

Public School, Homeschool... How Should My Adopted Child Be Educated?

By Arleta James, PCC

The post-institutionalized child and the child adopted from the foster care system frequently present with an array of learning problems, behavioral problems, social delays, etc. Parents struggle to select the educational program that offers solid academics within a context of understanding, empathy and the structure needed to adequately help the child learn, experience developmental growth and forge social connections.



The purpose of this post is to provide “food for thought” about two main academic options: homeschooling and public school. This post is also packed with resources for additional reading! Armed with knowledge you can select the educational path that’s best for you and your child!

1. The quality of a public education is contingent on the partnership that can be built between student, teachers and school administrators vs. the quality of a homeschool education is contingent on navigating relationships in the homeschool arena.

Public school remains the dominant means of educating children across our country. Certainly, many of us have fond memories of teachers, friendships, field trips, projects we had to complete, a winning basketball season, etc. Yet, for the child delayed due to his or her history of abuse, neglect, abandonment or orphanage residence, public school can mean a different—negative—experience. Children who struggle to learn can develop feelings and images of self as inadequate. They become frustrated with their assignments. Homework consumes an inordinate amount of time, leaving less time for the child and family to have fun. The special needs of many adoptees inhibit peer relationships due to lack of social skills development or because of their negative behaviors.

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These children may require special education services. Some schools will willingly approach parents about putting special education services in place. Yet, in other instances, parents will need to [learn to advocate](#) in order for their son or daughter to receive the accommodations that facilitate a successful school outcome. ***Thus, the quality of their public academic life is contingent on the partnership that can be built between student, teachers and school administrators.***

Roughly 1 to 2 million children are homeschooled at any given time (online www.k12academics.com.) Motivations to homeschool, according to the US Census include,

- 33% of home-schoolers cited religion as a factor in their choice,
- 30% felt the regular school had a poor learning environment,
- 14% objected to what the school teaches,
- 11% felt their children weren't being challenged at school, and
- 9% cited "morality."

The quality of the home school education is contingent on navigating relationships in this arena. Home schooling requires a stay-at-home parent (potential loss of income), (or the income to locate and hire a qualified person to carry out the educational requirements). Either way, you will need to [invest time selecting curriculum](#) in accordance with your state's specifications, [developing and implementing lessons](#), and learning to [teach to your child's special needs](#). This latter might mean researching [learning styles](#), understanding various [processing problems](#) and how to accommodate them, and so on. In this form of education, you'll be networking with the online resources, on-line groups, community homeschoolers' associations, etc. You'll want to get to know these parents and the consultants they utilize to enhance your teaching methods, and to ensure you are meeting any guidelines established by your state. As you learn, you will have the flexibility to adjust the pace of lessons, and to incorporate new learning strategies on the spot.

Some of this can be made easier via e-learning systems like www.k12.com. Such virtual schools offer similar advantages to public schools—access to teachers, books, equipment and so on. You will still have to oversee your child's participation and completion of assignments. Of course, you'll need to learn to operate the technology. But, much of your work will be reduced with these computerized educational systems.

In some instances, the child can still receive services or partial class work via the public school. Parents are encouraged to check with their school district prior to removing the child from the school setting. If, for example, your child won't be eligible for speech, occupational or physical therapy through your local school, will you have enough insurance coverage or the financial means to carry out these services upon initiating home schooling?

2. Advocacy Time vs. Personal Time

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The parent of a child with special needs in a public school setting may find their extra personal time is now invested in learning their child's educational rights as explained in the [Individuals with Disabilities Education Act \(IDEA\)](#). In essence, as stated above, you may need to advocate in order that your child receive services that lend to a positive school experience. The homeschooling parent will obviously lose his or her personal time due to the demands of being responsible for the child's academics. Let's talk about being an advocate, and then cover the issue of personal time for the homeschooling family.



