

Are you a Real Homeschooler?

Diane Wheeler interviews Rhonda Barfield in a TOS Exclusive.

Okay, I will admit it. I wither in the heat. The problem is, in the beautiful foothills where we make our home, heat is the name of the summer game. But, joy! As the fans are blowing hot air around my house, I can turn my focus ahead to fall, the loveliest time of my year. The weather cools, the leaves turn color, and we begin afresh with a new school year. This last year was what I call a "blurry" year. It included trifles and tragedies that took precedence over my original plans for the year. But, like the life-changing reality of forgiveness through faith in Christ, each school year can begin fresh, clean and brand-spankin' new. Isn't that a reason to celebrate?

One of our main goals at The Old Schoolhouse is to bring encouragement to homeschooling families, rookies and veterans alike. Our job is difficult enough without having the burden of trying to be something we imagine will make us "real homeschoolers." God has made each of us unique, with strengths and talents that make each of our families special. We also bring with us limitations, whether finances, energy, time, physical ailments or extended family needs such as aging parents. These things are no surprise to God, who knows that each thread of our lives will be used to create a tapestry for His honor and glory. We can trust that He knows what He is doing in our schooling, our families and our own hearts.

One recent source of encouragement has been speaking with author Rhonda Barfield. Rhonda has written several books including *Real Life Homeschooling* and *Feed Your Family for \$12.00 a Day*. We are looking forward to featuring Rhonda in our new TOS Home Economics column, debuting next spring. She will be talking about saving money on food and offering very practical advice for the first steps of changing our grocery budgets. This fall, though, I will share our conversation about *Real Life Homeschooling*. Rhonda has a deep commitment to, and belief in, the homeschooling movement and this comes out strongly in the conversation she and I enjoyed early one July morning.

TOS: Your book, *Real Life Homeschooling*, is the story of twenty-one homeschooling families. Each family is incredibly unique; what did you learn as a result of this project?

Rhonda: First, that we have a lot to learn from each other. There are many, many choices, and I honestly see very little reason not to homeschool. No matter what your circumstances, there are options. That was a real surprise to me. I have been in the homeschool movement for ten years, I have read journals and articles, and I have networked with people all over the country, and still it was a shock to see how many ways you can homeschool.

It is just a matter of creativity, which is such a vital aspect of being an American. We have the freedom, and we have the creativity. But, it is really easy to get bogged down in

daily circumstances, to get discouraged, and to say, "*I cannot homeschool anymore.*" But, the chances are really, really good that you can. You just need to look around and see what is available. That is why I wrote the book I did. There are a lot of how-to books out there, and they are important. I wanted to show how real people are really homeschooling, what worked for them and what didn't. So first of all, I learned that there are many options. I want to encourage people: don't give up!

The second thing I learned is to relax. That is a major problem that homeschoolers have. We tend to compare. Don't you?

TOS: Yes! Of course.

Rhonda: I know I do. We tend to look over the fence and think that it is going to be better if we do it "that" way, and we try really hard. Then, so much discouragement can result. Almost everyone that I interviewed, especially those that had been doing it for a long time said the most important lesson they learned was to relax. They started out like school, exactly like school, and they got more and more relaxed. They realized, it is not as hard as it appeared to be when they first started.

TOS: When I talk with friends about homeschooling struggles, I do think the feeling "it can't be done!" is very common. But, often, the other options are completely unacceptable.

Rhonda: Then homeschooling becomes a total grind; it feels like a trap.

TOS: I don't believe claustrophobia was what God intended when He gave us the vision to homeschool. I do think it is hard to relax, though.

Rhonda: It is. Our family is transitioning into the teen years, and it is really hard not to get super busy, running here and there. So, I always have to pull back and say, "What is an alternative here? What are my options?" It is the idea of pulling back and evaluating each thing.

Many people I spoke with during my work on *Real Life Homeschooling* said that the thing that discourages them the most is not the teaching, it is the housework. Homeschoolers really do need resources on how to save money, how to save time, how to get their housework done, so they can actually have time to enjoy homeschooling and relax.

In closing, I have a degree in music. I have taught piano in piano schools for years, and writing is a whole different direction that I never expected to take. It is one that God has led me on, though, and I am so excited about it. I think I have a lot to say because of information that has come my way. I am such a believer in the homeschooling

movement. I want to encourage homeschoolers and show them that there are many ways that they can accomplish homeschooling.

Rhonda Barfield is the author of Real-Life Homeschooling: The Stories of 21 Families Who Teach Their Children at Home (Fireside/Simon & Schuster, 2002), Feed Your Family for \$12 a Day (Kensington Publishing, 2002), and 15-Minute Cooking (Lilac Publishing, 1996)

The second portion of this issue's Homeschooling 101 Column is dedicated to June Oberlander, author of *Slow and Steady, Get Me Ready*. June's book is highly respected in the homeschool community and we are pleased to have her with us today. Welcome, June!

TOS: June, could you please introduce yourself to our readers and explain why you developed *Slow and Steady, Get Me Ready, A Parent's Handbook*?

June: My name is June Oberlander, a retired kindergarten teacher with over 25 years of teaching experience. I have 2 grown children and 7 grandchildren.

