

Year-End Assessment:

Taking Stock and Creating a Roadmap for the Coming Year

As the school year ends and next year looms ahead, it is a good idea to step back and do two things: first, assess what you and your children have accomplished this past year; second, make goals for the coming year.

Pat yourself—and your kids—on the back

Taking the time to drink in success will recharge your—and your children's—batteries for the long year ahead. Here are a few ways to acknowledge this year's accomplishments:

- For each subject you worked on, note your children's major accomplishments and the most important things they learned.
- Talk with your children about what they learned in different subjects. You'll find that such discussions are a shot in the arm for both you and the kids.
- With your kids, pull out a number of things they did at the beginning of the school year—and then things they did at the end. You and they will be amazed.
- Ask your kids to list some of their favorite activities or accomplishments.

Assess your progress

With the glow of accomplishment still red in your cheeks, remind yourself of *what you set out to do* this past year. If you followed a set curriculum, the year's targets were probably clearly laid out from the start. If, on the other hand, you built your own curriculum, you probably set goals—or at least made mental notes—when you put the curriculum together.

Either way, at this point you probably have a clear sense of three things about your child's work in each subject:

- what you wanted to accomplish;
- what your child *actually* accomplished;
- what remains to be done to complete this year's work.

Reflecting on such things, you may see gaps between *what you set out to do* and *what your child actually learned*. Such gaps are normal, and before we go any further, there are a few principles about home schooling that we all need to bear in mind:

- **Tailoring to the family.** Home schooling adapts to circumstances: perhaps you had a toddler or new baby to care for while conducting lessons; perhaps you switched to a new approach to home schooling. No matter; there's always time to make up lost ground.
- **Tailoring to the needs of the child.** Some children simply need more time to understand certain lessons. Others show passion in particular subjects, so that you end up devoting far more time to a particular topic—and less time to other topics—than you originally intended. But such flexibility cultivates in each child a keen engagement and a personal curiosity that are hard to obtain by any other means.
- **Learning to proficiency.** The aim in homeschooling is that the child masters each lesson before you move on—what is often called *learning to proficiency*. In a large classroom setting, this standard is usually sacrificed to the need of the group to march on, stay on schedule, stick to the curriculum. Not in home schooling.

In home schooling, accordingly, not completing this year's work never means that your child gets held back. Your timetable is dictated by your child's needs—not imposed by some arbitrary structure or standard. So in any given year you *may not cover everything* you had planned to cover—and that's *okay*. The typical pattern with home schooling is that your child surpasses some goals and falls short of others.

Any performance gaps, accordingly, are nothing to feel bad about; you do, however, need to factor them into your planning. Each time you see a gap between what you set out to do and what your child actually learned, take time to understand the *causes* of that gap. Whatever the specific reasons, understanding which subjects are likely to take more time, and why, enables you to make appropriate adjustments in your goals for the coming year.

Why set goals?

For many parents, measuring and mapping out what we plan to do this coming year helps us sleep better at night. It gives us a plan that we can follow—and deviate from if we choose to. In addition, writing goals or learning objectives this year gives us a clear record to look back on when assessing our children's progress.

Some parents, however, seem to resist making goals. They seem to feel constrained by them, or they fear a kind of enslavement to them: they fear that, once made, the goals will dominate daily choices, and their children's freedom and curiosity won't be given free rein.

Parents who experiment with home schooling goals, however, find that they're an invaluable tool. Each of us must realize that the *goals* aren't in charge—we are; then we can relax some of those fears and begin harvesting the real benefit of goals, which is their ability to bring focus to our efforts.

