

YOU CAN LEARN ANYTHING AT ANY TIME IN ANY ORDER

By Leland McArthy

When my wife asked me to write an article for the NHEN website, my initial reaction was negative. I'm way too busy for that. Then she said it would be about how a husband who is a full time working professional can support the homeschooling effort of the family, even within his time limitations. I was stuck. So, here is how I have supported our homeschooling efforts for our two boys, 10 and 11 years old.

First, let me give you the context of my work. I am a VP-level executive with a Fortune 500 company involved in biomedical testing. I am currently responsible for our Asian operations and am based in Tokyo. I cover all of Asia short of India and south to Australia. I am required to travel to our US headquarters at least once every two months, make monthly trips to Hong Kong and have traveled to other Asian countries as the need arises. The gist of this is at least 50% travel, and plenty of time and performance pressure. Now, to be clear, I am not a workaholic: However, I do think my situation qualifies as a reasonable example of a busy father who might have trouble thinking it is possible to contribute well to a homeschooling effort. In addition to work demands, there are other time-consuming activities that might interfere with home education. I have personal interests and hobbies, of course.

For me, to make a contribution to our homeschooling efforts, there are a few key principals I bear in mind:

1. It is not my wife's responsibility,
2. Spend more time with my children,
3. There is no such thing as teaching, only learning,
4. You can learn anything at any time in any order.

You are as responsible, just not as available.

The first point is basic, but I am sorry to say was a revelation to me. It is an easy trap to think that the breadwinner is not included in the educational division of labor and is justified abdicating by being busy and tired. Sorry. Everyone is busy and tired. That's no excuse. As soon as you recognize it is as much your responsibility as your partner's, you can find ways to contribute. You might indeed not have as much time to devote, but there are ways to compensate. One thing you can always do is to be supportive. Go to the conference. Listen to the issues. Assume responsibility.

Prioritize your time: Join the fun

Perhaps one thing in my favor is that I have always desired to stay a kid at heart. I like to be silly to the point of being a little weird. Okay, a lot weird. But I want to preserve the ability to imagine the impossible, to remember the simple wonder of the world unfolding around me, the glorious supernatural life we have. I play with my kids just as an excuse to play like a kid. This is a choice of how I invest my time. I could do other things. But by using this as a reminder that I wish to preserve my "id," I am driven to have time with my kids, and the time gives them a chance to learn from me.

Explanations are opportunities

There is no such thing as teaching; only telling and learning. Kids are naturally curious. They drive you crazy with random questions about their surroundings. I have come to think of explanations as opportunities. Not answers, explanations. Whenever my son asks me about how something works or why or how, I answer the question and then take it one step deeper. I explain the immediate question and the relevant concepts behind the answer. I try to bring every explanation back to basic principals of science or society, being careful to separate opinion from fact. I also relate common threads between questions raised in a recent time frame. A question about the choke on my Harley leads to a discussion about physics and chemistry. Now this idea only works if you are careful in a couple of ways: First, you have to be enthusiastically interested in your explanations. Put real energy and animation into it.

Second, you have to be very sensitive to short attention spans and cut it off when your audience is fading. When that point comes, I quickly summarize the above-mentioned basic principals and stop.

What you know is worth telling

There is no topic anyone must know about. (Reading and arithmetic are tools, not topics.) So anything I know is fair game for my kids to learn. I never assume that my kids would be bored by any topic. This doesn't mean they aren't. They are more often than not. But I can't guess what will capture their imaginations and what won't. So I try everything. Hey kids, you know how companies decide on how to price their products? Hey son, see that rock? Look, did you know these trees are an ancient species? You know why I think clowns are scary? See that dog? This is not a simple core dump. It is an active attempt to rifle through my catalog and find the points of common interest. When you do, you drill down as far as the attention span will go. So eventually, my kids will learn things that they will connect with other things, and they will synthesize that into ideas. Ideas, not information, are the key. I don't worry if it is complete. Fortunately, I am not the only source. They will get other pieces they need from other places. I just have to do what I can.

What you do is worth showing

Sometimes, you can't play or have quality time doing something with your kids. You have a chore to do. This is where curiosity helps. If you invite some interest, curiosity sometimes takes over and you can use whatever you have to do as a means of creating an opportunity for your kids to learn. I try to see if one or the other or both of my kids might be interested in whatever I must do. If they are, they can learn by watching me. They don't even have to be interested in what I am doing, just interested in me while I am doing it. I might get them involved through a separate issue, but by seeing me complete a task, while we chat about Pokemon or Magic cards or the meaning of life, they can learn about how to fix a faucet or file a tax return.

So that is how I try to contribute. Learning in real time, rather than school time. In the end, this is what home schooling is all about. I just have to be as much a source to learn from as I possibly can be. Of course there are other things such as setting an example and being a family leader. But these are baseline. Is it working? I think so. At least I know I am responsible for the process as much as anyone is.

Of course, my kids are accountable for what they learn.

Leland McArthur, homeschooling Dad to Brendan (11) and Trevor (10)