



Home School

By Jennifer G. Williams

Changing schools every few years is a way of life for many children of today's service members. But a growing number of military parents are choosing to teach their children at home—smoothing at least one transition that occurs with each move.

Homeschooling as a whole has gained in popularity and acceptance over the past 20 years, and while there are no statistics on homeschooling in the military, those who are doing it say they've noticed more people joining the crowd.

"We're not as unusual as we used to be," says Rhonda Eggleston, an Army wife of 15 years who started homeschooling her oldest daughter 13 years ago. She now teaches her three youngest children, ages 17, 15 and 13 at home outside Fort Hood in Texas.

Susan Hubbard, school administrator of Valleydale Academy, which facilitates homeschoolers in the Birmingham, Ala.-area, agrees: "Homeschooling is no longer weird—in fact, it's kinda cool now."

According to the most recent information from the National Center for Education Statistics, roughly 1.1 million children were home-schooled in 2003, up 29 percent from 1999. Home-schooled students made up about 2.2 percent of the country's school-age population in 2003, up from 1.7 percent in 1999. The NCES also reported that nearly half of the homeschooling parents in their study said their primary reason for homeschooling was either concern about the environment of other schools (31 percent), or dissatisfaction with the academic instruction available at other schools (16 percent). Thirty percent of parents said their most important reason for homeschooling was to provide religious or moral instruction.

Eggleston says she started looking into homeschooling for her oldest daughter after noticing how the public school schedule cramped their style, especially with military moves and trying to make time to visit family. Her husband, Kirk, is an Army doctor, and vacation for doctors can be hard to manage—especially when students are off during the summer, otherwise known as PCS time. The flexibility allowed by homeschooling, she says, is its biggest advantage for her as a military parent.

"Once our children became school age, travel time to visit family back home became a challenge," she says. The Egglestons traveled home for three siblings' weddings in Iowa and Nebraska while their daughter was in first grade. "Her teachers all knew we were traveling, we made up the work, her grades never faltered and we still received a letter in the mail about missing too many days," says Eggleston. "Private school was out—we did not have the money. I have always wanted to be a stay-at-home mom, so I started to look for homeschool resources."

Getting Started

While some military installations have organized homeschooling groups you may contact for more information, one of the best places to get started is on the Home School Legal Defense Association website at www.hslsda.org. There, you can find updated information about homeschooling laws in your state or country of residence, as well as resources on homeschool support groups in your state or territory. The

Home School Foundation is a supporting organization of the HSLDA that promotes home schooling and provides assistance to needy home schooling families. Their website, www.homeschoolfoundation.org, is another good resource for interested parents.

Helpful tips on getting started can also be found at www.youcanhomeschool.org/starthere/tips.asp, which encourages parents to determine what their child's individual learning style is before selecting a curriculum. The site provides links and additional resources to identify learning styles and various curriculums available.

"The advice I would give to any parent is to educate your children as you think is best," says Eggleston. "If you have decided that home schooling is for you, then I would meet with several other home school parents and actually look at curriculum. The available curriculum is endless. Talk to people who have different views on home schooling and once again choose what is best for your child. Our family has done a little of everything. Coop classes taught by moms who are certified in their field, online classes, purchased curriculum and unit studies are all terms and modes of teaching you should be familiar with before you make your final curriculum choices."

While her oldest daughter is now in college, Eggleston taught all four of her children at home at the same time, and at different grade levels. Her secret? "When my children were younger, I still used a preschool so that I could focus on the children who were in early elementary levels and the most important thing our children learn in school—how to read. After that it is a matter of discipline. When it is school time, that is what you are to be doing, no TV, music, or other activities."

"Early elementary takes the most one-on-one time," says Eggleston, "so while I worked with one child, the others would do work that they were able to complete independently. We got into a rhythm after a while."

As her children grew older, they worked more independently on their studies, she says. "Knowing what has to be done and just getting up and doing it is one of the biggest advantages to home schooling," says Eggleston. "This is great preparation for college. I have also noticed that when my kids want to learn to do something they try to figure it out or find the solution themselves. I love it when I see my children teach themselves to do something or want to know a fact they go find out for themselves."

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A Typical School Day

Eggleston says her family gets up by 8 a.m., and now that her kids are older, they usually read the paper and eat breakfast before beginning classes at about 9 a.m. "The bulk of schoolwork is usually done by early afternoon," she says, freeing up the rest of the day for activities including sports and music lessons.

