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The Work of a Child

by Andrew Pudewa

At some point, most homeschooling parents experience a sort of “anxiety spike” when their child hits twelve or thirteen years old. With the onset of “ninth grade” or “high school” just a year or so away, things seem to suddenly become more serious; heavy words like “transcript” and “ready for college” slip into conversations. Concerns grow about the student being “at grade-level,” particularly in areas he or she may have struggled with in the past, such as writing or math. And it seems especially easy to worry even more about boys, who we imagine will someday need to support a family, but who also tend to mature a bit more slowly.

Overall, I have been pleased to hold a rather relaxed attitude about grade levels and age-ability expectations; my wife and I have striven to embrace a more individualized, flexible, holistic approach to education in our home, recognizing that each child is very different, will have a different mission in life, and will need skills and a course of study different from his or her siblings. However, even I have suffered the aforementioned anxiety spike about my son, who as one of the most dyslexic people I have ever met literally could not read a book until he was almost twelve years old.

To say that “schoolwork” was hard for a boy who couldn’t read would be an understatement; some days it seemed like zero progress. But he always had plenty of energy. He wanted to draw, to build, to fight, to run and jump, to explore, to argue—in short, to play ... all the time! Once when he was around ten, I asked him: “Son, don’t you want to read?” His answer was one word: “No.” “Why not?” I queried, not containing my exasperation. His response? “Because you don’t do anything when you read.” Ugh! That was one of those bad moments when evil thoughts like, “I’m failing him ... maybe I really should send him to school,” creep into one’s mind. But then, quickly common sense returned, and the truth outshone the dark thought: “If he’s not learning to read here, at home, with one-on-one help, how in the world would a school ever do better?” And we pursued every sort of method, program, system, or training that could be had, with frustratingly little progress.

Fortunately, I was certain about a few things, and this knowledge sustained me through the most doubtful of days. One thing I knew and often reflected on is this: The salvation

of his soul did not depend on his reading ability. A second thing I knew for sure is that there are many successful men who didn't read much at all until their late teens. I personally know a man with several advanced degrees who didn't read a book until he was twenty years old—and now he runs a publishing company! The third thing of which I was certain is that the most important component of nurturing an excellent speaking and writing ability is to build the language database in the brain through auditory input (by being read to out loud in huge quantity) and memorizing English verse and prose.¹

So for many years his “school” time seemed to be mostly just basic math fact drill, copywork, and being read to out loud. And most of the rest of his day appeared to be play, though frequently accompanied by audiobooks on an iPod. He listened to hundreds of books growing up, many of them classics by authors like Dickens, Twain, Melville, Tolkien—books he never would have been able to read even if he had been reading “at grade level,” and way more books than his parents could have read to him. We persevered with faith that God had a plan for his life, that some day he would be able to read, and that even if he didn't ever read well, it wouldn't doom him to failure in life. Meanwhile, he would sit in on my writing classes, often dictate his compositions, at first to mom, then later to a computer. Gradually he developed a fine vocabulary and a rather sophisticated way of using words. The handwriting and spelling were hard (and still are), but we kept him doing copywork daily for almost two years. Had we done standardized tests, he probably would have scored frighteningly low, but we had the wisdom to just say “no” to the world's demand that we compare our children with other people's children. However, I must confess there were many days when we really doubted whether this was the right approach.

With a great amount of unstructured time, he was free to fulfill his natural calling to run and jump and build and fight and explore. As we had renounced video games and television as available forms of entertainment in our home, he was forced to be creative. He spent considerable time outdoors, often alone, observing and absorbing his world in a healthy, visceral way. Maria Montessori asserted, “Play is the work of the child,” and indeed my son worked at play. (G. K. Chesterton noted that the reason adults don't play more is because it requires too much effort.) So it was the combination of imaginative recreation, huge quantities of great literature, and a small but steady rigor of simple academics that got us over the hump and into the homestretch. And where are we today? My son is fifteen. He reads voraciously, applies himself seriously to the study of grammar, logic, and rhetoric, still loves to argue and debate (only now over much more sophisticated ideas), and writes prose that awes me. A couple of months ago, he took a pad of paper and went out into the woods behind our home. An hour or so later, he returned and read to me what he had written, a part of which I offer you now, unedited (except for spelling):

¹One of my most important presentations, *Nurturing Competent Communicators*, explains this concept fully: IEW.com/NCC-E

The dark forest floor is illuminated in spots by the small amount of light let through by the dense branches above. After the first few layers of pine foliage, the branches die, leaving dark claws, grabbing at any traveler. The moss which has grown on the rocks turns to bright gold when light finds rest there. Although the feel of the forest is magical, it is in no way good, for good only lives in the places of good, and the cedar forest is not a place of good. The magic which lives in the forest is strong, but wild, treacherous, and unpredictable. It seeks to hinder the traveler, causing him to become bewildered. The wind that blows through it is spasmodic and chilling to the bone. The scattered grasses which find root there are tossed in the icy breeze. Thorns stretch from one tree to another, weaving a complex web almost as if a giant spider had made the land its own.

I don't think I could ever write something like that. That sort of play requires too much effort. Am I worried about what he'll do three or five or ten years from now? Not really.

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