

7 Steps to Choosing Curriculum for Your Home School

by Cindy Short and Sue Welch

Whatever your individual situation, there are multiple solutions that can make home schooling a blessing to your family. An understanding of issues basic to home-education methods and curriculum will help you make choices that will bring your family success.

How you use your curriculum can be at least as important as which curriculum you choose. A wonderful curriculum that stays on your shelf will do your family no good. On the other hand, a simple, basic curriculum used conscientiously along with reading, enriching experiences, and normal daily living can produce an excellent education.

Should You Change Curriculum?

Your criteria for choosing curriculum might change slightly or drastically from year to year. However, some of the advantages of staying with the same curriculum for several years at a time include:

- * Following the publisher's scope and sequence.
- * Savings of money by using materials again for younger children.
- * Teacher and children getting used to a certain style or type of material.

The grass might look greener on the other side, but constantly changing curriculum because you are always looking for something just a little better can take a lot of time, energy, and expense for very little or no real gain.

However, it might be appropriate to make some changes in your methods and materials a few times over the course of your children's education.

STEP 1 Start with Prayer, Your Family Mission Statement, and Goals

Before you start the process of choosing your curriculum for next year, take time to commit your way to the Lord. If you do, He will certainly guide you. You need not be anxious, but can relax and enjoy the rewarding experience of finding curriculum materials that suit you and your children.

In our last two newsletters we discussed how to write a family mission statement and set long- and short-term goals that will help you accomplish your mission. This process is an important step in preparation for choosing and using curriculum to its best advantage for your family. http://www.teachinghome.com/newsletters/vol_2-no_80.cfm

After reviewing the goals and objectives you have for your children, you are ready for the next step.

STEP 2 Assess Each Child.

Take an inventory of each child's knowledge, skills, aptitudes, interests, learning style, and character in light of your goals for him. You can do this in several ways.

Informally

Simply write a few notes from your everyday observations of each child on a notebook page.

Testing

Use results from standardized tests given by those recommended by the following home-school organizations.

<http://www.teachinghome.com/states/index.cfm> BJU Press. <https://www.bjup.com/services/testing/>

Or use results from one of the following:

- * Publishers' free online diagnostic and placement tests.

http://www.aop.com/contact_us.asp?chan_id=354 <http://www.schooltomorrow.com/diag.asp>

Scope and Sequence

Use a scope and sequence chart and check off the skills or knowledge that your child has already attained. (A scope and sequence lists which knowledge and skills are taught at which grade level.)

A Beka Book online scope and sequence. <http://www.abeka.com/Resources/ScopeAndSequence.html>

Bob Jones University Press online scope and sequence. <http://www.bjup.com/resources/overview>

The Typical Courses of Study by World Book <http://www2.worldbook.com/wc/browse?id=pa/tcs>

Learning Styles

As children mature, individual learning styles and rates should be noticeable to observant parents. For example, your child may learn best by either seeing, hearing, doing, or touching and may need more or less review than another child. Natural strengths in learning styles may be fully utilized and weaknesses corrected by the choice of methods inherent in specific approaches or curricula.

You may want to use your child's favorite learning style to encourage him in his least favorite subjects. You can also expand his skills in his less-preferred learning style by incorporating its methods into the study of his favorite subject.

Venture to foreign lands with powerful, picturesque Power-Glide Flash Cards.

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<http://www.aop.com>.

STEP 3 Learn About Different Educational Methods and Materials.

The major educational methods and materials used by Christian home-school families are described below with links to websites for more detailed information. Unless otherwise noted, the publishers we list offer:

- * A distinctively Christian worldview throughout all subject areas.
 - * No pronounced denominational viewpoints (except for slight references in the excellent Mennonite publishers, Rod and Staff and Christian Light).
 - * All subjects for all grades.
 - * Free catalog.
- Most of these publishers also offer:
- * Accredited or nonaccredited correspondence programs.
 - * Supplemental teaching materials.

Traditional Christian Textbooks

The traditional approach to education involves teacher-directed study and the use of textbooks. Written assignments, workbooks, or other projects are also used. Textbooks cover subjects thoroughly and usually include study questions, enrichment activities, and projects. These excellent books are rich in colorful illustrations, photographs, diagrams, charts, and/or maps. Teaching materials such as workbooks, tests, answer keys, and daily lesson plans are available.

