

Job Juggling and the Home Educating Family.

As lifestyle challenges go, combining earning a living whilst at the same time home educating your children, has to be one of the toughest. I'm assuming, for the purposes of this article, that you're not one of the few home educating families where the parents can afford to go out to work and employ someone to supervise and home educate their children for them. For most families these days, school provides a large chunk of free child-care and this is what many parents exploit in order for them to be able to earn a living whilst raising children. So, what do you do when you do not have access to hours of child-free work time each day? What can you do if you are a single parent and/or home educating very young or disabled children? Tough challenges indeed, but certainly not impossible judging by the number of families I've come across who are, apparently successfully and happily, doing just that. There are many different ways in which families achieve this, although the process of changing their lifestyle has often taken place over several years. How do they manage it?

Balancing income and costs.

In absolute terms, of course, it doesn't matter how much income we have so long as it is equal to or greater than our costs. Most of us can decide, to a large extent, what our costs will be and therefore how much of an income we need, but if our income drops, then it follows that our costs must decrease too.

When I decided to take my two boys out of school in 1998, I was already running a small business from home, but it quickly became apparent that I would not be able to continue with this. My job, though home-based and part-time, took up around 30 hours per week, some of it spent away from home. I wasn't happy spending that amount of time working or being away from my children while they were young (age 8 and 6). So, I quit my job in order to home educate. My doing that left us with one income (I was married at the time and my husband was working) which was not sufficient to cover our bills as they stood. So, we decided to downshift to a part of the country where it was less expensive to live, buy a much less expensive home and lower our sights in materialistic terms.

During the months and weeks that followed, I read many books and websites on home education and, just as importantly as it turned out, I started learning about something called "Voluntary Simplicity". The tenets of Voluntary Simplicity are frugal consumption, ecological

awareness and personal growth. However, this change in life path and priorities i.e. my children's education now rated above my quest for material possessions, felt like deprivation or even poverty sometimes. I realised there were seeds of resentment threatening to germinate as a result of our decision to home educate. I needed to stop feeding them. I needed a change of perspective.

It was a revelation for me to discover that taking the path of voluntary simplicity was not about poverty at all, but about unearthing a simpler, freer way of living that gave us more time together. I quickly realised that this was really an opportunity for us to lead a much richer, more meaningful life emotionally, physically and spiritually.

What are your options for cutting costs?

When we take our children out of school (or decide not to start sending them) and home educate, it can appear that we have lost the time necessary to earn a living. So one of the things we need to do is re-gain that time some other way. How do we do that? One option is to view our time spent with the children as a time to practice frugality. At the same time we can be educating our children. Here are some examples of the sort of activities I mean:

1. Home education eliminates the need for the school run. This reduces the number of miles travelled and therefore the cost of transport (although some of these miles will be made up by families travelling to events and social gatherings). Perhaps you can find a way to reduce your car use further by walking, cycling or using public transport. This can be much more interesting for the children and lead to many questions and discussions about what you all observe during your journey.

2. By being at home more, all the family have the opportunity to take part in daily cost saving activities such as recycling, composting, growing and cooking their own food, maintaining the house and garden, learning how to reuse and repair items rather than just throw them away. (Thus learning about how things work and about the materials from which they are made.) You can learn how to make necessary everyday items, from sweaters, skirts and scarves to soap, plant pots, bird-tables, garden tools and even computers. There are further savings to be had by buying your food locally and through farmers' markets and by forming a food co-op with other local home educating families. All of these are much richer in interesting experiences,

human interactions and problem solving opportunities than a quick trip round your local supermarket.

3. If you decide to cut your costs by minimising your expenditure on “educational materials” you can actually find yourself presenting information to your children in a way that promotes a more holistic perspective. For example, using real money instead of plastic money, real items to weigh instead of artificial weights and measures, items from your kitchen or garden for science experiments rather than science kits. Many materials used in schools are produced with the assumption that consumerism is the norm. Some are sponsored by private enterprises that have a vested interest in encouraging children to start using their products from an early age e.g. worksheets on dental hygiene produced by a leading manufacturer of toothpaste who promote the use of fluoride. At home, parents may point out all the alternatives of which they are aware. E.g. the pros and cons of using fluoride as a means of protecting teeth.

