

# Featured Excerpt

The following is an excerpt from

*Beyond Survival: A Guide to Abundant-Life Homeschooling.*

© 1997 by Diana Waring, all rights reserved.

This is one question asked constantly by new homeschoolers. Having been schooled in a classroom setting with thirty other students, we initially have no conception of the dynamics of a tutorial educational style. As you continue to teach your children, you become increasingly confident in what your children know, what they struggle with, and what they are not yet ready to learn.

Having said that, let me offer some suggestions of ways you can informally test your children, of ways your children can display what they have learned. The following are ideas that many homeschoolers utilize in evaluating their children's progress:

**- Observation/examination.** Look over their shoulders as they work. Listen to the things they share with their siblings or with you. "This is a great book! It lists all these weird but true facts about the Civil War." That remark tells me that my child is (a) reading (b) comprehending, and (c) retaining information, along with (d) the content of his studies and (e) the focus of his interests. What are your children saying?

Take a lesson from birdwatchers: carefully observe your children at work. It will become evident in what subjects they are thriving and in what areas they need more support and more practice.

**- Discussion.** Talk with your children about what they are learning or about what you are learning. Ask questions, listen to their answers. Give thoughtful answers to their questions. You will be amazed when you really listen to your children's thoughts.

Remember that discussions will flow in a caring, responsive environment; they will not flow in an inquisition atmosphere. We need to examine the settings in which we ourselves feel most at home sharing our thoughts and then try to sensitively create that kind of environment for our children. For instance, I love the conversational atmosphere of candlelight, classical music, and a roaring fire in the woodstove. My children respond warmly to this congenial setting when given the opportunity to share their thoughts, though they also enjoy a cafe booth with French fries, or the top of a grassy knoll under shade trees.

**- Narration.** Discussed more fully in the book *For the Children's Sake* by Susan Schaeffer Macaulay, narration simply means allowing your children to tell in their own words what a story was about. The children narrate back to you (not parrot, mind you) what they have learned or what you just read out loud or what they read to themselves. It is very enlightening to listen to your children narrate; they often get more from the story than you think. In fact, they may have picked up on some nuance that you would not have expected.

Be open to what your children consider important. Remember Valerie Bendt's son who thought the best part of the story about Patrick Henry was the fact that he did not have to wear shoes until he was nine years old. We need to allow our children their designated important events to stand, even if later we want to enlarge their understanding of what else was important in a story, biography, etc. Obviously, if our children have not listened and cannot accurately

narrate what was in a story, the story needs to be reread with a little more enthusiasm. We need to be careful not to stomp on a newly budding creative thinker.

**- Projects/presentations.** Rather than have your students answer true/false questions, guess on multiple choice, or fill in blanks, you could utilize a project/presentation that offers a creative, expressive way for students to demonstrate what they have learned.

Projects can range from very simple science experiments conducted for the family to elaborate posters on 4x8 sheets of plywood diagramming the cause/effect relationship of people and events during a historical time period. They could include artwork, crafts, experiments, table displays, charts and diagrams, architectural designs, and more.

Presentations could include describing a project before an audience- "You just add water to this dry ice and...voila! An erupting volcano before your very eyes!!"-or presenting a skit, puppet show, dramatic recitation, Shakespearean play, debate, etc., any of which could demonstrate what has been learned.

Several years ago, we initiated our Homeschool Presentation Night (as described in Chapter Eight) to give our children a chance to have an audience. We have invited friends, family, and other homeschooling families to attend, though often the audience is composed of just the five of us. One of the best results of our presentation night is that it causes our children to learn the materials thoroughly. [Diana's maxim: The one who has to teach others is the one who learns a subject best!] Our children will go to great lengths to prepare a good presentation for this night, and we've seen marvelous creativity unleashed in each of them as they have had this opportunity. It's also been rip-roaring family fun, as they have performed puppet shows, sung a cappella, recited hysterically funny poetry, drawn cartoon portrayals of economic principals, and more. It has certainly been worth all the time and trouble to prepare for these nights, and these presentations are a far greater evaluation of what our students have actually learned than a test would show. We highly recommend this method to you.

**-Tailor-made lessons.** Ask your children what they are interested in learning. It is much easier to learn what you want to know than to learn what you have no interest in knowing. Isn't it thus obvious that your children will learn readily and enthusiastically if they have some say in the matter about what they are to learn? This is not to say that you cease teaching grammar or math or phonics or spelling (often the "groaners" of education), but it does mean you could try to balance out the "groaners" with the "grinners"

We make it a point every year to sit down with our children and ask each of them, "What would you like to learn about this year?" The subjects suggested have been as varied as horticulture and World War II airplanes, but we try to find ways to incorporate at least some of their interests into the planning of our school for the year. The creative, unusual suggestions offered by our children have stretched us, caused us to learn things we would never have thought about learning, and wonderfully benefited us all.

**The preceding have all been relationship-based evaluators used to discover what our children are learning. There are also formal evaluations, which we are probably more familiar with, that we can utilize.**

Learning to take tests is a skill that will benefit our children through out their lives, so we have made it a point to teach our children how to take tests. "Read the questions very carefully."

"Answer first the questions you know, then go back to consider the questions you didn't get easily." "Check your work." "If it is multiple choice and you do not find the answer listed that you expect, reread the question and make sure you understand what is being asked."

If you yourself were not a good test taker, make it a point to learn the concepts along with your children. You can get books devoted to teaching your children how to take tests from your local library.

Though we prefer the informal, relational approach and seldom give our children tests in their regular course of study, you may choose to test your children on a more regular basis. There are tests listed in textbooks, questions at the end of a chapter (both in textbooks and sometimes in educational living books), tests you can create based on what your children have been learning, and the once-a-year standardized tests (discussed in more detail later in this chapter).

One important concept to remember is this: Tests evaluate how well you have been teaching or how well the materials have done their job more than how "good" the student is. Don't berate a student for not knowing something. Use the student's lack of knowledge in a particular area as a sign for you to go back and reteach an area, perhaps using different materials.

Another means of formal evaluation is professional assessment. We know of many professionally trained educators who are quite sympathetic with homeschoolers (some of them are homeschoolers themselves). Such people can sit down with your students and evaluate how they are doing in school-whether they are at grade level, comprehend the materials being taught, and have acquired the necessary skills to advance to the next level. Professional evaluations are a wonderful alternative to standardized testing (if you have a choice), since they are nonthreatening and friendly and the evaluator can learn a lot without the child's ever realizing he or she is being tested. If you desire to have your child evaluated by a professional, ask your local support group for its recommendations, and be aware that it will probably cost you a professional's fee.