

## Chapter \_\_\_\_ Choosing a Schooling Approach

*“Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?”*

*“That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,” said the Cat.*

*“I don’t much care where –“ said Alice.*

*“Then it doesn’t matter which way you go,” said the Cat.*

*“—so long as I get somewhere,” Alice added as an explanation.*

*“Oh, you’re sure to do that,” said the Cat, “if you only walk long enough.”*

~Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*

As soon as the heat of summer wanes and the leaves prepare for their autumn display, the sight and sound of the big yellow school bus triggers a wave of childhood nostalgia for most of us – the first day of school. We recall shopping for new clothes, getting our hair cut, picking out notebooks, pencils and crayons and, if we were lucky, even a new lunchbox. The school bus meant a new year with a new teacher and perhaps a new school, a new room full of kids and a chance to make new friends. There would be new things to learn, new challenges to face, new skills to master. For most of us the start of the school year was met with excited anticipation mixed with disappointment that the summer was over, and always a bit of anxiety about how the year would go.

For parents of young children, the start of the school year is also met with a mixture of emotions – relief, perhaps, that life will return to a more structured routine, excitement over all that the children will learn and experience, and often considerable anxiety about whether or not they’ve made the right decision for their children’s education.

Deciding on a schooling approach is one of the most important decisions you’ll make as a parent because of the character-shaping influence of the educational environment. Many parents feel as lost as Alice in her conversation with the Cheshire Cat, knowing the importance of choosing a direction but lacking a clear sense of the desired destination. It’s easy to be swayed by the opinions of mothers in the neighborhood play group or the advice of the latest parenting magazine or talk show guest, but doing the hard work of exploring school options and choosing the approach that’s best for you and your child is no easy task. Public school, private school, parochial school, magnet school, Montessori school, multicultural school, gifted school, career prep school, umbrella school, classical school, home school, even an ‘unschooling’ approach! Which is right for your child? It’s our hope that this chapter helps you think through your options and answer that question.

We live on the farm where Chris’ mother was raised in the foothills of the Ozark mountains. On one corner of the property, nestled into a meadow at the base of a hill, stands the one-room schoolhouse she attended through the eighth grade. Looking like an abandoned set from *Little House on the Prairie*, it sits as a reminder that, not so long ago,

parents didn't have many choices about schooling. Children either went to the public school within walking distance, the parochial school within their parish, or they were schooled at home. Only the very wealthy could afford other options.

Options are wonderful and it's a blessing to have so many, but parents often express frustration in evaluating them. The decision is complex because the schooling approach chosen becomes a central piece of the overall plan and vision parents have for raising their children. To make a wise decision about education, they need a clear vision of God's call to raise up children for him.

### **The Importance of Vision**

We believe parenting is the most important role to which any human can be called. There is no higher ministry, and no responsibility for which we will be held more accountable before God's throne. This is surely why scripture insists on evidence of effective parenting as one of the criteria for selecting leaders within the church. We must prove ourselves able to lead first at home. If we are faithful with a little, *then* we can be placed over much. God can call any number of people to preach or teach or head up various outreaches and ministries, but he can't get anyone else to be the parents of our children. That slot is filled, whether we carry it out well or poorly. Our children were entrusted to us and we will answer for them one day to Him.

Having been called to so great a task, we need to ask "What is my vision for parenting? What is my vision for educating these children God has entrusted to me?" Without a vision, our parenting style and education choices are not intentional and purposeful. Without a vision we become reactionary, tossed around through the parenting years, always in a defensive posture, never on the offense.

Without a vision, we perish. We default to the vision put forth by our culture and gauge our success by comparing our kids to those around us. We define success as merely *surviving* – if our kids don't get themselves killed or end up on drugs or alcohol or pregnant or dropping out before graduation, we can breathe a sigh of relief and say, "We made it." It's a pathetic vision but it's all we have if we don't do the hard work of catching a clearer vision from God. If our vision is only for survival, our children will actually perish spiritually. Our vision must be for *thriving*.

