.html (for K–8)
- www.ccel.org/index/classics.html (links to books in electronic format)

Other classical education programs, especially for the elementary grades, focus on other learning strategies more than on Good Books or Great Books. For example, some follow Dorothy Sayers' beliefs about children's ability to memorize in the grammar stage, so they build much of their curriculum around memorization as a means of obtaining knowledge.

Personally, I believe that the goal of acquiring knowledge and skills at the grammar level does not necessarily dictate any particular methodology, so all these variations might be appropriate for building a foundation to move on to dialectic and rhetoric stages.

An even larger question is the role of classical languages in classical education. Historically, study of Latin and Greek was always at the foundation of classical education. More recently, emphasis on the structure of the trivium and reading the Great Books seems to have displaced the study of Greek almost entirely and even Latin to some extent.

As you can see, there is quite a bit of discussion (and even disagreement) about the nature of classical education. It will be up to you to decide which elements of a classical education are most important to you. One thing to keep in mind is that classical education generally requires more direct instruction and interaction than do some other approaches. It is often more parent controlled and directed than other approaches.

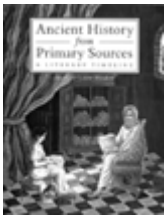
See the following to read more about classical education:

The Well-Trained Mind, 2004 revised edition, by Jessie Wise and Susan Wise Bauer, (W.W. Norton & Co.; order through bookstores or distributors) $39.95

This is a nonsectarian book that lays out comprehensive, detailed classical education programs for all grade levels with a strong college-prep emphasis. Even if you don't do everything the way they suggest, this is a treasure trove for anyone considering classical education.

Teaching the Trivium: Christian Homeschooling in a Classical Style by Harvey and Laurie Bluedorn (Trivium Pursuit, PMB 168, 429 Lake Park Boulevard, Muscatine, IA 52761; 309-537-3641; www.triviumpursuit.com) $27.00

The Bluedorns, pioneers in classical Christian education, temper their enthusiasm with cautions about pagan content. Rather than buying into the "Great Books" model of classical education, the Bluedorns apply the methodology while carefully selecting resources that support a biblical Christian worldview. They suggest numerous ideas for content, presentation, and timing but leave it to parents to decide what makes sense for their own children. They approach their subject from a Reformed Protestant perspective. Even those Christians who might not share the Bluedorn's theological perspective should find this book helpful if their goal is to use the classical model of education by drawing from it that which is worthy, while staying true to biblical principles.



Ancient History from Primary Sources: A Literary Timeline by Harvey and Laurie Bluedorn (Trivium Pursuit; see contact information above) $59.00

This is a book and set of two CDs. The CDs contain primary source documents, while the book is a guide to their use. The Bluedorns direct us to excerpts from the various writings on the CD, so the prospect of using primary sources becomes much more manageable.

Natural Structure: A Montessori Approach to Classical Education at Home by Edward and Nancy Walsh (Catholic Heritage Curricula, P.O. Box 125, Twain Harte, CA 95383-0125; www.chcweb.com)

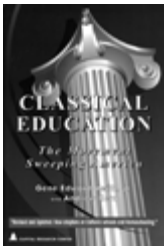
Natural structure is the name given to this form of education, which combines Montessori and classical education. Edward and Nancy Walsh have brought them together by adopting the framework of the trivium and quadrivium as outlined by Dorothy Sayers, then using Montessori's detailed teaching methodology to present the content. The program as presented in this book is Montessori-style education, but with resources selected to ensure content coverage reflective of the various stages of classical education. As children move past the preparatory and grammar stages of the trivium, Montessori materials are used less frequently and methodology becomes more similar to other forms of classical education. The Walshes rely on Montessori's original ideas, including her foundational Catholic perspective. While *Natural Structure* can be adapted by those with other religious beliefs, it does not readily fit nonreligious situations.

Introduction to Classical Studies by Cheryl Lowe (Memoria Press, 4105 Bishop Lane, Louisville, KY 40218; 877-862-1097; e-mail: magister@memoriapress.com; www.memoiapress.com) $14.95

I suspect many parents like the idea of classical education but have no idea where or how to start. This guide solves that problem. Author Cheryl Lowe lays a foundation for classical education in the elementary grades (as early as third grade) by outlining a study of three key

books: *The Golden Children's Bible, Famous Men of Rome*, and D'Aulaires's *Book of Greek Myths.* These three are key to a *Christian* classical education since classical studies center around Greek and Roman thought and history, and the Bible provides the foundational guidepost of truth.

The guide has daily lesson plans for a year and also shows how to recycle through the lessons at higher levels for a three-year plan. Children should begin Latin study along with these studies for the fullest benefit.



Classical Education: The Movement Sweeping America by Gene Edward Veith Jr. and Andrew Kern (Capital Research Center, 1513 Sixteenth Street, Northwest, Washington, D.C. 20036; 202-483-6900; www.capitalresearch.org)

This book covers the broad range of classical education, the different approaches and different settings as well as key organizations and resources. This is one of the most objective resources if you are trying to sort out what approach within the classical education models you might use.

Unit Study

Unit study appears under many different names and formats but can be recognized by the presence of a unifying theme. Rather than approaching each subject and topic as isolated things to be learned, information is integrated across subject areas, thereby helping children better understand what they are studying. According to the theory behind the unit study approach, when children really understand what they are learning, they remember it better.

A unit study might focus on one primary subject area or on many subject areas. The major published unit studies generally encompass social studies, science, and the fine arts, with varying amounts of coverage of language arts and religion, and very limited math.

Here's an example of a typical unit study that comes from the first chapter in *KONOS* Volume 1 on the character trait "attentiveness." First, we choose an aspect of attentiveness we wish to study, such as listening and sound. We study related Scriptures, then study about the human ear (science), listen to music (music), make musical instruments (crafts), study about musical composers (music history), practice listening games (character development), study about and apply the speeds of sound and light to thunder and lightning (math and science), and write a headache commercial describing irritating noises (language). These ideas are only a fraction of the choices offered within a typical *KONOS* unit!

There are also limited unit studies available that focus more narrowly on a single topic. For example, a study of horses might include the history of horses and the different breeds around the world, a study of their anatomy and physiology, and a written research paper on a horse-related topic. Thus history, science, and language arts are taught around a single theme selected primarily as a science topic.

You might also create your own limited unit study from resources on hand. For instance, if you are studying about the California Gold Rush, you could study those sections in a California history textbook along with sections about mining and minerals from a science textbook. You might also integrate a language arts activity by assigning a creative writing task related to the Gold Rush.

Unit studies typically use real books as sources for learning material rather than textbooks. Many unit studies incorporate Charlotte Mason's ideas on the use of real books, nature study, and narration.

Unit study is often, but not always, multisensory, using hands-on experiences or activities for more effective learning. Most unit studies are constructed so they can be used across a wide age span, with adaptations suggested for various levels.

Unit studies work best for families with more flexible schedules since activities might take more or less time on any given day. Most also require preparation and presentation time. You will need to gather materials and resources for the study and decide how to use them; the different published unit studies vary in how much of this work is already done for you.

The parent/teacher generally spends more time working directly with students in most unit studies— reading aloud, discussing, or leading an activity. The trade-off for extra time invested is that children retain the information that has been presented in such interesting ways, thereby relieving parents from reviewing and reteaching the same material again. An added bonus of this type of learning is that it tends to get children excited about the process—a real motivational boost.

Some parents are overwhelmed by the idea of unit studies, but there are programs available (e.g., *KONOS in a Box*) that are so thoroughly developed that they not only provide all the resources you need, they also tell you exactly what to do when.

Unit studies for high school level tend to be more book-based than activity-oriented. While unit studies at elementary levels require heavy parental involvement, those for older students frequently require a good deal of independent work.

Examples of comprehensive unit studies among my Top Picks are *Tapestry of Grace, KONOS*, and *Five in a Row.* Examples of limited unit studies are *Further Up and Further In* and *Media Angels Science* units.

Unschooling or Relaxed Homeschooling

The idea of letting children follow their own inclinations in their education has been called “unschooling.” The philosophic ideas behind this approach are most often associated with John Holt, author of numerous books, such as *How Children Learn, How Children Fail, Instead of Education*, and *Teach Your Own.* Holt's books are available from libraries and bookstores, especially from John Holt's Book and Music Store.

A true unschooler would allow a child to determine what, when, how, and even “if” the child learns anything. But few people go to that extreme. What seems closer to reality in most unschooling situations is a much greater consideration for each child's interests and the timing of when they tackle various topics and skills. Also, unschooling parents often ask for their children's opinions about resources and learning methods. This approach is also sometimes called “relaxed” homeschooling.

Hallmarks of an unschooling approach are likely to be a very loose schedule, emphasis on developing a love for learning, rare use of traditional textbooks unless selected by the child, and more hands-on projects and/or field trips.

