

BLUEPRINT

HOMESCHOOLING

How to Plan a Year of Home Education

That Fits the Reality of Your Life

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Part One: Values

Building without plans

When my son was three or four years old, I started thinking about preschool options. At that time, I wasn't sure if I was going to homeschool or not, so preschool was my trial run. I set up bulletin boards and colorful calendars and started teaching letters and animals and colors. As he got older, I shifted into phonics, pre-kindergarten workbooks, and math flash cards. When he was five and officially not going to a public kindergarten, I became his full-time teacher and took it upon myself to do everything I could to make it *feel* like kindergarten.

Now I watch other young parents go through the same cycle, and I have to wonder why. Why do we do all these things in exactly this way, without really thinking through it all? I know that in my case, I felt like I needed to prove myself. I had to prove that I could educate my own children. So I took it upon myself to do more than they do in schools. I did more crafts, more glitter, more books, and more work. Now I look back and wonder how many of those activities are the equivalent of setting up a plum stand in the back yard. All of it looks good and I worked really hard, but was it the best thing to do at the time?

I think many of us go into this homeschooling thing without really knowing what we want. It's as though someone just gave me an

acre of land and I decide to build a house on it. I've seen houses before. I've been in other people's houses. So I put together some twigs and branches and try to build my own house. But it won't stay up. It's not keeping the rain out. Why isn't it the dream house I was hoping for?

Before you build a house, you need plans. You need blueprints.

Today, we're going to take a step back from all the fuss about socialization and standardization and doing things the way they've always been done, and we're going to put together a set of blueprints for your homeschool year. The first thing we're going to talk about will help you build the foundation of your house. We're going to talk about why you homeschool and what that looks like for your family. We're going to take a good long look at values.

What are values?

Let's imagine for a moment that you have all the time, money, and resources you need to build a new home. Going back to the idea of creating a blueprint, the first thing we need to know is, "Where in the world are we going to build this thing?" Depending on the location of the home, you'll know what things it has to have.

My parents live in Hawaii. It's always warm there. Until a few months ago, I lived in Washington State, where it's often chilly and rainy. In Washington, we had two major things in our home that my parents in Hawaii do not: a heater and storm windows. My parents wear shorts, light T-shirts, and sandals almost every day. We wore rain jackets, layers of long-sleeved shirts, and shoes that entirely covered our feet. My parents spend their free time at the beach. We spent our free time walking in the local forests. They have to pay attention to tsunami warnings due to earthquakes halfway around the world. We had to pay attention to local river levels because we lived in a flood zone. Now I live in Southern California, where shorts and sandals are an every day occurrence, but rain is not. We still have our differences.

Even though my parents are my family, and even though I look like them and share several mannerisms and traits with them, we live very different lives because we live in such different places.

Homeschoolers, too, can share the same passions but be entirely different from other homeschool families. Why? We have different values.

What are values? To put it simply, values are the ideas or concepts that have the most worth to you. Values are the ideas that drive you. Values tell you where in the world you're building your life. If you value luxury, you will spend your time and money on things you consider luxurious. If you value knowledge, you'll spend your time and money acquiring knowledge—buying books, attending classes, reading, and researching new ideas. If you value family, you'll spend time with your family and participate in family-friendly activities.

One of the easiest ways to discover your values is to put them in terms of dollars. If someone offered you \$100 to give up some aspect of your life for one week, what could you give up? What couldn't you give up? Could you give up chocolate? Could you give up access to the Internet? Could you give up using your car? Could you give up your ability to walk? Could you give up your smartphone, your music, or your movies? Some of these things might be easy for you to give up for \$100, but others would be difficult or just not worth it.

What about if the offer was raised to \$1,000 a week? What could you give up then? I'm not a fan of chocolate, to be honest. I can take it or leave it. But I love my Internet. I can always find answers for things I'm curious about, and can communicate with my friends. Even for \$1,000, I'd be hard-pressed to give up the convenience of having answers and entertainment at the click of a mouse.

It might be different for you. You might think Internet connectivity is overrated, but you couldn't imagine giving up a week's worth of coffee, even for \$1,000.

Those things you don't want to give up, even for a hefty price, are the things that you value. All of us have values that drive our decisions, but we don't always know what they are. In this chapter, I'm going to

focus on helping you discover what your values are as a home educator. Your life and family values might coincide with your values as a homeschooler, but they might not. For this chapter, try to think specifically about home education as you answer the questions and do the exercises.

List your reasons

Some of you may have read the last section and immediately identified your values. "I value literacy above all else!" Others may have looked at all that and thought, "Huh? Give up my coffee? I don't get it." Let's do a few exercises to help you narrow down your values with regards to homeschooling. We'll start by finding out why you homeschool, and then work from there.