### **A Vision for Education**

For our children to thrive, we must recognize that education is about much more than academics. To be sure, academics are a huge consideration, but we must also address their *character* education, their *social* education, their *sex* education, and their *spiritual & religious* education. Each of these will become a critical gauge of their maturity and of their fitness for Kingdom work. We all know people who received excellent academic training and even hold postgraduate degrees, but who are sorely lacking in character or social skills or morality or spiritual maturity. They may have great careers but they've

often lost their marriages, their children, their health, and/or their faith. Attending the best academic schools is not enough. We must educate the whole person.

Educating the whole person means *preparing them for life*. It's about teaching responsibility and self-discipline, communication and relationship skills, problem solving, time management, self-control, leadership, cultural sensitivity, artistic appreciation, a Christian worldview, and even good parenting skills. It's about teaching the Word and how to study it, practicing the disciplines of our faith, dying to self, yielding to the Spirit, persevering through trials, growing in intimacy, and allowing God to mold us into His image. A Godly vision for educating our children must incorporate all of these things. None of them is superfluous or excessive, and none of them is trivial.

### **Searching for the Perfect Solution**

By now you may be thinking, "What schooling approach does all that?" The answer is: none of them. Not in isolation. Any approach to education needs to incorporate elements from several different sources, with parents always serving as the center or the hub, the "education director". Every school teacher, public or private, will tell you that the children who do best and are most well-rounded are those whose parents are very involved in their education, helping them with homework and exposing them to many life experiences outside of the classroom. And any homeschooling parent whose children are healthy and balanced will tell you they expose their children to structured group activities and programs in the community to augment the work they are doing at home.

Whatever primary schooling approach you choose, you should view it as only one of many tools used in your child's education. For example, if you choose a public school or a non-Christian private or specialized school, you will probably need to augment that with other resources to address your child's spiritual and sex education. If you choose a Christian school or homeschooling, you will probably need to find additional resources to round out his or her social education, such as group sports and special activities. No single schooling choice will address all of your child's educational needs, nor should it. As parents, we need to be constantly evaluating and directing their education using whatever tools may be best for a particular season of their lives. We do not have to provide the education ourselves, but we must always be supervising and directing it.

We can't emphasize this enough. In our Christian coaching practice we find that many parents have unwittingly abdicated their role as "education director" for their children. They've become so concerned about what the so-called experts say that they don't trust their own judgment about what's best for their children. They have farmed out the responsibility to those with advanced degrees and don't realize how important their role is in constantly assessing each child's development and making changes as necessary to their educational plans based on their overall vision for each child.

It's helpful to think of our children as coming to us like wet clay. Each day provides an opportunity to let God guide our hands as we intentionally shape the clay into the vessel he desires. If our hands are not there guiding the process, they will be shaped by the

views and opinions of other hands – their peers, the media, teachers, coaches, the government. There will come a day when the clay begins to harden into the shape in which it has been molded. If we have shaped them well through their education, God will be able to use the vessel of their life in His Kingdom work. If we have failed, they will not be fit for service and the Master will have to break and rework the clay. This is often horribly painful, and is largely preventable if parents take an active and ongoing role in directing their children’s education.

### **The Way Children Learn**

In order to wisely direct our children’s education, we need to understand a bit about how children learn and grow. Children learn very differently from adults. Adults are able to work with abstract concepts such as ideas. We can easily take in new information by reading, listening, or observing. We can compare the information to what we already know or have experienced and form new conclusions – all in our heads. This is why most adults enjoy picking up a book, listening to a lecture, or dialoging with another person to learn something new.

Children, in contrast, cannot work well with abstract concepts. They work primarily with the concrete – things you can see, touch, and experience. While adults can process new information inside their heads, children must move new information around outside of their heads – with their hands, their senses, and with language. Learning comes by doing, through experience.

This is why reading or lecture is so boring for most children – they do very little real learning this way. It’s often all they can do just to sit still through it. True, they may be able to memorize information, answer questions, and study for a test – but this does not necessarily mean they are learning. Many children quickly forget what has been taught in this manner.

The famous child psychologist, Jean Piaget, was fascinated by the ways in which children learn. He identified four stages of cognitive development, or ways of learning, that children pass through as they mature, and a brief understanding of these is helpful when assessing the ideal schooling choice for your children at various stages of their lives.

