

## “Curriculum decision making time”

by Willemien Krüger © December 2011

Often the number one question new homeschoolers asks when wanting to start is “what curriculum should I use?”. The irony is that often the answer they receive will be a less-than-clear answer, even more confusing than clarifying? In this article we will be exploring ‘Making the Curriculum choice’ in more depth to encourage homeschoolers not to be afraid to experiment.

A better place to start for a new homeschooler is to start at the first important step (Step 1 of the 7 Step process on [www.homeschooling-curriculum-guide.com/eclectic-homeschooling-7Stepprocess.html](http://www.homeschooling-curriculum-guide.com/eclectic-homeschooling-7Stepprocess.html)) in asking “What is my vision for homeschooling?” “What do I want to achieve?” Part of your vision will include what your worldview and faith reflects, and what values and beliefs you would like your children to learn. These will definitely aid in excluding some curriculums that do not support these values. It is also wise to understand different approaches to homeschooling (as described as Step 2). If considering a literature based approach, you do not even have to consider textbooks for example and you can feel free to *ignore* everything that falls outside of your chosen approach to homeschooling. Thereafter thinking about your Course of Study (Step 3 of the process) will also help you better Investigate and Get the Curriculum for your home school as Step 4 of the improvement process. The course of study will help you define the scope of ‘subjects’ or learning areas you would like your child to learn about. This will again help you exclude/include curriculums for consideration in making your decision.

The important thing to understand is that there is *no* such thing as choosing the perfect curriculum for homeschooling your *whole* family for *all* of their school years. Yet many do not believe this yet.... we attend workshops, scour the products at the booths, converse with the vendors, and envision locating the ultimate treasure—the perfect curriculum. But curriculum choices are best made as **year-to-year decisions** taking a few factors into account. A new homeschooler will often feel that they have no idea how to get info on curricula, but as one researches, explores, discuss, investigate and keep your eyes open, you’ll discover that there is so much information out there, it can be overwhelming! Although it is wonderful to have so many resources available (books, unit studies, textbooks, workbooks, supplemental DVDs and audio files, literature studies, science kits etc), it can be a daunting task to go about making a decision on what is right for your family. Even experienced homeschoolers can get bogged down looking at new, exciting products thinking that something else is better! I believe it is this fact that make people often choose a predefined Textbook curriculum to avoid making the decision. As a first choice, this is not a bad idea as this helps one understand what you want and especially not want in a curriculum. It will often help you relax a bit to realize that you can experiment to find curricula that works for you and your specific child for that specific year.

This is where curriculum reviews can be valuable. It can provide different perspectives on curriculum. But it is always worthwhile to try and see curriculum physically for yourself as well. That is why it is sensible to be part of a home education support group, so that you can know people who already have curriculum available. Go visit them and investigate a variety of options. All homeschoolers know how difficult those first steps were and will happily share their favorites and not-so-favorites to help you decide which are the best fit for your family.

If you are a believer, curriculum choices is one area where your faith will prove to be practical and very valuable. Continually **praying** for wisdom, discernment and guidance throughout the process can keep us from second-guessing our choices. We can rest confidently in knowing we have taken the time to pray, listen, and follow.

If you have put thought into your vision, understand different approaches to home education and determined a course of study, then some **factors to consider** when making home schooling curriculum choices include :

1. **Past success** : Part of continuous improvement is to evaluate the past and think about what has worked well. Evaluation is Step 6 of the 7 Step process whether done daily, quarterly or annually for curriculum choices. It is comforting to know that not all has failed, and when

you are satisfied with even just one subject's resources, it narrows the scope of curriculum choices down. Think about the past year and use what has worked again the following year – don't always change everything every year. Of course this is more difficult when starting out with homeschooling, but within a quarter you will already have a feel of what works for your family and what doesn't.

2. **Finances** : Your financial situation is a big consideration in your homeschooling plans. Creating a realistic budget is important. How to choose how much finances is allotted where within a budget is where creativity and priority come in to play. Sometimes one or two more expensive purchases can better meet real needs than an overabundance of cheap items that don't quite do the job. Doing your homework and not discounting an item simply due to cost is key to being wise in curriculum choices.
3. **Time available** : How much time will you have available for your child(ren) and how much time do they have available ? There are different seasons to life which can impact on the practical real time you have. Allow room for major life seasons you are in – pregnancy, small children, illness, new projects, starting a business, building projects, new ventures and ministry can all affect the real time available for home education. Think about what kind of opportunities will the next year bring? Is there a co-op with somebody wanting to share things with other people, you want to be part of? Are there vacations planned ? What types of field trips will be reasonable? Wonderful, educational experiences do not always come in the form of curriculum and it is experience which help one recognise and plan these opportunities as well.

The most important thing about time is the fact that ***“you are the one who will need to be there emotionally and physically to cheer your child on, to listen, share, encourage, and hold your child accountable to some standards. However, in terms of who is the one on a daily basis who will plan lessons, explain certain concepts, or offer feedback to your child, there are four major options for you as a home schooling parent (these affect the real time availability you need to have):***

1. You can be the main teacher,
2. You can be like a tour guide,
3. You can facilitate learning as (s)he learns to teach her/himself
4. You can coach him/her as someone else teaches him/her.”

