

ADHD AND HOMESCHOOLING

It's a growing trend, and here's why.

BY KATHY KUHL

More and more parents are choosing to homeschool. About 1.8 million students in the United States are homeschooled, according to the U.S. Department of Education (DOE). Leaders of state homeschool organizations report that more parents are asking for help to start homeschooling a struggling learner.

As homeschooling grows, it's changing, and parents are using new resources to educate their children. Why is this trend on the upswing? How can parents homeschool children with ADHD? What can we learn from them—even if we don't homeschool? After homeschooling my son with ADHD from grades four through twelve, and interviewing dozens of other parents doing the same, I have real insight into these changes.



New Resources

NOT JUST HOME WITH MOM OR DAD ALL DAY

Homeschooling doesn't mean parents and students spend all day working at home together. As the trend has grown, so have the options.

Homeschool Co-ops, Umbrella Schools, and Classes

More co-ops and associations now offer homeschool classes. Some are provided by large, formal groups with online registrations, tuition, and high-school and even AP-level courses. Less formal groups form as parents swap lessons in their areas of expertise. In some states, "umbrella schools" serve families by functioning as liaisons between families and school districts, monitoring academic progress, providing classes, and sometimes providing special education consultants. Recreation departments and tutoring services also offer classes. Colleges offer dual enrollment courses.



Online, Virtual, or DVD Instruction

Homeschooling parents can outsource some subjects online. Students email assignments, participate in online discussions with teachers and classmates, and watch and listen to teachers over the Internet. Some companies provide individual tutoring online in many subjects; others offer automated programs for teaching math, available on the Internet or on CD. Parents recruit relatives to provide lessons in person or long distance: one woman used Skype to give long-distance recorder lessons to her grandchildren. Many courses are available on DVD, so learners can replay lessons.



Special Education Consultants

Some homeschoolers employ special education teachers as consultants for help in measuring progress, or for advice on instructional methods, accommodations, and curriculum.

Virtual Charter Schools

Virtual charter schools provide an alternative to public school classrooms through online instruction. State homeschool organizations point out that virtual charter schools don't allow parents to customize or change curriculum or schedule, a flexibility that homeschoolers often rely on to help children with ADHD.

Why homeschool?

The latest U.S. DOE survey (August 2013) shows that almost half of parents say the most important reasons they homeschool are either concern about the school environment or dissatisfaction with academic instruction. Almost one in three said that they homeschooled because their child had a special need. (The survey did not ask parents if their children had ADHD.)

I asked twenty-six parents why they homeschooled their children with ADHD. Their top answers were:

- 54% academic reasons
- 38% difficulty getting help in school
- 19% classroom was distracting
- 19% frustration, family life suffering
- 19% already homeschooling a sibling
- 15% medication issues, and
- 15% ridicule or other social problems.

At school, budget cuts and test preparation time continue to cut into teachers' time to help struggling learners. A special education teacher who later homeschooled her own children observed:

In a special education classroom, there may be up to twelve students in one classroom with different strengths and weaknesses. What works for two might not work for all twelve. In a homeschool setting, that student is receiving one-on-one attention from a parent who knows his strengths and weaknesses and can give that child exactly what he needs.

Can parents homeschool legally?

Homeschooling is legal in all fifty states, but requirements vary. Some states require that families notify the authorities annually of their intent to homeschool, and a few require families to set up as virtual private schools. Some states require that tests, evaluations, or portfolios be submitted annually. The Home School Legal Defense Fund (HSLDA.org) has a handy state-by-state guide, with links to, and summaries of, the current law for each state.

How can parents homeschool a child with ADHD?

With flexibility to adapt their program of instruction, parents report key differences between school and homeschool that help students thrive.

● **Customized to fit the child's strengths**

Many students with ADHD are talented, but bogged down by schoolwork. Their time for their passions, hobbies, and sports are limited. Homeschooling par-

ents can customize curriculum to the child's strengths. Parents can accelerate lessons in areas of strength, and adjust the pace as needed. Students gifted in gymnastics, tennis, and violin gain extra time for practice, because school lessons take less time when parents are working with them one-on-one.

Some homeschoolers adopted a unit-study approach, building their entire month or quarter around a theme (ancient Egypt, dinosaurs, etc.). Others pursued "relaxed homeschooling," developing curriculum around their student's interests. I spoke with parents who'd built on curiosities in fashion design, music, and Japanese films. Our family let our young historian with ADHD take frequent field trips to historic sites, work as an apprentice reenactor, and read plenty of historical fiction and biography in his language arts program.

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● **Tailored to accommodate and overcome weaknesses**

Without dozens of classmates around, parents can limit distractions many ways:

- **Sound.** Play instrumental music or calming soundtracks, or give children headphones, ear protection, or earplugs.
- **Sight.** Create work areas without visual distractions. Take down posters and buy or make study carrels. (One mom used an appliance box, while another used tri-fold display boards as visual blinders for her sons.)
- **Smells.** For students highly sensitive to scents and chemicals, choose different cleaning products and schedule cleaning when school is out.
- **Seating.** From kitchen chairs and sofas, to hammocks and exercise balls, students can "sit" anywhere. They can work flat on the floor, at standing desks, or even slide under a mattress if they crave deep pressure. One California mom found that her child retained more when she let him sit upside-down.