IDEA aims to ensure that all children receive a free and appropriate education (FAPE)—in the least restrictive environment (LRE)—and special services to assist in meeting their educational needs. Children who have difficulty learning adequately may qualify for special education services. Under IDEA, once a child is deemed eligible for special education services, the child is entitled to have an [Individualized Education Plan \(IEP\)](#). The IEP includes annual goals and short-term objectives, and is developed with the participation of the parents. Once an IEP is completed, parents or the school can request changes to it, but no changes can be made without the parents being informed. The IEP is reviewed annually, but may be reviewed as often as needed to make necessary changes (National Resource Center on AD/HD, www.help4adhd.org.)

A [Section 504 plan](#) is typically faster, more flexible and a less stigmatizing procedure for obtaining some accommodations and services. Less information about the child is needed to obtain eligibility. However, regulations do not dictate the frequency of review of the 504 plan, and do not specify the right of the parents to participate in its development (National Resource Center on AD/HD, www.help4adhd.org.)

After reading the above two paragraphs, it is easy to see that there is a learning curve just in the jargon—IEP, IDEA, FAPE, LRE, 504 plan—a parent will need to absorb! However, with today's information highway, help is just a click away! Our "Readings and Resources" (right) and hot links will take you directly to some of the key websites, books and articles you need to chart a course in the public school.

While advocacy is the highway to obtaining what your child needs, it can become a grueling, time consuming endeavor. In addition to understanding your rights under IDEA, and the development and implementation of the IEP, each year you may find yourself dealing with new professionals. In essence, you will find yourself educating others about your child's needs throughout your child's academic career. The public academic setting may not be familiar with the needs of children adopted from institutional settings, nor realize the problems that stem from abuse or the issues that occur as a result of being adopted. Of course, there will be professionals who are more open-minded and willing than others. In essence, each professional will view your child through his or her lens. [There will be times that their and](#)

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[your perspectives collide!](#) Some parents determine that they have stamina and skills to carry their advocacy tasks to graduation. Yet, other families will choose to hire educational advocates to assist them.

Some parents opt to move to homeschooling. This means your personal time is now far more limited due to the added demands that educating your child yourself will require. Think carefully about this. If you have had the experience of spending an extended period of time with your child, how did it go? Is your spouse supportive of the homeschooling choice? Will your husband or wife be available to give you breaks? Do you have other child care options? Carefully consider what you might need to give up in order to provide education in the home. [Think also about the fact that being one-on-one with your child](#) will heighten the intimacy of the relationship, and the child's need to take direction from you. Initially, until you achieve a balance, this might lead to a heightening of behavioral issues or exacerbate a child's attachment difficulties. In most instances there are solutions to manage such a backlash. The point is, weigh the pros and cons of what it will mean to increase your time with your child. [Spend some time networking with those already homeschooling.](#) Listen to their struggles as well as their solutions. Be as prepared as possible if homeschooling is the route you opt to travel. Or, recognize that you are not a bad parent if you do not feel you are able to manage your child without the break that school may offer.

3. The Impact of the “Invisible” Quality of Mental Health Issues

Because children who have experienced trauma, look “normal” on the outside, parents will struggle to get the public school to accept that there is a problem—in many cases! In fact, many children with mental health issues have a “superficial charm.” The school sees one child “cute” and “wonderful”, while at home parents and siblings see a very different child. So, valuable time is lost attending to the needs of these children. This is very frustrating and heart-wrenching. Often the parent is believed to be the source of the problem. This becomes further exacerbated as the parent then works more diligently to educate the school about his or her adopted son or daughter. Soon, the parent looks fully crazy in the eyes of those educating their child. If you find yourself in this situation, take a time-out from dealing with the teacher to re-group. Determine what your intention is. Frequently, parents are seeking validation for the hardship of parenting the child with mental health diagnoses. Ask yourself if this is possible? The answer may be “no.” Likely, the only people that can “get it” are other parents “in your shoes.” It may be time to locate a support group for emotional support, and for ideas as to how to handle your particular school matters differently. Veteran parents are often the best source of strategies to effectively oversee your child's educational rights. In any event, stay focused on the IEP goals most essential to your child's education. Advocate for what is truly important. If possible, volunteer at your son or daughter's school. Let the staff see you in a different capacity. As they come to know you as a “person” other than “Johnny's Mom”, their perceptions will change.