#### **Sensorimotor Stage (Ages 0-2)**

In the Sensorimotor Stage, the child has not yet developed language. Without language, the child explores and learns about the world through the senses – through what he or she sees, smells, hears, touches, and tastes. This is why parents of crawlers and toddlers find themselves constantly repeating, “No, no, don’t touch that.” “Get out of there.” “Don’t put that in your mouth.” The child is learning! Sensory exploration is critical for healthy cognitive development.

This obviously requires that parents closely supervise the learning environment so the child doesn’t get hurt. (As this was being written, our 22 month old got into Rachel’s

makeup and emptied a brand new bottle of *Clinique* foundation all over herself and the carpet!) Most parents are the primary caregivers at this stage and we strongly advise against placing a child this young in the care of any other educational environment. Much of what they are learning is about whether or not they are loved and if the world is a safe place in which to get their needs met. No one else can teach your children the answers you want them to have to those questions. Don't put your children in anyone else's care at this stage if you can possibly avoid it.

### **Preoperational Stage (Ages 2-7)**

At the Preoperational Stage, children begin using language as an additional means of exploring the world and learning. These are the years of the "Why" questions. "Why do we do that?" "Why can't I go?" "Why does it rain?" "Why did that happen?" A child at this stage needs people with whom to converse and ask lots and lots of questions. This is one of the many shortcomings of daycare programs and the use of television to pacify little ones – they don't accommodate this kind of interaction. Many parents worry that they may not be starting their children in preschool programs early enough, when in fact the student/teacher ratio makes it impossible for children to ask the questions they need to at this stage to learn best.

The preoperational stage requires a great deal of adult intervention. Children are just beginning to use language and when frustrated will fall back to what they know – the sensorimotor stage – screaming, whining, hitting, and biting. They need to be shown how to use language in these frustrating situations. Be sure the educational environment you choose accommodates that kind of learning. When children are left to play on their own or "fight it out" without adult intervention (as many "experts" suggest) they will naturally resort to more immature ways of dealing with problems. These eventually become habits and patterns they'll take with them into adulthood. Many of the couples Chris saw in his counseling practice were still using unhealthy patterns learned in childhood to work out problems in their marriages. That's a sign of a poor education for life.

Play and learning go hand in hand at this age. While some play is discovery, much of it is pretending and imitation. Pretending allows a child to practice what they see modeled. We've often watched our little ones playing with doll house figures saying, "Please stop." "Oh, I'm sorry. Will you forgive me?" "Okay. I forgive you." This is valuable learning and it's very important that the educational environment provide plenty of opportunity for pretending.

Imitation reinforces what they've learned. It's how boys learn to be masculine and girls learn to be feminine. Imitation is one of the primary ways they pick up manners, organizational skills, ways of interacting with others, and getting along. Children in the preoperational stage love using new words and expressions, imitating nuances, and voice tones. What they see and hear, they imitate – the good and the bad. This requires that parents supervise and constantly evaluate the peers, adults, TV shows, movies, and music

to which their children are exposed. They will develop the habits and attitudes of those with whom they spend the most time.

### **Concrete Operational (Ages 7-12)**

During this stage of development, children begin to retain what they have learned much better. It is only after children enter this stage that they can be counted on to become truly responsible for a chore like remembering to feed the dog. They will simply not remember well before reaching the concrete operational stage.

Children in this stage continue to learn through concrete (hands on) experiences. Their development of language allows them to articulate more difficult questions. “Why do people get a divorce?” “Do you think we will be children or adults when we get to heaven?” “How do I know God really exists?”

Imitation continues, with children desiring to wear their hair like everyone else or to use the same verbal expressions. Girls become more drawn to imitating their mothers or other images of femininity they see. Boys practice being tough to win the approval of dad or other males in their learning environment. Media, obviously, is extremely important to monitor from this stage forward.

Children at this age have difficulty making cause-and-effect or “if-then” connections, lacking the discernment of a more mature teenager who has reached the formal operational stage. They may do things with no apparent forethought and no real understanding of the potential consequences. In some learning environments, this can result in them being ridiculed and ostracized which is horribly damaging to their developing self-esteem. Watch for signs of this and address them proactively.