To learn more about unschooling, read one of John Holt's books listed above or one of the following:

- *The Unschooling Handbook* by Mary Griffiths (Prima Publishing, www.primapublishing.com; order through bookstores or distributors) $15.95—Mary helps explain what unschooling might look like, with anecdotes and examples from many different families. She also includes specific ideas about how to help your children become educated without the normal structure and curriculum.
- *The Relaxed Home School* by Mary Hood, Ph.D. (Ambleside Educational Press, P.O. Box 2524, Cartersville, GA 30120; 770-917-9141) $10.95—This is a practical book that seems to reflect what many families are actually doing. Mary stresses the need for goals coupled with an openness to many ways of attaining them. She suggests letting children have significant input into goal and strategy decisions, taking into consideration their talents and interests.

Independent Study

I include independent study as a distinct approach even though it often uses resources listed under other approaches. The key idea here is that parents use resources that allow a student to operate with little direct teaching or interaction regarding lessons. This means there must be a preset curriculum that is self-instructional.

School of Tomorrow, Alpha Omega (*LIFEPAC* curriculum), and Christian Light all have courses very similar in appearance that work this way, although these are not the only choices for independent study.

In the three aforementioned programs, a number of booklets (typically ten to twelve for a year-long course) comprise a course. Each booklet contains information students read (much like that found in textbooks). However, short sections of text are followed by questions. Students answer the questions referring back to what they have read. If they get most answers correct, they move on to the next section. If not, they review the material and answer questions again. Periodic tests operate the same way. So a student, theoretically, masters the material before moving on from each section. No direct teaching or parental interaction is required other than checking answers.

Alpha Omega took their *LIFEPAC*s a step further by creating a computer-based version called *Switched-On Schoolhouse (SOS).* (See the review of *SOS* in chapter 14.)

While the above-mentioned resources are designed for independent study, many textbooks may also be used this way. Some of *A Beka's* textbooks work well this way. *Saxon Math* from *Math 54* and up are primarily used for independent study.

Independent study works best for self-directed learners who are responsible about their use of time. Most young learners do not do well with independent study, but many high schoolers

thrive on it.

Parents faced with difficult time constraints often see independent study resources as the only way they can manage to homeschool. However, it is important to keep in mind that when you choose independent study resources, you forsake the ability to adapt to meet the learning style needs of your child.

In addition, the format of independent study means that most learning is at the lower levels of thinking—knowledge and comprehension—rather than higher levels of synthesis and analysis. Answers for lower-level questions can be simple, factual answers, while those for higher-level questions tend to be complex and subjective—the type of answers that require sentences, paragraphs, or discussion rather than multiple choice or fill-in-the-blanks.

While the last paragraph describes resources designed particularly for independent study, there are many others that homeschoolers use for independent study that actually involve higher levels of thinking. Examples are the *Wordly Wise* vocabulary series, almost any of the *Critical Thinking Books, Apologia Science* courses, *Worldviews of the Western World*, and *KONOS History of the World.*

Eclectic

For want of a better name, we identify those who pick and choose from among a variety of philosophies and resources as "eclectic" homeschoolers. In reality, I suspect the large majority of homeschoolers are eclectic to some extent. Few use everything in a given curriculum. Homeschoolers tend to supplement even the best resources or programs with other interesting things they find.

The goal for eclectic homeschoolers is generally to combine the best ideas that work for their family. This might even mean using philosophic opposites, such as a very structured grammar program and a discovery approach to science.

Eclectic homeschooling requires more parental decision-making and responsibility, so it works best for those with some experience and/or confidence. Many homeschoolers start their first year with a traditional program or even a unit study. The next year, they branch out, keeping what they liked from the prior year and adding new ideas and different resources each year to the mix.

While using an eclectic program generally means putting it together yourself, *Sonlight Curriculum* actually has put together eclectic programs for you. Each level includes a mixture of workbooks and real books that you might say represents a mixture of traditional, Charlotte Mason, and classical approaches. *Sonlight* is a great place to start if you really don't know which direction you would like to go. (See the complete review in chapter 14.)

Umbrella Program

I use the designation "umbrella program" to mean correspondence schools that have a preset curriculum with only a few possible options (e.g., Calvert with optional advisory teaching service or Christian Liberty Academy's full enrollment option). Enrollment in such programs provides parents with not only curriculum but guidance and evaluation assistance.

Umbrella programs can be a boon to parents who want assistance in choosing curriculum, planning schedules, and maintaining records. Generally, these programs don't require a great deal of preparation or teaching time. Some umbrella programs might even use resources for independent study, such as Alpha Omega *LIFEPAC*s or *Switched-On Schoolhouse*, although most use a mix of resources from various publishers (unless the umbrella program is offered through a publishing company such as A Beka or Bob Jones University Press).

The negative trade off when using such programs is that you loose flexibility in curriculum choices and scheduling and in your ability to adapt to each child's needs. Nevertheless, such programs help parents who lack confidence, are disorganized, or do not have time and energy to go it alone.

Note: While I've restricted the meaning of umbrella programs in this manual, there are actually some that allow families to choose from among a broad range of curricula, and there are some—like the aforementioned Calvert and Christian Liberty Academy—that offer options where you can use their curriculum without reporting and accountability requirements.

Yes, this is confusing, so check out such programs carefully before enrolling. In addition to the obvious questions—How much does it cost? What grade levels do they offer? Is it Christian, nonsectarian, etc.?—ask what curriculum they use, what options are available, what sort of record keeping is required, if there are time limits, if there is any possibility of a refund once students have begun the program, and how much help is available and how quickly you can get it.

Finding Umbrella Programs

I've mentioned Calvert (see the review in chapter 14) and Christian Liberty Academy because they are the largest such programs, but there are many other such programs available that meet the needs of families with different educational and religious philosophies. Following are links to four very helpful Web sites that have lists of such programs with brief annotations:

- www.geocities.com/Athens/8259/umbrella.html
- www.gomilpitas.com/homeschooling/methods/DLPsCorrespondence.htm
- www.christianhomeschoolers.com/hs/satmisc.shtml
- www.homeschoolteenscollege.net/diplomaisp.htm

Figuring Out What Works For You

OK. You have added up the numbers on the chart and have read through the descriptions of different approaches, but perhaps you still have not developed a clear preference. Take heart! You can narrow this down even more as you consider some very practical issues. Your thoughts about the questions I pose next are so important that I've left space for you to jot down your responses on each one.

1. How much confidence and/or experience do you have homeschooling?

If you have a great deal of both, then you will probably do fine with unit studies, unschooling, and other more creative and loosely structured approaches. If not, you might easily be overwhelmed by resources that require you to make many choices, find resources,

plan projects, and create your own assessment. It is sometimes better to start out with more structure, gradually adding more and more adventurous ideas as you gain confidence.

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2. How much time do you have available for working directly with your children and for planning and preparation?

Be realistic about this! If you've got two little ones in diapers (one of them still nursing), a beginning reader, and more work than hours in the day, choosing curriculum that requires lots of preparation, direct instruction, and your constant attention only proves that you have a death wish. It doesn't matter how much you love real books, project learning, and field trips if you don't have time to do them.

Figure out where your children *really* need you and which subjects *must* be taught this year, then find the most efficient resources you can for those. If there is time left over, add more interactive learning and more subjects. This doesn't mean your budding reader needs to learn how to read from a computer program. While that's possible, it will be much better if you squeeze in *some* time for one-to-one work together.

Keep in mind that you can easily provide some reading instruction as you go about your daily routine. You can have magnetic letters on the refrigerator that your child identifies by sound while you're preparing a meal. You can have him or her find letters on signs as you drive to the grocery store. The same thing goes for math; counting silverware while setting the table, adding the total number of spoons and forks, and counting pennies that made it all the way through the laundry into the clothes dryer are examples.

If you are one of the fortunate few with plenty of time, you have much more freedom to choose time-consuming resources. However, most of us are somewhere in between the two extremes. We can usually function well if we balance some one-to-one time with some group time and some independent study time.

I strongly recommend trying to group your children together whenever you can for efficiency's sake. It's easiest to do this with religious devotions and instruction, history, science, and the arts. Math and language arts generally require more individualized work. Of course, methods like unit study and Charlotte Mason work better for grouping children than do traditional curriculum or correspondence courses, which have different books for each student for each subject.

So how much time do you really have to devote to homeschooling, both for direct teaching and for planning and preparation?

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3. How much money can you spend?

If the world were your oyster and cost were no problem, then choices would be simpler. Unfortunately, most of us have sacrificed a second income and operate on a limited budget, so we cannot buy everything we would like to own.

First, let me reassure you that the most expensive resources are not necessarily the best. Expensive resources sometimes provide more parental assistance, saving you time and energy. However, sometimes they only provide you with many more things that you will feel obligated to do but are really not essential to your goals. If your child does not need lots of hands-on work to grasp math concepts, money spent on a program with pricey math manipulatives would have been better budgeted for a family vacation.

