

Connor

WR 13100

Professor Clauss

October 30, 2011

Lighting a Fire or Filling a Bucket?

Situation: I am writing to my aunt, Cathy, to convince her that she should home school her daughter Emily. Aunt Cathy is an educator, and is highly critical of both public and private schools for being too rigid and formulaic. She has considered home schooling Emily in the past, but does not think the home schooling is a viable or competitive strategy. Despite this, she remains unsatisfied with the education Emily is currently receiving, and is open to any feasible solution. I hope to persuade her to reconsider home schooling as an option. I myself have been home schooled for ten years, and believe it did me a great service.

Dear Aunt Cathy,

How is the family? I feel like I've only seen you briefly this year, though there were a couple of days in the summer. Thanksgiving is just around the corner, though, so we'll be able to catch up soon. Of course, it's always a surprise to see the kids again after such a long stretch. They seem so big! Let's see, Rianna would be eleven now, which makes Emily nine. Is she still having trouble in school? It must be hard...Emily's such a smart kid, but the shy always have a hard time in school. I can attest to that. Last I heard you were considering moving her to a private school, but didn't have high hopes. I'm inclined to share your hesitance. Emily could well run into same problems there as in the public schools, since they operate in largely the same fashion. I remember you talking to my mother about home schooling a few months ago, as a possible option for Emily's schooling. I think it would be a good thing for her, especially in light of her shyness. It's going to be very hard for any teacher to get the most out of her in a classroom full of other kids. Since I have quite a bit of personal experience with home schooling, I thought I'd write you to try and dispel a few of the stereotypes about home schooling, and explain some

of the benefits. Home schooling was a great choice for me, and I'm confident it would do wonders for Emily.

First, I'd like to explain a little bit about my homeschooling experience. You know the basics, from talking to my parents; but I would like to give you my perspective. I have been home schooled since second grade. At that time, I was withdrawn from school, for various reasons, primarily lack of academic challenge and poor teacher recognition of my strengths and weaknesses. I was reading far above my level, but could barely write at all. After some discussion, my parents settled on home schooling over private school. It was a surprisingly easy adjustment for me, as it turned out. I liked the opportunity to focus on what interested me, and things I was good at. I also benefited from having a teacher intimately acquainted with my weaknesses. If we had to take extra time to work on math, we did. As a result, I actually wound up a few years ahead in math and science—my worst subjects—by the time I entered high school. This allowed me to take even more time to pursue my strengths, by taking college courses and getting to know mentors in poli-sci and history. Ultimately, I feel that my home schooling experience went a long way towards preparing me for college.

I'm sure you have your own ideas about the pros and cons of home schooling. It's been my experience, however, that most people's feelings on the subject are dominated by one or two specific experiences or acquaintances within the home schooling community. This isn't really a fair way to judge thousands of people, but people aren't always rational. For example, Aunt Kathy, upon hearing that I was to be home schooled, asked of my mother "But won't you turn him into a freak?" If my own family could hold such opinions about home schooling, it isn't surprising that others with less personal connections do as well.

By far the most persistent stereotype of home schoolers is that they are antisocial, or in some other way socially handicapped by their experience. Certainly this would be of some concern to you, since Emily is already so shy. In honesty, there is some truth to the idea that home schoolers, on average, tend to be less socially functional than other students. This, however, is because many parents choose to homeschool their children *because* they have some sort of handicap. For instance, I know a young man named Alex who is absolutely brilliant. He is already taking college philosophy seminars in 8th grade. Alex has severe Asperger's Syndrome, to such an extent that he can scarcely carry on a normal conversation. He would not be able to cut it in a school environment. Many home schoolers, like Alex, are actually at home for social reasons—but the vast majority of home schoolers are actually well socialized. If you're willing to look for them, there are opportunities for home schoolers in virtually any area. A lot of kids I know get involved in theater, or sports, and meet people that way. My friends are a mix of home, public and private schooled kids, which is pretty typical. You needn't worry whether Emily will get to spend enough time with other kids. My friend Daniel is currently a sophomore at Gordon College. He explained to me that he felt well-adapted to making friends in the college environment, largely due to the socialization he enjoyed as a homeschooled student. "Friendships in home schooling are based upon commonality, rather than who you're thrust in with in class," he reported, "This is pretty similar to my experience at college, where it's really up to me whether I pursue a friendship or not." On the whole, Daniel thinks being homeschooled benefited him socially.

As to whether a home education can stack up academically, I can fortunately refer you to a family friend with a similar background to your own. Linda Fantauzzo, who has at various times headed up a half-dozen different home schooling organizations, majored in education. She

taught middle school for five years—by the end of which, she was determined not to send her own children into that system. “Home schooling is more efficient,” she asserts, “because children spend less time in taking attendance, waiting in line, and so forth, and more time one-on-one with a teacher who has unmatched knowledge of their abilities and learning style. There is no need for busy work.” To illustrate the kind of time-wasting avoided, she cited an actual assignment that a colleague at her middle school handed out, to make caricature of a family out of fruits and vegetables. She finds it more worthwhile to cut to chase in shorter, more focused periods of student-specific teacher time. I think this is particularly relevant to Emily, since quieter students usually need a little more time with the assignment, and with the teacher.

One thing you may want to consider is what kind of pressures may contribute to Emily being uncomfortable at school. In home schooling, there is virtually no peer pressure. That means no pressure to drink or do drugs. But at a less radical level, there is no push to be somebody else. I know that Emily is very shy. As somebody who used to be painfully shy myself, I know that there is a tremendous weight of peers to fit in, and adopt the identity of the group. This does ease relations with other kids, but it also squashes self-identity and creativity in some cases. Conformity, to my way of thinking, is the enemy of brilliance. It is not so much that gifted kids cannot shine in public schools, as that sometimes their shyness or desire to fit in overcomes their creativity and drive to do something they love.

Emily is obviously a bright kid, with a lot of ideas. She thinks long and hard about things, which will be to her advantage in life. But this, taken with her shyness, can easily be misinterpreted as reluctance or disengagement. I, again, can speak from experience. In fact, a large part of the reason I began studying at home was a hostile relationship with a teacher who interpreted my boredom as apathy, and accordingly placed me way below my level in reading

and math. Ultimately, it wasn't really her fault. It's simply impossible for a teacher to completely understand the personality and learning style of every single student. For those who meet expectations of what a student should be, the system often works well. A lot of my friends did well in school, and had a great time. But for kids who don't quite line up with the template, public or private schools can be stifling, even life-altering. Home schooling allows a student to receive a tailor-made education, and moreover to pursue her passions. I don't know if Emily has discovered something she loves yet, but I do know that no school can offer her more freedom to find that passion, or to explore it when she does, than can home schooling. I'm not suggesting that it is the only option, or even the best one. It is, however, a viable solution to your dissatisfaction with the local schools, and would be a truly rewarding experience for both you and Emily. It can give her a flexible education, and the give you an opportunity for a closer relationship with your daughter before she grows up and moves away.

Whatever you settle on, I hope you find a solution to the dilemma of Emily's education. I'm sure she'll do well wherever she goes, and I know you'll make a good decision. I really look forward to getting to know her better in the next few years. She's getting to that time in her life where she will really start to make decisions for herself about what she's interested in ...and that will be exciting for both of you. I'm looking forward to seeing you in a few days—thanks for letting my family stay in the Woodstock house! See you soon.

Love,

Connor

Works Cited

F----, Linda. Phone Interview. 2 Nov. 2011. (xxx) xxx-xxxx.

S----, Daniel. Phone Interview. 31 Oct. 2011 (xxx) xxx-xxxx.