- A Beka Book.** <http://www.abeka.org> * Colorful and enriched textbooks. * Classes on DVD. * Correspondence programs.
- Bob Jones University Press.** <http://www.bjup.com> * Colorful and enriched textbooks. * HomeSat TV broadcast classes. * Correspondence programs.
- Christian Liberty Academy.** <http://www.homeschools.org> * Secular and Christian Textbooks published by CLASS and others. * Correspondence programs.
- Digital Learning Network.** <http://www.digitallearningnetwork.com> * BJU HomeSat broadcasts (see above) on DVD.
- EducationPLUS.** <http://www.edplus.com> * Unit study targeted for high school using BJU Press textbooks.
- Rod and Staff Publishers.** <http://www.rodstaff.com> * Mennonite publishers. Grades 1-9.

Christian Worktexts

A worktext is a combination of a workbook and a textbook. It contains lessons, questions, projects, and exercises in each consumable workbook. Worktexts are available from Christian publishers that incorporate a Christian world view. These curriculum materials have similar content to traditional textbooks. However, they are usually less extensive and could require less time to complete. Typically there are five subject areas (Bible, Language Arts, Mathematics, History & Geography, and Science) divided into 10 booklets for each subject per grade. Answer keys are available, as well as other supplemental materials.

Diagnostic tests show where a child should start in each subject; this can be useful for children coming out of a school setting.

- Accelerated Christian Education.** <http://www.schooloftomorrow.com> * PACEs worktexts in five core subjects and numerous electives. * Correspondence program.
- Alpha Omega Publications.** <http://new.aop.com> * Lifepacs worktexts in five core subjects and numerous electives. * Correspondence program.
- Christian Light Education.** <http://www.anabaptists.org/clp/> * Mennonite publishers.
- Switched-On Schoolhouse.** <http://new.aop.com> * Multimedia computer format of Alpha Omega's Lifepacs. Grades 3-12.

Christian Unit Studies

Unit studies present knowledge from several subject areas centered around a common theme for each unit. For example, a theme such as "attentiveness" or "light" may be chosen and related material for study selected from history, science, literature, and Bible.

Reading, language, and arithmetic assignments can be related to the unit, but basic skills such as phonics and math are taught separately and systematically.

Unit study curriculum varies in the amount of teacher preparation required. Usually many library books are used, but Christian textbooks, home resources and/or the Internet can also be used for reference and information. You can also plan your own short- or long-term units. http://www.teachinghome.com/newsletters/vol_2-no_55.cfm
http://www.teachinghome.com/newsletters/vol_2-no_56.cfm

- EducationPLUS.** <http://www.edplus.com> * Unit study targeted for high school using BJU Press textbooks.
- KONOS.** <http://www.konos.com> * Unit study curriculum based on character traits. * KONOS-In-A-Box contains books and resources.
- The Weaver Curriculum.** <http://new.aop.com> * Unit study curriculum based on the Bible.

The Principle Approach

Curriculum using the Principle Approach is available or may be developed by parents. Use a Bible concordance or a topical Bible to research a subject's biblical origin and purpose. Record your findings in a notebook and add facts, outlines, definitions, essays, etc., as you study the subject from other sources.

As details of the subject are gathered and added to notebooks, observe how God has used the principles, events, developments, or study of the subject to enlighten and liberate men and help them learn more about His Word and creation.

Foundation for American Christian Education. <http://www.face.net> * The Noah Plan.

Additional Teaching Methods

The following are methods that can be used either alone or along with various materials such as those above.

Classical Approach

In a modern modification (proposed by Dorothy Sayers) of the classic medieval scholastic curriculum, all subjects are taught concurrently, but are divided into phases.

During the "Grammar" phase, a child is taught to carefully observe and memorize details. These facts provide the data for logical thought in the next phase.

In the "Dialectic" phase, the child is taught the rules of logic and how to reason, explores the hows and whys of nature and history, learns the proofs of geometry, becomes a discriminating reader, and learns to think carefully when he speaks or writes.

In the "Rhetoric" phase, expression and presentation of the knowledge obtained and evaluated in the first two phases is developed.

See the September/October 1997 Teaching Home back issue. <http://SeptOct97.notlong.com>

Extensive Reading

In this method, basic reading, writing, and math skills are taught separately. Other subjects are studied by reading well-chosen books that cover all areas of knowledge in a clear and interesting way.

For young children, the parent reads aloud and the child narrates back what he has heard. A discussion follows of facts, ideas, and principles revealed in the reading.