Second, you might not need to purchase a lot of resources designed primarily for educational purposes. You already have a wealth of "unintentional" learning resources if you simply look for learning opportunities that surround your children in real life. Your kitchen is loaded with possibilities for learning and applying math. Building projects, board games, budgets, checkbooks, allowances, family businesses, and shopping add even more opportunities available to most of us. Children can practice language arts if you simply capitalize on opportunities all around you—writing thank-you notes for gifts, creating shopping lists, writing directions to their friend's home, and copying and posting a "quote for the week" or memorization verse on the refrigerator are just a few examples.

You *do* need information beyond your own limited knowledge, but your local library stocks more books than you can hope to own. Make friends with your librarian and get the most out of this marvelous resource.

The easiest way to tune into learning opportunities in your environment is to ask yourself what it is specifically that your child needs to learn and then think about how he or she might learn it with whatever is available. For example, your son needs to learn both standard and metric linear measurement. Grab a ruler and/or yardstick marked with both inches and centimeters and start measuring and comparing. Need to teach about adjectives? Use them in abundance as you talk to your child—get flowery, silly, alliterative, and imaginative: "Just look at this fuzzy, filthy, fungus-covered floor covering! It must need vacuuming." Then challenge your child to come up with his or her own descriptive sentence. (Be careful not to include adverbs like "very" and prepositional phrases like "under piles of junk." Explaining the difference is another lesson.)

I could digress with many more examples, but I think you get the point: learning need not happen the way it happens in schools. This means you can save some of the money you might have spent to recreate a traditional school at home. Keep this in mind as you come up with a budget amount for your homeschooling. So, how much can you budget for homeschooling?

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4. How do your religious beliefs impact your homeschooling?

Families have different feelings in this regard. For some families, spiritual knowledge and development is the highest priority. Other parents make academic excellence or raising independent, self-motivated learners their highest priority. Religion might be a lower priority, or it might have no place at all in their homeschooling. Many families haven't thought about their priorities enough to know how to answer this question. Thinking through this question is

very important. Religious beliefs will play a role in your home education whether you plan for that to happen or not.

Many parents think that non-Christian textbooks present a “neutral” education, one that doesn’t include any kind of spiritual viewpoint. In reality, all resources reflect a spiritual outlook. Now I can just picture some of you shaking your heads and saying, “Come on. There's no religion in my child's spelling book.” Or, “Math doesn’t have anything to do with religion!”

A humorous piece that has been wending its way around the Internet for a number of years illustrates my point. I have no idea who originated the first version, and it has been updated with additions to reflect ideological changes on a number of Web sites where it is posted. Here's a version I pulled from one Web site:

The Logger's New Math

Teaching Math in 1950: A logger sells a truckload of lumber for $100. His cost of production is 4/5 of the price. What is his profit?

Teaching Math in 1960: A logger sells a truckload of lumber for $100. His cost of production is 4/5 of the price, or $80. What is his profit?

Teaching Math in 1970: A logger exchanges a set “L” of lumber for a set “M” of money. The cardinality of set “M” is 100. Each element is worth one dollar. Make 100 dots representing the elements of the set “M.” The set “C,” the cost of production, contains 20 fewer points than set “M.” Represent the set “C” as a subset of set “M” and answer the following question: What is the cardinality of the set “P” for profits?

Teaching Math in 1980: A logger sells a truckload of lumber for $100. Her cost of production is $80 and her profit is $20. Your assignment: Underline the number 20.

Teaching Math in 1990: By cutting down beautiful forest trees, the logger makes $20. What do you think of this way of making a living? Topic for class participation after answering the question: How did the forest birds and squirrels feel as the logger cut down the trees? There are no wrong answers.

Teaching Math in 1996: By laying off 40% of its loggers, a company improves its stock price from $80 to $100. How much capital gain per share does the CEO make by exercising his stock options at $80? Assume capital gains are no longer taxed, because this encourages investment.

Teaching Math in 1997: A company outsources all of its loggers. The firm saves on benefits, and when demand for its product is down, the logging workforce can easily be cut back. The average logger employed by the company earned $50,000, had three weeks vacation, a nice retirement plan, and medical insurance. The contracted logger charges $50 an hour. Was outsourcing a good move?

Teaching Math in 1998: A laid-off logger with four kids at home and a ridiculous alimony from his first failed marriage comes into the logging company corporate offices and goes postal, mowing down 16 executives and a couple of secretaries, and gets lucky when he nails a politician on the premises collecting his kickback. Was outsourcing the loggers a good move for the company?

> Teaching Math in 1999: A laid-off logger serving time in Federal Prison for blowing away several people is being trained as a COBOL programmer in order to work on Y2K projects. What is the probability that the automatic cell doors will open on their own as of 00:00:01, 01/01/00?
>
> (Taken from www.geocities.com/geminilaz1/newmath.html on March 22, 2003.)

These are mostly exaggerated examples of what folks have found in math textbooks over the years. You might have noticed that there's no mention of religion in any of them. But what does it imply when feelings take precedence over the facts of math as in the 1990 example? Or what about the other agendas (like ecology) that work their way into supposedly neutral subjects? And what do you think of presenting business ethic questions as mere mathematical calculations rather than moral challenges?

Do you doubt that some very different beliefs about God and man, man's purpose in life, and man's responsibilities in relationship to others shape many texts used in schools?

Even more subtle are the choices of what to include and what to leave out of textbooks. For example, history books that start with an evolutionary explanation of the origins of life proceed as if the theory has been proven. They ignore the possibility of man being a special creation of God. They also ignore all historical evidence of God being a real part of history. Less subtle are science texts that teach that accident and random chance are what brought us out of a primordial stew to our present evolving state.

In literature texts and readers we often find folk tales of various pagan gods that show us how each of the gods “blessed” those who followed their instructions. The implication is that all “gods” are created equal. Those same texts probably include no stories about the one true God, and certainly none that imply that He is the only one we should obey.

Even those that try to leave *all* spirituality out of learning are inadvertently teaching their children a materialistic philosophy. If spirituality and transcendence never enter the discussion, we are teaching children that the world consists only of what they experience with their senses and know with their minds. Some will admit that God might exist, but if He does, He is so irrelevant that He has nothing to do with important things like history and science. While parents might believe in God, if they don’t show their children that that belief makes a difference in the way they look at all areas of life, they are teaching their children to be materialists—a religious belief.

If, on the other hand, you believe in God, it should be important enough to impart to your children— or else what's the point of believing in Him at all? If faith and knowledge of God are important, then they need to be incorporated into the learning process, both into the content and method of presentation. You teach what you believe and you demonstrate your belief by the way you act, how you speak, and how you treat people.

So, you must keep spiritual goals and influences in mind as you select your curriculum. A resource might be very popular with homeschoolers in general, but it might not reflect your family's spiritual beliefs. Sometimes you can work around these issues with minimal effort, but sometimes it's more trouble than it's worth. Be especially careful when selecting resources that your children will be using independently. You might seldom look at the curriculum once they start working, and you won’t have opportunity to spot content that undermines your family's beliefs.

Back to the question: How will your spiritual beliefs affect your homeschooling—your goals and your choices of resources and methods? Do you want to use religiously oriented materials? Will there be some resources you will avoid for spiritual reasons?

_____

_____

_____

_____

Before you pull all this together, look at the samples in the next chapter to see how to combine the information you've gleaned thus far to put together your own philosophy of education.

3

Putting Together Your Philosophy of Education

There was a lot to work through in chapter 2, and you might be confused at this point. That's why I have created a sample of how this might look as you work through each section. I've written responses and completed charts as I would have when my sons were about ages seven, ten, and twelve.

After you read through these completed questions and charts, I'll show you how it all comes together.

Let's begin with the first three questions.

Content and Methods

What do you think is most important for your children to learn?

Sample (remember that 1 indicates highest priority, 2 the next highest, and 3 the lowest):

I want my children to	Priority Level
have a strong sense of God's reality in all aspects of their education	1
love to learn so they will become self-educators	1
have a broad education so they can consider lots of possibilities for their future	2
develop excellent reading skills	1
develop excellent thinking skills	1
develop excellent communication skills	2
learn how to work with other children/adults in groups	2
develop good work habits	2
develop excellent knowledge of Scripture and religious beliefs	1
prepare for college so that they have more life choices	1
develop a heart for service to others	1
cover all the normal subjects so they can pass tests when necessary	2
figure out their special talents and gifts	2
be computer literate	2
have exposure to the arts and develop some "artistic" skills	2
be physically fit	2
develop a strong Christian worldview	1
read widely from both classic and good books	1

Note: Notice there are still some blank lines. You don't have to fill them all in just because they're there. However, if you need even more space, feel free to grab another piece of paper and make your list longer. Also notice that there are no level 3 entries. I realized that I had so many level 1 and 2 entries that things that might be level 3 were too low on my priority list to even bother writing them down. However, you might write out your own list, then find on reflection that some of your entries actually rate a level 3.

How do you think learning should happen?

I have three very active boys who need to be able to move around and do lots of hands-on learning. I want lots of interaction and experiential learning. I also want them to learn how to operate independently and learn to teach themselves through their independent reading, especially as they get older. So a balance that combines these two ideas is best for us.

