

Jessie Wise: Answers from a Veteran Homeschooler

Diane Wheeler

"Fun can be an ingredient in the total life of the child, but the training of the child should be preparation for adulthood." - Jessie Wise

I love learning from home educators that are further down the path than I am. Maybe it is a birth order quirk. As the younger sister, I quickly learned the good ideas and not-so-good ideas of life without skinning my own knees in the process. With home education and all the individual personalities and learning styles in a family, it is more often required that we learn through trial and error. But there are still time-tested methods and ideas that veteran home educating parents can share that will bring encouragement to the "younger siblings" of the homeschool community. This summer I enjoyed taking some time to talk with Jessie Wise. Mrs. Wise is the mother of three and the co-author (with daughter Susan Wise Bauer) of *The Well-Trained Mind: A Guide to Classical Education at Home*. Not only does she have the experience of home educating her children from elementary school through high school, Mrs. Wise communicates in a no-nonsense way that has brought me great reassurance. I recommend you get yourself comfy, pour a cup of tea or coffee and enjoy a few minutes with Jessie Wise.

TOS: How do I know if I am doing enough academically for my children?

Jessie Wise: I worried about my children's academic progress until they became National Merit finalists in high school. In fact, I worried about a lot of things. And even though homeschooling is now very common, and homeschoolers are doing well, I think all conscientious parents worry. The inexperienced parent is wise to start with a curriculum or guidebook like our *Well-Trained Mind* to prevent the child from avoiding areas that are difficult or unfamiliar to him. After a while, the parent should feel comfortable adjusting and changing to help the child fulfill his potential.

I am concerned that parents are being encouraged to think that all learning has to be fun. Fun can be an ingredient in the total life of the child, but the training of the child should be preparation for adulthood. And living a responsible adult life is not all fun and entertainment.

TOS: How can I teach my children, take care of the house, serve at church, love my aging parents and still sleep enough at night? Can you share how you set priorities during your homeschooling years?

Jessie Wise: When our son was a baby, we were fortunate to have been advised, "Live your life in chapters." You don't have to do everything you want to do in life while your children are small. There are priorities: God first, husband second, children third, then other family responsibilities, which would include honoring parents' needs. For homeschoolers of small children I don't see how there is much time or energy left for long-term commitment to other things. In thinking about "God first," I think we need to realize that marriage, parenthood, and

caring for mother and father, are forms of worship when they are practiced in accordance with biblical principles. Parents who are training and educating young children should not be made to feel guilty about not taking leadership roles in the formal organization of a church.

Practically, you must take the time to teach your children to do chores. If your children have not been doing all that they are able to do, shorten the academic day until you have trained your helpers. Two books that helped me are *401 Ways to Get Your Kids to Work at Home* and *Bonnie's Household Organizer*, both by Bonnie McCulough, published by St. Martin's Press, New York.

In order to prioritize and be efficient with your time, it is necessary to have a daily schedule. Putting it on paper eliminates a lot of scolding and playing around when chores can be done quickly.

But we were not rigid in following schedules. We had fun days off, and we had unexpected emergencies. We took structured academic time off to take care of things when necessary. But we had in place a predictable schedule to go back to.

TOS: Many homeschoolers worry about socialization. What are your thoughts on this?

Jessie Wise: I, too, worried about socialization. But I began to relax a bit more when we saw that our children were well mannered and related to all age groups. Working in the family and for other people, learning good work habits and how to please an employer: these should be considered socialization.

Our culture seems to be obsessed with same age socialization, and that is because the majority of children spend the majority of their time in institutional schooling. They are forced to be with their own age group. This socialization is unnatural and never occurs again for the rest of a person's life.

The most important socialization - and you can observe this need in our modern culture - is for a child to learn how to function happily in a family. The family then enlarges social contacts as is suitable for the child, but I think it should always be under the careful oversight of the parent. We decided to opt out of youth group at a church we attended because of the immoral influences this socialization was bringing: provocative clothing, free sex talk and the deception of parents.

TOS: What are your thoughts on teaching reading, and what academic priorities do you recommend emphasizing in the first years of learning?

Jessie Wise: I feel very strongly that a systematic phonics program should be followed for teaching reading. With young children I recommend that the child learn to read first. Then, as his motor coordination matures, he can use the phonics program for spelling and writing. The materials I used are out of print, but I am using *Phonics Pathways* to teach my grandchildren.

I think reading, spelling, and writing should be academic priorities in the first years of teaching, along with basic arithmetic operations and facts. If a child learns to read well, he will pick up information about history and science as he reads independently, even if he is not taught these subjects formally. But if he does not learn to read well, he will be hampered in those areas in the later grades.

TOS: Related to the above question, you have a new book out from Peace Hill Press: *First Language Lessons*. Can you tell us more about the book and any other plans for new publications?

Jessie Wise: I believe we underestimate what children are capable of learning early. Our ideas are often influenced by the school model, which aims most of its instruction at what it considers the largest population - the "average child." But, when we teach to the average, we train our children to be average! Instead, I think we can grow children who exceed the average content-as long as that content is taught patiently, frequently, and consistently and is reviewed often.

First Language Lessons provides a written script for the instructor so it is easy to give the child examples of correctly spoken and written English in order to train the child's ear and hand. It is better to do less work and do it correctly than to practice errors.

My next project is a book entitled *If I Could Do It Over Again*. I have been speaking on this subject and collecting notes for years.

TOS: As someone who has seen her children move on to successful lives as adults, what vision can you offer to those who are weary?

Jessie Wise: Long term, each family has to form its own vision, and I think it is a good idea to discuss the vision and write it down, then periodically evaluate. Is our energy going towards fulfilling our vision for our children's future? You need to share your vision with your children so they know your expectations. I think keeping that vision before you keeps your eye on where you are going and not just on the work of the day. My father was a farmer. He told my husband, "When you are going to plough a long furrow, don't look at the end of the tractor where you are plowing. Choose a tree across the field and keep your eye on it as you drive towards it. It will make your furrow straight."

In the short term, if you are continually weary, re-evaluate your activities to see whether you are unnecessarily over-committed. If there is not a choice, as might be the case with single parents or with limited finances, you can work on the efficient use of the time you have and on reducing stress-causing conflicts. If you are weary from battling children, go back and train first-time obedience. And work on your relationship with your children to reduce conflict. I have found two helpful resources. One is *For Instruction in Righteousness*, published by Doorposts. The other is *The Peacemaker* and other titles by Ken Sande. Hard work can be physically tiring but invigorating; conflict drains physically and emotionally.

I think the real question involves, "What do I want my children to be as mature adults?" Then you adjust your priorities towards that goal. It is better to focus on the desired outcome rather than dwell on the sacrifice necessary to make it happen.

Biographical Information

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