Children typically grow out of this stage and into formal operational thinking around 12 years of age, but there is growing concern that this stage is becoming prolonged – even past age 18 – in a surprising number of children. Much of this may be a consequence of family instability and poor parental involvement resulting in children having to learn everything by trial and error – the “school of hard knocks.” Many researchers are concerned that rushing children through the earlier stages of cognitive development is limiting their experiential learning and contributing to this problem.

### **Formal Operational (Age 12+)**

As children reach the formal operational stage of thinking their desire to dialogue increases as they learn to mentally take in ideas, think them through, and draw new conclusions. Teenagers at this stage really enjoy talking with adults who are available. If the adults are too busy or are not involved, they will dialogue with peers instead. Although the peer group is important during this developmental season, it is imperative that parents stay actively involved in every aspect of their teenagers’ education. Remember, you are educating them for life, not just for academic achievement.

Be intentional about deepening your relationship with them. You can't afford to take a passive or back-seat role in these years. The cultural wisdom says parents should dread the teenage years and that kids have to rebel in order to discover who they are. Nothing could be further from the truth. If you have been actively involved in your child's education up to this point, these can be some of the richest years you'll have! After-school snack time, attendance at extracurricular activities, regularly scheduled "dates" with your child, and special group activities which you supervise can all create a tremendous atmosphere for dialogue, connecting, and learning.

These are the years your child will begin thinking about big concepts like careers, sexuality, spirituality, the future, marriage, and raising children. It is during these talks that you will help your child develop a vision for the kind of marriage they want and how they will recognize the person that will be a good mate. You will have the opportunity to help them investigate vocations and consider college and career paths. You can have some of the deepest conversations about God you've ever had (*before* they go off to college and have their theological underpinnings challenged as never before.)

Whatever schooling choice you make, your child will need you through this stage as much as at any previous stage. Don't lose your vision in the teenage years! Your child will be making decisions that will impact his or her life more than any others they will make in their entire lives.

### **Clarifying Your Vision for Each Child**

It is our position that there is no single best way to educate your child. What works well with one child may fail miserably with another, even within the same family. We are all unique, endowed with different temperamental qualities and learning styles, and constantly impacted by a wide variety of internal and external influences. Parents must be tuned in to the uniqueness of each child and seek to discern which schooling approaches will work best for them at each stage of their lives. Not only do the needs of a child change at various developmental stages, but many other factors affecting the family can change as well which may impact the choice of schooling approach. A death in the family, divorce, a move, job change, unemployment, serious illness, and many other family stressors can trigger a need to re-evaluate a previous schooling choice.

As you step into the role of "education director" for your children, begin clarifying the vision you see for each child as they mature. Take notes, make lists, and do some journaling to put this vision in black-and-white. Consider each child separately, since each is unique. Note the natural strengths and weaknesses of each. Consider how various schooling approaches might play to those strengths and address those weaknesses. Try to discern each child's natural leanings – are they artistic? Gifted in math? Fascinated with science and nature? Good with spatial skills? Musical? Athletic? Are they social, or more quiet and reserved? Energetic, or ponderous and thoughtful? Foster an ongoing dialogue about these things with your spouse and key people in your children's lives. Consider hiring a parenting coach to develop your vision.

Always remain open to new insights as you seek to discern their changing needs and how your schooling approaches can meet them.

In clarifying your vision, factor in other things such as the character you want them to develop, the spiritual walk you want them to have, social skills you want them to develop (such as confidence, patience, self-control, leadership), extracurricular skills you'd like them to explore, life experiences you want them to have, and how you will handle the dating years. All of these will significantly impact the choices you make.

### **Matching the Options to Your Vision**

Once you have done this kind of thoughtful analysis, you are finally ready to match up the schooling resources in your community with the vision you have for your children. If you were to start researching schooling options before clarifying your vision, you would find yourself like Alice in Wonderland, asking advice without knowing where you want to go.

Talk with other parents, check the phone book, and find out what schooling choices your community offers. Get information on the philosophy and outcome research behind each approach in which you are interested. Attend informational meetings and check out some books from the library on different approaches to schooling. It's impossible to make an informed decision if you don't have good information.

