

# Homeschooling with Young Children

By Diane Hurst

In the field of home education, there seem to be three camps.

One firmly believes that young children should not be formally “taught.” Fearful of stifling their children’s creativity, or pushing them to achieve before they are ready, they have decided that academics for children are “better late than early.”

In another camp are those seemingly genius parents who raise seemingly genius children who do amazing things such as reading at third grade level at age five.

Then there is the camp of the “middle ground,” where many home educators find themselves. They teach their children on a timetable that is similar to that of the public school system, and their children may learn faster or slower depending on each individual child’s abilities. They feel comfortable with teaching young children many things, but are somewhat lacksadaisical about how much, what, and when their toddlers and preschoolers learn.

In our own family’s many years of homeschooling, we have found ourselves most often in this camp of the middle ground. Our philosophy for schooling young children is pro-active: we believe they should be actively taught, and we love to see them learn new things. What fun to hear a four-year-old sing the alphabet song! Or to watch a two or three-year-old paint, or a five-year-old proudly write his name. But we are not without reservations—we know we must teach our young children carefully, in harmony with their own interests and readiness.

The way it works in our family is like this:

Young children are read to regularly from babyhood, and babies and tots play and are played with during the day while the other children are doing schoolwork. Toddler and preschool activities are an assignment for one or more of the older children each year, as a part of their own school schedules. Activities have been duplo/lego, board games, I Spy, playing with dolls, building block towers, etc. I write the activities on each older child’s weekly assignment page. The toddler or preschooler knows he will have this scheduled activity time, for a half an hour or so, and the rest of the time he explores/plays on his own.

At about age three the young child starts to have his own “schoolwork” to do, with Mom. We try to make this one of the first things done after breakfast so that the child gets in the habit of doing his work first, then being free to play. This first schoolwork is an activity like early math counting games, learning the names of letters with an alphabet puzzle, doing a fingerplay, etc.

As the child gets older, more schoolwork is gradually added, including kindergarten workbooks and coloring pages.

The child becomes more independent in his work, and usually takes very little time to complete it. He has Mom quickly check his work, and is then usually content to occupy himself with his own activities.

Because we have a large family of closely-spaced children (nine children, mostly two years apart), we have always had a sibling close to the young child’s age who is finished with schoolwork part-way through the morning, and then wants to play with the younger brother/sister. So, besides having a structured play activity with a much older sibling, the young child also plays freely with a sibling close to his/her age.

Each year I make plans for each child's school activities, including the youngest members of the family. Because my older children's needs may seem more pressing, it can be easy to forget about planning for the younger ones, but they are important, too!

I remember one year when I had a lot of older children to plan for (six kids in various stages of elementary, middle and high school). I had made detailed plans and had purchased curriculum for the older ones. I knew I didn't need to plan much for the baby, but had neglected to consider my preschooler. When curriculum began arriving and my tot saw all the materials for her siblings, she asked, "What am I going to do?" Well, that was a good question! I hadn't even thought about it! Realizing my mistake, I told her, "Your things are coming later," and hastily went shopping for a few materials for her. It wasn't that she needed a lot of curriculum materials at her young age. But she did need something to do, and she needed to feel that she was a part of what the family was doing. After that I always tried to make sure my young children had something coming for them in the new curriculum we purchased.

Young children do vary in their readiness for academic tasks. But when you are homeschooling you can tailor the activities to fit their needs. This is one way that homeschooling has an advantage over group preschool and kindergarten programs, where everyone is supposed to do the same thing. For example, we have a daughter who learned to write all the capital letters and loved to color with painstaking care at age four. Her brother, at the same age, lacked the coordination to write a curving line and was more interested in cutting than in coloring. We modified our son's assignments so that he would write only straight-line letters and he was encouraged to cut out his colored pictures.

To provide some ideas and examples of the types of things that preschoolers can do for their "schoolwork", here is a list of some of the materials we've enjoyed using with our young children:

#### *Number Tiles*

These are tiles—often made of plastic, but could be made from wood or heavy cardboard—with numbers one to ten and zero. It's a good idea to have at least four of each number.

Young children like to handle small objects such as number tiles, and they are especially helpful for children who aren't adept at writing. Just because writing numbers can be difficult for preschoolers, that doesn't mean they can't do math!

Young preschoolers can count objects in flashcard pictures and put a number tile next to each card. Older preschoolers can add or subtract, using easy one-digit math problems that are written out for them, and use number tiles for the answers.

#### *Ten Bead Abacus*

I made my own ten bead abacus by opening up a coat hanger and putting ten large wooden beads on the wire, and closing it back up again. (I also closed the "hook" at the top, making it into a loop.) It's best if there are two colors of beads—five of one color, then five of another color. That makes it easier to quickly see what the numbers are when you make numbers six through ten.

