

Mary Pride's Homeschooling Secrets

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Edition

The following tips and shortcuts are those that have helped me the most while we were homeschooling. With nine home-schooled children (all of whom are now college graduates), a magazine to publish, Facebook pages and Twitter feeds to keep fed, and a very large website to keep up to date, I found I needed a *lot* of help!

In a short brochure like this I obviously can't cover every situation—e.g., “How do you handle nursing a baby, watching a toddler, and helping a third grader all at the same time?” (The answer: have the third-grader read to the toddler while you nurse the baby!) But I do hope you will find something helpful on this list. And if *you* have a great idea *not* on this list, please write and share it with me!

Chores

- ✓ School or chores first? **Do the chores first.** This is *the* secret of successful home schooling! So it takes half the day at first. So the children whine and complain. They are learning *valuable lessons* of obedience, tidiness, task completion, and life skills. Children who do chores well will do their schoolwork well—and *you* won't be going crazy because the house is a mess!
- ✓ I suggest that **each child have his own chores** and be paid for them. This is the beginning of training him for our free-enterprise system. Paid chores should not include picking up after himself, but should be work that benefits the whole family—e.g., taking out the trash and doing the dishes. **Bonus tip:** *pay DOUBLE for a job done with a cheerful spirit!*
- ✓ **How to teach children to do chores:** first, be sure you lead them through every step of the chore. Second, do it alongside them. Third, leave them to do it and check up on them. Every now and then, join them in their chores, to keep motivation high. **Bonus tip:** *don't complain about your chores if you want the children to do them cheerfully for you some day!*
- ✓ **In our house,** we found it worked best to give specific chores to specific kids, and

then revise these assignments when (1) a kid truly got sick of that chore or (2) a younger child got old enough to do a tougher job. By the time they left home-school, they *all* knew how to cook, bake; clean, vacuum, mow, do laundry, and handle office chores. Which is more than you can say for most kids these days, and which also makes them a GREAT deal for future spouses! :)

- ✓ **Helping Mom and Dad** is an honor. Also, nobody should complain about being a “go-fer” for a family member caught up in important work, or for a sick family member.
- ✓ **For laundry,** get each family member his own laundry bag. Each member's clothes are washed separately. Those old enough, do their own laundry. Clothes never need to be sorted. This is the system the Coast Guard Academy uses to keep hundreds of cadets' laundry organized.
- ✓ **For quick relief from a messy house:** either (1) set a timer and announce, “Everyone pick up for five minutes,” or (2) tell everyone to put away 10 items.

Organization

When homeschooling, it really helps to have “a place for everything and everything in its place.” See my “Organizing Secrets” brochure for detailed suggestions.

Now, here's a tip that isn't in that brochure. If you have a child who is always explaining that he wasn't doing his schoolwork because he “couldn't find a pencil,” bore a hole through a pencil just under the metal band that's below the eraser, run a long string through the hole, then make it into a necklace and drape it around Junior's neck. If Junior is found during the school day without his “pencil necklace,” let him know some suitable consequences will occur.

For a girl, try using a pretty pink shoelace for the string.

Other fun ideas: attach the felt side of Velcro to a headband, then a small snippet of the “hooks” side to an assortment of pens and pencils. Kids can wear their writing implements like a war bonnet!

Scheduling & Priorities

- ✓ **Getting up early** to have devotions and a Bible lesson before the day starts is a great idea, at least for those of us who know enough to hit the hay before 11 P.M. If you, like me, find getting up early almost impossible, try after-supper or before-bed-time devotions. The children will show *eager attention* and beg for the lesson to continue if bedtime is next on the agenda!
Bonus tip: *You can find a free through-the-Bible-in-one year reading plan on the home page of our website, www.home-school.com.*
- ✓ **Don't take phone calls** during school hours. That's why answering machines were invented!
- ✓ **Don't turn on your computer, check your email, or visit a single Web site** until the school day is over. You know what I'm talking about! *Exception:* the Web is a great place to find the answers to questions that come up in your homeschool. If your kids are curious about crocodiles, show them AustraliaZoo.com.au (the zoo founded by the late "Crocodile Hunter" Steve Irwin). If you want to know exactly how much oil the Deepwater Horizon rig spilled, type "Gulf oil spill" into a search engine. Do this while the kids are watching, so they can see how the Web is *supposed* to be used.
- ✓ It's worth repeating: **Do the chores first.**
- ✓ **Toughest subjects first.** For most families, this is math.
- ✓ **Projects and outside classes in the afternoon.** Getting out or moving around will wake everybody up after lunch.
- ✓ **Field trips or co-op on Friday** is the choice of many homeschool families. Having a more "fun" activity at the end of the week gives everyone something to look forward to.
- ✓ **Lunch comes after chores and morning schoolwork.** Kids who dawdle all morning become a ball of fire when they realize they won't get fed until they get something done. Unless you've managed to get locked into a real power struggle with your student (probably from issues that arose before you began to homeschool), most goofing-off kids will quickly get

busy when their stomachs remind them it's close to lunch time.

