



What To Consider Before Choosing A Curriculum



Curriculum tends to be the question homeschoolers ask each other when meeting for the first time or shortly thereafter. “So, what curriculum do you use?” We like to compare notes on that. It’s a way to relate to others, but it’s also something we often use as a proxy for our plan for how we’re teaching and raising our kids. So, before you head off to find the “right” curriculum, let’s discuss the **topics we should consider before we get to that question.**

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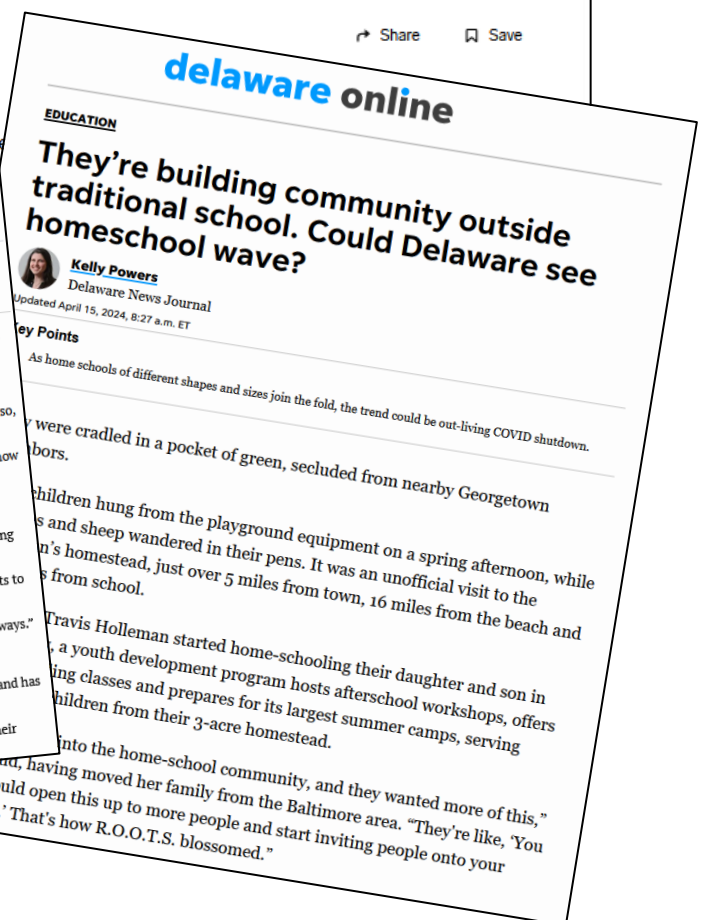
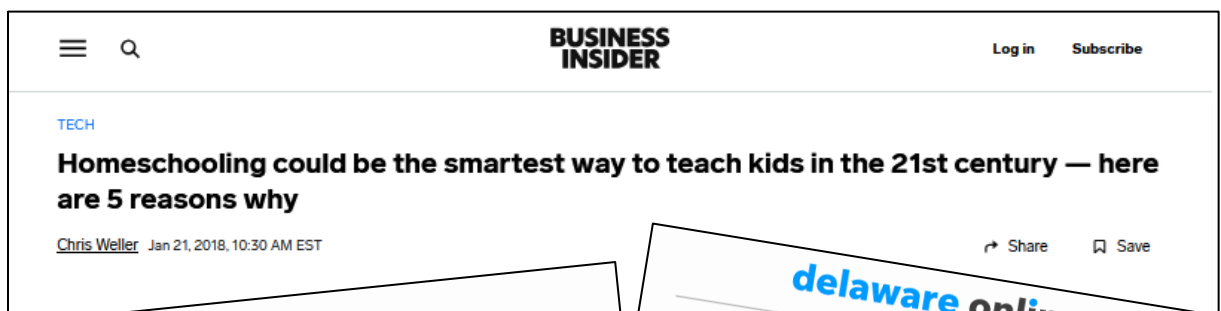
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After all, there's something about homeschooling that interests people, whether they homeschool or not. This was true pre-pandemic and it's only increased since then. There's interest in:

- the **flexibility** it holds
- the **freedom** to craft an educational experience that fits each child
- in the **lack of overhead** when compared with an institutional school.

And this isn't rare anymore. When an outlet like Business Insider calls homeschooling "the smartest way to teach kids in the 21st century", we can say there is widespread recognition of the value.