This issue often causes parents to consider homeschooling. Parents tire of the chronic “blame.” They are sad and disturbed by the knowledge they are not accepted. They also know their child’s learning problems are not being met. In such cases, there can be relief in moving to an at home academic program. The parent feels better out of the spotlight, and the parent feels the child’s academic issues are finally being addressed in a manner that will better alleviate the residue left by the destructive path of trauma.

4. Social Skills and More...

A common query posed about homeschooling is whether children educated by parents develop social skills. The answer is “yes.” While the body of research pertaining to homeschooling is small, it is positive. Two studies of particular interest include, [Scholastic Achievement and Demographic Characteristics of Home School Students](#), Lawrence Rudner, ERIC Clearinghouse on Assessment and Evaluation, and [Homeschooling Grows Up](#), Dr. Brian D. Ray, National Home Education Research Institute. In summary, homeschooling “produces successful adults who are actively involved in their communities and who continue to value education for themselves and their children.” In fact, 71% of formerly homeschooled children continue to be active in their community as adults—coaching a sports team, volunteering at a school, working with a church or neighborhood association—vs. 37% of U.S. adults of a similar age.

Today’s homeschooled children are privy to the same types of social opportunities as those attending public school. Homeschool networks exist and through these networks children attend dances, field trips and so on. Many participate in sports via their local school district or through programs in their neighborhood. The homeschool student takes karate, gymnastics, art lessons and so on just like the kids riding the bus to their local public school! Each group also has facebook, twitter, email and cell phones!

From a developmental perspective, parents are the people who put social skills in motion! The interactions between parents and infant lay the foundation for how the child will interact in all subsequent relationships. Children with histories of trauma—abandonment, abuse, institutionalization, neglect—often, and unfortunately, present with serious delays in their abilities to interact with age-appropriate peers. If the impact of their trauma lends to behavioral problems as well, they are certain to struggle with making and keeping friends.

In this area, homeschooling offers the distinct advantage of having more control over the peer interactions—beneficial when your child has poor self-concept, and this educational alternative puts the child at home—with a parent—who can re-do the early life experiences that facilitate social skills development. There is simply no substitute for parental time

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when it comes to facilitating gains for the child with a history of trauma. In reality, the lack of psychological stimulation that resulted from orphanage residence or a dysfunctional birth home, is the cause of the child's current inadequacies. Enhancing the parent-child relationship—even at later ages—lends to changes in how the child will relate to all others.

The public school philosophy is often the reverse. Parents are encouraged to place their child in activities with peers. This is putting the horse before the cart. As stated above, the child's first social coaches are his mother and father. Until, he is attached to a parent, it is unlikely he will watch his peers and internalize the skills he sees them exhibit. Certainly, there are exceptions to this as there are with any philosophy or theory. In such cases, these parents can relax and enjoy watching their child hit a home run, or make a basket! However, for those parents who continually watch their child move from one superficial acquaintance to another, or get passed over for invitation to another birthday party, homeschooling—having the opportunity to devote quality and quantity of time to your son or daughter—may be a viable option.

Further, if your child's behavioral difficulties are severe enough in the public school setting, you may face the dilemma of moving your child from a regular education classroom to a classroom designed for children with emotional/behavioral problems. Certainly, many of these classrooms offer wonderful opportunities. Yet, a disadvantage is the lack of seeing "normal." Children's perceptions become skewed when segregated from their typical peers. Many really cannot comprehend that their actions are at a discord with those kids developing appropriately— especially if they function higher than their classmates in these alternative programs. Parents want to be vigilant when their child must move to a more restrictive academic environment. Visit the classroom. Establish a communication system with the teacher. Monitor the academics and the social opportunities. Supplement at home as need be.