Building Cooperation

- ✓ **Listen to your kids.** Power struggles happen when the kid no longer trusts you. But the power of sympathy is amazing. If you show interest in what they care about—even if it's not naturally enthralling to you—they realize that you're on their side, which makes all the difference.
- ✓ **Encourage sibling affection.** Coming from a community where insults were the normal way kids communicated, I resolved from the first to always encourage kindness between my own kids, and to nip negative speaking in the bud. When one of the little ones entered the room, they were always greeted with enthusiasm.
- ✓ **Let even small ones hold the baby,** under your close supervision and with proper instruction, of course!
- ✓ When you have a new baby, **buy or make presents for the other kids too and pay them some special attention.** Kids naturally adore new babies, as long as everyone doesn't just fuss over the new baby and totally ignore them.

Professional Courtesy

- ✓ **Politeness counts.** Bill used to pretend he couldn't even hear the kids if they asked without saying, "Please." And if a kid pestered (asking for the same thing more than once), the answer was an automatic "No." Mercy started the family tradition of having all the kids thank us for taking them on the way back from every family outing. And of course, we adults say "Please" and "Thank you" to the children also. Such little things make the home atmosphere much more harmonious, which is good, because when you homeschool you're there 24/7!
- ✓ **Phone manners.** Kids love to ask you questions while you're distracted . . . like on the telephone! I've found two ways of dealing with this. (1) Have them write out their questions and hand them silently to you. (2) Teach them simple sign language for common phrases and requests. The second one was a real crowd-pleaser, and can

also be used when Mom and Dad are having a discussion and the kids are antsy to ask for something.

Homeschooling Lots of Kids

- ✓ **Teach the little ones first.** This will make them feel loved and cared for, and prevent them acting up to get your attention later on! While the little ones are getting their lessons, the older ones can be doing chores or working independently on their assignments. Dedicate this time to the special lessons suited only to little ones—e.g., cutting and pasting, phonics, and other preschool and kindergarten studies.
- ✓ **Enlist an older child** to assist with kindergarten and preschool. This can save your life if you are feeling exhausted or unwell. The older one will enjoy getting to play with clay and crayons again, and the little ones will get closer to him.
- ✓ **Have a box** of toys and games for the littlest ones while the others are having their lessons. Vary the toys and games: put some away for a couple of weeks and take out new ones.
- ✓ **“Circuit teach”** when kids are all doing the same subject (e.g., math) at different grade levels. Go over each child’s lesson in advance in turn.
- ✓ **Read aloud** to the whole group, or watch videos together, or do projects together.
- ✓ **Pick just a few outside activities** that most or all of the kids can attend at once. For our family, it was Civil Air Patrol, Tae Kwon Do, and (in the summer) swim team. This saves you from the mad scramble of driving 5 different places every day.

Moms and Multimedia

- ✓ **Watch educational DVDs and listen to CDs at mealtimes.** Saves time and effort!
- ✓ **Save your sanity** during non-mealtimes by getting the kids inexpensive headphones. Now you won’t have to listen to the bleeping of educational software or to a video tutor while trying to talk on the phone or teach a lesson. The same headphones will plug into a computer, an iPod, a CD player, or the audio system for your DVD player.
- ✓ **Let all the kids listen at once.** I bought

a “splitter” at Radio Shack. One end goes into the headphone jack, and the other end can connect to up to four headphones. With a splitter, up to four kids can listen quietly to a CD or DVD on headphones while others study in the same room.

Making Your Own Materials

If you have time, a Magic Marker and pair of scissors, and a bit of creativity you can save money by making many homeschool items. Here are just a few ideas for making your own customized homeschool materials.