Like many military families, Eggleston says they've never had a house large enough to have a "school room," so her kitchen and dining room tables are where her children do their school.

"Now that my kids are older I plan for weekly, not daily lesson plans," says Eggleston. That way, if the family plans to take off a day during the week, her kids can plan accordingly, doing extra work to finish the week on schedule.

The Egglestons loosely follow the public school calendar. "I try to start early so we can end earlier in the year," says Eggleston. "My kids think it is unfair they don't get snow days or teacher work days, but we sometimes need to take off for family activities so it all evens out."

Socializing

Both Eggleston and Hubbard dismiss the notion that homeschooled students are missing out on the socialization experienced in a traditional school setting. "When people ask me this question I work very hard at not rolling my eyes," says Eggleston. "That has not been an issue with my family—it is with some home school

families, but by and large it is not with most home school kids. Sitting in a classroom with other kids who are all your age working on the same project is not socializing students. Good socialization skills come from strong families. Teachers cannot and should not teach children social skills."

Homeschooled students actually have an advantage over their traditionally schooled peers, says Hubbard. "Homeschoolers can interact with people of all ages, not just their peers," she says. And students don't get caught up in all the cliques and negative aspects of peer pressure you see in a brick-and-mortar school, she adds.

Hubbard says she's noticed the majority of homeschooled students ranging between third and seventh grades. "I think parents feel more comfortable teaching their children at the younger grades," she says. Once a student reaches high school, many opt to go to a traditional school—a lot of times because the parent may not feel as comfortable teaching the higher level and variety of academics found in many high schools. Plus, she says, many students want to experience the activities found in high schools.

Eggleston admits, "The true disadvantage to home schooling for us as our kids have gotten older is we have no sports teams...and we have had to be creative with extra-curricular activities. But we have been able to overcome all obstacles if we want it bad enough—and are willing to do the driving.

The Department of Defense (DoD) has a neutral stance on homeschooling, neither encouraging nor discouraging the practice. Their policy does state, however, that "a host nation, state, commonwealth, or territory where a DoD sponsor is stationed may impose legal requirements on home schooling practices." The DoD Education Activity encourages "DoD sponsors who wish to home school their dependents to communicate their desire to their commanders to determine if there are any command policies or other rules ensuring that home schooling practices meet host nation, state, commonwealth, or territory requirements. Sponsors are responsible for complying with applicable local requirements." The full DoDEA policy can be read at <http://www.dodea.edu/foia/iod/pdf/02OD002.pdf>

Homeschooling can be difficult in some countries, including the Netherlands, where homeschooling is not technically recognized under Dutch law. Strict compulsory attendance laws fuel a requirement for families wanting to homeschool to get an exemption from school registration for "deeply held religious or philosophical reasons." This exemption is very difficult to get, and is not an option once a child begins attending public school.

In Germany, there are no laws that specifically allow for home schooling, though each state enacts its own compulsory attendance laws and gives school officials some discretionary authority to approve alternative education. While some families have obtained this approval, most operate underground.

In Japan and South Korea, the laws are vague and since the business communities support home schooling, home schoolers are largely left alone.

In the United Kingdom, homeschooling is clearly legal. Laws allow for children to attend school or "otherwise." There is no requirement to inform the authorities when one is home educating.

A summary of the legal options available in each state

States requiring no notice (10 + 2 territories):

No state requirement for parents to initiate any contact: AK, CT, ID, IL, IN, MI, MO, NJ, OK, TX, Guam, Puerto Rico.

States with low regulation: (15 + 1 territory):

State requires parental notification only: AL, AZ, CA, DC, DE, KS, KY, MS, MT, NE, NV, NM, UT, WI, WY, Virgin Islands.

States with moderate regulation (16 + 2 TERRITORIES):

State requires parents to send notification, test scores, and/or professional evaluation of student progress: AR, CO, FL, GA, HI, IA, LA, MD, NC, NH, OH, OR, SC, SD, TN, VA, American Samoa, Northern Mariana Islands.

States with high regulation (11):

State requires parents to send notification or achievement test scores and/or professional evaluation, plus other requirements (e.g. curriculum approval by the state, teacher qualification of parents, or home visits by state officials): MA, ME, MN, ND, NY, PA, RI, UT, VT, WA, WV.

—source: *the Home School Legal Defense Association*, <http://www.hslda.org>.