Electing America's Leaders Was \$35 -- Now Only \$15 by Jessica Hulcy, KONOS

This is a fabulous 9-10 week unit study on the electoral process and how to positively influence the process through grass roots campaigning. Using hands-on activities and real-life involvement, this is a manual the entire family will enjoy using to learn together. <http://www.konos.com>

STEP 4 Consider Combining Methods and Materials.

The different teaching approaches used by home educators (see Educational Methods and Materials, above) overlap in philosophy, methods, and content. Parents can select elements of several approaches, adapting and blending them to serve their family's changing needs. You can use a complete curriculum package from a publisher or put together your own components. Neither option will make you a "better" home schooler. Whichever curriculum or approach you choose, you can incorporate other methods into it. Some examples:

- * You may use a unit study curriculum supplemented with traditional science and history texts as reference books, and add library books for reading.
- * You might use worktexts for math and language and have your children keep "principle approach" notebooks for science, history, and literature.
- * You may emphasize the appropriate phase of the classical approach for each child in his individual assignments.
- * You can rearrange the order of the units in your curriculum to conform to the seasons or your children's current interests.
- * Reading aloud and discussing subject texts and/or a variety of informative or enriching literature can complete or supplement any curriculum.
- * Textbooks or workbooks can be supplemented with unit studies, or vice versa.
- * Games, projects, computer programs, etc. can be added to any curriculum to help cover all your objectives.

There are other possible combinations of methods and materials. You are the best qualified to choose a mix that will be right for you and your children.

STEP 5 Decide Which of Your Children You Will Teach Together for Which Subjects

You may be able to teach several of your children the same material at the same time for the most efficient use of your time and effort. There are many possible variations and combinations of multilevel teaching techniques that can work for any home-school family.

Separate Classes

Basic Skills. Skills such as reading, handwriting, and math depend on mastery of some skills before others can be understood or learned. Those skills must be taught separately. However, there is enough review and repetition in textbooks from grade to grade that

a 5th-grade math text, for instance, could be studied by both a 9- and 12-year-old children, depending on their abilities.

Individual Instruction. When one student needs individual attention, you need to have a list of ways that the other children can use their time constructively by working independently, reading, doing chores, playing an educational game, watching an enriching video, etc.

Older Students. Some students can do much of their work independently while younger ones receive necessary tutoring in basic skills.

Combined Classes

Subjects like geography, history, science, literature, and Bible, which do not depend on prerequisite skills for understanding, can be taught to the whole family together. Lessons can be presented in an amplified manner with explanations that enable all children to understand. For example, you might teach all of your children, ages 5-18, a course in botany. High schoolers could use a detailed textbook while younger children read or hear about parallel topics from texts or library books on their own levels. Discussions and projects can include the whole family.

Combined Classes and Subjects

You might want to teach most of your subjects to all your children at once through a series of unit studies that integrate literature, history, science, Bible, and other subjects around a theme. As described above, you can tailor resources and assignments to individual students.

STEP 6 Look for Specific Materials with Features That Will Meet Your Needs

Now that you have gathered and considered a wide range of information about your goals, your children, and your options in teaching methods and materials, you can evaluate curriculum materials according to how they match your needs and preferences in various areas, such as the following:

- * Thoroughness or depth of coverage of the subject.
- * Enough practice and review.
- * Enrichment features such as mini-biographies, stories, story problems.
- * Attractiveness of the material, such as type size, layout, color, visuals such as photos, art, diagrams, timelines, maps, etc.
- * Activities such as projects and experiments.
- * Answer Keys. These might be included or separate and might be needed or not essential, depending on your own knowledge and/or involvement in the study.
- * Your knowledge, experience, and confidence in teaching a particular subject or method. Available teacher's manuals or curriculum guides can give beginning or hesitant teachers the words to say, the activities to introduce, and the pages to assign. Teachers of higher-level subjects will find a wealth of background information and projects that can add substantially to the coverage of the subject (e.g., the teacher's editions of world history texts from A Beka and BJU Press.)
- * Adaptability to combining classes (see Step 5).
- * The amount of time and energy you would need to expend in preparation, teaching, and/or correcting.
- * Your family's budget.

STEP 7 Choose and Buy Your Curriculum.

Choose

After you have spent a reasonable amount of time on the step-by-step process of considering curriculum, place your trust in God, agree with your spouse on the main points, then go with your best judgment. Don't worry about making a "huge mistake." You can give your children a good education with practically any curriculum, and you will learn what works by experience. As you make your selections for next year, list them in a notebook.