A ten bead abacus is just right for preschool age children. Unlike a hundred-bead abacus, it doesn't have a lot of beads that they will never need (because their math problems don't normally go above ten), and that may be distracting to them. And the beads used are so large that it is easy for young fingers to move them.

Our kids liked using the ten bead abacus along with math problem pages that I had made on cardstock, using number tiles to show the answers.

Using the abacus made it easy for them to do their work independently, because they would slide the beads on the abacus to figure out each problem; then they KNEW they were right!

### *Picture Matching Games*

A picture matching game is a double set of matching picture cards. You can buy these ready-made, or make your own by buying two sets of picture flashcards.

There are two ways to play:

For younger children, take some cards (not the whole deck!) and set them face up in a row. Put their matches face down. Then have your child pick up one of the face down cards, say what it is, and put it next to its match. Continue with each face down card, one at a time.

For older children, you can play a “concentration” matching game (also known as “memory match”) with a small group of cards, or a larger group. Place all the cards face down. In this game, the players take turns. On each player’s turn, he/she turns up two cards, and says what they are. If there is a match, he/she keeps the pair of cards. Then the next player has a turn. Play continues, with matches being made when players remember where certain cards were (or pick up a match by chance). Young children of five or six can be remarkably good at this game. Their minds and memory are so sharp that they will often find more matches than other, older players.

Picture matching games can be made using many different topics (shapes, nature objects, animal mothers and babies, transportation, etc.).

Another type of picture matching game uses a game board with pictures, and a set of cards that are placed on their matching pictures on the board. For this type of game, cards are placed one at a time, with the goal of matching all the pictures. We have an animal sounds matching game like this; it has pictures of animals on the board, and cards that have words for animal sounds (the words are read by a parent or older child).

### *Finger Plays*

I don’t know who has more fun with finger plays—the preschool tot or the parent/older sibling! Finger plays are little rhymes that have finger motions to go with them.

Many finger play books have lots of rhymes together on a page. We found it easier to use them when we put some in our own book that we made. We wrote each rhyme on a separate page, and made simple illustrations.

### *Collage, Crayons and Paint*

Toddlers and preschoolers are very capable of making collage pictures; gluing on small pieces of colored paper, leaves, fabric or felt pieces, etc. It doesn’t matter what the pictures look like—they just like the process of putting glue on (with a cotton swab or popsicle stick, with the glue in a jar lid) and sticking items onto the background paper.

Young tots will need you to help and supervise, but older preschoolers can do collage projects on their own, once they know how. They just need you to set out the materials.

Preschoolers also like to color (whether it’s “in the lines” or all over the paper—either way, they are developing coordination and artistic expression).

Painting is something that fascinates young children; it can also be very messy! But it is a good activity to bring out once in a while, when you know you’ll have time to do the clean-up.

Besides painting with brushes, toddlers and preschoolers can make prints with various objects (spools, cardboard tubes, carrot or potato pieces, corks, Styrofoam pieces, sponges, etc.).

### *Felt Toys*

Older preschoolers like to play with felt people, animals, cars, trees, furniture, objects, etc. They can either put the felt toys on a large feltboard, or can freely play with them on the floor/couch/anywhere. Felt toys can be purchased pre-made, or you can buy felt and make your own.

### *Picture Books*

Using books as educational materials probably goes without saying, but I will list books here because they are such an excellent activity. There are so many wonderful books for young children, and there are so many topics that can be looked at and discussed by using picture books. If you don't go to the library frequently, it is worth the investment to purchase a large number of picture books. And of course, even if you do go to the library regularly, there are some books that you and your children will want to own. Picture books can be expensive, but they can often be bought inexpensively at second-hand stores, online used book stores, through special book club offers and at garage sales.

### *Lotto Games*

Also known as "bingo" games, these games are matching games with a difference. Instead of matching by placing a picture next to a picture, a match is made mentally, and a game token is placed on the game board, to record the match.

These games can be created and played using many different topics. They are wonderful for learning vocabulary words (for foreign language or for types of flowers, birds, trees, etc.) For young children, bingo games with pictures on the boards are best.

Each player will need his own board. A set of cards is made to go with the boards, with either pictures or words to be looked at and called out. Enough game tokens to cover all the pictures on the boards will be needed, too. Or, you can use pennies or buttons.

Each board should have a different mix of pictures—they can all have the same pictures, but have them in different places, or they can have *some* of the same pictures along with some different pictures.

But the cards for the caller have to include all the items that are on all the cards.

To play, when a word is called out, all the players look for its picture on their boards, and put a game token on the picture. The object is to be the first to cover five in a row (a "bingo"), and then to shout, "Bingo!"

Bingo games have 25 squares, with five rows down and five columns across.

The first person to put five tokens in a row either vertically, horizontally, or diagonally, is the winner.