How do you want to teach or "run your school"?

1. Do you want to try to teach most or all of your children together, at least for some subjects?

Absolutely.

2. How much of the time do you want (or are you able) to work directly with your children?

I want to start together in the mornings for about 1½ to 2 hours, do some group classes or park days a few afternoons a week, and have them work independently or one-to-one with me the rest of the time.

3. How much of the time do you expect your children to work independently?

My middle son works independently better than the other two—at least a few hours a day. My youngest will do a few scattered fifteen minute to half hour periods of independent work. My eldest will do at least two hours of independent work as long as I check on him frequently.

4. Do you want to use real books (biographies, historical novels, books written about particular science topics, etc.) as part of your curriculum?

Definitely.

5. Do you want to include field trips? If so, what type of field trips?

Yes! Field trips related to unit study topics plus any good opportunities that come up!

6. Do you like to "make up" curriculum as you go, adapting to the needs and interests of your children, or do you prefer things well planned out in advance?

I like to have a general plan completed during the summer, then adapt as I go.

7. Do you need a set schedule to get things done, or would you prefer more flexibility?

Flexibility, although we need to start with together time first thing in the morning.

8. Do you prefer a curriculum that is thoroughly laid out in advance and that tells you what to do when?

No.

9. Any additional thoughts about how you want to operate?

I want my lesson plans to become my record-keeping books, so I work from my spiral notebook that I use during each summer to make general plans for the year. I periodically fill in my lesson plan/record book for the next few weeks with specific books and page numbers, activities, field trips, etc., so it is easy to make changes to my original plan.

I'm not concerned about grading in the elementary grade levels, but I will give grades once in a while so they have concrete feedback about how I think they are doing. Grading becomes more important to me in junior high.

Approaches

Which approach to education should I use?

I prefer:	Traditional	Charlotte Mason	Classical	Unit Study	Unschooling	Independent Study	Eclectic	Umbrella Program
predictable structure.	1	.5	1			1	1	1
that children have many real life experiences for learning—nature studies in the woods, building projects, etc.		①	⑤	①	①	①	①	
children read historical novels and biographies rather than textbooks.		①	①	①	①		①	
a program that is thoroughly laid out for the teacher and provides a feeling of security.	1					1		1
a grammar program that emphasizes rules and memorization	1		1			1	.5	1
workbooks, teachers manuals, and answer keys for most or all subjects.	1					1	.5	1
children to work independently as much as possible.	.5				1	1	.5	.5
mental training and mental discipline have higher priority than stimulating curiosity and interest.	1		.5			1	.5	.5
curriculum that ensures my children cover the same things other school children might be learning.	1					1	.5	1
informal evaluation of my child by talking over what they've read and looking at their work rather than by testing.		①	①	①	①		⑤	
that my young children do a significant amount of memorization, repetition, and recitation.	.5		.5			.5	.5	.5
my teen to get a strong background in the great books of western civilization.		⑤	①	⑤	⑤	⑤	⑤	⑤
to emphasize developing a love for learning *more than* the ability to work in a structured, methodical way.		①		①	①		⑤	
that teens develop a "life of the mind" more than vocational skills.	⑤	①	①	①	⑤	⑤	⑤	⑤
presenting my children with information to learn rather than having them choose their own topics to investigate.	1	.5	1	.5		1	.5	1
highly structured resources that "script" what teacher/parent and child are supposed to say and do.	.5		.5			.5	.5	.5
lots of discussion and interaction in the learning process.		①	①	①	⑤		①	⑤
covering subjects (e.g., history, science, religion) at the same time with the same material with as many of my children as possible.		①	①	①			①	
making connections between different subject areas, showing relationships, and viewing that as a high priority in learning.		①	①	①	①		⑤	
project-based learning.		⑤		①	①		⑤	
to teach my children one-on-one as much as possible	1	.5	.5		.5		1	1
that my children learn grammar in a casual manner—e.g., some instruction, use of a grammar handbook, then working on mastery in their own writing.		⑤		①	①		⑤	
Totals for each column for this page:	.5	9.5	7.5	10.5	8.5	2	7.5	1.5

I prefer:	Traditional	Charlotte Mason	Classical	Unit Study	Unschooling	Independent Study	Eclectic	Umbrella Program
to keep structure to a minimum so that I and my children are able to pursue interesting learning ideas when they arise.		(.5)		(.5)	(1)		(.5)	
to make frequent field trips an essential part of schooling.	(.5)	(1)	(.5)	(.5)	(1)		(.5)	
to give my children freedom to determine what they will study and when and how they will do so.				.5	1		.5	
an "investigative" approach that stimulates my children to pursue information and research on their own.		(.5)		(1)	(1)	(.5)	(.5)	
flexible curriculum and schedules so I can capitalize on "teachable moments."		(.5)	(.5)	(1)	(1)		(.5)	
a mixture of structured learning and experiential/discovery learning.		(1)		(1)			(1)	
to set my own goals and schedule rather than adopting someone else's.		(.5)	(.5)	(.5)	(1)		(.5)	
to select curriculum/methods that suit my child's learning style rather than curriculum/methods widely recognized and accepted by authorities.		(.5)	(.5)	(1)	(1)		(.5)	
that computer-based learning be a significant part of the curriculum.	.5					.5		.5
A. Total for each column for this page	.5	4.5	2	5.5	6	.5	4	0
B. Totals for columns from first page	.5	9.5	7.5	10.5	8.5	2	7.5	1.5
Total for each column: add line A and B and enter total as the numerator (top number) of the fraction	1/11	14/15.5	9.5/14.5	16/17	14.5/17	2.5/12	11.5/18	1.5/11
Optional: Percentage for each column (divide numerator by denominator)	9%	90%	66%	94%	85%	21%	64%	14%

Note: When I complete this chart, I come up with high numbers (and large fractions) for unit study, Charlotte Mason, unschooling, classical education, and eclectic approaches. Traditional education, independent study, and umbrella programs are clearly not my preferences.

Check Your Results

As I read through the actual descriptions in chapter 2, I find that there are elements of unschooling that appeal to me, but not enough of the philosophy that I would really consider unschooling as my own approach, even though it scored 85 percent.

I really like certain aspects of classical education—Great Books, discussions, higher level thinking— but I'm not enamored with some of the memorization-based programs that are also called classical education. This dilutes my strong preference for the aspects I like and makes my preference for classical education appear weaker than it actually is. (This should be a caution to others who, like me, prefer some aspects of what is labeled classical education. You need to investigate resources described as classical to ensure that they really are what you want.)

With my highest numbers appearing for unit study and Charlotte Mason approaches, it would make sense for me to see if there isn't a way to incorporate the classical education and Charlotte Mason ideas I like within a unit study format. (Yes, such curriculum actually exists!)

The Next Four Questions—the Reality Check

Next, I wrote down some notes on the next four questions, thinking back a few years to when I had children in elementary grades through junior high:

1. How much confidence and/or experience do you have homeschooling?

I have lots of confidence and enough experience that I don't mind trying unusual approaches.

2. How much time do you have available for working directly with your children and for planning and preparation?

My time is very limited because of other demands. My husband doesn't have much time to help. But I can work with other families to do some group classes, so that will help on the time question. So I have about three hours a day available for direct teaching/interaction. I need to do a lot of planning over the summer when I have more time, then I should have about three or four hours each weekend to plan for each week.

3. How much money can you spend?

We're on a limited budget, so I should spend about $300 to $400 total this year.

4. How do your religious beliefs impact your homeschooling?

My religious beliefs are a critical part of homeschooling. They will underlie everything we do. I would like to use resources that reflect my beliefs, but I can work with others as long as they are not in direct conflict.

When I consider my answers to these four questions, I can see that my time constraints will make time-consuming planning and projects difficult to impossible. I need to compromise on my desire to do unit studies and lot of project learning. I also might not have the time to do classical education.

Money will be a limitation, but I'm not set on only one way of doing this, so I can look at many different options.

Incorporating religious beliefs is easy within Charlotte Mason and unit study approaches since they use real books and require discussion and interaction. If I do classical education's Great Books/Good Books approach, I can also incorporate religion easily.

Putting It All Together

Now, I am ready to gather what I have learned so that I can verbalize my own personal philosophy of education and what that might look like for our family. You can do this in any order you wish, but I will describe my own process.

First, I summarized my educational philosophy primarily from the first section, actually copying from some of what I wrote there. I did not need to include everything from that section.

My philosophy of education:

I believe that my children's education should help them develop a strong sense of God's reality in all aspects of their lives. I want my children to love to learn so they will become self-educators who choose to learn on their own. I also want them to have strong academic skills so they have the tools for independent learning. I want them to have a broad education since I do not know what direction God has for each of them.

Next, I looked at the chart where I'd checked boxes reflecting different educational approaches. I'd already come to some conclusions (noted above) about which approaches I like. In my notes following the last four questions, I already noted that one of my highest priorities—incorporating religious goals into education—is easier to do within one of the "real books" approaches.