- * Make three columns on a page for each student.
 1. Under each subject area list the objectives to be met.
 2. List material chosen for each objective.
 3. Record the cost of all materials.
- * Note who will share materials and whether you need more than one copy.
- * Include any supplemental teaching materials.
- * Add up all the prices and make adjustments if necessary.
- * Gather ordering information.

Buy

Buy Direct or Used. You can buy new or used materials directly from publishers, mail-order companies, Christian bookstores, thrift stores, or online (even E-bay). See a list of recommended resources on The Teaching Home website at <http://www.teachinghome.com/resources/index.cfm>

With a Program. Correspondence courses or home-extension programs offered through a local Christian school or church can provide teaching materials and various levels of accountability, testing, record keeping, and counseling.

Borrow. You might be able to trade nonconsumable materials with a friend whose children are different ages than your. Also, check to see if your support group has a lending library or what you can find in your local public or church library.

Collect Supplemental Materials

Build your family's reference library with educational resources that can be used repeatedly. (You might want to order some of these early in the summer.)

- * Excellent literature worth reading and re-reading.
- * Reference books such as encyclopedia, dictionaries, thesauruses, Bible concordances, atlases, nature guides, etc.
- * Illustrated books on historical, geographical, or scientific topics such as those from Usborne, Reader's Digest, Dorling Kindersley, and creation science organizations. www.masterbooks.net
- * Time lines, maps, and globe.
- * Manipulatives for math or other subjects.
- * Educational games and software. http://www.teachinghome.com/newsletters/vol_2-no_59.cfm
- * Tools and instruments (for math, art, science, etc.).

The rich variety of teaching options and resources available to home educators ensures that you can find or design a plan that will satisfy and delight your entire family as you participate together in the joy of learning.

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College at Home Handbook <http://www.collegeathome.org>

God Loves You.

Because we were separated from God by sin, Jesus Christ died in our place, then rose to life again. If we trust Jesus Christ as our Savior and Lord, He will give us eternal life. "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast" (Ephesians 2:8, 9).

<http://www.TeachingHome.com/about/salvation.cfm>

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Table of Contents

1. Learn about Different Methods and Materials.
2. Assess Each Child.
3. Set Goals and Objectives.
4. Consider Pertinent Factors.
5. Decide Which of Your Children You Can Teach Together.
6. Match Your Needs with Available Materials.
7. Order or Buy Basic Materials.
8. Collect Supplemental Materials.

* Recommended Resources 1.Highlights for Children 2.NorthStar Academy 3.Nallenart's French Program

There is not just one right way to home school. One of the great advantages of home education is its extreme flexibility. Each family is free to choose from among many excellent options the educational philosophies, methods, materials, and schedules that best suit its needs.

1. Learn about Different Methods and Materials.

Read more at <http://www.teachinghome.com/started/q&a/material.cfm> Fine Christian educational materials developed for Christian schools are available to home educators. New materials have also been developed or adapted especially for home teaching.

Approaches Home educators can choose or combine elements of the following approaches.

- * Traditional Textbooks. High-quality textbooks are available from Christian publishers. These cover each subject in-depth and in a logical order of topics.
- * Worktexts. Some publishers have combined textbook information with exercises in consumable write-in books.
- * Classical Approach. Children progress from memorization of facts and development of learning skills to advanced logical reasoning and expressive use of language, giving them the ability to discuss their knowledge and beliefs.
- * Principle Approach. For each subject, teachers and students keep notebooks containing biblical perspectives and principles, factual information on the subject acquired from various sources, and personal applications.
- * Unit Studies. Theme-centered units integrate information from several subjects. Language arts and math need additional systematic teaching.
- * Books & Life Experiences. Other than basic teaching in the three Rs, much learning comes through reading good literature and nonfiction. Normal everyday activities supplement study and give it perspective.

Media Read more at <http://www.teachinghome.com/started/basics/media.cfm>

- * Traditional print media includes textbooks, worktexts, books, unit studies, newspapers and periodicals.
- * The development of courses that use forms of electronic media has expanded the options available to home educators. They include audio, video, computer, and internet courses.

2. Assess Each Child.

- * Take an inventory of each child's knowledge, skills, aptitudes, interests, learning or teaching styles, and character.
- * You can do this informally by simply sitting down and writing a few notes from your everyday observations beside each child's name.
- * Or you can use results from standardized tests, publishers' diagnostics, or your own oral or written tests. Alpha Omega Publications free online placement test. http://www.aop.com/contact_us.asp?chan_id=354

3. Set Goals and Objectives. Take time to think and pray about what you want to accomplish. This will give direction to your efforts and help ensure that your children will achieve excellence in education and character.