Write specific goals

Goals or learning objectives can be written as specifically or as generally as you want. Successful managers, however, will tell you that *you can only manage what you measure*. Let's take a specific example:

One goal for your child this year might be: *Learns to read*. That's a big goal that could take the entire year. How will you be able to tell whether your teaching methods and materials are working? How will you know when you're well on your way to reaching that goal? You might want to make smaller milestones by breaking down the goal into specific steps or stages:

- *Masters phonetic sounds of all letters.*
- *Masters short vowel, three-letter words.*
- *Learns the following words by sight: the, on, of, it, is...*

Making specific goals will enable you to better assess how you are doing in the process, what you need to spend more time on, or whether you should use a different approach.

If you have an older child studying several subjects, you can be as specific as breaking down the number of pages you want your child to cover in each subject in a week's time. Some parents note the number of pages or lessons in each subject, then divide by the number of weeks or days to determine weekly or daily requirements. Experiment. Find

out what works for you. Whether specific or general, goals help you get to where you want to be.

Standard milestones. Curriculum requirements and grade-by-grade standards are helpful in setting learning objectives for each year, but beware: they can also be irrelevant when you are home schooling. In home schooling, a child may be two years ahead of grade level in math and a year behind in reading. Use such grade-by-grade standards, accordingly, as rough guides you can use to build your own map for the year.

Generally speaking, your own assessment of the work your child did this year will be a more accurate guide of what you need to do this coming year, and it can also help you determine what to work on over the summer. Many parents keep a few worksheets handy and have their children complete one or two each week to prevent having to do a lot of review in the fall.

If you are building your own curriculum or if you are new to homeschooling, there are several sources you can peruse to get clear milestones for each grade. They include the following books and websites:

- *Core Knowledge* by Ed Hirsch. Known more popularly as “What Your First Grader Needs To Know”, “What Your Third Grader Needs To Know”, etc. The Core Knowledge series is a consensus-based model of grade-specific guidelines for each subject. The suggestions can provide a solid, coherent foundation of learning for students in the elementary and middle grades.

<http://www.coreknowledge.org/CKproto2/about/index.htm#SAM>

- Another source to review for learning objectives by grade is the *World Book Typical Course of Study*. This resource offers the results of ongoing research into curriculum requirements and standards. The learning levels include preschool through grade 12.

<http://www.worldbook.com/wb/Students?curriculum>

Best Practices: Make your life easier

There are a few practices you can follow this year that will make your life easier when you go to write goals next year.

- **Date everything.** Date all of your child’s written reports, artwork, math sheets, etc. This way you can easily chart progress from the beginning of the year to the end.
- **Notebooks.** Set up a series of notebooks, one for each subject for which your child creates written reports—e.g., science, history, reading, writing—and plan to use the same notebook for several years. Notebooks covering several years’ work are useful for two reasons; first, your child can periodically review his or her own work, and in doing so, reinforce what has been learned; second, notebooks are an excellent record-keeping system.

Here’s how to do it—for example, how to create a writing notebook: Simply take an empty three-ring binder, label it *WRITING*, and then use it to store all of your child’s stories, dictations, and handwriting samples. You can include separators labeled by type of writing if you wish.

- **Take photographs.** For large projects and field trips, take photographs and work with your child to place them into the appropriate notebooks and write short descriptions or comments.
- **Schedule.** Make a weekly schedule for each subject and let your child manage his or her time. Here's how: make a grid with the days of the week across the top. Then for each day, place one subject in each box and what the child needs to accomplish. Then give the schedule to your child and let him manage his time. For example, if you know that you want to cover one spelling lesson each week, and the lesson consists of five pages, write *Spelling: 1 page*, on each of the five days. If your child completes his assignments before Friday, he gets to have free time. You can even make a game with your kids to have all the assignments for the week completed by Thursday.

Making a schedule offers another benefit: You can refer to this year's schedule when you are writing next year's goals. Reviewing the schedule will help a better, more accurate goal-setter.

Keep a long-term perspective

Just keep in mind that educating a child is like building a stalagmite—drip, drip, drip; a little at a time. What really matters is consistency over a long period of time. Setting goals and creating a roadmap for getting there are tools that will help ensure that consistency.

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