Another priority I set in the first section—and one of my strongest—is that my children love to learn. That means I will want to be particularly attentive to methods and resources that are appealing to them and that encourage that love of learning. I know enough about learning styles to recognize that this might mean choosing different resources for each of them, if necessary.

However, as I noted in the last section, we have a limited budget. Therefore I might not be able to purchase everything I would like to use.

Time is also a precious commodity. I know I don't want to plunk my boys down with workbooks all the time if I really want them to love learning. On the other hand, they will have to do some independent work both for their sakes and mine. I do not have time to do everything with them, and I want them to eventually become independent learners, so they *do* need to learn how to work independently.

I will need to come up with a balance of interesting, interactive learning activities and independent work. I realize that I can primarily use the educational approaches I prefer, but I will probably have to include some traditional workbooks just to make things manageable.

I want to incorporate worldview education, even more so at junior high and high school level, so that will narrow down my choices in some ways. I would like to use classical methods from the dialectic and rhetoric stages for a good part of worldview education.

Realistically, I can see that my time demands are going to be heavy. One of the smartest things I can do is work with all three children together whenever possible. Unit studies might help me do that. Group classes with other families will be another way to help with the time issue.

All of this tells me that I should probably look to unit study ideas, looking for those that have a strong worldview orientation plus those based on either Charlotte Mason's ideas or classical education (the latter especially for my older sons). I can likely use traditional books for subjects not covered by the unit study.

• • •

Now, it's your turn. When you've completed this section, go on to chapter 4 to see how understanding both your own and your children's learning styles will help you fine-tune your curriculum choices.

4

Learning Styles: How Does *My* Child Learn Best?

If you are like me and most other parents I've asked, teaching your child to read is probably the scariest part of homeschooling. We have this sense that if we blow it with reading, then how can we possibly accomplish anything else?

Given that so many of us share this common insecurity, you might well be one of the thousands of parents who shelled out two hundred to three hundred dollars for one of those reading programs advertised on the radio. The glowing testimonials really convinced you that this would be money well spent.

Also like thousands of parents who invested in such programs, you might have had a very discouraging experience with the program. Let's say you bought the one that teaches the alphabet and phonetic sounds to rap tunes. When you plugged in the first cassette for your child to listen to, you discovered a couple of disconcerting things: your child doesn't like rap music, and your child couldn't make any connection between what he was hearing and the letters he was seeing on the paper. If you figured this out quickly enough, you were able to return the program within the allowable time and get your money back. If not, the program got added to your collection of white elephants.

So how do we save ourselves this sort of expensive grief? One of the best ways is tuning in to our children's learning styles.

Unfortunately, this was something I learned after making some big mistakes in my initial curriculum choices. When we first began homeschooling in 1982, my strongest conviction was that I wanted to use a Christian curriculum. The only Christian curriculum publisher I knew of was A Beka Book. This was the "dark ages" of homeschooling—a time when most publishers were not interested in selling to homeschoolers, even if they knew such a thing as homeschooling existed. Nevertheless, I went to a great deal of trouble to obtain *A Beka* worktexts to use with my two older sons, first and third graders at the time.

It took no more than two weeks to figure out that this sort of curriculum was about the worst choice for my eldest son, Chris. You'll understand why shortly when you read the description of the Wiggly Willy learning style. I had to get busy adapting and doing other things to enable Chris to learn. If it depended upon him working through *A Beka* lessons, reading the text and completing the activity pages, we were doomed.

Learning Modalities and Learning Styles

I first started using methods relating to learning modalities. You might already be familiar with learning modalities—the idea that people tend to prefer one of three types (or modes) of sensory input:

1. auditory (hearing)
2. visual (seeing)
3. kinesthetic (feeling or experiencing with one's body)

Understanding learning modalities might have helped the parent who bought the phonics program that uses cassette tapes for most of the teaching if she had known that her child was *not* an auditory learner. Learning by listening would not be the method of choice for such a child.

Learning modalities helped me with Chris since I knew he was a kinesthetic learner. I pulled out math manipulatives and other concrete objects to teach lessons even though *A Beka* made no provision for that sort of learning. But it was a lot of work to come up with such adaptations for the different subjects while also sorting out what parts of the *A Beka* worktexts I could still use.

Understanding learning modalities helps to a certain extent, but it's a bit too simplistic. For example, what do you do with a child who is a strong auditory learner but who can't sit still long enough to listen to a lesson being read to him?

That's where learning styles come in. The term *learning style* refers to the way (or style) a person most easily learns and processes new information or skills. Learning styles are just a bit more complex than learning modalities. They not only include awareness of the child's preferred learning modality, they go further to look at other personality/learning traits, such as a desire to work with other people or to work independently, an orientation toward either the big picture or the details, and preferences for a more or less structured environment.

Learning modalities play a partial role in understanding learning styles. For example, the kinesthetic learning modality is an obvious match with Wiggly Willy learners. However, visual and auditory modalities cross learning style boundaries and should be taken into account no matter what style learner our child seems to be.

Which System Is Best?

Experts have come up with many different systems and labels for identifying a person's learning style. All of them are useful. The most significant differences are in their complexity. Some systems are so complex that an expert needs to administer an assessment and analyze the results.

When I first read about learning styles, hardly anyone was using them to address the needs of children. The first book I found that did so was titled *Learning Patterns and Temperament Styles*[1] by Dr. Keith Golay. Dr. Golay discussed learning styles in relation to traditional, public school classroom settings. Although it was very useful, the fact that it lacked a Christian outlook and didn't address homeschooling motivated me to come up with my own approach, which I use in this book.

The learning styles I use fall into four categories. Yes, it could be much more complex, but our goal with learning styles is not a thorough analysis of each of our children so much as

developing an awareness that each child will have ways of learning that are easier and ways that are tougher. By identifying learning styles, we are able to choose teaching methods and materials that are more likely to be successful for each child.

For example, one child's learning style might be very physical in a whole-body sense. This child learns math best when she puts two blocks plus two more blocks together, then counts to see that there are four. She needs to move her body as she counts each number. She learns prepositions best by putting her teddy bear *on* the chair, *under* the chair, *over* the chair, and *beside* the chair. You can imagine how challenging children with this learning style might be to teach in a typical classroom setting!

Another child with a different learning style responds well to traditional classroom textbooks. He learns just fine by reading textbooks and doing workbook exercises. He doesn't need to feel or experience things to learn. But he also depends upon the predictability and security of those workbooks. He really struggles when it comes to creative writing and art projects.

Yet another child learns best when it's a social experience. She thrives on "unit study day" when you get together with a few other families to do all those creative unit study activities together. She blossoms when she gets to role-play a character in a historical event. Her writing is impressive because she wants to do her very best in her correspondence with a pen pal.

Recognizing these differences within each of your children will help you make better choices in the methods and materials you use. But that's only part of the curriculum equation.

But of Course My Way of Learning Is Best!

The other part of the equation is the parent's own learning style. The reality is that we parents have our own learning style preferences, and we tend to teach our children in ways that *we* learn best rather than ways *they* learn best. Our preferred learning style, by default, becomes our teaching style. That's what we're most comfortable with. That's what comes naturally to us.

Structure, organization, and schedules will be important to some of us, while exploration, creativity, and flexibility will be higher priorities for another parent. Some parents love to do messy art projects, while others would rather their children watch an art appreciation video. There's no right and wrong to such choices. Rather, it is a matter of recognizing one's own preferences, then checking to see if those methods are really what work best with one's own children. I like to think that in God's graciousness and wisdom, He usually gives us children of contrasting learning styles so we have more opportunities to stretch and grow.

Adult Learning Styles

The following will help you identify your own learning/teaching style. Read through the description of each learning style. Don't get hung up on the names at the top (Wiggly Willy, Perfect Paula, etc.). These are the labels I use to help you remember each style, but that doesn't mean that only males can have a Wiggly Willy style or that Perfect Paulas are exclusively female.

It is unlikely that every item under any one learning style fits you while none on the other three do. More likely, you will find a number of items under one learning style that describe

you and only a few under one or more of the other learning styles. As you read through the four learning style descriptions decide which one is most like you. Then consider which style has the next highest number of characteristics that fit you, continuing through all four figuring which learning style or styles are also least descriptive of you. If you should find that you are fairly evenly spread across one or more learning styles, that's fine too.

