

## Top 10 Tips and Resources from a Reluctant (at first) Homeschool Mom

*"I'm not a teacher." "I don't have the educational background, the subject knowledge, nor the patience to homeschool my kids..."*



Don't worry! You can do this. Let's face it, your children will never forget this time spent in quarantine together. Learning will not only add normalcy and purpose to their lives, it can lead to a wonderful appreciation for each other. Experiential learning as a family has the power to inspire new interests and to create lifelong bonds among siblings. How do I know?

My backstory... I was forced into homeschooling to support my son (middle school). He was struggling academically, socially, and emotionally. My husband and I feared we were going to lose his beautiful spirit and love for life. My daughter asked to come home as well. I was terrified. Fast forward four years... My son is a high honor student athlete, in a very rigorous Information Technology program (high school). My daughter reentered the public high school as the highest level math student for her grade (2 years ahead). After a year at the top of her class, she has returned home to study independently through Johns Hopkins University's Center for Talented Youth and Northwestern's Center for Talent Development, with the goal of attending either Harvard University or the Air Force Academy.

Homeschooling our children was the most important decision we made as parents. We studied Chemistry, Physics, Earth Science, Biology, and Anatomy and Physiology, all at a high school level. Our history curriculum took us from Mesopotamia to Contemporary. The humanities (literature, geography, philosophy, government) followed our chronological history studies. We read the classics, performed endless experiments, and visited museums. At the end of middle school, both were well ahead of grade level in math. Secondary to their academic success, the four years we spent together were the best years of our lives (and the kids will say the same). A brother and sister, who were essentially strangers (separated by grades and long hours in after school activities), became first peers, then partners in crime, and eventually best friends. It is a bond they will have for a lifetime.

Along with my tips and resources, I will share insights that will hopefully save you time and dispel any uncertainties you may have about your new job. You can do this!

1. **You have everything you need.** At your fingertips. Literally. The internet offers a vast network of support for every academic subject imaginable. Here are my favorite internet and app resources:
  - **Crash Course** <https://thecrashcourse.com/>. Originally developed for college/high school, Crash Course offers hundreds of videos on Anatomy and Physiology, Astronomy, Biology, Chemistry, Computer Science, Ecology, Economics, Government, Literature, Physics, Psychology, U.S. History, World History, and more! These videos are very funny and engaging. While they present the material at an advanced level, my children loved them. In fact, we used the science and history videos to supplement our homeschool curricula. Tip: The Green brothers talk really fast, but you can download the transcripts on YouTube.
  - **Big History Project** <https://school.bighistoryproject.com/bhplive>. Developed by Bill Gates, “Big History is a social studies course that spans 13.8 billion years. It weaves insights from many disciplines to form a single story that helps us better understand people, civilizations, and how we are connected to everything around us.” It is simply amazing! Recommended for middle school to high school, but I think younger children would love this program as well.
  - **Documentaries!** There are countless free documentaries available online. My kids both say they miss the ability to completely immerse ourselves in a fantastic documentary series. Some of our favorite are **PBS Ken Burn’s *The Civil War*** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y7HmBmWz9ml>; **American Experience** <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/videos/>; and **Empires** <https://www.pbs.org/show/empires/Empires>. The **BBC** is also a terrific resource for documentaries.
  - **Math support** <https://www.khanacademy.org/math>. One of the most challenging subjects to teach is math. **Khan Academy** offers hundreds of math videos, from elementary through high school. Sal Khan breaks it all down, with the voice and patience of a saint. If you are struggling with a specific problem, download **Photomath** on your phone for free. Just take a snap shot of the problem and the step by step solution appears instantly! <https://photomath.net/en/>. Saxon math is the gold standard for full year curricula. <https://www.hmhco.com/search/shop/homeschool>.
  - **Museums offer science, arts, history, and humanities** resources and original documents that are stunningly beautiful and engaging. A few of our favorites are: **The Smithsonian Museums** <https://www.si.edu/museums>; **The British Museum** <https://www.britishmuseum.org/>; and **The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History** <https://www.gilderlehrman.org/>; and **NASA** <https://www.nasa.gov/>.
  - **ELA support** <https://owl.purdue.edu/>. Purdue University offers extensive resources for grammar, punctuation, proper citation, and genre writing.
  - **Interactive learning online - Search it!** Do you want to drive a camera through the pyramids? Here’s a link to NOVA: <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/pyramid/explore/>; Interested in exploring the mysterious illuminated Medieval manuscripts of the Book of Kells? You can do just that at Trinity College of Dublin online: [https://digitalcollections.tcd.ie/home/index.php?DRIS\\_ID=MS58\\_003v](https://digitalcollections.tcd.ie/home/index.php?DRIS_ID=MS58_003v). The possibilities are endless.
2. **Be a student.** When I first started homeschooling my kids, I spent many sleepless nights preparing lessons for the next day. You don’t need to plan extensively, and you don’t need to