Social skills are but one area of development first influenced by parents. Self-esteem, emotional regulation, problem-solving skills, the ability to delay gratification, the capacity to be reciprocal, etc. also develop early and within the context of the parent-child relationship. If your child struggles in any of these areas, homeschooling may be a viable option to explore. Homeschooling—short-term or long-term—lends to stabilizing these foundational developmental

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skills. The child has access to a parent for an extended period of time. This offers a period similar to infancy and toddlerhood, during which the foundation of all cognitive, social, emotional and physical skills is set.

For more information related to this point, visit my article, *Nurture: The Ring that Holds All the Keys*.

5. Take All of Your Children Into Consideration in Selecting a School Option

Abigail entered the family at age 9. She and her typically-developing sibling, John, attended the same school. One day, Abigail was found eating food off of the bathroom floor. A preceding student had apparently dropped it. The news of this behavior passed through the school quickly. At recess, numerous fellow classmates asked John, "What is wrong with your sister?"

Randy's family adopted Sean when he was 6 years old. Randy and Sean attended the same school. Randy was two years older than Sean. Each day, Sean struggled with emotional regulation. The school's response was to have Randy come to Sean's class to assist in calming him down. This interrupted Randy's education as well as it caused his classmates to wonder what was going on. "Where was Randy going every day?" "What is the problem with his brother?" It wasn't long before questions were posed to Randy about his brother's behavior.

Loretta is now age 9. She was adopted when she was 9-months old. She has tantrums—daily! Her brother, Bobby, age 12, recently asked his parents if he could go to public school. He stated, "It is too stressful being with Loretta all day!"

Situations such as the above cause parents concern. In the public school setting, their typical children are often called upon to explain or help with their adopted sibling's problems. Or, there is embarrassment due to a sibling's behavior. In the homeschool setting, unless the family has access to a support system or a variety of outlets for the healthy children, the entire family is home with the child who tantrums, can't "go with the flow", lies, steals, etc.

In families comprised of numerous troubled adoptees consideration must be given to the fact that such children—related by birth or not—forge trauma bonds. In essence, they connect to each other via their emotional disturbance. Such siblings tend to fluctuate. One improves in functioning, one declines in functioning. Then, vice-versa. Thus, these types of trauma relationships impair overall progress. Again, these children need opportunities away from each other in order to heal their mental health issues.

Some families are able to create an environment that allows for homeschooling all of their children. Other families decide to use a combination of homeschooling and public education.

In conclusion, public schooling and homeschooling are unique educational opportunities. Parents have to take much into consideration. There are also [charter schools](#), private schools, religiously affiliated schools and schools based on philosophy like Montessori schools. This post did not cover these types of educational alternatives. Parents are encouraged to explore these options within their own communities. Many offer small class settings beneficial to children with various types of learning disabilities and attention problems. Some specialize in educating children with mental health issues.

No matter what your choice, please also keep in mind that your child's mental health services are equally important. Certainly, education is valuable and there is no intent to dismiss the value of a good education. However, mental health issues seriously impair the ability to form relationships. Straight As are wonderful. However, if the child obtaining the good grades can't interact with people, will he be able to use his education? Or, there is the flip side. There is the child who has so many mental health issues she can barely learn. Parents battle the school for accommodations, often taking a school district to court if necessary. Other parents homeschool year round in an effort to help the child keep pace with the desired learning goals. These extraordinary efforts, as with good grades, are only important if ***an equal amount of effort*** is being put into improving the mental health issues. Some families pursue mental health services

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tenaciously. However, more often, the mental health issues are scheduled around academic endeavors and extra curricular activities as if the mental health issues are the lowest of these priorities.