So what should we consider before we choose a curriculum?
Five broad categories of things:

- 1 **Why do you want to homeschool?**
- 2 **What makes your family unique?**
- 3 **What role should you play?**
- 4 **What outcome do you want?**
- 5 **How do you reach that outcome?**



Know your “why”

It's important to know your own “why”, not everyone else's.

Also write it down. Going through the process of defining “why” helps clarify it. If you have to form enough words to write down, it helps to get into specifics.

Writing it down helps to refer back to when sorting through all the decisions you make in your homeschool:

- How do you spend time?
- What materials and resources do you use?
- What events do you prioritize?

If you can draw a line from <whatever the thing is> to your “why”, then it probably belongs. If not, then it may just be clutter on the schedule or on the bookshelf.

Your “why” can help ground you in why you started

Writing it down also helps to refer back to when you get to the point of questioning yourself or you're pondering throwing in the towel or you're considering throwing everything out and starting over. It can help ground you in why you started.

Your “why” may shift over time as your family changes – and that's ok

Household rhythms

Do you have an early riser? Do you have a kid who has 25,000 words to use each day? What work schedules and errands and appointments do you have to plan around?

Ages of kids

Do you have all young ones? Ones learning to read? Ones that are old enough to be self-driven?

Season of life

Are you in newborn mode, where most of life is scheduled by a baby? Similar to that, do you have elder care responsibilities either at home, or outside the home? Are you homeschooling your first, where you can provide one-on-one attention, or do you have multiple kids of different ages? It may seem unnatural to name your season of life, but if you include this step in your planning, and you explicitly identify where you are, then you can identify the practical impacts that season has before they pop up along the way.



Kids learning styles

This is one that takes some observation. When your kids are interested in something, **how do they go about learning more** on the topic? Do they put their nose in a book for hours? Talk about it all the time and verbally process what they're learning? Do they take things in from a variety of sources and write it all down and organize it themselves. Do they have to touch everything?

What are your big rocks?

You've heard the analogy before: to get a bunch of differently-sized rocks in a jar, you need to put the big rocks in first. It's an imperfect analogy, but the idea is that **the most important things need to be prioritized**, otherwise they'll get crowded out by less important things. Identify the important things for your family, whether that's vacations with distant family, planting a church, grieving a loss, involving your kids in a business, or whatever. It's also worth noting that your list of rocks may change over time and some conscious reprioritization may be in order as things shift.



To answer that, we need to ask:

What is education anyway?

Let's head back to Noah Webster's 1828 dictionary:

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EDUCA'TION, *n.* [*L. educatio.*] The bringing up, as of a child; instruction; formation of manners. Education comprehends all that series of instruction and discipline which is intended to enlighten the understanding, correct the temper, and form the manners and habits of youth, and fit them for usefulness in their future stations. To give children a good *education* in manners, arts and science, is important; to give them a religious *education* is indispensable; and an immense responsibility rests on parents and guardians who neglect these duties.

What role should you play?

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How does that compare to today's definition?

education noun

ed·u·ca·tion (,e-jə-'kā-shən ◀▶)

[Synonyms of education >](#)

- 1 **a** : the action or process of **educating** or of being **educated**
| *also* : a stage of such a process
b : the knowledge and development resulting from the process of being educated
| a person of little *education*
- 2 : the field of study that deals mainly with methods of teaching and learning in schools

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educate verb

ed·u·cate ('e-jə-,kāt ◀▶)

educated; educating

[Synonyms of educate >](#)

transitive verb

- 1 **a** : to provide schooling for
| chose to *educate* their children at home
b : to train by formal instruction and supervised practice especially in a skill, trade, or profession
- 2 **a** : to develop mentally, morally, or aesthetically especially by instruction
b : to provide with information : **INFORM**
| *educating* themselves about changes in the industry
- 3 : to persuade or condition to feel, believe, or act in a desired way
| *educate* the public to support our position

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educated adjective

ed·u·cat·ed ('e-jə-,kātəd ◀▶)

[Synonyms of educated >](#)

- 1 : having an **education**
| *especially* : having an education beyond the average
| *educated* speakers
- 2 **a** : giving evidence of training or practice : **SKILLED**
| *educated* hands
b : befitting one that is educated
| *educated* taste
c : based on some knowledge of fact
| an *educated* guess

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This modern definition stresses process, methods of teaching and schooling but doesn't really focus on... learning. Hmm.