There are many other ideas on the internet if you search on “frugal living”. For single parents and for those with very young or disabled children, using more than a few of the above examples is likely to present more of a challenge. In this case, it can be beneficial to get involved with other home educating families or to engage other members of the extended family for mutual support.

Many cost-saving measures are healthier for us as well as providing our children with interesting educational opportunities. Maintaining good health, after all, is also a cost saving exercise.

What are your options for generating an income?

I find it uplifting to hear of the many resourceful and imaginative ways in which home educating parents choose to earn money. During my time as a “stay at home mum” when my boys were young, I watched the freedom with which they chose what to learn and how to spend their days. I decided to emulate them and choose a vocation that my heart was in and that I absolutely enjoyed. Also, having felt the twinge of resentment at the thought of reducing our income and our buying power at the outset, I was determined not to head down that route again. Rather than take any job that would earn us a decent income,

my aim was to use the situation as an opportunity to re-train in something I loved. For me that job was life coaching. Here are some examples of what others have done. These are taken from the experiences related to me by friends and acquaintances or else by parents I've coached:

A married couple with 4 children who both teach musical instruments. When their children were too young to be left unsupervised at all, they took it in turns to teach. As they got older, they increased their teaching hours.

A single mum who, in return for food and accommodation for her and her two children, carries out voluntary work for a charity in several different countries.

A married couple where the mother is a journalist and technical author and the father looks after the children.

A married couple with 3 young children where both partners are business consultants and take it in turns to work. When they occasionally have to work away from home together for a day or two, the children's grandparents provide childcare.

A single mum who re-trained as an herbalist and sees clients at her home.

Other jobs that I've know home-educating parents to do, either as a couple or alone, are:

Running a franchise business selling clothes or books in people's homes or running an after school club.

Making and selling specialist foods, home-made clothes, soap, and jewellery.

Providing accommodation for foreign students who are in the UK on school trips.

Childminding

Bed and breakfast accommodation

Travelling with the children and being employed in a variety of casual or temporary jobs.

Writing

Performing (e.g. music, circus skills).

The Benefit Dilemma

Something that I've had considerable trouble facing since starting home education is the idea of being dependent on someone else for my income, whether it was my ex-husband or the state. The latest efforts by the Government to get single parents "back to work" under the mistaken impression that all single parents of over 7 year olds must have nothing constructive to do with their time, has not helped to quash this social stigma.

Time again for a change in perspective, I think. By home educating each child, we are saving the state several thousand pounds per year and yet we receive nothing from the state to fund our home education. We can view social security benefits as a way in which the state (i.e. society at large) is supporting us for fulfilling this vital role. This is especially true, I believe, for those of us who home educate young or disabled children, since they require a large degree of supervision, commitment and specialised care. To expect a single, home educating parent to work at some other job too in these circumstances is beyond belief and yet this expectation is a situation we are going to have to accept and deal with until such time as the Government sees reason.

The benefit that home educated children (and therefore society as a whole as they grow up) receive from being nurtured in this way is something that the rest of society finds it hard to acknowledge and value at the moment. In the meantime, if you're in the situation where you're reliant on benefits, my suggestion from personal experience and from talking with others is to do everything you can to acknowledge to yourself the value of the "unpaid work" that you do. Also remember that as your children grow up so your life and work situation will change. Being at home with your children is a wonderful opportunity to learn new skills and broaden your horizons before returning to work or re-training if that's what you choose to do.

My experience during my 9 years of home educating so far is that home educators are a feisty bunch and not people to be too daunted by a challenge or two. Combining earning an income with home education requires above all an open and creative mind, capable of

thinking outside the box. If parents don't have those perspectives when they first start home educating, many learn to cultivate them as a result! This puts them in the perfect frame of mind to create a means of income generation at the right time, that meets their needs and that they enjoy.

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Sally Lever is a long-term and committed home educator. Since home educating, she has been both married and a single parent, a "stay-at-home mum" and part-time self-employed. Her two sons, one of whom is disabled, are now 18 and 16. Her website www.sallylever.co.uk offers many useful resources for the home educating, self-employed or working-from-home family, including free subscription to her monthly newsletter, "Fruitful".