Adult Learning/Teaching Styles

Wiggly Willy

- Has trouble organizing and following through
- Would rather play and have fun than work
- Tends to do things impulsively
- Probably did poorly in school (often due to lack of interest or boredom)
- Looks for creative and efficient solutions to tasks
- Dislikes paperwork and record keeping
- Prefers activity over reading books
- Prefers to teach the fine arts, physical education, and activity-oriented classes

Perfect Paula

- Likes everything neatly planned ahead of time
- Likes to follow a schedule
- Is not very good at coming up with creative ideas
- Is comfortable with memorization and drill
- Gets upset easily when children don’t cooperate
- Worries about meeting requirements
- Often prefers to work under an umbrella program for home educators
- Prefers to teach with preplanned curricula
- Is more comfortable with “cut and dried” subjects than with subjects that require exploration with no clear answers

Competent Carl

- Likes to be in control
- Thinks and acts logically
- Likes to understand reasoning and logic behind ideas
- Is selectively organized
- Likes to work alone and be independent
- Is impatient with those who are slow to grasp concepts and those who are disorganized

- Is often uncomfortable in social situations and has trouble understanding others' feelings and emotions
- Tends to avoid difficult social situations
- Likes to make long-term plans
- Prefers to teach math, science, and other logic-related subjects rather than language arts and social studies

Sociable Sue

- Enjoys social interaction
- Likes to belong to groups, especially for activities
- Worries about what other people think
- Tends to be insecure about how well he/she is doing with home education
- Is idealistic about expectations and goals
- May or may not be organized, depending upon accountability
- Is more interested in general concepts than details
- Prefers to teach subjects related to language arts, social studies, and possibly, the fine arts

The following analogy showing how different style learners might respond to a visit to a theme park might help you see the differences even better.

For Wiggly Willy it's all about the rides. He wants to experience all of them. Forget the shops and the shows you sit and watch. He wants to feel the action.

Perfect Paula is likely to have organized the event in the first place. She'll make sure there's a meeting place in case someone gets lost. She'll know what time various events take place and try to schedule out the day to make sure she gets to all the things that are on her list.

Competent Carl won't mind going off on his own if everyone else takes too long figuring out what they want to do. He'll choose rides over shops, but particular shows might also intrigue him. His choice activities will be ones with special effects because the fun for him is in figuring out "how they did it."

Sociable Sue will make sure all her friends have come along. Then she'll enjoy whatever happens as long as everyone sticks together. For her the fun is in the company. They could spend hours standing in lines waiting for rides and that would be as much or more fun than anything else.

The next time you go to a theme park, pay attention to your group and see if you can't identify some of these patterns!

If you found that most of your characteristics matched up with a single learning style and very few were described under the other three, you will have to pay more attention to learning styles than a parent who is more evenly spread across the learning styles. You might tend to be "lopsided" in the learning methods you use with your children, leaning heavily toward those that favor the especially strong learning style of yours.

On the other hand, if you recognized a number of your characteristics in two or more learning styles, you will probably have an easier time adapting to the needs of your children since you already have a tendency to work across one or more learning styles.

Now, keeping in mind what you've discovered about your own learning/teaching style, it's time to try to identify your children's learning styles. Remember that they, just like adults, will rarely fit neatly into only one category. They will perhaps have one stronger learning style, one or two that are weaker, and maybe one that doesn't fit them at all.

Children's Learning Styles

Wiggly Willy

Wiggly Willys are those children who learn best by doing—the hands-on learners. They like to be free to move around and act spontaneously. Do you have a little boy who just seems to fall off his chair if he has tried to stay put for more than ten minutes? That's typical for a Wiggly Willy.

They have short attention spans most of the time, although it's interesting to see how their attention spans lengthen when they get into something of their own choosing! These children are usually not interested in deep thinking or analysis if it means sitting still for very long.

On the other hand, they generally do very well with hands-on projects. They can be very creative and imaginative.

These are carefree children who live for the moment. However, they can be difficult to motivate. Wiggly Willys hate being bored. They'll create their own "interesting moments" to break the boredom.

They don't think ahead about consequences, positive or negative. Telling them "Study hard and get good grades so you can get into a good college ten years from now" will not motivate them. Ten years from now is a nonexistent concept for them, so why on earth would they sacrifice present pleasure for that? These children need short-term goals and immediate rewards.

Wiggly Willys can be disruptive in groups. Sometimes these children are labeled as having attention deficit disorder (a disorder that I *do* believe is real) when the actual problem is that, because of their age and temperament, they really need to be moving around more than is allowed in a typical classroom.

Perfect Paula

I call our second type of learner Perfect Paula. This is the responsible child who likes to see that everything is done correctly. She likes things to be clearly structured, planned, and organized.

Perfect Paulas have a narrow comfort zone. They feel more secure when things are orderly. Consequently, they seldom act spontaneously and are uncomfortable with creative activities that lack specific guidelines. For example, if you want them to do an art project, they will ask, "Show me what it's supposed to look like." They want to make sure they do it correctly rather than seize an opportunity to express their own creativity.

They follow rules and respect authority, and they often feel it their duty to make sure everyone else does likewise. They like to follow a typical school curriculum and feel that they are accomplishing the same things as other children their age. They prefer to be part of groups, and they need approval and affirmation to let them know that they are doing what is proper.

Perfect Paulas can be easier to homeschool than other learners, but you might have to work at helping them develop more flexibility and creativity.

Competent Carl

Competent Carls like to be in control of themselves and their surroundings. They tend to be analytical, constantly trying to figure out what makes things tick. Problem solving is typically something they enjoy.

Their analytical/logical bent typically makes math and science their strong subjects and the more subjective language arts their weaker subjects.

Social skills can also be a weak area. Often Competent Carls have difficulty understanding and relating to their peers. Because of this, and sometimes simply by choice, they enjoy solitary activity. They expect others to operate the same way they do, and they don't find it easy to adapt to other ways of doing things.

Competent Carls tend to be self-motivated and enjoy long-term, independent projects. They have their own ideas about what they want to learn, as well as when and how they want to learn it.

Some Competent Carls love to brainstorm—to think out loud. These more verbal Competent Carls often want a more interactive learning environment, or at least one that allows them to ask questions and talk through what they are learning. One-to-one teaching or small groups usually suit Competent Carls better than large groups.

Sociable Sue

Sociable Sues are, of course, sociable. They often have warm, responsive personalities. They are interested in people, and as they get older, that interest expands into ideas, principles, and values.

They tend to be big picture people; concepts are more interesting to them than details and technicalities. They don't like memorizing names and dates for history, but they want to understand how different cultures and events affect one another.

They love change and new things. They can be very excited about a new project or assignment but easily "lose steam" once the novelty has worn off. Sometimes you have to switch what you are doing or add something new with Sociable Sues to reignite their interest—a different curriculum, a new supplemental workbook, an educational game, a field trip, etc.

They are motivated by relationships and care a great deal about what others think of them. They like to be recognized and acknowledged for their achievements. Because of this they will sometimes be overachievers, putting out extraordinary effort to impress people. For the same reason, they are vulnerable to conflict and criticism. They often dislike and avoid competitions, preferring cooperation so that no one's feelings are hurt.

Caution

I have to throw out a few cautions here as we talk about children's learning styles. First of all, think of a typical two-year-old child in terms of learning styles. Most two-year-olds fit into the Wiggly Willy category. They don't sit still very well. They are totally hands-on as they explore their new and expanding world. They aren't interested in deep thinking, long-range planning, or delayed gratification. But they grow beyond their two-year-old world, and eventually, their true learning style becomes evident. This might happen at age five, eight, or ten. They might seem one learning style as they begin kindergarten, then seem a very different style at age ten. So don't try to peg your preschooler's learning style. And don't think you've figured out your older child's learning style and expect it to remain the same forever.

Another caution: It's tempting to use learning styles as an excuse to ignore bad behavior or spiritual issues: "My son's a Wiggly Willy, and he just can't sit still." So you let him drive everyone crazy with his uncontrollable behavior.

Every learning style has both positive and negative character qualities. Wiggly Willys can be enthusiastic and fun-loving, but they struggle with self-discipline. Perfect Paulas can be very self-disciplined, but they might also be bossy or self-righteous. Competent Carls can be so self-sufficient that they lack charity or concern for others. Sociable Sues can be very concerned about people but absolutely hopeless when it comes to other areas of personal responsibility.

Recognizing these strengths and weaknesses in each of our children helps us identify our job as parents. We build on their strengths, but we also help them overcome their weaknesses.

Conflicting Learning Styles

Maybe you have already spotted the biggest problem with learning styles—the potential conflict between the learning styles of parents and children. For example, let's say you identify many of your own characteristics under "Competent Carl." You tend to be a very logical, analytical person. You like independent work, and you've little patience with drama queens. You might have a hard time with your Sociable Sue daughter who tries to use emotional manipulation to get out of doing what she doesn't want to do.

Or consider a very common situation in homeschooling: Perfect Paula mom and Wiggly Willy son. Mom has her lesson plans all organized, her curriculum well planned, and her daily schedule on the refrigerator for all to see. Wiggly Willy would much rather be outside doing practically anything other than school. He freaks out at the sight of the inch-thick math workbook, not to mention the pile of other books mom has purchased to make schooling easy for her to manage.

A far less common situation might be the reverse of our last scenario: Wiggly Willy mom and Perfect Paula daughter. Mom gets up in the morning and it's a beautiful day for a field trip. Besides, she has yet to get around to creating any lesson plans, so a field trip is a good excuse to put off planning for another day. Meanwhile, her daughter has compared notes with her age-mates and knows that she is way behind in math. And she worries that their "real book and field trip" approach to history might not help her know enough to get a high score on the standardized test she'll have to take at the end of the year. She would just love it if her mom would get some *real* school books and let her stay home and do school.

