

Pioneers in New Zealand - The Craig Smith Family

Kendra Fletcher

In the early days of the modern homeschooling movement, God equipped pioneers with extraordinary vision, a steel will, and unmatched moxie. Among such pioneers were Craig and Barbara Smith of New Zealand, who began homeschooling their first child in 1985.

Twenty-one years later, all eight of Craig and Barbara's children have been home educated exclusively, and three of the four who have graduated are working with such homeschooling ministries and businesses as the Home Education Foundation and Rainbow Resources.

Craig and Barbara have been at the forefront of legislative issues concerning home educators and conservative Christians, running National Christian Home Education Conferences and National Leadership Forums annually since 1996, moderating various home education email discussion groups, speaking at national seminars, hosting overseas speaker tours, and networking among local support groups and with international homeschooling organizations.

TOS had the privilege of talking with Craig and Barbara about their continuing commitment to home education, both by serving as the head of the New Zealand Home Education Foundation and by continuing to steadfastly educate their four youngest school-aged children.

TOS: Craig and Barbara, when you had made the decision to homeschool your children, how did you approach the school officials in New Zealand?

CRAIG SMITH: Fearfully at first. We'd read all the horror stories about homeschooling parents in the USA going to jail for homeschooling, so we had to prepare for that possibility.

But the legislation here turned out to be very reasonable. We only needed to have a chat with the local primary school principal and convince him that our efforts would be "as regular and efficient" as a registered school. All he had to do was issue a written statement that we were exempt from the compulsory attendance law and we were on our way. No annual checks, no testing, no reports . . . we disappeared completely off the state radar screen.

The officials didn't really know, but there were less than 100 homeschooled children at that time in New Zealand. Things have changed since then, and they do keep track of us in a database.

TOS: You were really standing alone in this; what were your sources for curriculum and what did your homeschool day look like in the beginning?

CRAIG SMITH: At first there was only the ACE curriculum. It suits some families really well. I personally like the way it's organized. But it drove our children crazy. We made a little school here in our home: I (Craig) did the teaching in the early years as my job was only afternoons. I had my own desk, the children had theirs. I organized assignments, had the odd lecture, and even instituted daily flag salute to the New Zealand flag while singing the New Zealand National Anthem, which in fact is a really Godly prayer. New Zealanders are patriotic but would never

dream of showing it in any overt way such as a flag-raising ceremony. Our friends and neighbors began to wonder about us at this point. But I just copied what I knew, having grown up in California.

TOS: How would you say your approach has changed over the years?

CRAIG SMITH: It changed, all right! The children became typical classroom kids: squirming constantly, needing a drink, to go to the bathroom—you name it. So I figured one day, “I’ll fix you guys,” and got the most boring thing in the world: a history textbook. I got them to sit on my knees and began to read it.

Now, I love history, so at least I was going to enjoy myself; but I knew it would so bore the children [that] they would soon be back at their desks doing their assignments with thankful hearts. Now, because I really enjoyed the subject, I would stop and say, “Do you know what this is referring to?” “Have you heard of this person before?” And then I’d be off telling them all about it from my store of knowledge and my perspective. After chasing that rabbit trail for a while we’d come back to the text. Then I’d say, “Oh, oh, this reminds me of when I was a kid, we once ...” and away I’d go down a different rabbit trail, making the subject personally relevant to the children as it involved their dad and other relatives.

After an hour and a half of this, my legs had gone to sleep, my throat was dry as dust, and I said, “Hey, time to let me up, guys. I’m parched.” But they enthusiastically shouted, “Don’t stop now, Dad! It’s just getting interesting!” It took a couple experiences like this before I realized that their attention spans had gone from 5-10 minutes to virtually unlimited when I sat down and did the study with them!

Later I was reading an American homeschooling magazine about various educational approaches: mastery learning, traditional classroom, classical, delight- directed. That delight- directed one caught my fancy.

The next day I thought to myself, “So what would I delight to investigate today?” The subject of nuclear physics came to mind, so I fished out a child’s book of atomic structure we had on our shelf and brought down the large laminated periodic chart from storage, and we began—the students then being aged 7, 9, and 10.