- ✓ **Math counters** (manipulatives used for demonstrating addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division) can be anything of uniform shape that’s large enough and smooth enough for small fingers to handle. Bingo chips (these come in many educational games), finger puppets, and checkers work well. Peas are too small—use large white beans instead. M&Ms are especially motivating—practice division by dividing them equally among the children (they’ll learn in a flash!) and subtraction by eating them!
- ✓ **Place value:** use popsicle sticks! Bundle groups of ten with rubber bands.
- ✓ **Money:** use the real thing and set up a play store! Play coins are not very realistic—real coins work much better. You may need to make or purchase paper bills, though, for making change in your store.
- ✓ **Fractions:** try some “kitchen math” using your measuring cups and measuring spoons.
- ✓ **Phonics flash cards:** make your own set by cutting posterboard (index cards are too see-through and wear out too soon) into uniform sizes. With a Magic Marker, draw an uppercase letter on one side of each piece and the corresponding lowercase letter on the other side. First flash the cards in alphabetical order while teaching the sounds. After a week or so of this let the child try to tell you the sound as you flash the cards in alphabetical order. He gets to “keep” each card he gets, giving them back after the session. Test him on the cards he knows by flashing them in random order. Use the same procedure for

blends (*br, bl, str*, etc.), digraphs (*sh, ch*, etc.), and diphthongs (*oi, ai, ew*, etc.).

- ✓ An **alphabet book** is a fun project. Again, cut posterboard into uniform pieces. 9" x 12" works well. On each piece carefully draw an uppercase and lowercase letter, plus a word beginning with that letter and a picture illustrating that word. For example: *ant, bat, cat, duck* . . . Punch a hole or two in the pages and attach them with clip-on rings. I made one of these, and it lasted for decades!
- ✓ Make your own **portable time line** by attaching a length of paper to two wooden dowels. Tape sheets of paper together to make a long time line, or buy special "banner" paper from the manufacturers of one of the software PrintShop-type programs. Mark years on the time line in uniform increments, then fill in memorable people, dates, and events as you study them. **Bonus tip:** *It works best to have one time line for world history and another for American history, as virtually all history resources are divided into these categories.*
- ✓ Make your own **outline maps** of continents and countries by tracing maps in your atlas, then photocopy up sets for your children to fill in with rivers, cities, country and state names, etc.
- ✓ Study **human anatomy** with homemade materials! Take a large piece of posterboard and trace a human outline on it. Glue a piece of Velcro to each spot where a major organ goes. Then make posterboard cutouts of the organs, with velcro on the back of each one. These can be colored or labeled—use your imagination! If desired, you can also lightly outline the place where each organ should go. Then let everyone practice putting the organs in place!

Some Common Problems

The first best step towards uncovering and solving a teaching or discipline problem is diagnosing it correctly. Ask someone who *knows you and your child well* for their opinion. Many supposedly "hyperactive" children are just normal little wiggleworms! TV, unedifying peer groups, and food allergies also cause children to behave strangely.

• Try eliminating these influences first!

- ✓ **Hyperactivity.** Some old folk remedies: (1) No TV, Playstation, or computer. (2) Cut down on sugar. (3) When hyperactivity occurs, have him run 10 times around a football field (or the nearest equivalent). This worked *every time* for the Christian school principal who told me about it! (4) Kelp tablets taken along with a glass of water in which a tad of vinegar is mixed. This is an old Vermont folk remedy. (5) Check for allergies.
- ✓ **Slow learner.** Some suggestions: (1) Drop the troublesome subject altogether and come back to it in a few weeks. This often unblocks the problem. (2) Do some physical activity (juggling is ideal) and return to the lesson. (3) Use hands-on teaching methods—avoid verbal-only or visual-only instruction. (4) Use gross-motor movements. For example, tracing large letters in a sandbox is more beneficial for a slow learner than trying to write relatively small letters holding a pencil.
- ✓ **Daydreamer.** Constantly check up on the child; work alongside him when possible; encourage him if he is on task and discipline him if he hasn't been working. *Check for allergies* if the daydreamer seems especially listless. The daydreamer will often work night and day on his special projects, but don't fall for the temptation to let him just do those. Give him time and space for creativity, but also help him develop habits of discipline. Keep telling him, "The more you hate the job, the harder you should work at it so you can get rid of it faster!"
- ✓ **The Messmaker** gets to clean up his own mess. If he persists in making messes, you may elect to (1) temporarily or permanently take away some of the items he scatters around, e.g., LEGO bricks, (2) give him additional chores, (3) make him pay others for the extra labor he is causing them. Be sure to thank him when you see increasing signs of neatness!