

*My name is Melanie Alexander, and my husband, Cameron and I have been home educating our two children since 2011. My background is in psychology and primary school teaching, both of which have helped me along the home education journey. But I'm still learning every day! Home education is simultaneously one of the most rewarding and challenging experiences of my life. It has become a way of life for our whole family, and has enabled us to develop deep relationships as well as learning together. We love the flexibility and almost endless opportunities available to home educating families and their children.*

*This piece was written during my participation in a working group in 2016, when the new standards and guidelines were being developed. Its purpose was to summarise our group's discussions about home education - how it could be viewed within the context of education generally, as well as specifically within families. I hope that it captures our conviction of the huge value of home education to society, families and, of course, the children themselves, as well as providing some insight into home education in Tasmania.*

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## **A Look at Home Education in Tasmania**

By Melanie Alexander

### **Introduction**

*Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.*

Nelson Mandela

A quality education is powerful. Individuals can be enabled to fulfil their potential, whilst society itself can be enriched and even transformed. The immense value of education is such that the right of all children to an education is protected under international agreements; several articles in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) are devoted to education<sup>1</sup>.

In 1990, the World Declaration on Education for All asserted that it is essential that learning tools (such as literacy and numeracy), as well as the development of knowledge, skills, values and attitudes be addressed by education<sup>2</sup>. Further, in 2001, the General Comment by the Committee on the Rights of the Child offered clarifications, including that education must be child-centred and empowering<sup>3</sup>.

It is in the light of these understandings that Home Education is a recognised, legal form of education in Tasmania. The Tasmanian Education Act 2016 allows parents to exercise educational choice and register as home educators. In doing this, parents assume the

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<sup>1</sup> GENERAL COMMENTS OF THE COMMITTEE ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD, UNICEF

<https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/crcgencommen.pdf>

Accessed 26/06/2016 page 3

<sup>2</sup> World Declaration on Education For All: Meeting Basic Learning Needs, UNESCO

<http://www.un-documents.net/jomtien.htm>

Accessed 26/06/2016

<sup>3</sup> GENERAL COMMENTS OF THE COMMITTEE ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD, UNICEF

<https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/crcgencommen.pdf>

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responsibility for delivering education during their child's compulsory years of schooling. (In Tasmania, a child who is 5 years of age at 1 January must be either enrolled at school or home educated by a registered home educator. This continues until the child is 17 years old or completes a Certificate III. Once a child has completed the equivalent of Year 10, the child may decide whether to continue with home education or undertake an approved learning program.)

The Education Act 2016 and Education Regulations 2017 set out the requirements for registration as a home educator in Tasmania. The registration process – both initial and ongoing – is managed by the Office of the Education Registrar, and further information is available on the website: <https://oer.tas.gov.au/home-education/>.

The Tasmanian Home Education Advisory Council (THEAC) was established in 1993. While its roles and responsibilities have recently changed under the 2016 Act, the Council continues to provide advice on matters relating to home education, both to the Education Minister and Registrar, and to members of the community. THEAC functions as a reference point for queries, responds to community concerns and liaises with other agency regarding home education. THEAC's website can be found at <https://theac.tas.gov.au/>.

Home educators in Tasmania comprise a richly diverse and vibrant community from many backgrounds, cultures and beliefs. Their reasons for home educating are varied, as are their philosophies, methodologies and practice. But their children are the learners of today who will become the adults – the leaders, explorers, investigators, researchers, thinkers - of Tasmania's future. A successful home education for these children can lead to an enriched future for us all.

Through the ages and across cultures, children have been educated by their parents. A home education can provide an environment for learning where the child is known, valued and nurtured according to the child's individual needs and differences. It is an environment that can be particularly suited to supporting both those children with learning difficulties, and those who are gifted. There is a plethora of examples of successful adults who were home educated, from solo around-the-world sailor, Jessica Watson, and sportswomen Serena and Venus Williams, to musicians, actors, and inventors. The opportunity for home educated children to become adults who can contribute significantly to their families, communities and society is enormous.

## The Home Educated Child – The Focus

For most families, the decision to home educate is reached after much thought and preparation. There are many considerations in assuming the legal responsibility for a child's education, including social, financial, organisational and practical questions. While there are certainly potential complexities and challenges, home education invariably begins with the core conviction that the unique characteristics and features of home education will best meet the child's needs.

One of the main advantages of home education is its inherent flexibility and adaptability. Consequently, each child's individuality, differences, needs, interests, readiness, motivations and skills can be recognised; not only that – they can be continually addressed and utilised optimally. A family's individual situation and experiences can be reflected in the program or

philosophy they choose to follow, and this can change with time. Many families find that their home education “style” is relatively fluid and shifts with their child’s growth and development. The focus though, is the child, and their individual needs.

The flexibility of home education also means that families often find that they have more time: time for family and time for their children to be children, as well as learn effectively. So, home educated children often pursue areas of talent, such as music or sport. They are able to spend time developing skills in fields which interest them, whether this be in computer programming and robotics, or handcrafts and art. And home educated children generally have time to play: creatively, actively, and imaginatively. Play is an essential part of childhood, and its value in enhancing both learning and health cannot be ignored.

Home educated children are able to receive individual, focused attention. They often work in a one-to-one situation with their parent, so that strengths and weaknesses (or opportunities and challenges) can become quickly apparent, even without formal testing. This ongoing informal information about how their child is going can help the parent to adjust the program easily: it might be that additional time is needed in one area, or an opportunity to encourage a spark of interest is noticed. The involved home educator is in a powerful position to respond immediately to their child’s learning needs.

