

Home-Schooling *on the Go*: Families share why they do it, how they make it work, and what pitfalls to avoid

By Janine Boldrin



A young boy looking through a telescope stood in front of HMS Gannet moored at Chatham's Historic Dockyard.
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What if you could take your child's school with you as you make your next move? It's a decision some military families are choosing to make as their children join the estimated 1.5 million home-schooled students. From educational stability to unfamiliarity with local schools, military families have unique reasons for joining the steadily growing trend among Americans to home school.

Read on to learn how military families make home-schooling work for them and get tips on what pitfalls to avoid.

Reasons to choose home-schooling

According to the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, the reasons parents chose home-schooling vary from the desire to give religious to moral instruction, concerns about school environment, dissatisfaction with academic instruction, and such things as family time, finances, travel and distance.

But for military families, frequent moves may weigh more heavily in their decision to consider home-schooling as compared to their civilian counterparts.

"I think home-schooling is ideal for the military family, because it eliminates the repeated transitions

Want to learn more about:

DoDEA's policy on home schooling? View their policy memorandum at: www.dodea.edu/foia/iod/pdf/020D002.pdf

Each state's, territory's or country's policies on home schooling? Your rights as a military family home schooling overseas? View the Home School Legal Defense Association's web site at: www.hslda.org. According to HSLDA, in Japan and South Korea, the laws concerning home-schooling are vague, and the business communities are supporting home-schooling, so home schoolers are largely left alone.

from one school to another that disrupts kids' learning experiences and social lives," says Barbara Frank, author of *The Imperfect Home-schooler's Guide to Home-schooling and Life Prep for Home-schooled Teenagers*. "While it will still be hard for home-schooled kids to leave their friends, at least home-schooled siblings have each other through the transition; in essence, their closest 'classmates' will come with them to their new home."

Because military families have less control over where they live, finding a school that meets all of a family's desired criteria may not be an option. Plus, military children sometimes have to be pulled from schools in the middle of the school year.

"[Home-schoolers] academic progress will only be interrupted for a short time during the move, and they'll pick up where they left off, which would not likely be the case when switching schools, because schools vary so much in how and what they teach in each grade," adds Frank.

That's not to say that the same concerns that lead civilian families to seek out educational alternatives don't also apply to their military counterparts.

"The more I learned (about home-schooling) the more I felt it was right for us," says Jennifer Laws, a military spouse who home schools her two oldest children, ages four and six.

Laws' initial decision to home school was made when the family decided not to send their oldest to preschool due to their finances. But when he did end up going to public school for Kindergarten, bullying, picking up habits and a lack of consideration for his discussing his faith made Laws decide to go back to home-schooling.

Home-schooling on the move

While moving may be one reason as to why parents choose to home school, it also may have been an obstacle keeping them from choosing it in the past.

Varied policies across Department of Defense (DoD) schools led to confusion and difficulty for military home-schoolers on how to interact with different home schools; however, a 2002 Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA) Policy Memorandum stated what DoDEA schools would provide and offer home-schooled DoD dependants.

A tip for home-schooling during a deployment

I think it's important for all home-schooling parents (and especially those who are single or parenting alone during a spouse's deployment) to find like-minded friends with whom they can talk, says Frank. The Internet has made it easy for communities of people with shared interests to discuss their concerns and offer solutions. In groups like these, parents can share their joys and concerns with others who know just what their lives are like.

While neither encouraging nor discouraging DoD sponsors from home-schooling their children, the issuance of the policy by DoDEA gave parents of home-schoolers more consistent resources and policies as they moved from duty station to duty station.

"If a home-schooled DoD dependent is eligible to attend DoD schools, we will provide and offer classes and or special education services, consistent with existing regulations and policy," says Mike Lynch, Chief, Policy and Legislation for DoDEA. "If the student plans to take a class or more than one class through the school, the student must be registered and must comply with all registration procedures and requirements."

