

## Introduction

In Deuteronomy 6 we read of a revolutionary plan, hatched in the mind of God, to ensure that Israel was an educated nation:

*These are the commands, decrees and laws the LORD your God directed me to teach you to observe in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess, so that you, your children and their children after them may fear the LORD your God as long as you live by keeping all his decrees and commands that I give you, and so that you may enjoy long life. ... These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up (Deuteronomy 6:1-2, 6-7).*

Here we observe Moses as he describes the aims of Israelite education – God having his rightful place in the centre of personal and communal life, leading to obedience that in turn offers the promise of long and enjoyable lives for the people. Every education system makes promises to its graduates – in 1997 Tony Blair described education as his new government’s best economic policy. For many in Western society, the promise of education is little more than economic prosperity. For Christians however the aim of education is to establish in ourselves and our children a focus on life which is God-centred. It is for this reason that Moses describes a system of education that begins with parents – these commandments are, ‘...to be upon *your* hearts’ and only then focuses upon children. Parents themselves are then instructed to *impress* this God-centred worldview upon their children; the instruction is not merely to mention God once or twice during the week or even to ensure that they receive good Biblical teaching on Sunday. The writer of Deuteronomy is clear – the purpose of education is to firmly fix in children an awareness of the reality of a living God moving in history. In addition, the method and location of education is clearly described – as parents go about their daily business – when they get up in the morning, whether they go out and about or sit at home, when they go to bed at night, they are to breathe learning over their children.

During the last twenty years a quiet revolution has been taking place. Without formal approval from church leaders, without the support of large organisations or mainstream publishers and without the backing of wealthy benefactors, increasing numbers of Christians in Britain have been prompted to raise their children without sending them to school. Just how revolutionary this is, can be seen from the reactions of some church ministers, magazine editors and national Christian leaders who have looked at home-based learning with suspicion, dismay or outright opposition. And yet despite this lack of support, growing numbers of young families have chosen to use the home and the wider community rather than the local school as their primary places of learning.

This book contains their stories – or at least the stories of a very small number of those ordinary families who have chosen to do a quite extraordinary thing. As you read these accounts you will quickly notice that the typical home educating family simply does not

exist. At a time when our state-funded schools are becoming increasingly monolithic in educational approach, with every child being expected to conform to a pattern set down by central government, education within the home education community is varied, vibrant and, genuinely, focused on how individual children learn. Time and again, within these accounts, the reader is challenged by the reality that children learning at home with their parents are more likely to have their educational needs met than those who sit in a class of twenty-five to thirty, vying for the attention of one adult.

One common feature that runs through this book is of families courageously choosing to be different. They have opted to swim against the educational and spiritual tide, often as a result, facing criticism from both secular educators and other Christians. Despite this, these accounts do not focus on negative experiences or criticism of those around them. Rather we read of families taking a step of faith similar in many respects to Abram's departure from Haran (Genesis 12:1). Thrillingly we also read of a faithful God upholding and blessing families time and again as they attempt to walk a faithful path in raising their children.

Whether one is concerned with developing children's abilities or finding methods of learning that suit them individually, the home appears to be a powerful learning environment. Within these stories we read of children who are gifted and talented; not in the divisive, contemporary and narrow sense of possessing some special ability that sets them apart from their peers for particular attention, but in the sense that God gives *all* children gifts and talents that are to be nurtured and cultivated. Whilst schools focus primarily on academic performance, we see families exploring together to discover what each child is good at – whether these gifts are in the areas of music, sport, the arts, or practical abilities such as joinery or farming. Whilst school-based learning seems locked in a nineteenth century time warp with methods that would be familiar to Dickens' Mr Gradgrind, these parents write about exciting and innovative teaching methods that are sensitive to children's needs. In a very real sense these stories demonstrate the fact that parents working outside the system are the last true radicals in education within the UK.

After twenty or thirty years it is now possible to look at the 'graduates' of home-based learning and assess the success or otherwise of the venture. Of course, this does prompt difficult questions about how we can measure success in our young people. Can we honestly say, as successive British governments of either political complexion have suggested, that the sum of all educational success can be measured by the acquisition of five (or more) GCSEs at grade C or above? And can we hold that without this 'magic' collection of certificates our children are more likely to fall into a life of crime, disadvantage and poverty? It is certainly the case that home educated young people who sit GCSE exams often do exceptionally well. There is also a lot of anecdotal evidence that further education and sixth form colleges readily accept home education 'graduates' since they generally find them to be diligent, thoughtful, sociable students who appear to enjoy studying their chosen subjects. This, of course, knocks on the head one of the perennial arguments used against home education – that children taught at home are invariably going to be socially stunted and incapable of engaging with their peers. The fact is that both academically and socially, young people who have been educated outside

school do well. American research maintains that they actually do better than their schooled peers!<sup>1</sup> For many home educating parents however this is not enough. They aspire to more for their children. They want them to grow up with an understanding of the world and created reality that firmly places God at the centre. Whether they are studying history or geography, science or literature, their desire is for each child to see the hand of God at work in His world. Like all Christian parents they aspire to see their children have a personal and intimate relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ; however, even if they have not yet made that commitment when they complete their home-based learning, home educating parents want to know that their children have a God-coloured perspective on the world. For many Christian home educating parents, this is the real measure of success.

For all the parents whose stories unfold in these pages, education is not a neutral activity devoid of spiritual intent. Non-Christian teachers delivering a secular National Curriculum are simply not consistent with a Biblical calling to impress upon our children a God-centred view of the world. For them, secular education is concerned with leaving God out in a vain attempt to be neutral. Such neutrality is nothing short of practical atheism; God, if he is there at all, is of such little consequence that he is omitted from all areas of the curriculum. In contrast, parents who share their experiences in these pages describe a view of the world and a lifestyle that is centred upon God; with such a view of reality it is little wonder that their view of education is fundamentally different from that which is the norm today. And yet, in these families, we do not see lives that are pre-occupied with condemnation of what they see around them or even with protecting their children from a 'wicked' world, but rather we observe people who are focused on living out their Christian family life in a thrilling, dynamic way before an increasingly secular world.

The remainder of this book is something of a potpourri. More than anything else these twenty-one families present varied and vibrant approaches to education. All are Christians of a broadly evangelical perspective, but in other ways they are very different. Some are informal whilst others appear quite structured; some make extensive use of commercial curriculum packages whilst others use homespun curriculum individually tailored to their children's needs. There are stories of high academic achievement - GCSEs, A levels and further study at university whilst others tell of alternative routes with no formal qualifications at the age of sixteen. With such an eclectic mix of narratives it would be easy to slip into an almost judgemental mode, picking fault with those approaches that one most disapproves of. Remember, however, that these stories are little more than snap-shots showing scenes taken from the complex lives of real people who are not afraid to live boldly. As a reader you are unlikely to agree with everything that you come across in these pages, however it is our prayer and our desire that you will be inspired to reflect on the experiences of these families and possibly consider afresh your own views on education and the raising of children.

Steve and Lyn Richards

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<sup>1</sup> See *Home Schooling on the Threshold – a survey of research at the dawn of the new millennium* by Brian D Ray for detailed research findings regarding home-based learning.