be an expert in any subject! You are a student right along side your children. We read the classics, learned (or relearned) Algebra 2, performed many chemistry experiments, and competed in an aerodynamic paper airplane contest *together*. (The teacher lost.) It's ok to not know the answers. Your kids don't need you to be perfect, just to be there for them. YouTube.com has thousands of videos to explain just about anything.

3. **Set up a school room.** The dining room table makes a great gathering space for school work. The kids won't mind eating in the living room for awhile, and the dedicated space will start to feel like a learning place.
4. **Don't underestimate your child.** Kids are so smart! My children were both in middle school when we started homeschooling, so I logically choose middle school curricula. Big mistake! Within a week, they were bored and asking really intelligent questions... *but, how does a muscle contract? Do you want to learn the Sliding Filament Model of muscle contraction?!* Long story short, I ended up ditching our grade appropriate texts for really awesome online materials, such as the American Chemical Society's curricula <https://www.acs.org/content/acs/en/education/educators.html>; The Physics Classroom <https://www.physicsclassroom.com/about>; Tom Henderson's ebooks (available for \$.99 each) <https://books.apple.com/us/author/tom-henderson/id5308060>; and CK-12 for science, math, english, social studies, and more! <https://www.ck12.org/teacher/>.
5. **Experiment!** There are so many wonderful science experiments that you can perform with household items and minimal supplies. Our favorite science website is <https://sciencebob.com/>. His experiments on the Jimmy Fallon show are amazing and hysterical! There are wonderful chemistry and physics experiments available at: <https://www.stevespangler-science.com/lab/experiment-library/>; <https://interestingengineering.com/7-diy-physics-experiment>. Nothing beats experiential learning.
6. **Go off on tangents.** If you child is interested in a topic, explore it in more depth. My kids were fascinated by China's Terracotta Warriors. An internet search revealed a lost purple pigment that is currently being analyzed (in Tallahassee, FL) for new applications in high speed train technology and in the development of quantum computers!
7. **Walk away.** When you get frustrated or lose your patience, take a break. The amount of material you will cover in a short amount of time, one on one (or two, or three) will be much greater than that covered in a typical school day. Don't be afraid to take breaks!
8. **Visit museums and National Parks.** My eight year old daughter was St. Helen in the All Saints Day parade. While researching her saint, she came across a photo of St. Helen's sarcophagus... *"Mom, we SAW this at the Vatican!"* Children learn so much from experiencing places, touching history, seeing artifacts in person. Although you can't do this in person right now, several museums, zoos, and theme parks are offering virtual tours <https://www.goodhousekeeping.com/life/travel/a31784720/best-virtual-tours/>. America's National Parks are also offering free tours online. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/coronavirus-is-closing-national-parks-but-you-can-still-visit-them-on-a-virtual-tour-2020-03-21/>.
9. **Exercise!** For at least an hour per day, go outside. During our homeschool years together, my children mountain biked, trail ran, walked on the beach, or just played in the yard daily. Now, it is part of their lifestyles. Establishing healthy habits early sets the stage for a lifetime of wellness.
10. **Family first.** Being successful academically is important, but take care of each other above all else. Being together constantly means sharing the good and bad. We've faced serious illness, loss, and many happy times together. I think you will find that the greatest benefit of

homeschooling, even temporarily, is the emergence of a loving, supportive, and safe environment for your children. The memories and laughter will last a lifetime.

Cynthia Polakovic, M.S. has found the teacher within. She will join the faculty of Quincy College in the fall of 2020 to teach Biomechanics.