

Authentic Homeschooling in the Information Age
2018 WPA Conference
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The information age. I'm not sure exactly what it means, or when it started. But I know that it has changed homeschooling. I'm sure it's actually true or not, but it feels like this all happened fast—

All of a sudden, finding resources has gotten really easy. Parenting has gotten really hard.

We used to worry about how to help our kids find out about the world. Now we are more worried about all the ways that the world can find out about our kids.

The thing we used to spend all of our time doing—finding information and resources—is now relatively trivial. The problem is not finding information, it's figuring out what information to use. What's reliable. What matters to your family. When our kids are young, we can do this for them. X is right, and Y is wrong. But as they get older, we need to prepare them for adulthood, and this means we have to help them understand how to make these decisions for themselves.

The way we do this is part of what it means to create a family culture.

What is culture? It's the values that we hold about what is valuable and not valuable, what is right and what is wrong—the way things work. It's the shared background that defines what is “normal”.

This is done in different ways with people of different ages or capacities:

When kids are little, they are governed by the expectations of others, especially parents. This is called rules.

As they get older, the rules become internalized and become their expectations of their own behavior—their habits.

As they continue to mature, they intuitively come to understand that the family works best when we have shared expectations of each other. This is your family's culture.

It's mostly invisible, but you can see the hidden edges of it when a little kid goes to someone else's house to play and they find that there are different rules—maybe it's screen time, or snacks, or crossing the street without an adult. But it can be very confusing—how can there be more than one set of rules?

And it's hard for adults, too. Ever wonder what's the right way to discipline somebody else's child? You have your own understanding, your own culture, as background. But you also respect the other parents' right to have theirs. And of course you intuitively understand how challenging it can be, especially for younger kids, to deal with shifting rules, because rules are what help the world make sense.

I was trained as an anthropologist, so I suspect that I think about culture more than most people. But a huge part of it is that it provides norms, which is another way of saying that it defines what we think of as normal.

If culture is what's “normal”, why do we have to create it? Isn't normal just, well, normal?

I'm sorry to break this to you, but if you are attending this conference, you are not normal. And I guess you don't really have to create a culture, but if you don't, if you don't make choices, society will create it for you. I accept, in fact I love, the fact that every family in here is unique. That's because we all chose to be. We have decided not to just accept the culture that was given to us. We'll build our own—using parts from here and there, making some thing up if we need to. No mass production here—every single one is custom.

You may have heard of the analogy of a fish in water. The fish does not know that it's in water, as opposed to, say, air—it just thinks it's in the world. We're going to take a pass on the question of what a fish “knows” for the sake of argument.

You are the fish that knows it's swimming in water, and that there is such a thing as air. You have decided that, for reasons that are entirely your own, other people's normal is not going to work for you.

It's a risk. But it's also an opportunity.

A risk because society likes to sort people into categories that already exist. Do you worry that this incredible, beautiful life that you are creating with and for your kids will, in the long run, be an impediment because it's not “normal”? Do you have a crisis of homeschooling faith? Because I do.

But remember, it's an opportunity. A chance to build from scratch. To use the categories that make sense to you, or to use none at all. We have this chance because 35 years ago, a bunch of people who all had individual visions of what they wanted their “normal” to be teamed up and the result was WPA and Wisconsin's Homeschool Law.

The lesson that these WPA founders taught us is that the desire we all share—to take responsibility for the education of our own children—is far more important than all the details of the differences in how we want to do it. It's a lesson we would do well to remember.

In communities all over the state, homeschooling is on the rise. It's almost becoming, dare I say it, normal. More people means more approaches, and that's OK—maybe even great. But you may have noticed that in many of those same communities around the state, some people are taking their right to homeschool for granted. They are no longer distinguishing between “a wide range of parental discretion” on the one hand and “anything goes” on the other. Many of them do not know what our homeschooling law says, let alone its implications, or what it means. They just file their paperwork (or most of them do—there are some who don't even know to do that) and do whatever they want. We have a broad degree of freedom, but it is not unlimited. There are things that we must do. And do them we must, because if the powers that be decide that we can't handle the responsibility we've been given, they will be more than happy to assign that responsibility to someone else. Who will that be? I'll give you a hint: It rhymes with “School District.”

I don't want that. I'm pretty sure none of you want that. Here's the deal: We have rules—the homeschooling law. That comes from outside. We all, each of our families, have our own habits—the things that your family does to progress toward your educational goals and meet your own expectations.

But I think that we're missing a piece—we're missing a widely-shared culture of responsible homeschooling—the common beliefs and behaviors that everyone shares, and when we see behaviors outside of these shared boundaries, it's shocking, even scandalous. We're missing some way to send a

message to people who are homeschooling outside the bounds of compliance with the law. Whose job is this? It's not WPA's job—it's not an enforcement organization. So there really are two choices: it can be public school personnel, or it can be our community. Our family, if you like. When you hold someone accountable from a position of outside authority, you can be as blunt or as cruel as you like: "Fail!" "Denied" "Wrong!". But when you seek accountability from family, you have to do it with kindness, respect, and with love and consideration.

I'll ask you to consider something for the benefit of our community: Think, really think, about how to create a culture of responsibility—how to react when you see someone doing something that jeopardizes everyone's homeschooling freedom. How to approach them in a way that honors their autonomy and their commitment to their kids, but that also helps them understand what is at stake not just for their own family, but for the larger family of homeschoolers. To make this work, we ourselves need to be exemplars—we need to be well informed, we need to be visible, and we need to be approachable. We most certainly do not need to be shoving anything down their throats.

There's a trend you may have observed—when you have young kids you are very involved with lots of group activities. All sorts of get-togethers, pot lucks, park days, and the like. As the kids get older and start to define their own interests, much of that stuff falls by the wayside. You start to focus on a smaller subset of things. You don't need opportunities to connect with people because you've developed your own network. I think maybe part of the answer is to make an effort to be more engaged for longer. Because in this family, people with older kids are the big brothers and big sisters who model good practice and create a picture of what is to come. And if your kids have other things they want to do, it's OK to go to park day or the pot luck without them.

And I think we have to find ways to have more personal connections with people who have views and motivations different from our own. It's really hard—we all know that. We don't just need it in the homeschooling world—we need it everywhere. And it's also an important part of culture—what we mean when we say "us." If we focus on the points of difference, there are a million ways we can choose to divide and label. But here's an idea—don't think of homeschooling as something that we do. Think of homeschoolers as something that we are—an identity that we share.

We all have a tendency to live in bubbles of our own creation, but that's not working. And in this age of interconnectedness, it's easy to fool ourselves. It's so easy to interact with more people that we can lose sight of the fact that it's more of the same people. So we need to push ourselves a bit and extend our comfort zones. It can be scary and awkward, so we have to be gentle with each other, but we also have to be honest.

So here is my challenge to you—go out there and find ways to build a culture of responsible homeschooling. I have some ideas, but we're all going to have to figure it out for ourselves. But that's OK—it's what homeschoolers do.