Most of us parents tend to think that the way we like to approach homeschooling will be equally appealing to our children. One of the most important lessons we can take from learning styles is that the opposite is more likely true. As parents, we need to stretch ourselves out of our own learning style comfort zones to try to meet our children's needs.

For parents without a single strongly dominant learning/teaching style, this will likely be easier. Such parents will more easily adapt to their children's needs than will the parent with a narrower range of personal learning styles.

Teaching to Their Strengths: Methods That Work Best For Different Learners

Meeting our children's needs in terms of learning styles does not mean we have to construct our entire curriculum around these learning styles. Generally, our children will have stronger subjects and weaker subjects.

Perhaps your child is good at math and weak in language arts. If you are using a math program that doesn't really use methods best for that child's learning style, but he is still learning just fine because math comes easily for him, then don't worry about it. Stick with what you are using. But if language arts are a challenge, then you will want to look for resources and methods for composition, grammar, spelling, etc., that work best with his learning style.

Use learning styles as a tool to help you tune into your child's needs and choose methods and materials that help in troublesome areas.

Let's look at methods that are most likely to work with different learning styles.

Wiggly Willy

Wiggly Willy is a kinesthetic learner. The more he can use his body and his senses to learn, the better. Hands-on learning works well. That might include math manipulatives, building projects, making 3-D maps, learning facts set to music, and anything else that involves both large and small muscle movement and as many senses as possible.

When you need to directly teach Willy, it's best to use audio-visual aids; the more he can hear, see, and touch what he's learning, the easier it will be for him to tune into and remember the lesson.

Willy has a short attention span, so if you have something important to say to him, say it quickly— don't use it as the final point in a five-minute lecture. He won't be listening past the first minute unless you've done something interesting to re-engage him.

These children really need freedom to move around. Often they learn best when their bodies are moving. Some therapists recommend that children with attention-deficit disorders do things like practice saying math facts while jumping on a trampoline. It also might be a good idea to let Willy play with something in his hands while you present a grammar or history lesson.

Project learning can work well with Wiggly Willys; however, these children do not think about consequences, so they need supervision. If they tackle a project, set up periodic checkpoints so you can ensure they are staying on task and making progress.

Likewise, unit studies often are a good choice for Wiggly Willys. Typically, unit studies include a healthy mix of book learning (including real books) and activities that stimulate and hold his interest. Unit studies that offer a number of activity options are especially good since Willy probably will need more hands-on activities than the average learner.

If you do not want to do a total unit study approach, you should still consider using real books rather than textbooks, especially for history and science, but also for other subjects. Essentially you will create your own mini unit studies that stay within a subject area. For example, for science in the elementary grades, choose only three or four topics to study during that school year. Find one or two good resource books on each topic to use as information sources—these will have far more information than a typical textbook and will invariably be more interesting. Find ideas for hands-on activities, experiments, and field trips related to each topic. Then study the selected topics in-depth instead of trying to cover ten to twenty topics superficially as do most textbooks. (Actually, this approach to science is good not just for Wiggly Willy but for all types of learners.)

Willys are easily overwhelmed by what seems to them to be too much reading or pencil-and-paper work. A math book with one hundred practice problems on a page might look impossible. However, half that number of problems broken down into twenty-five per worksheet and supplemented with practice using manipulatives or a computer game would be no problem at all, even if the total number of practice problems were higher.

Another example: an assignment for an older child to write a lengthy report should be broken down into manageable chunks that are due each day rather than simply assigning one big project due in two months.

If math is a problem area, use manipulatives like *Cuisenaire® Rods* or *Base Ten Blocks®* to teach new concepts. You can purchase these to use alongside a more traditional math text, or you can purchase a program that has manipulatives built in, such as *Math-U-See* or *Moving with Math.*

Consider supplementing manipulative-based programs even further with math games (card games, board games, computer games), applications through building projects, cooking activities, etc.

For beginning readers, use a movable alphabet—rubber or magnetic letters children can arrange into words, phonics games, and interesting reading material.

For Willys who are reluctant writers, first try making a shape book or some other interesting format for presentation of the writing project and *then* have Willy write what goes into the book. Dinah Zike's *Big Book of Books and Activities* (*Dinah-Might Activities*, available through teacher supply stores and homeschool distributors) is packed with lots of great ideas for this sort of thing.

With Wiggly Willys you should probably reduce your use of traditional texts and workbooks and focus instead on resources that are stimulating and interesting.

Wiggly Willys pose special challenges, but the key is for parents to pay attention to what does and doesn’t work for their child, no matter how unusual it might seem.

In summary, Wiggly Willy prefers:

- hands-on activity

- multisensory audio-visual aids
- short, dynamic presentations
- freedom to move around
- whole-body physical involvement
- project learning
- texts or workbooks that are not overwhelming
- learning games
- variety in learning methods

Perfect Paula

Many parents wish all their children were Perfect Paulas when it comes to homeschooling because these children actually care about doing what's expected and pleasing you. Perfect Paula tends to work well with typical school curriculum. She likes the security and predictability of knowing what's expected and how it is to be done each day. She can usually work well independently as long as instructions are clear.

However, recall that Paula has a narrow comfort zone. She's most comfortable with review, repetition, and drill because she's already familiar with most of the answers. New concepts can be challenging, so work closely with her when introducing new concepts. Give her lots of encouragement at this stage.

Paula would rather receive information than think creatively. She's not likely to do as well in a Socratic discussion (classical education method) as most other learners. If you are planning such a discussion or other activity that will take Paula out of her comfort zone, give her as much advance notice, reassurance, and encouragement as possible.

She's not likely to be enthusiastic about creative writing, dramatizations, or other self-expressive learning activities. You should not eliminate these from her experience, but introduce them gently, a little at a time. Unit studies might be a good tool for stretching Paula since most offer a variety of activities that can be used in this way.

One of the biggest problems for Paula is that she often does well memorizing and repeating information (typical for early elementary grades) but struggles when it comes time to start making connections, analyzing, and synthesizing information.

For example, A *Beka*'s math program might work fine up through third or fourth grade because Paula loves the continual practice, the clear presentation of the rules for each process, and the fact that she does well on timed drills. By fourth or fifth grade, however, she might struggle because *A Beka* has not explained concepts—why math processes work the way they do. She memorizes her math facts very well and knows how to do multidigit multiplication and division, but two-step word problems throw her for a loop. One solution would be to continue to use *A Beka* but add math manipulatives or supplemental books that present math "brain teasers," thereby helping to push her to deeper levels of thinking so she develops conceptual understanding. Or choose a different program altogether, one that includes understanding of math concepts such as *Modern Curriculum Press Mathematics* or *Horizons Math.*

Paulas probably will not need as much hands-on work as Wiggly Willy, so a manipulative-based program is generally not essential, although it might be helpful.

Since Perfect Paulas are generally weak in creative writing skills, look carefully at some of my Top Picks for developing writing skills.

Because the structure of most traditional curricula fits Perfect Paula's learning style fairly well, you will more often find yourself looking for supplements to help with difficult areas and to stretch her beyond her comfort zone.

In summary, Perfect Paula prefers:

- workbooks
- consistent structure in both schedule and curriculum
- rules and predictability
- lectures or lessons that follow an outline
- repetition and memorization
- drill and review
- time to prepare for any discussion
- gentle help to develop creativity and deeper thinking skills

Competent Carl

If you recall from looking at adult learning styles, control is a big issue for Competent Carl. He has lots of ideas of his own and has little patience for listening to others. Discussions are OK only if he gets to do a lot of talking. He'll tune out of an hour-long lecture. Unlike Perfect Paula, however, he might love Socratic discussions if questions are meaningful and such discussions are productive.

Carls like to think out loud or brainstorm. For example, you might find that he writes better when you first take plenty of time to talk through possible organizational strategies or ways to tackle writing assignments rather than leaving him on his own to figure it out.

Because of his logical mind, he prefers curriculum that is well-organized and purposeful rather than entertaining with lots of extra activity involved. He wants to know in advance what he is doing and why. Structured traditional curriculum can work well for Carl as long as it doesn't have too much busywork built into it.

Carl has plenty of his own ideas to explore, therefore long-term independent projects can work well for him. One approach is to present the learning objective and offer two or three possible ways for Carl to achieve it. Let him choose; then write up a learning contract that details what assignments will be completed and when they will be turned in.

Competent Carls are more likely than other learners to challenge you with "Why do I need to learn this?" Take time to explain to him since it will improve his motivation if he understands the purpose for each task.

He's also likely to challenge you about repetition, practice, and busywork. Sometimes Carl doesn't like to do review and practice once he's already covered something, even though he really needs the practice for proficiency. Choose curriculum that contains a minimal amount of busywork and review, or have him skip such material when it is unnecessary.