The book *Slow and Steady, Get me Ready* was developed initially for my daughter. She was confused by the educational jargon from books that she had read and found it difficult to decipher from books with appropriate activities that she could use to begin teaching her newborn (now 15 years old). She had read that newborns could learn far more than previously thought. My daughter wanted to know what to do, how, when, and what skills could be taught to a newborn. She asked me to help because she knew that I had taught preschoolers.

After using the activities for a while, she commented that other mothers would benefit from using these activities. This motivated me to format and publish *Slow and Steady, Get Me Ready* because I knew from my teaching experience what many preschoolers could know, but don't know. They lacked various basic skills that could have been taught at home if parents had known what to do and how to teach them. Skills taught at the appropriate age are often much easier to learn than later.

TOS: For those people who have yet to read your book, please share with them the science behind "the early brain."

June: Babies are born with billions of brain cells that are ripe for responding to stimuli. Unfortunately, many of their brain cells remain dormant due to the lack of proper stimulation at the appropriate time. The brain is similar to a computer as it receives and organizes information. There is a rapid rate of growth during a child's first year. This is prime time for preparing the brain for learning patterns. A baby's brain cells can be compared to a sponge. They are capable of absorbing information, using the God-given natural senses such as: seeing, hearing, touching, smelling, and tasting.

Visual, auditory, and sensory stimulation can easily be activated if a parent is aware of what to do, why, when, and how. These types of interactions can be accomplished with a young child during very brief encounters, because attention span at this age is very short. Fine and gross motor activities, as well as thinking and simple problem solving skills can be introduced to favorably activate brain cells. It is essential to stimulate a baby's brain cells. Proper stimulation, not "overstimulation," is the key to maximize a baby's developmental ability. It is often said that, "A baby either uses it or loses it."

TOS: If you present this book to parents as they bring their first child home from the hospital, what type of instruction would you give them?

June: I would introduce them to the book by telling them that babies are not born with directions. This book was written and published to help parents get off to a good start. *Slow and Steady, Get me Ready* is essentially common sense on paper and is full of ideas that are so simple that no one should be intimidated with the information in this handbook.

In addition, I would like to make every parent aware of the capabilities of a newborn. Many parents do not have a clue as to how to interact with a baby. New parents are often overwhelmed and find life taxing just to feed and diaper a baby. They often fail to realize that they are the first and foremost teachers of their child. It is up to them to help the baby to develop to his/her fullest potential. Therefore, I would tell them that my book contains important information and is an ideal first book to help put them on the right track to bonding and enriching their newborn's development.

Next, I would tell new parents to tune in to their baby's needs, because infants recognize their mother's face, smell, touch, and voice. It doesn't take much thought to change a facial expression to interact with a newborn and a baby will readily react by smiling or cooing, etc. I would also inform them that by touching and moving the baby's body, arms, legs, fingers, and toes while singing a little tune or chant, will serve to stimulate interest and soothe a newborn as well.

TOS: I've been working with my soon-to-be four-year-old daughter using a variety of approaches, including your book. Lately, she's pretending to be a baby. She is the youngest of three children, and even though I know that role-playing is a normal part of her development, how can I be sure she doesn't need something more fun from me?

June: Some preschoolers often resort or regress for various reasons. It could be that they feel more secure by acting younger. Children seem to grow in spurts and may not understand fully how to maintain the proper or "adult expected" behavior. Some children act like babies because they see an adult dote over a baby or another child, and they desire that kind of attention. Other children may simply act baby-like to capture attention and for self-ego. In most cases that I have observed, the problem goes away as suddenly

as it began. It works with some children to correct them once and then ignore the behavior for the rest of the day. I would need to know the child and his/her personality to advise any further behavior modification.

TOS: In this new version of your book, you've included charts to help parents mark the developmental growth of their children. Understanding that all children progress at different rates, how does a parent know when their child may need professional intervention?

June: I am one that prefers to avoid labeling a child too soon when I suspect learning or behavior problems in a preschooler. All children need a chance to grow so that a learning style can be established. We all have different learning patterns. Teachers are often reluctant to label a child as a child of "special needs" even if he lacks some of the skills listed in the charts. There are exceptions. For example, I have read that some autistic children have displayed normal behavior at first and then deviated to inappropriate behavior. Therefore, this would be an obvious red flag situation and this child should be referred for professional help. There are skills listed in the charts in the back of my book that cite the expected progress and development for a child of a given age. However, children do not develop at the same rate. Some are accelerated, some average and some below. Some children are very "late bloomers." This checklist guide may serve to alert a parent that the child may need extra help if he/she has not mastered most of the skills for his age level or those below his age level.

TOS: June Oberlander presents us with a way to reach out to our young children when they need us the most, in the early years. This book is like picking up the phone and hearing the voice of my own mother, encouraging me to turn off the television and get down and play with my youngsters. A must-have book for parents, new or experienced. Thank you for offering us this approach to learning.

Biographical Information

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Diane Wheeler is the senior staff writer for The Old Schoolhouse. She and her husband John live in Placerville, California.

June R. Oberlander is a retired teacher who taught kindergarten for 19 years in Virginia. Prior to that, she taught in a church kindergarten for 2 years. After retirement, she wrote the early childhood developmental parenting resource, Slow and Steady, Get me Ready. In 1999, Mrs. Oberlander received an alumni achievement award from her alma mater, Longwood College. She has shared ideas with more than 100 groups in schools, hospitals, libraries, churches and parenting organizations throughout the United States.