- * Write out or review your long-range goals and philosophy (fundamental convictions) for your children's education and training.
- * Include Bible verses and plan for both academic subjects and nonacademic areas such as character and life skills.
- * Set objectives for this year for each child that will move him toward your long-range goals.
- * You can use a publisher's scope and sequence or a list of concepts usually taught at each level helpful for ideas or a guide in choosing materials to fit your objectives.

A Beka Book online scope and sequence. <http://www.abeka.com/Resources/ScopeAndSequence.html>

Bob Jones University Press online scope and sequence. <http://www.bjup.com/resources/overview>

- * Discuss these objectives with each child privately, and explain how they fit into the big picture of his future.
Read more: "Setting Goals for Excellence" at <http://www.teachinghome.com/started/basics/basics.cfm>

4. Consider Pertinent Factors. Consider the following factors for your family -- they may change from year to year as your children grow.

- * Your preferences in teaching.
- * Your children's learning styles.
- * Each child's developmental levels, strengths, and weaknesses.
- * Your knowledge, experience, and confidence.
- * Your family's resources of time and money.
- * The number of children in your family.
- * The legal requirements in your state for home education.

Contact your state home-school organization for information. <http://www.teachinghome.com/states/index.cfm>

Consider joining Home School Legal Defense Association. <http://www.hsllda.org>

5. Decide Which of Your Children You Can Teach Together. Several of your children may share similar objectives. You may be able to combine them in the same class for your most efficient use of time and effort.

- * History, science, Bible, and literature are subjects that can usually be taught to several grade levels of children together.
- * Skill building subjects such as math and beginning language arts may be on different levels.
- * However, there is enough review and repetition from grade to grade that a 5th grade math text, for instance, could be studied by both a 9-year-old and a 12-year-old, depending on their individual abilities.
- * Lessons can be presented in an amplified manner with explanations that enable all children to understand.
- * Older students can do much of their work independently while younger ones receive necessary tutoring in basic skills.

Example: You could read a Christian history text at an intermediate level to all your children, assigning age-appropriate projects such as oral discussion or a play for young children, extra reading or research for older children.

Read more about "Teaching Several Children at Once" at <http://www.teachinghome.com/started/basics/several.cfm>

6. Match Your Needs with Available Materials You can use a complete curriculum package from a publisher or put together your own components. Neither option will make you a "better" home schooler. Whichever curriculum or approach you choose, you can incorporate other methods into it.

- * Choose and list the methods and materials that you will use to meet your objectives for each child this year.

- * Textbooks or workbooks can be supplemented with unit studies, or vice versa.

- * Games, projects, computer programs, etc. can be added to any curriculum to cover all objectives.

- * For example, you may use a unit study curriculum supplemented with traditional science and history texts as reference books and library books for reading practice.

- * You might use worktexts for math and language and have your children keep "principle approach" notebooks for science, history, and literature.

- * You may emphasize the appropriate stage of the classical trivium for each child in his individual assignments.

- * You can rearrange the order of the units in your curriculum to conform to your children's current interests, or you could stimulate interest in upcoming units with a story or trip.

- * Reading aloud and discussing subject texts, a variety of informative or enriching literature can complete and supplement any curriculum.

There are other possible combinations of methods and materials. You are the best qualified to choose a mix that will be right for you and your children. Read more about "Combining Methods and Materials," including learning styles at <http://www.teachinghome.com/started/basics/combining.cfm>

7. Order or Buy Basic Materials. A complete curriculum or components that you put together yourself can be obtained in the following three basic ways:

- * You may order texts and teaching aids directly from the publishers or through mail-order companies, through Christian bookstores, or online. See a list of 142 resources on The Teaching Home website at

 - <http://www.teachinghome.com/resources/index.cfm>

- * A home-extension program offered through a local Christian school or church can provide teaching materials, testing, and counseling.

- * Materials, testing, and guidance can also be obtained through Christian correspondence courses.

8. Collect Supplemental Materials. Build your family's reference library with educational resources that can be used repeatedly, such as:

- * Reference books (encyclopedia, dictionaries, thesauruses, Bible concordances, atlases, nature guides, etc.) and higher-level textbooks.

- * Time lines (or materials to make one).

- * Maps, globes.

- * Audio/visual aids such as pictures, charts, videos, and tapes.

- * Manipulatives for math or other subjects.

- * Educational games and software.

- * Various tools.

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