For instance, once Carl knows how to read fairly well, let him read books selected from your "approved" list rather than reading anthologies (textbooks). Use study guides for novels

(see *Total Language Plus* and *Progeny Press* guides) or carefully selected supplemental activity/workbooks to work on comprehension, vocabulary, and other analytical skills. He will be more engaged in the process if he is able to select what he wants to read without being bogged down with what he considers redundant exercises in a reading text and workbook. You can focus on particular skills he needs to develop rather than that wide range of skills covered in a text.

While Competent Carls generally prefer independent work, group learning situations help them develop social skills. You might do a family unit study where everyone is together for foundational reading or discussion. Carl would then pursue the same topic as your other children by doing more independent research, reading, and writing while you continue with group activities with the rest of your children. You might also have Carl participate in a Friday afternoon art activity with the whole family.

Probably the most important thing to keep in mind with Carl is that he wants his learning to be efficient. Don't bog him down with manipulatives and hands-on activities if they aren't helpful. They can do more harm than good.

In summary, Competent Carl prefers:

- independent work
- logically organized lessons
- clear sense of purpose for lessons
- long-term projects
- talking rather than listening
- problem solving
- brainstorming

Sociable Sue

Sociable Sue is a perfect candidate for unit studies of the *KONOS, Tapestry of Grace*, and *Five in a Row* variety. She will thrive on group projects and interactive learning. Read-aloud sessions will also be appealing to her, so using real books rather than textbooks is a good choice.

Sue picks up on social dynamics better than other learners. She's sensitive to your attitude toward subjects, so choose curriculum about which you can be enthusiastic. If she senses that you don't like the curriculum, she won't like it either. You will also notice a dynamic that makes things even more complicated: if her friends like or use a particular resource, she's likely to have a positive attitude about it solely for that reason. This can make purchasing resources difficult since you're not likely to know ahead of time what her friends are going to be enthusiastic about.

Because approval from others matters so much to Sue, she generally likes "public presentations"— reading her writing assignment aloud, participating in a dramatic reenactment or dramatic reading of a poem or speech, performances (e.g., music, dance), or sharing her artwork.

Creative activities usually are more appealing than repetitious review and drill. Sue gets bored with the same learning format. She thrives on variety. Choosing a resource that alters the

lesson format from time to time is wise. Otherwise, you will need to supplement or adapt what you're using to keep her motivated. Hands-on resources you might choose for Wiggly Willy often work well for Sue because they require social interaction.

One of the worst things you can do with Sociable Sue is purchase a workbook-based program that is designed for independent study and expect her to spend three hours a day in isolation as she works through her books. She can work alone for short periods, but not all day. If you must use independent workbooks, alternate them with sociable/interactive learning activities to keep her going.

Sue will also need help learning how to persevere even when learning isn't sociable and fun. She must develop the self-discipline to follow through on assignments even when it gets boring.

In summary, Sociable Sue prefers:

- real books
- unit studies
- discussions
- social interaction
- enthusiastic teaching
- variety in types of resources
- creative writing
- public presentations
- novelty and creativity in curriculum presentation
- situations where she is personally recognized and valued
- (needs but does not necessarily enjoy) repetition for detail

Keep Learning Modalities in Mind

As I mentioned earlier, our children might also have a strong learning modality—visual, auditory, or kinesthetic—where they learn best by either seeing, hearing, or touching/experiencing. Coupling what we discover about both learning styles and learning modalities gives us a lot of information we can use to make better curriculum choices for each of our children. A Sociable Sue who is kinesthetic will prefer more project-type learning, while an auditory Sociable Sue will prefer more sedentary read-aloud activity.

This does not mean, however, that we teach each type of learner only with methods that suit his personality and temperament. (For some children everything would be fun and games, and they would learn no self-discipline.) Instead, use methods that work best for each child when introducing new or difficult subject matter. Once they have grasped the concept, then using other more-challenging methods will be less likely to produce stress or failure.

We can help strengthen students' weak areas (such as short attention span or lack of creativity) by working on these problem areas within subjects that are especially interesting to them or in which they excel. For example, many Wiggly Willys do not like writing assignments. But reading an exciting historical adventure or biography aloud, then asking them to draw a picture about the story and write a few descriptive sentences will develop writing skills in a more enjoyable way than most workbook activities.

After initial instruction, review and reinforce learning through methods that will help each child stretch himself and strengthen his weak areas. For example, a very active Wiggly Willy can initially learn math by using objects, without paper and pencil. Once he has mastered a concept, he can then get out the paper and pencil to do review and practice.

To sum it up, with both younger and older children we should teach new concepts through a child's strongest sense (learning mode) or learning style and then review and practice through the other senses (modes) or learning styles.

It helps if we recognize those subjects that are easier and those that are more difficult for each child. While there are some typically strong subjects within each learning style, there are many exceptions. Wiggly Willys usually prefer physically active subjects such as music, the arts, and athletics. Perfect Paulas like more structured and predictable subjects like math, spelling, history, and geography. Competent Carls often excel in math and science, exhibiting less interest in the humanities. Sociable Sues often prefer whatever subjects are presented with the most enthusiasm and interaction, but their strong areas tend to be writing and literature, languages, social studies, and performing arts. Of course, these are very general observations that may or may not apply to your child.

You must observe which subjects consistently are handled with ease and which cause frustration. For those frustrating subjects, consider using teaching methods that better fit your child's learning style. Avoid using a child's "weak" methods until he understands the basic concept and has reached a review or application stage.

Matching Learning Styles to Curricula

When I put together the chart of the 100 Top Picks, I did not include columns headed "Only for Wiggly Willy," etc. This is because there are rarely direct matches between resources and learning styles. Instead, I included columns that rate how a curriculum tends to suit a primary aspect of each learning style. Thus, there are columns labeled multi-sensory/hands-on (WW), structure/rule-oriented (PP), appeals to logical/analytical learners (CC), and has social activity (SS).

You will also need to look at other columns that might be equally important, such as whether or not it works for independent study, how easy it is for the teacher to use, how much writing is required, or what methodology it reflects. Only you can decide which characteristics of a particular curriculum are most important.

Compromise Solutions

Sometimes your teaching style and your child's learning style are drastically different. Suppose your child really needs a unit study approach with lots of creative activity, but your Perfect Paula style makes you shudder at the thought of trying to gather all the stuff you need *plus* having to choose among activities. What if you choose the wrong ones? And then how will you know if your children did enough or too much?

There are what I call "compromise solutions" for such situations. For example, KONOS publishes *KONOS in a Box*, a unit study that includes step-by-step instructions plus all the books and materials (even craft materials) you need. Cornerstone Curriculum publishes *Making Math Meaningful*, a math program that includes manipulatives but has scripted lessons

that tell parents exactly what to say and do. (This is not one of my Top Picks, but it works well in such situations. The address for Cornerstone Curriculum is under *Worldviews of the Western World.*)

So keep in mind that while you are looking for resources that suit your children's learning styles, you must also choose resources with which you can work.

Motivation

Motivation is often a two-part process. First, motivate your children to do well by providing a program that fits their learning style and makes it easier for them to grasp concepts. If you can make learning more enjoyable for children (not that it always will be!), you solve part of the motivation problem. By using creative approaches and relating learning to the interests of your children, you make learning more of a partnership than a struggle.

You also can try to improve motivation by using rewards or incentives. Just as different style learners are successful with different learning methods, they also respond to different types of rewards or incentives. Wiggly Willys often respond well to prizes, special trips, playtime, or food—the more immediate the reward, the more effective. Perfect Paula can be motivated with stickers, good grades, and other concrete affirmations as well as with personal praise. Competent Carl, who enjoys being independent, can be motivated by self-designed contracts or rewards of free time or money. Sociable Sue, more interested in people and relationships, tends to be motivated by personal affirmation (praise) and recognition or an opportunity to do something special with a friend.

Experiment with different types of motivation to figure out what works best with each child. Don’t be afraid to use different incentives with each of your children.

Disguised Learning Disabilities

A word of caution is needed here. Sometimes we can mistake the characteristics or evidence of a learning disability for a learning style. If you have tried everything—paid attention to learning styles and methods and have retaught five different ways—and your child still “doesn’t get it,” he or she might have a learning disability. Sometimes a child will appear to be a Wiggly Willy because a learning disability interferes with reading, writing, or thinking processes. If the work is too difficult, your child might act bored, restless, or inattentive to avoid dealing with the “impossible” task. Active learning that requires less paper-and-pencil work or reading will appear successful, but it is only masking the real problem. This will be apparent when you’ve already taught a concept that they seem to understand—such as doing multiplication using blocks—but when you transition them to writing down what they have done, they are unable to make the shift.

If you suspect that your child has a learning disability, seek professional assistance. Generally, your local homeschool support group can recommend a professional in your area who can help you determine what is going on.

In Conclusion

The goal here is not labeling your child but becoming aware that each child will have strengths and weaknesses in the ways he or she learns. Likewise, you must recognize your own