Noah Webster's definition mentions the **bringing up of a child** – this a picture of preparing them for adulthood. Noah Webster's definition mentions instruction, but it also mentions **discipline** and hangs both on the intention to "**enlighten the understanding**". That's a lot different than the process of schooling.

There're two main takeaways from this comparison:

- Education is so much more holistic than the list of subjects and training we often call school.
- In the educational environment that we're tasked with creating, learning needs a higher priority than teaching.

So, with that backdrop, what's our role?



We are a guide

A facilitator, enabler, encourager, a revealer of things that they don't know exist. We're less of a "teacher" since that implies we're either the source of, or conduit of, knowledge. We may be in some cases, but not in all cases.

“You’re not a classroom teacher. You’re a tutor and the first thing a tutor does is finds out what the kid knows and moves at the kid’s pace.” –Steve Demme

To illustrate this, there was a 20-year study⁸ that looked at the level of education a child will attain and found that the difference between being raised in a home with no books compared to being raised in a home with a 500-book library was



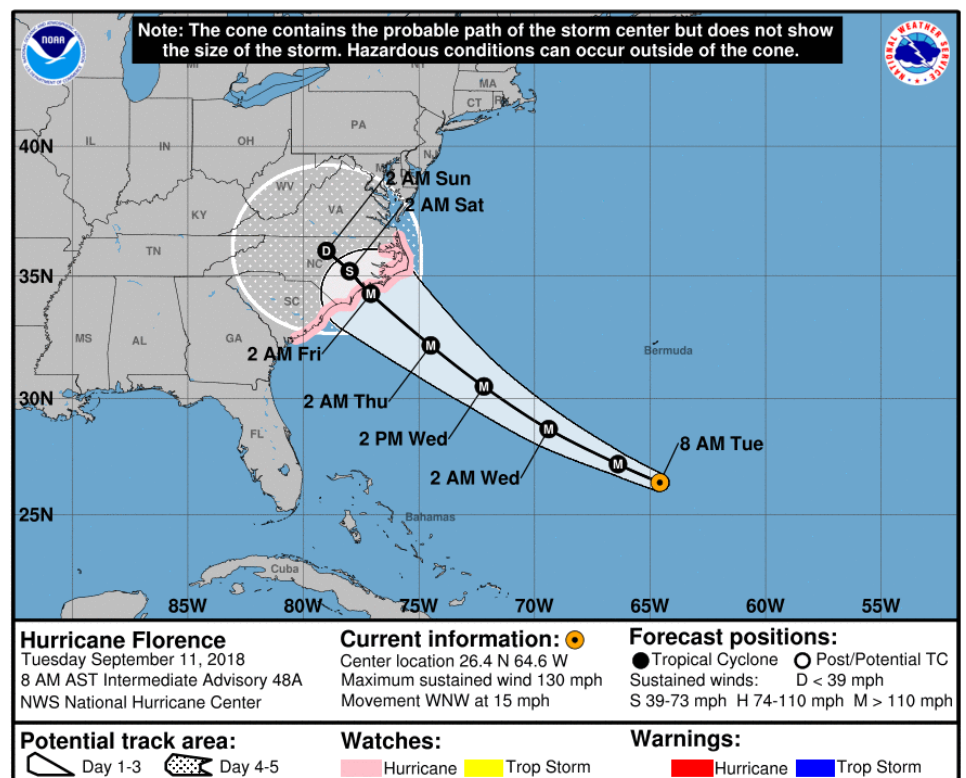
the same as the difference between having parents who are barely literate and having parents who have a university education. Basically, children growing up in homes with a bunch of books they could access had the equivalent of several years more schooling. The gains here were a result of **learning**, not teaching.

We are a coach

Coaches develop skills. They don't know every future game or opponent, but they help to develop skills that will be useful in those future games. **We're preparing our kids for a world that doesn't exist yet.** Even looking at formal occupations, they change over time. How many people do you know work in a field that they didn't go to school for? Or in a field that didn't even exist when they went to school? We know as humans we are able to learn; we are able to take what we know in one area and apply it another area. Both of these things help prepare learners for a world that doesn't exist yet.