A note on supplies: This book contains a series of exercises I call Blueprint Sketches. Many of them will require you to write something down. A lot of it is initial planning: brainstorming and idea generation that happens before we put anything on a calendar. What you use for these exercises is up to you. I use cheap steno pads or notebooks and keep all of my notes and lists in one notebook for each year. It's not pretty, but it works for me. If you want to use pretty planner paper, you'll want something that has a lot of space for notes and lists, especially for the first few sections. You can use scratch paper for the initial planning work, and then a nice planner to put your final plans in. Printer paper works fine. Loose-leaf notebook paper works fine. Sticky notes work fine, but might be a little small for our purposes. Construction paper with crayons will be fine. Use what works for you.

If you are the type to do everything on your computer and back it up in the cloud, that works too. I use Google Drive to store my weekly subject plans, once I've deciphered my almost-legible scribbles from my notebook. If you want to do the entire process on your computer, just create a new folder and keep your new documents inside it. Easy.

This process does not need to look pretty. You don't have to show your friends. No one will check your work later. If it helps you to use your favorite pens and different colors of paper, then do that, but don't

feel obligated to make it attractive. You can be as messy and disorganized as you want as you do these exercises. Just try to keep the papers in one place, for your own sanity.

Blueprint Sketch #1: Write to a friend.

Get out a piece of paper or open a new document on your computer. Pretend that a good friend of yours or a beloved family member is considering homeschooling. They just asked you why you homeschool rather than having your kids in a public or private school. For the sake of this exercise, pretend this person has the same beliefs, the same worldview, and the same lifestyle as you do. They won't be offended by anything you say and won't think you're weird for saying it. If you can't think of a friend or family member, just pretend you're writing to your younger self. Now, spend fifteen minutes writing a letter to convince them they should homeschool. What are the benefits? Why do you choose to do it? Every reason counts. Go.

Blueprint Sketch #2: Enlist the help of your family.

Let's take that first exercise a step further, shall we? Now, you're going to answer the same question, but this time you'll answer it with the assistance of your family. Gather everyone, get a few sheets of paper, and get ready to write. Ask: "What are some reasons for homeschooling?" Write down all the answers, even the silly ones. Even very young children might have some insightful ideas to offer. When we did this with our family, we had answers as silly as "every day is a pajama day" and as serious as "we get to spend time together instead of being separated all the time." Write them all down.

By the end of these two exercises, you'll probably have a long list of reasons for homeschooling. If you need more ideas, here's a list of

reasons for homeschooling compiled from my own lists and from discussions with other homeschoolers online and in person. You may not agree with some of them, but that's okay. See if any of the following are reasons that you choose to homeschool:

- ~ You like to be home with your kids.
- ~ One or more of your children has special needs like autism or a learning disorder, or a chronic health issue like diabetes or an auto-immune disorder.
- ~ You are a (fill in your belief system here) and you don't like the way public schools teach about differing beliefs.
- ~ Your child has a special goal or skill and needs practice time to master it. Many Olympic athletes are homeschooled or taught by a specialized group of tutors for this reason.
- ~ You have a degree in education and spent time teaching in public or private schools and decided that you would rather teach your kids at home.
- ~ Your child was bullied in school and no one did anything about it, so you pulled him out.
- ~ Your child fell behind in school and remedial options were limited.
- ~ There's too much violence in schools and you're afraid your kids will get hurt.
- ~ Your school district has a bad reputation.
- ~ You don't like the subjects taught in public schools.
- ~ You believe it is a parent's duty to educate their own children.
- ~ Your child is advanced and doesn't get enough challenges in the public school system.

- ~ You can't afford private schooling.
- ~ Your family lifestyle is not conducive to school schedules. Some examples: managing a large family farm or other business, or having a job requiring a lot of travel.
- ~ You want your child to learn a different language or culture than what is taught in schools.
- ~ All of your friends are homeschooling and you felt peer pressure to homeschool, too.
- ~ Your spouse or a relative wants you to homeschool.

Distilling reasons into values

I have many different reasons for homeschooling. My son has Asperger's syndrome, a high-functioning form of autism. He does not do well in large, noisy groups, and he often has to pace while he's thinking. He learns best by discussing or by focusing on one topic and branching things out from that.

On the other hand, my daughter is neurotypical, but she's very active. If she can't move, stretch, stand on her hands, or jump, she starts to lose focus. She doesn't learn the same way as her brother does, but she also has trouble in a classroom setting because all that sitting is very hard for her.

I homeschool because I know a full, busy classroom would be difficult for both of them. I homeschool because I love being with them and exploring things with them. I homeschool because I know each of my children has special needs that I can cater to more easily than a teacher in a large classroom could. And I homeschool because I recognize giftedness in both of my children, and I don't want them to experience the bullying and boredom that I experienced in school.

Those aren't all my reasons for homeschooling, obviously, but from those paragraphs you can see a lot about what I value.

What I really want you to see is that there are a lot of different reasons why a family might choose to homeschool their children. When you are considering your values, please remember there are no right or wrong answers, and your answers might change from year to year. Right now, we're trying to discover what drives your intent to homeschool so we can make goals that will make sense for you.