### *Letter and Number Cut-Outs*

We have used a set of large (about five inches tall), colorful cardstock upper-case letters, and a set of large felt lower-case letters (sturdily sewn, with two layers of felt). Both types of letters can be easily hand-made.

They can be used for schoolwork activities, such as taking several letters at a time and saying their names and/or sounds. After a child knows the alphabet, he/she can put the letters in ABC order, or match upper-case letters to lower-case letters, or start to spell words.

Number cut-outs can be used to teach recognition of numerals.

Alphabet letters and numbers made of other materials, such as plastic, rubber crepe foam, and wood can be similarly used.

Alphabet and number puzzles can reinforce learning the shapes of letters and numbers. To do a puzzle, a child has to look for the letter/number shape to match the piece that he sees and feels in his hand. Then when he sets the piece in place, its shape is noticed again.

### *Pillowcase or Paper Bag Games*

In this type of game, objects are put in a bag, and the child has to reach into the bag and identify an object. These games can be a lot of fun. You can either have your child guess the object by how it feels, before taking it out of the bag, or you can simply have him/her take something out, and then say what it is.

We have used a pillowcase for a set of heavy cardboard shapes (triangles, circles, squares, rectangles) that are cut in various sizes. The shape is identified by feel for older preschoolers. Younger preschoolers just reach in the pillowcase, pull out a shape, look at it, and say what it is.

We like using a “Mystery Bag”, which is a medium-sized paper sack, and putting all kinds of objects in it to identify. Sometimes we put objects with two different attributes in the sack, and as the items are taken out, they are sorted into two different piles (for example, soft/hard, rough/smooth, round/rectangular, metal/wood).

You can play a “Musical Pillowcase” game, by putting items in a pillowcase and playing some music which you will stop and start again at random times. You can dance around to the music while it is playing. Then, when the music suddenly stops, the child reaches into the pillowcase and brings something out. He is supposed to say what it is. This could be used for developing language and vocabulary for very young children. You could put in objects that are all similar (such as different types of fruit, or small toy animals) or you could put in a variety of different things.

I think a good rule to follow in preschool activities is to make it fun. Most homeschool parents want their children to have a love for learning. This will only come about if they enjoy what they are doing. That doesn't mean that they should only be required to do things they want to do. Sometimes a young child needs to be prodded to do a task just because it is his responsibility, even if he doesn't want to do it. But you can observe your child, and if you notice he is unhappy or frustrated when you ask him to do certain schoolwork activities, you may want to substitute a different activity, or wait until he is older, or just help him more if he needs help.

To help maintain interest in schoolwork activities, try to have the child stop while he is still having fun. Don't allow him to continue at a task so long that he becomes bored or overly tired. Make his tasks easily attainable, so that you will both be able to rejoice in his success. Sometimes it can be hard to find a place of balance—how do you offer activities that are easy enough that the child will feel successful, but challenging enough to pique his interest? Each child is different, with different strengths and weaknesses, and different personality traits. You will have to try some things and see what will work the best for your child.

Young children are capable of learning many things, both on their own—through observations and explorations—and with the help and involvement of others. And they love to be involved in the family's homeschool. I think the most enthusiastic and eager students in our family's homeschool have been our preschoolers and kindergarteners. It is wonderful to see their great enjoyment of learning.

So when you make plans for your other children's schoolwork, be sure to plan for your preschoolers, too. Plan for some educational activities and some shared play activities along with each day's necessities such as snacks, meals, and nap. Everyone will be happy that you did.

Teaching your young child, even if only for a short while every day, can benefit him in many ways, regardless of exactly what or how much he appears to learn. Young children who are included in the homeschooling plans and activities of their family will grow up with learning as a lifestyle, which will help them develop discipline as well as joy in their own present and future scholastic pursuits.

*Diane and Michael Hurst have nine children, and have been homeschooling for over 25 years. Michael is an educational technology teacher who teaches public school and university. Diane is a stay-at-home mom, home teacher, writer, artist, and song writer. Diane and Michael have a homeschool curriculum business called Gentle Shepherd ([www.gentleshepcurr.com](http://www.gentleshepcurr.com)). Among Gentle Shepherd's products are some preschool materials which Diane has used with her own children, and has recently made into books. One of these is **Preschool Math: Number Tiles**, an e-book with reusable math work pages and patterns for making your own set of number tiles.*

Note: This article has been joined to another and published by *The Old Schoolhouse Magazine* as a WeE-book. WeE-books are short, very inexpensive e-books. The WeE-book includes photos and some samples pages from Gentle Shepherd's *Preschool Beginning Notebook Set I*. The title of the WeE-book is *Homeschooling With Young Children*. It is available at [www.theoldschoolhousestore.com](http://www.theoldschoolhousestore.com).

Here is a direct link to the WeE-book:

<http://www.theoldschoolhouse.com/product/homeschooling-with-young-children>