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For another imperfect analogy, think about each of your kids as a hurricane. You know where they are right now. Based on their current interests and skills, you know a general direction that they are likely to head in, but you don't know exactly which direction they will go, or at what speed they'll travel. But that's ok. Using where they've been, as long as they have the ability to continue to learn, they'll take the world by storm wherever they go.



As a coach, we're preparing our kids for a world that doesn't exist from both an occupational standpoint, but also a knowledge processing standpoint. The amount of knowledge discovered or created each year isn't something we can keep up with.

Learning how to learn, how to research, how to evaluate and assess information and sources of information is way more important than specific academic information or curriculum. All that to say, **we are a coach preparing kids to learn what we can't teach.**



We are an example

There are many facets to being an example, but let's mention just two:

- We're living adult life while we're preparing our kids for adult life. So we have to ask the question: **What do our kids see in us?** How do they see us learn? What habits do we demonstrate? What do they observe when we interact with other adults? And kids?
- On the topic of work and job shadowing, we can take our example role and pull in others.

“One of the many great advantages of home-based education is that children not shut up in school have a chance to see their parents and other adults work, and if they wish, as many do, to join in.” –John Holt ¹⁰

If your kids are interested in a career that you don't have, we have the opportunity to find others who can be examples. As homeschooling parents, we have already handpicked ourselves to craft our children's educational experience. Here **we can handpick** others to expand their education further. Specifically choosing adults to influence our kids isn't an opportunity that exists in institutional schools, but with homeschooling we can take advantage of that flexibility.

We all want our kids to have a “good education”. Before we dig into that, let’s address the question of learning gaps that often comes up. A learning gap is the difference between what a student was expected to learn by a certain point compared to what they actually did learn. **Let's question that mentality.** As long as each child has a good baseline of skills to carry into adulthood, let’s avoid worry for 3 reasons:

- The premise of a learning gap is a one-size-fits-all model, where everyone is supposed to learn the same things, at same time and at the same rate. It’s a factory model that doesn’t work well with unique people. They have unique interests and abilities. Expecting everyone to have the same set of facts memorized isn’t just unrealistic, it’s kind of boring. It’d be like going to a dinner party where everyone has the same set of knowledge to talk about.
- When you look at curriculum and concepts like grade levels, note that everything is made up. Someone somewhere had their view of “what” and “when” and wrote it down as a standard, but that doesn’t make it a universal standard. If you can move across state lines and create a “learning gap”, that’s a factor of the artificial standard, not the child.



- Everyone, regardless of whether they are homeschooled, public schooled, private schooled, privately tutored, etc. will have learning gaps. Earlier, we talked about the sheer amount of knowledge that is generated every year – it's impossible to know a significant portion of that. Every institution or parent that adopts a curriculum makes decisions on **what they want to cover in the given time they have**. The opportunity cost of that is everything else that they don't cover. In addition to that, knowledge changes. For example, curriculum used to teach that there are nine planets in our solar system and never mentioned cryptocurrency. Learning gaps are inevitable.

But let's set aside the negative concept of learning gaps and look at some positive outcomes to aim for.



While there are probably hundreds of specific desirable outcomes, let's look at two categories and two specifics:

Abilities over specific academic knowledge

In the changing world covered earlier, we can prioritize abilities over specific academic knowledge. Overall, these would be how to learn (how to gather knowledge, assess sources, discard and re-learn knowledge, find experts). Another set of abilities are life skills – those things adults often classify as “things they didn't teach me in school.” Hiring managers and interviewers will likely never ask your child to diagram a sentence, to name elements on the periodic table, or the age they learned to read. They want to know about skills: those relevant to the job but also fungible skills, i.e. skills that are interchangeable and useful in more than one area. Things like critical thinking and soft skills. **Skills, abilities and experiences have more weight than academic knowledge.**

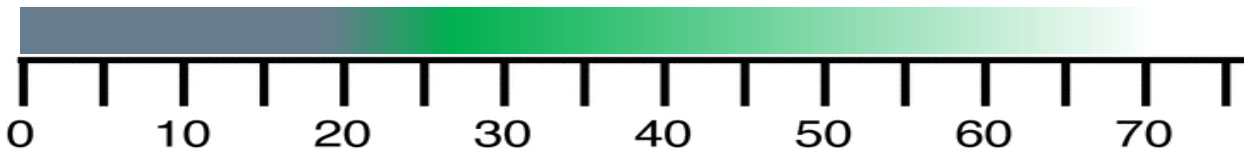
Character traits

A lengthy list of character traits could start with persistence, integrity, humility, courage, patience, creativity, etc. Positive character traits are worth the time to develop, and vice versa, avoiding negative traits is also a good goal. Each of these may or may not come from a curriculum decision, but if they do make sure to evaluate the impact of the decision intentionally.