We did nothing but nuclear physics for three weeks: no math (although there is a lot of math in the periodic table), no history (although we learned a lot of history surrounding the development of nuclear theories and nuclear weapons, etc.), no English (although we read a lot and did a lot of discussion over the periodic chart’s order and patterns), no art (although we had a ball making atomic models out of colored clay and toothpicks). In other words, we covered a range of academic disciplines though we only supposedly were concentrating on nuclear physics.

It was the most exciting three weeks of our entire home education careers! The children to this day can tell you the difference between nuclear fusion and nuclear fission. They know the difference among the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and Bikini Atoll.

Then I went back and re-read the magazine article on education styles. Oh no! I'd misread the "delight-directed" philosophy. It was supposed to be what the child delighted in that directed our studies. Well, what do you know! I'd invented a whole new educational approach—one that worked even better for our family!

BARBARA SMITH: For the first ten years of our home education, Craig did all the academic stuff. My education was very poor: the New Zealand state school system, including an expensive girls' boarding school, did not cater to my kinesthetic learning style. So when our situation changed and demanded that I do the teaching, I thought I had to be ahead of them all the time and was frantically trying to study up on every subject. Then I worked out that I probably only needed to be one night ahead. But praise the Lord, I discovered that if I just got in there and learned alongside of them, which was the usual situation anyway, my excitement about learning things was contagious!

I am convinced that if I can do it, then by God's grace anyone can do it and do it well. Ask the Lord to give you a conviction that your unmatched commitment to your children will cause your tutoring/ mentoring home education situation to produce superior results.

Your home education program, almost regardless of what it is, has vast advantages over even the most gifted of teachers in a classroom simply because it is you, their mum, doing one-on-one for as long as you like, any way you like, anywhere you like, seven days a week, 365 days a year. With such a conviction you will be spilling over with the kind of confidence that stirs up not only your own children but nearly everyone else you engage in conversation to want to know more!

So now there are two other considerations when I look at the education of our children: with eight children from 26 years to nine months, we will have been at this for at least 40 years by the time we "finish" (if one ever finishes this task), so we need to pace ourselves.

In addition, we will never accomplish all we need to do, so we need to see this task in a multigenerational light. The best thing that we have done for our children and future generations is to never send our children to school. We may not be able to teach our children all that is on our hearts to teach them, but we can have a good go at it. We trust that each future generation will be able to go further than the one before.

TOS: What do you think are the biggest issues facing home educators today?

CRAIG SMITH: We need to convince ourselves that we are the most qualified to train up our children because both our paternal motivation for them and our mentoring/ tutoring style give us huge advantages over even the most gifted secular teachers in the most expensively equipped secular and compulsorily attended classrooms. This is the number one issue: our lack of self-confidence.

BARBARA SMITH: I think one of the biggest issues Christians face today is the need to be more biblical. We need to help the Christian families with their children in the state schools to see this. There needs to be a mass exodus of Christian children out of the state schools.

Following this is the need to help families continue home educating past the standard two years. We need to help them see that it does get easier.

What are we training our Christian young people for—to be more effective in the world or for Christ? Are we thinking about their futures or are we being carried along by our culture? Are we training our daughters to be good wives and mothers? Ninety-nine percent of them will get married, yet we train them as if they are of the 1% who will never marry. Are we training our sons for the corporate world, where they will be away from home for long hours, or are we training them so that they will have careers and/or trade skills that will enable them to be good husbands and fathers, where they can “turn their hearts to their children” (Malachi 4:6)?

As the gap between the Christian worldview and the humanistic worldview widens, there will be persecution. As we train our children to be more biblical in their lives, they will stand out and will attract attention. We need to be training our children to expect persecution (2 Timothy 3:12) and also to trust Him through the difficult times ahead (Proverbs 3:5-6).

Biographical Information

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You can learn more about the Smith family and the New Zealand Home Education Foundation by visiting their website at www.hef.org.nz.

Kendra Fletcher has been blessed with Godly home educators like Craig and Barbara Smith who have walked alongside her and her husband as they homeschool their six children in California's Central Valley. She delights in walking alongside homeschooling mothers of preschoolers. You can find her at www.preschoolersandpeace.com.