Schedule interviews to meet with those in charge and spend time in the classroom getting a feel for the environment and teaching style. Find out about the student/teacher ratio, and about the education requirements for their teachers. Ask to see the evaluation reports from accrediting boards or governmental agencies that review the school. Find out what creative learning approaches they take to accommodate your child's developmental stage and any special needs he or she may have. Read their discipline policy and make certain you feel it is appropriate. Find out about structured social activities, clubs, sports, music programs and the like. Try also to get a sense of how much *unstructured* socialization your child will have with peers. Be sure to ask key curriculum questions like what sex education program they follow, what they teach about creationism verses evolution, what they will be taught about spirituality and various religions, and how closely they adhere to the values you want your child to have regarding definitions of marriage and the family, acceptance of sinful lifestyles and the like.

If you're considering homeschooling, visit some local support groups and attend a state or regional conference. Go to a curriculum fair and get an overview of the numerous approaches to homeschooling. Interview homeschooling parents and find out how they structure their days. Ask how they ensure a well-rounded social education, and how homeschooling has impacted their lifestyle. Find out how they school children of different ages, and how they handle subjects in which the parent may not have much knowledge. Inquire about how they accommodate learning disabilities, and how they provide for specialized learning such as computers, advanced science and math, art, and music. Read some books and visit websites that look at the research and outcome

measures of homeschooled students. Learn what laws govern homeschooling in your state and what kinds of testing, periodic evaluation, and record-keeping are required.

Like most other things in life, the choice of a schooling approach will, at some point, come down to considerations of time and money. We purposely saved these for last because they are many times the first (and often the only) factors parents consider. Hopefully by now you realize that the greatest consideration in choosing a schooling approach is the vision you have for each of your children. Once that vision is clear and you are committed to it, *then* is the time to look at the time and money required to make it happen. Parents can make dramatic shifts in priorities to free up time and/or money when they're passionate about a vision for their children's lives. First catch the vision and then count the cost.

Educating your child for life requires time no matter what schooling approach you choose. Public and private schooling parents face the challenges of finding quality time for connecting with their children outside of school, being on top of homework, getting everyone up and out the door at very early hours, flexing their work schedule when children are sick, and driving their children to and from school and activities. Homeschooling parents face the challenges of little time alone, researching curriculum, preparing lesson plans, documenting for the state, and driving the kids to outside activities. It's impossible to argue that one approach is more difficult than the other – they're perceived differently by different parents. One type of time pressure is traded for another.

Financial cost is another matter. Public schooling is generally the least expensive option, although before-school and after-school care can drive that cost up if a parent's work schedule doesn't allow them to be home during non-school hours. Private and specialized schools of all kinds can run anywhere from a few hundred to a few thousand dollars a month. Homeschooling parents need to invest several hundred to a few thousand dollars each year in curriculum and outside learning opportunities.

Money will often be the final decision-maker when parents have narrowed down their schooling choices to the few that are most in line with their vision, but money should never be the first nor the most important factor. God is a God of possibilities and what may seem impossible to us is nothing for Him. Don't allow money or time to prematurely shut down your creative thinking and praying about any specific schooling choice. Once again, catch the vision first and then count the cost.

### **“The Toughest Job You’ll Ever Love”**

As we said earlier, it is our belief that there is no single *best* way to school your child and we are blessed to have so many options available. It is our responsibility as parents to study our children and seek to discern their unique giftings and calling. We are to accept the awesome responsibility God has placed upon us to catch a vision for our children's education for life and become their “education director” throughout all of their years in our care. After catching that vision we must do the hard work of researching our options

and making whatever accommodations can be made to provide them with what we believe is the best approach for their learning style and needs. We must then constantly evaluate how they are doing in that environment and ensure that they thrive as God shapes them into the vessel He desires for His service.

Parenting isn't easy and choosing a schooling approach may be one of the hardest but most important decisions you will make as a parent. Remember that this is your highest calling and that you will answer for your parenting before His throne. Embrace your role, invest in your vision, commit to the work, and glorify the Lord by raising your children for Him.

### **Discussion Questions:**

1. What is my vision for each of my children by the time they leave home?
2. What does it mean for me to be my children's "educational director"?
3. What schooling approaches do I need to investigate?

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