(stated by Hilary Lynch from <http://www.home-school-curriculum-advisor.com>)

4. **What focus is needed** : Often we think that the academic subjects are the most important, but what if your 12 year old always ignore the assignments he has to do.....then maybe a season of character training and discipline can be considered as more important to focus on. Or what if there is constant fighting amongst siblings such that very little work gets done, then it makes sense that communication and relationship building needs to get attention for a while instead of just academics. Within academics though, some subjects need more focus in certain years than others, and you are the best one to judge which need focus for a next period. For example - are your kids math geniuses but struggle with spelling or have no time for other reading ? Have you spent the last four years studying history chronologically and need a break? Are your young reader fluent enough to be able to read on her/his own ? Is there any time built into the schedule for fun and enjoyment like art and music appreciation? Are there specific subject areas that need to take priority in time and financial commitment? These questions should help us stay focused and less likely to buy the latest fad we stumble over at the convention or our best friend's living room.

Hilary Lynch from <http://www.home-school-curriculum-advisor.com> also states the following interesting perspective to also bear in mind when considering curriculum. ***“What character issues do you want the curriculum to help instil in your child? Perseverance in finishing what he started? Self-discipline? Perhaps creative problem solving skills? Or would you rather not make an issue of finishing the assignment if he can learn the math facts in some other way? In addition to whatever stated learning objectives a curriculum has (such as reinforcing the multiplication tables), there are also underlying objectives related to what character qualities your child is learning through using this curriculum. What character qualities does this curriculum promote or enhance? Creativity? Self-discipline? Self-confidence? Time***

*management? Knowing what character qualities you want your child to learn while using a certain home school curriculum will help you make choices that will really work, day in and day out, in your home school.”*

5. **Structure needed** : For some people it is easier to just know how to plan a day, a week, a quarter etc. Some find this difficult and they will really find prepared lesson plans good support. When looking at curriculums, investigate support and assistance offered. Some products provide detailed day-to-day what-to-do-when with checklists, whereas others only provide a book assuming you can easily plan it for yourself. Know your needs and research accordingly. The good news is that, as you grow in homeschooling, planning and scheduling will improve and you will become more and more comfortable with less structured resources.
6. **Research** : Read reviews, curriculum websites, product comparisons, sample pages etc. Search for items you're interested in, but remember to search by subject as well. Sometimes the new-to-you product may be just what's needed, and you will find that out in a product review. Products never heard of can end up being family favorites. Read as many reviews as possible on anything that intrigues you—from reviewers who share your philosophy to those who are completely opposite. Websites such as <http://www.homeschoolreviews.com/> , [http://www.timberdoodlecompany.com/Homeschool\\_product\\_reviews/](http://www.timberdoodlecompany.com/Homeschool_product_reviews/) or [http://thehomeschoolmagazine.com/Homeschool\\_Reviews/](http://thehomeschoolmagazine.com/Homeschool_Reviews/) can be a starting point.
7. **Involve the kids** : Whenever children have some kind of input into their own education, there seems to be more enthusiasm. Allow them choices, if that's an option and as their ages allows. Give them boundaries and allow them to choose within those boundaries. An easy way to allow them their own choices is by incorporating unit studies.

Even though these 7 factors may help you when choosing curriculum, remember that curriculum can be **adapted to suit your needs**. Sometimes you have to make the best of what you can get, do not be afraid to supplement where there is something short, or ignore/skip where there is more than needed. An ebook called “Your Guide to examining curriculum” at <http://thehomeschoolmagazine.com/> has an excellent article by Heidi Pair called *Finding a Fit in the Imperfect: Adapting Curricula to Suit Your Needs* which describes this process in detail.

Lastly remember that change is not only possible but necessary. As the 7 Step process to homeschool improvement shows in Step 7, adapting and changing is a normal part of homeschooling. It is however not advisable to change curriculum too often and within a too short time. Quarterly or annually is the better option.

In summary, when having to make a decision on curriculum ask yourself these **12 questions** :

1. Do I have **peace** about this product ?
2. Does this product support **our vision, values, beliefs and worldview** ?
3. Does this products **fit the approach** of homeschooling I am comfortable with ?
4. Will this product ‘teach’ any (or all) of the desired Course of Study I envision for my child(ren) ?
5. Has this product **worked in the past** ? or with anyone else I know ? Why or why not ?
6. Can I afford this product **financially** ? Why or why not ?
7. Can I afford this product **time wise** ? Why or why not ?
8. Will this product be **supporting the focus** I would want in some subject area or other issue needing attention ?
9. Does this product have the necessary **structure** I am comfortable with ?
10. Have I done **research** on the product ?
11. Have I involved the kids and **listened** to their input ?
12. Will this product need adaptation or supplements ?

So in your search for the ‘perfect curriculum’ for now, keep in mind that you are the right parent for your children and you will ‘know’ whether something works or not. Do not be afraid to try, experiment, adapt and change curriculum as you are on this wonderful home education journey !