



Remarks by Kathleen Plunkett-Black at the Opening Session of WPA's 22nd Annual Home Education Conference on May 7, 2005. [Theme was Homeschooling Connections.] Published in *WPA Newsletter #72* - August 2005 pp. 11-12

Good Morning.

The theme of our conference this year is "homeschooling connections", and I've been asked to talk about some of the kinds of connections we make when we choose to have our children grow and learn at home. I'm probably not going to say anything that you don't already know. Over the years, one of the great joys of this conference have been those moments when someone says something that makes me think "Yes! Of course! How could I have forgotten that?" I think that is one of the big reasons we're all here- to remind each other of why we are doing this.

**T**he first connection many of us probably think of when we consider homeschooling is the one between parents and children. Certainly all parents feel connected to their children, and I don't mean to say that parents who choose to send their children to school don't have strong ties to them. But I do think that homeschooling gives us a valuable chance to nurture and deepen those connections.

A few years ago, I was asked to speak to a workshop on "simple living" about some of the choices our family has made over the years. When I mentioned how much I'd been enjoying my sons' teenage years, one of the participants commented "You're the first person I've ever heard say they enjoyed their teenagers!" He was completely amazed. That brought home to me just how unusual good connections between parents and young people are in our society today- and it made me feel sad for the people who are missing them. I'm guessing there are a lot of parents in this room who are enjoying your teenagers. Don't take that connection for granted- it is something valuable.

Homeschooling also nurtures connections between siblings. When we first started homeschooling, a neighbor told me that during the school year, her children, though only a year or so apart in age, would have nothing to do with one another. It was not "cool" to like one's brother or to spend time with someone in a different class or age. During the summer, the siblings would gradually come to enjoy one another's company. "They're just getting to be friends with each other about the end of August," she said, ". . . and then school starts again and that is all lost." I really value the deep connections my children have with one another- and I often forget to appreciate how out- of-the-ordinary that is in our culture.

How many of you have ever had someone comment on how unusual your child is because he or she can carry on a conversation with an adult, or play with children of a different age?

As our children grow up, at some point we see that they are ready for experiences beyond the home. For homeschoolers, this will probably be in a family-to-family context—a church or community group, homeschool support group, 4-H club—where we interact with people of all ages and generations. This is very different from the kinds of interactions that happen in institutional settings where people are segregated by age or ability or interest. I believe these family-based relationships are healthier for children—and for adults.

When we look at the area of connections among homeschooling families, the picture has changed a lot over the last 20 years. Our family was not one of the "pioneering" homeschooling families. We began homeschooling in 1985, when our oldest son turned six. When we asked what was involved in homeschooling in Wisconsin, the answer then was similar to what it is today: Fill out the DPI form, provide 875 hours of instruction, keep a school calendar, have a sequentially progressive curriculum that covers the six required subject areas. Some of the people who gave us this information prefaced it by saying "We have the new law now, so . . ." I didn't appreciate at first what that meant, but as I met homeschoolers with older children and began to hear some of their stories, I started to see how fortunate we were.

One of those stories that gave me a real feeling for what it had been like to homeschool before the current law was in place comes from my friend Jan, whose children are just a few years older than mine. She was a member of a food-buying club, and once a month she and half-a-dozen other women met to unload the truck from the warehouse and divide up 50-pound bags of flour, five-gallon buckets of peanut butter, etc. She was working with another woman in one room of the old schoolhouse where they met, and told her that they were homeschooling. "Oh,!" said the other mother, "So are we!" Within a few minutes, five or six other people had heard the word "homeschooling", and come into the room to say "You are homeschoolers? So are we!" These were people who had been working together as part of the buying club for months or years—and none of them knew that any of the others were homeschooling. "At that time you just didn't tell people about it." Jan said. Take a minute to imagine what that would be like . . .

I think it's important for us to know this history and to appreciate the opportunities we have now. So . . . will everyone here who was homeschooling before 1985 raise your hand? . . . If you have a chance to speak to any of those folks today, please do. Or, better yet, find out who some of the early homeschoolers in your local area were and ask them what it was like. Collecting those stories could be a great homeschool history research project next fall.

Besides these visible outward connections, there is a whole set of invisible interior connections our children are making. Most of us know that children are constantly learning, building new connections inside their brains. It can be easy to forget this, though, when we're surrounded by a culture that equates learning with school attendance or test scores. A father in our support group years ago said "It's too bad children don't come with an indicator light, like the ones in your car. Just a little light on their forehead, with a sign saying 'Learning Now in Progress.' We could look at a child playing with blocks or running around the yard with her brother or reading a comic book, see that the light was on, and be reassured."

Even without that light, most of us know that our children are constantly learning. Some of the interior connections they make are in the academic areas relatives or neighbors like to quiz us about: discovering relationships between letters and words or numbers, developing new understandings of the natural world or of human history and culture. As they do this, they're also connecting with their own interests and gifts, finding the areas of study and work that most fascinate and challenge them.

**I**n addition, every child is learning about his or her place in the family and community, about responsibility, respect for others, communication, interdependence. This kind of "socialization" is far more valuable than the hierarchical, age-segregated institutional social life kids get in school.

Another important connection is to the natural world. Being outdoors at any time of the day or year, having time to watch an animal or insect for as long as one wants to - these are simple, basic ways of learning how the world works that many schooled kids don't get to experience.

And children are making connections to that deeper reality that I call God. (Others might say spirit or morals or just knowing one's true self.) These kinds of connections take time. They cannot be forced or planned for in a curriculum. What we can do, though, is allow our children time for the solitude and reflection that nurtures them. And we can be there, ready to answer a question or talk about a child's concern at the time he or she is ready to ask. That gift of simply being there for the "teachable moment" - whether the question is about long division or about who God is - is one of the best ways we have to help our children learn and grow.

All of these inward and outward connections are important. There's one more connection, though, that I think is even more important. That is the connection between all of these different kinds of connections. As our children experience learning as part of daily life, they come to know that work, family and community, the natural world, religious or spiritual life, play, and learning are all part of one whole. Life cannot be compartmentalized into separate realms of work, family, faith, society. They are all connected.

One word for this sense of the wholeness of our lives is integrity - and it is one of the greatest gifts we give our children. It is something many people in our culture are hungry for, and I think they recognize and appreciate it when they see it. So as we celebrate and honor these young people who are moving out into the world, we can know that this gift of integrity is one that they will pass on to the larger society, simply by the way they live their lives. ❖