Similarly, home education provides a situation where children can impact their own education in a very powerful way. Recognising and responding to children’s abilities and interests can positively affect what they learn. Their passions can be pursued and their motivation heightened. Through discussion with their parents about their education, children can come to see themselves as a responsible party in their experience, thereby developing into engaged and independent learners. “Education” isn’t something that these children receive, so much as an experience that they help to shape each day.

One of the main questions asked of home educating families relates to the social interaction opportunities for the child. Interestingly, this is often the area of least concern for the families themselves, as they find their lives to be full of activities and relationships. These may be quite different from the traditional school environment where peer interaction is usually the focus; home educated children generally mix regularly with peers as well as those younger and older than themselves. Home education get-togethers are usually filled with busy children playing in mixed-age groups, and chatting with adults. The home educated child must be provided with a variety of opportunities to become an involved member of their community, as well as develop friendships. This can take many forms and will look different for each family, but is essential for the development of the child’s interpersonal skills and emotional well-being.

Finally, home education can enable a holistic way of viewing a child and providing for their development. The growth of character traits, such as curiosity, perseverance and empathy, can occur alongside academic learning. The child is truly known as a “whole” person, whose physical, emotional and spiritual development is not separated from their intellectual growth. In this way, home education can be very “forward looking”, recognising that the behaviours, attitudes and abilities that we would wish to see in a fully-functioning adult must be nurtured in the child. The future facing today’s children will look quite unlike that encountered by previous generations – they will need to be creative, adaptive, flexible and

self-motivating, as well as having strong academic skills. A good home education can provide a wonderful path into this future.

## The Home Educating Parent – Responsibility and Reward

It is essential that home educating parents are highly committed and well prepared for their role. Whilst home education registration in Tasmania does not require that a parent have prior experience in education, or have reached a certain academic level themselves, they will need to have researched home education and decided how to best implement it in their home for their child. Ongoing registration also requires that parents continue to learn about home education, and consider how to manage their child's changing needs over time.

There are many excellent resources available about home education, including the different approaches and philosophies, to guide a parent through this initial stage. Discussions with other home educating parents are also incredibly valuable, and there are many groups, co-ops and online forums where such connections can be made. Indeed, most home educating parents find that this “preparation” phase actually becomes one of ongoing learning and development for themselves. Their own experiences, reading, research and interactions with others continually refine both their philosophical views and their day-to-day practice. When developing programs and while working with their children, most home educating parents realise that they are learning something new as well. This can be one of the delights of home education – in seeking to know their child and provide the best education for them, the home educating parent embraces their role as a life-long learner also.

When home education begins, a parent undertakes a number of new roles. They become their child's primary *educator*, responsible for overseeing their child's education, with all the planning, preparation and evaluation that this entails. They are also a *facilitator* of experiences and connections, enabling access to resources, opportunities, social interactions and community. As the child grows, they might find themselves in the role of *mentor*, encouraging the child to become increasingly independent in their learning while still supporting their changing needs. Home educating parents are *advocates* for their child. This can be especially relevant for parents of children with special needs, who might need to seek additional assistance or resources for their child. Parents will be a *nurturer*, ensuring that the emotional needs of their children are being well met.

The way that these roles are managed on a daily basis will vary with each family and with time. However, home educating parents must be aware that these additional roles and responsibilities can bring extra pressure, so it is important to seek adequate support for themselves if they need it. Many home educating parents find that developing a supportive network is essential for their own well-being. Home education can be challenging, but there are great rewards to be enjoyed as well!

## The Home Educating Environment – An Everywhere Education

Whilst being labelled “home” education, most home educating families find that “home” is just one of the many places where valuable learning experiences occur. Home education is not limited to a particular place or time of the day. Children can learn about their world in many settings, from the backyard to the museum. Similarly, learning can happen at any time,

whether early morning, late at night, during family holidays, or during more traditional school hours. Real-life experiences, which occur every day, can be powerful opportunities for learning. Most home educating parents are continually on the lookout for “teachable moments”, seeking to help their children make the connections that make learning lasting and enjoyable.

Additionally, many families actively seek opportunities for learning away from the home environment and outside of traditional school hours. Such learning contexts that might be accessed – or created – by home educators include:

- home education co-ops and activity groups
- excursions and visits
- expert tuition and classes (eg. drama, sport, music)
- community involvement (eg. theatre groups, volunteering, scouts, church)
- interest-based clubs and societies (eg. astronomy, gaming, robotics)
- online communities

The learning environments which families create together will be as unique as each family themselves. However, every home educating environment must be a safe place for a child to learn and grow, enabling them to be enriched, engaged and supported according to their needs and development.

## Approaches to Home Education – Developing a Style

Home education occurs within family units. Just as each family is unique, so too will be their experience of home education. Each brings their own knowledge, skills, challenges and expectations into the home education journey. A family’s reasons for home educating, along with the goals they want to achieve, will also shape their experience. And, of course, families themselves are made up of individuals – people with their own likes, dislikes, different learning needs, aspirations. So, even within a family, the home education experience may look different for each child.

Each family’s way of home educating will be uniquely theirs. There are, however, a number of broad “styles” or philosophies which can be used to describe the overall approaches to home education. These include Natural Learning, Unschooling, Curriculum-based, Eclectic, Charlotte Mason, Classical, Montessori and Steiner. As the home education journey begins, it is important that parents are aware of these approaches. Their understanding of the features of each can help them to work out where their own family’s style is likely to fit, and can help to inform and develop their pedagogy (the method and practice of teaching). It can also be an opportunity to consider ways of home educating that they might not have been previously thought about. Thinking about how to home educate encourages parents to more effectively plan their program to best meet their child’s needs.