If you value being at home with your children, then your goals will reflect your desire to be together as a family. If you value their being free from bullies, then your goals will emphasize a need to create a safe and kind environment for your children. If you value academics, your goals will focus on creating a challenging learning environment.

Now that you have listed several different reasons for homeschooling, we're going to try to distill those reasons into single words, phrases, or quotes that sum up your philosophy on home education. Your reasons reveal a lot about you and your values.

Let's look again at the reasons I gave for homeschooling. Do you see the things that are similar? I think you can find at least two of my values there.

One of my values is Creating a Learning Environment. Neither of my kids does well in a classroom setting. I'm sure they could get used to it if it were necessary, but I know they learn more in settings that celebrate their particular learning styles and preferences. Rather than forcing them into expectations of behavior that might be necessary for a large group, I give them the freedom they need to explore things, to pace around, or to do somersaults between math problems.

A second value you can see above is my belief in Personalized Education. While I teach both of my kids all the core subjects, I often teach them in very different ways. My son prefers traditional learning methods. He reads books, answer questions about what he has learned, and writes or draws his reactions. On the other hand, my daughter likes manipulatives, stories, pictures, and hands-on activities to help her understand concepts. I know she is learning when she incorporates a topic into her pretend play worlds.

Blueprint Sketch #3: Find the similarities.

Look through the lists of reasons you made in the first two sketch exercises. Which of your reasons are similar to one another? Are there reasons that can be grouped together? What are the big ideas that those reasons have in common with each other? Those common aspects are your big-picture values.

Fill in the blank: I value _____.

Values list

If you're having trouble coming up with words or phrases to define your values, try looking through this list to see if you connect with any of these. This list is not complete by any means, so if you come up with something that isn't on it, go with your thoughts.

- ~ Flexibility—You value being able to change things mid-stream and have time and energy for fun things that come up.
- ~ Personalized Education/Individuality—You value ensuring each of your children has a different educational experience based on their own strengths and weaknesses.
- ~ Family—You value being together as a family and caring for each other's needs.
- ~ Religious/Spiritual Freedom—You value teaching and practicing your family's religion and using religious curriculum and texts. On the opposite end, you could value freedom from religious pressure.
- ~ Real-World Training—You value learning specialized skills in a mentorship/internship model rather than the factory model of schooling. There are many examples of this, but a few include living on a farm, running a family business, or being an entertainer, performer, or athlete.

- ~ Hands-On Learning—You value getting your hands dirty and experimenting with things, and will forgo most textbook and worksheet work.
- ~ Parental Control over Education—You might value this one if you think that it is a parent's responsibility, and only a parent's responsibility, to raise a child.
- ~ Caring Environment—You value building up a child in a loving way and offering them freedom from bullying, teasing, competition, or harsh words.
- ~ Creativity—You value art projects, dressing up, acting out plays, learning songs, and drawing and painting. If you value creativity, you might frustrate yourself if you use a curriculum that is mostly textbooks and worksheets that stifle your creative expression.
- ~ Achievement—You value good grades, excellence in a sport or team activity, and/or winning awards in contests and tournaments. If achievement is one of your values, you're probably already thinking about college degrees and scholarships, and will have to plan accordingly starting as early as the elementary years.
- ~ Academics/Rigor in Education—If you value a rigorous education, you might be fond of the Classical model, and will likely teach difficult subjects because they are worth learning.
- ~ Interest-Led Learning—You value letting your children take the reins in their own educations. You would rather build around what they're interested in rather than stick to a strict curriculum.
- ~ Cultural Awareness—You value the big picture, so to speak; depending on what version of history you read, you might not get it. If you value cultural awareness, you'll want to teach about

many different groups of people and how they do things in different ways.

- ~ Encouraging Independence and Self-Sufficiency—You value independence in your children, so you will probably have them doing a lot of things on their own from young ages, including chores, cooking, cleaning, or even running small businesses.
- ~ Safety—You value protecting your children from danger, whether physical, mental, emotional, or spiritual.
- ~ Health—Those who value health often have chronic health issues, allergies, or other needs that can best be treated by a parent as care-giver.
- ~ Lifelong Learning—If you value lifelong learning, you will tend to help your children learn how to learn, and then set them loose with the resources they need.

Define your top values

Maybe you're wondering why all this matters. Maybe you thought we'd get right into putting subjects on a calendar: "Math, 10:30 a.m., every weekday."

The truth is it's easy to lose sight of the things you think are most important when you're in the middle of a school year. You may say that Flexibility is one of your values, but in November you find yourself with such a tight schedule due to sporting events, holiday preparations, and other obligations that you want to pull your hair out. You may think that Family is a value, but if you and all of your kids each join a different activity, you might get frustrated that you're spending so much time in separate places. Or maybe you value Parental Control, but you signed up for that charter school or that government-run online school, and now they're telling you what curriculum you can or can't use. Setting your values will help you make those decisions before you make commitments you might regret.