A solid relationship with your kids when they are grown

This outcome won't show up on any list of goals you'll find at an institutional school. As homeschoolers we have the unique benefit not just to see that our kids are prepared to launch as adults but that we can continue a positive relationship with them after they have launched based on the foundation built while they are growing up. If a "schooling" approach or a particular curriculum starts to impede that relationship, it's worth reevaluating that. Just by the numbers, the time spent when kids are young in what we call K-12 is much shorter than the potential lifelong relationship that's possible. We have time after they are grown, where we will still welcome questions



and want to spend time with them to be an extended family. Even if we don't live to see that much time, **the investment we make in the relationship** while they are young can still bring them benefits and good memories after we are gone.

Kid's solid relationship with Jesus

Speaking of solid relationships, many of us would want our kids to establish their own relationship with Jesus. Why mention this in a discussion about homeschooling and curriculum? Since it's a desired outcome with which some homeschooling decisions may interfere. That could include curriculum but could also include other things like what activities we pursue or even how much of our schedule is filled with activities. You may have heard the expression that God doesn't have grandchildren?

Each person needs their own saving relationship with Jesus.

How to reach that overall outcome is the big question. A few pointers:

- **Know your state law**

This is the starting point since compliance is important regardless of where you live. For those in Delaware, check out our eBook "How To Start Homeschooling in Delaware" in our eBook list (<https://www.tristatehomeschool.org/ebooks>) for details on Delaware law and how to comply with it.



- **Don't assume you need replicate "school" at home**

Institutional school as we know it was designed for mass instruction. You likely don't have 30 kids at home lined up in 6 rows of 5 where a one-size-fits-all approach is the only scalable one. You have the freedom and ability to tailor your approach to provide what each individual child needs. An example:

"...we get better at using words, whether hearing, speaking, reading, or writing, under one condition and only one—when we use those words to say something we want to say, to people we want to say it to, for purposes that are our own." –John Holt ¹⁰

The same principle applies to any other skill. When we use it for something we want to do in a context that makes sense, then we not only get practice in that skill, we get good use out of it.

On the friction a school at home model could have, let's take a reminder from two versions of Ephesians 6:4.

Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord. (NIV)

Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. (ESV)

How many school lessons did we endure as kids that could fall into the category of exasperation? We get to interact with our kids in a relationship that is more caring than a school-based teacher/student relationship. Let's use that closeness to "bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord" and to apply the home-oriented model to academic learning.



- **Follow your kid's interests**

As adults, we tend to have our own interests and pursue knowledge related to those. Kids can follow that same model, and as noted below, likely retain more of what they learn when it comes naturally.

- **Start each thing at the right time**

Starting earlier isn't always better. This is especially true of the younger ages for things like reading and basic math concepts. There is research that points to kids learning things naturally later than we are used to who end up just fine and even in some cases better off than kids who were forced into formal learning earlier. When someone wants to learn something they tend to retain it more and they are more likely to keep the love of learning that they are born with.



What then shall we say about choosing a curriculum?

It's a tool, not a boss

Whatever you choose to use, make sure to keep it in its position as a *tool* that you are using, not as a *boss* that is micromanaging you. If your child gets a concept in three worksheets, there's no need to do ten more just because the curriculum has them.

You're the parent

As the parent, you get to create the learning environment for your own learners in light of everything we've discussed earlier.

Make sure it matches with your kids and your goals

Going back to what makes your family unique, especially your season of life and kids learning styles, make sure the methodology of what you choose matches with your kids and your goals. A traditional textbook style resource is going to look different than a project-based unit study which will differ from an interest-led unschool approach which is different from strewing. Not to mention online vs. physical variations. What you go with could be different for each subject, kid or both. If you haven't encountered a homeschooler using the word "eclectic" yet to indicate a mix and match of styles and materials, you will.

Wrap up

Your kids are your kids. They weren't assigned to you by mistake. You are in the best position to know them and their interests and where they could be headed in the world. Hopefully this provided some food for thought, but more than that, let this take some of the pressure off of finding the "right" curriculum.

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