Lynch adds that DoDEA offers eligible home-schooled students other services such as academic resources, library access, and allows participation in music, sports and other extracurricular activities.

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Barbara Frank, home schooling parent and author of *Thriving in the 21st Century: Preparing Our Children for the New Economic Reality* (Cardamom Publishers, April 2011) talks about the mistake she made when she started to home school:

Many new home-schoolers replicate school in their homes. That's how I started out: with a formal class schedule and even a school bell! But before long, I wore out trying to keep up with the demands of a curriculum as well as my self-imposed schedule, and my kids got bored with the curriculum. Over the years I've learned that this happens to many home-schooling parents. Hopefully they don't give up at that point, because sooner or later that exhaustion and boredom leads them to try different curriculum, loosen up their technique, and get their kids' input on what they want to learn, which is what happened to us.

Pitfalls to avoid

What are several common mistakes that you can avoid as you start your home-schooling journey?

- Don't spend a bunch of money when you start. Adjust to the routine and lifestyle of home-schooling using free available materials and resources while you get to know what you and your child want to accomplish, plus his personality and learning style. Then gradually purchase the items you know you will use, says Crane.
- Avoid signing your kids up for all sorts of organized activities and classes in order to make sure their kids are "socialized" and well-rounded. If your kids are regularly exposed to other children and adults as a natural part of their daily lives, they'll learn to get along with people of all ages, says Frank.

While DoD schools have a stated standard policy, the lack of consistency of state and international home-schooling policies is an issue military families must still address.

"You'll need to learn the state laws regarding home-schooling if you're moving to another state," says Frank. "States do vary in their requirements, and also in how they treat home-schooling families." This also applies when moving to an overseas location, as laws vary in different countries.

Frank suggests tapping into online communities for home-schoolers in your new area as soon as you learn you are moving to find out how easy or difficult it is for home-schoolers in the new state.

To better understand overseas requirements and DoD resources, military families should reference the 2002 DoDEA policy memorandum and contact their local DoD school with questions. Additionally, the Home School Legal Defense Association (HSLDA) has issued several special reports to clarify the rights of military families to home school overseas. These can be found on their web site or by contacting HSLDA with specific questions.

"If ever I encounter a home-schooling law that is vague, it is very easy find a clear explanation at reputable

home schooling websites, and also by simply contacting current home-schoolers in that state," says Angie Crane, an Army spouse who teaches her daughter, age 6, at home. "State laws have not been an obstacle to home-schooling for me."

The benefits of one-on-one learning, plus the freedom to study as their interests led them made for a successful first year of home schooling for Crane and her daughter. When the family moves next year to Korea, home-schooling will move with them.

"We like the flexibility it will provide to travel...plus the opportunity to explore a new culture in depth and have a global experience every day," adds Crane. "We are looking forward to the adventure."

How to get started

"My first tip is to read," says Laws. "Most libraries carry many books on home-schooling. It is important to do research and determine if home-schooling is right for your family."

Talk to other military families who home school; ideally at the same location where you will be living. Find out what resources are available to you through your local DoD school, civilian school district and area organizations. Make sure you understand the state laws that will apply to your family

where you live. Connect with other home schooling families to find out about what groups and cooperatives you may be interested in joining.

Crane, who choose home-schooling when they moved and did not identify local schooling options that worked for their family, soon found a secular home school group that offered activities that included park days, cooperative classes, holiday parties, field trips and informal play times each week.

Part of your research will be to figure out what approach you will want to take when it comes to teaching. It is important to remember that there is no one "perfect" approach for every family.

"The key to successful home-schooling isn't necessarily avoiding mistakes, it's jettisoning what doesn't work, paying attention to what your kids need and what they're interested in, and tailoring your home-schooling efforts toward that direction," says Frank. "I believe that you should combine what you want your kids to learn, what your kids want to learn, and what your state requires that you teach, and use those as your goals when deciding how to home school your kids." ●



Children at the Kinderzeche pageant in Bavaria.
Photographer: Andreas Kaster.