

Homeschooling Is Changing My Child In a Good Way

The email from my son's teacher hit us like a ton of bricks.

The students will not be returning from spring break, it read. School will be closed until April 17. In the meantime, the children will receive their lessons online. Like many parents in the first days of social isolation, we were alarmed.

Technology Has Come a Long Way

We were encouraged, though, to find out that the technology for remote learning has never been better or more accessible. Google Classroom, Khan Academy, Duo Lingo, Zoom video conferencing, and other online learning tools have been used by homeschoolers and unschoolers for years. My son has used all of these tools in the physical classroom and is comfortable navigating them at home.

We are also fortunate that internet technology has progressed to a place where we have the broadband to support this massive homeschooling effort. Twenty years ago, this would not have been possible for so many.

We have never been better-equipped to cope with a nationwide quarantine of schoolchildren.

Unlike many parents, we are not working from home during the quarantine. We are delivery drivers in an essential industry, so we continue to leave the house every day. Our 12-year-old son will have to learn on his own, without the direct supervision of parents or teachers during the day. We worried about his self-discipline. Could our son stay focused and complete his work without an adult standing over him?

Structure and Self-Discipline

Our concerns were not completely unfounded. He had stayed home alone for one day during spring break, and it went as you might expect. I came home from work at five o'clock to find him in his pajamas, eating chips, and playing video games. He would not reveal how long he had been in this state. Obviously he needs *a little* structure.

We worked together to create a schedule, with our son making most of the decisions. We made clear that while some elements were required, the order of their completion was largely up to him. He decided when to wake up, complete his assignments, eat lunch, exercise, read, practice guitar, and play outside. We assigned him some chores (ok, we just told him to run the Roomba once a day). We even scheduled some time for his favorite video games.

We assured our son that if the schedule didn't work for him, it could easily be changed. He could finally be his own boss.

We stocked the freezer with pizza rolls and frozen waffles, and filled the pantry with Spaghettios and Mac and Cheese. In a moment of unreasonable optimism, we included some fresh fruit and vegetables.

The night before school started, he set his alarm clock for the first time in his young life. We crossed our fingers and hoped for the best.

I'll admit I had some trouble letting go. I called him at 8:30 in the morning to make sure he was awake, because his teacher wanted him to check in by nine. To my surprise, he was fully dressed and eating breakfast. He told me that he had already logged in, and would start his schoolwork shortly.

I called again to check on him in the afternoon, as did my husband. Our son reported that everything was fine. He had met

with his class in a video conference, worked on some math, eaten lunch, and taken a recess in the front yard.

His teachers, for their part, were dealing with their own separation anxiety. We received about five emails a day during the first week, and my son received even more. We expect these to taper off a bit as the students each get into their own rhythm.

Rising to the Challenge

The biggest surprise to emerge from our first week of remote learning? Our son has adapted to it beautifully. He takes his school work seriously, but completes it on his own schedule. It's as if, by giving him more control over his own life and learning, he is rising to that challenge.

He is also growing up in ways that we didn't expect. I came home from work on Wednesday to find the house unusually tidy. A bottle of Windex and a rag lay on our table.

"I did some dusting," he explained, "and I picked up the living room. It was getting kind of messy in here."

It is amazing to watch our son exhibit a maturity that, frankly, we didn't know existed.

The only drawback? We might not be ready for him to grow up this quickly.

I called him on FaceTime from my iPhone on Friday. He smiled brightly as he popped a Cheeto into his mouth.

"Sweetheart," I gushed, "I just want to tell you how proud you've made me this week. You've handled this weird situation so well. You're doing all of your assignments, you've helped out around the house, and you seem truly happy. You're growing up before my eyes. Sometimes I feel as if I'm talking with a small adult."

“Thanks, Mom,” he chirped, smiling. “Listen, can I call you back? I have a conference call in a few minutes.”

Like other families, we are struggling with the radical lifestyle changes imposed on us. My husband and I worry every day about the possibility of contracting Covid-19. We realize that our son will miss his friends and our extended family. We also know that other families have it much worse. The situation is far from ideal.

In the midst of this crisis, the possibilities of remote learning reveal a bright spot. We have been forced to rethink our preconceptions about education. Our child has been freed from strict regimentation in his learning, and he is thriving. Maybe kids don't need constant supervision after all. We are learning in real time an age old truth: children learn best when they are free to find their own way.

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