

To Be or Not to Be Socialized; That is the Question

Michelle VanMatre

Standing in line in the cafeteria.
Bubbling in circles with a number two pencil.
Raising your hand to answer a question.
Being the target in dodge-ball.
Unhealthy peer pressure.
Being exposed to sex and drugs at an early age.
Undermining biblical and parental authority.
Desensitizing children to Truth.

None of the experiences on this list stand out as skills that are necessary or valuable in order to function in the real world. Even in an office full of identical cubicles, adults aren't surrounded by same-aged peers who are working on the exact same thing at the exact same time. Success in the world, be it vocational, social or within the family, doesn't depend on whether or not you were the homecoming queen or the star quarterback. However, learning to operate in your God-given giftedness, strengths and abilities in harmony with people of all ages and backgrounds can be a great asset in living a successful and productive life.

“What about socialization?” is, perhaps, the most commonly heard question for a homeschooling family. Inquiring minds want to know how our children will manage without the benefit of being in a classroom with their same-aged peers for several months each year. Well meaning family members, friends, neighbors and cashiers at the grocery store feel the need to point out the dangers of not socializing our homeschooled children by placing them in an institutional setting. Fears that the children won't develop meaningful relationships, won't experience “normal” life, and won't have a healthy childhood because they are not in a classroom five days a week often fuel people to use the dreaded “S- word” as a passive-aggressive attempt to challenge the validity of homeschooling.

Socialization, by public school standards, is an invalid concept. Spending 180 days a year in a desk in a classroom, where conversation and freedom of expression are confined to who sits at your lunch table, is hardly a fertile environment for developing relationships and learning how to interact with people. Socialization is defined as a continuing process whereby an individual acquires a personal identity and learns the norms, values, behavior, and social skills appropriate to his or her social position. In spite of the assertions of the NEA, many sociologists and those opposed to homeschooling, nothing in this definition would cause us to think that a classroom setting provides the ideal environment to acquire personal identity and learn the norms and values to be able to function well in society!

Many new homeschoolers (and some veterans!) are intimidated by the question of socialization. We are faced with so many details as we start the homeschool journey that we aren't sure we can provide an appropriate social environment for our children outside of our living room. We've been duped into believing the hype that lunch lines, school buses, gym class and the classroom have some indefinable benefits every child needs in order to live a fulfilling, healthy life. Not so!

God is far more creative than Horace Mann, the purported Father of American Education. We are given the generous bounty of the world as our classroom, which allows us to interact with people of all ages and backgrounds. In my little, rural community, there are ample opportunities for my children to be socialized in a healthy manner. Homeschool co-ops, church and community events abound. Volunteer and service opportunities, recreational sports leagues, community - theater and cultural festivals also provide a ready outlet to learn more about our culture and interact with people. Mercy, patience, grace, compassion, good sportsmanship and sacrifice can be learned by serving in a soup-kitchen, visiting a nursing home, volunteering in the church nursery and playing a game of pick-up basketball.

The kind of socialization that is my goal for my children doesn't hinge on winning at all costs. It isn't characterized by dividing people into learning tracks, cliques that are defined by their popularity or the kinds of clothes they wear, or whether or not they live in the right neighborhood. My goal isn't to relive my childhood through my children, hoping that they'll gain the prize or the trophy that eluded me in my public school career. No, my heart for socializing my children is a little more organic and free-form. My prayer is that my brood will become people who value life - their own, that of the unborn, and that of the elderly. I hope that they learn to see beauty in diversity while maintaining a firm grasp of the truth of Christ. I want them to learn to see God's fingerprints in their own interests, passions and personalities. I want them to develop the confidence to walk their lives out with conviction, while being sensitive enough to others to draw them to Christ in them, rather than bullying others into agreement. Socialization is crucial. We are all in the process of being socialized, daily, no matter what or age or where we learn. Institutionalized classrooms do not have a corner on the market where socializing our children is concerned. We need to rest in the fact that God placed these children in our care and that He provides many opportunities to grow them into the people He created them to be! As we walk out this homeschool journey, may we all be free from the tyranny of the "socialization myth". When well-meaning observers ask us the socialization question, let us all have the confidence to answer the question with "We're well-socialized, thank you! How about you?"

Biographical Information

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Michele is happily married to Jeff, and is the proud mom of Zach, and triplets, Hannah, Noah, and Seth. She began homeschooling eleven years ago with Five in a Row curriculum and has never looked back. Those early experiences of loving learning together with great literature have allowed her to embrace homeschooling a high schooler and three middle schoolers. Other than her faith and her family, homeschooling has been the biggest blessing in her life.