● **Improved focus**

Kids with ADHD rely on many different techniques to sharpen their focus, and at home parents are using creative methods.

Several parents stated that it was easier to tutor their children in the morning, when everyone wasn't exhausted, instead of addressing homework after school.



Next Steps

Considering homeschooling? Study the resources in the Additional Reading sidebar and:

- Contact your state's homeschool associations. Many have very helpful websites.
- Check the law on homeschooling in your state. [HSLDA.org](#) has links to each state's laws and summaries of the requirements.
- Talk with homeschoolers. Many will not have a child with ADHD, most love to help others.
- Attend a homeschool convention. Ranging from 100-17,000 attendees, they provide lots of information and opportunities to examine materials and ask questions. Larger conventions will have more vendors and a wider range of speakers. Some have a special needs track or special "how to begin" workshops.
- If possible, visit a homeschool co-op or support group, but keep in mind that every group is different. It may take several tries to find the right groups for you and your children.

- **Exercise.** Several families begin the day with physical activity to improve attention. One teen practiced drumming before school, providing rhythmic exercise and a great upper-body workout. Another teen ran two miles each morning. Between or during lessons, students can do jumping jacks, race around the house, or even bounce on a trampoline when they need to move. Using movement to improve memory works for many students with ADHD.
- **Tactile tools.** Homeschoolers can let students use fidgets (small objects to keep hands busy) and see which ones are effective. One parent told me Legos helped her son listen better, but others found they were a distraction. And, at home there's no rule against chewing gum.
- **Modified schedule.** Parents can assign tougher subjects when students are most attentive. Therapies can be scheduled during the day, when the child is more alert. Students with co-existing conditions miss less instruction when parents can adjust the schedule. A flexible school calendar also allows for family events, field trips, performances, and more.
- **Social distractions.** Classmates are distracting and some children with ADHD have difficulty reading social cues. Two homeschoolers said their children found it hard to learn social skills and academic subjects simultaneously, so they focused on each separately.
- **Monitored medication.** It's easier to monitor the effect of medication at home. One mom said her child needed less medication in the calmer home environment.
- **Reduced stress**
Homeschooling parents often hear, "I could never homeschool. I don't have the patience!" Yet more parents are choosing to the homeschool route, without being paragons of patience. Why?
Several parents stated that it was easier to tutor their children in the morning, when everyone wasn't exhausted, instead of addressing homework after school. Many reported great academic gains. Parents of students with co-existing conditions such as autism could spot oncoming meltdowns and immediately reduce sources of stress. Three parents asserted that homeschooling was less stressful than having the child in school.

Not for everyone

Parents must find the educational placement that works best for their family and their children. That can vary from child to child and year to year. Many parents of children with ADHD are satisfied with their local schools, and some parents seek alternatives. As homeschooling expands, it offers resources that can benefit any parent, including those raising kids with special needs. Teachers and families with no interest

in home education have found help, encouragement, interesting educational resources, and a fresh view of education that can enrich children's lives even when school is not in session. 📖

The author of Staying Sane as You Homeschool (Learn Differently, 2011), Encouraging Your Child (Learn Differently, 2015), and Homeschooling Your Struggling Learner (Learn Differently, 2009), Kathy Kuhl speaks and advises parents on homeschooling. Visit www.learndifferently.com for more.

ADDITIONAL READING

Carol Barnier, *How to Get Your Child Off the Refrigerator and onto Learning* (Emerald Books, 2000), and *The Big WHAT NOW Book of Learning Styles* (Emerald Books, 2009). Helpful newsletter; sign up at <http://sizzlebop.com>.

Melinda Boring, *Heads Up Helping: Teaching Tips and Techniques for Working with ADD, ADHD, and Other Children with Challenges* (Trafford, 2006). Good blog and many sensory and other educational resources at <http://www.headsupnow.com>.

Chris A. Zeigler Dendy, *Teaching Teens With ADD and ADHD* (Woodbine, 2011) and other helpful books and resources at <http://chrisdendy.com>.

Christine M. Field, *Homeschooling the Challenging Child* (B&H Books, 2005).

Sharon Hensley, *Home Schooling Children with Special Needs* (Redemption Press, 2014) addresses all kinds of special needs. 2009 edition. www.AlmadenValleyChristianSchool.com

Kathy Kuhl, *Homeschooling Your Struggling Learner* (Learn Differently, 2009). Downloadable sample chapter (on deciding whether to

homeschool), newsletter, handouts, consultations and more at <http://learndifferently.com>.

Cheryl Swope, *Simply Classical: A Beautiful Education for Any Child* (Memoria Press, 2013). Explains classical education and its value for all children, and author's experience homeschooling twins with many disabilities, including ADHD.

Cindy West, *Homeschooling Gifted and Advanced Learners* (Prufrock Press, 2011).

Home School Legal Defense Association offers an excellent newsletter for teaching struggling learners, has a very informative special needs section to its website, and gives its members advice from its special needs consultants. www.hsllda.org/hs/specialneeds

National Annual Special Needs Struggling Learners Homeschool Conference. November 21-22, Orlando. Sponsored by Florida Parent Educator Association (FPEA) and HSLDA. <http://fpea.com/events>.

Gifted Homeschoolers Forum, <https://giftedhomeschoolers.org>

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