

DEMYSTIFYING PT 2
EDUCATION

the ABCS
of REAL LEARNING

by Diana Waring

In the previous issue, we discussed the concept of *demystifying* education -- looking behind the scenes at what makes education truly superb. In this, we considered two truths that many people miss:

#1) Children are always learning. (*Our job is to help them learn how to love learning what they need to learn.*)

#2) It's not really learning until it changes you. (*Getting it right on the test does not mean you've really learned it.*)

Let's consider another demystifier that will elevate learning from the zone of drudgery and boredom to the zone of enthusiasm and self motivation.

Demystifier #3: Homemade tastes best.

I recently had the unusual experience of making blueberry muffins from a store-bought mix. My senior-something mother needed muffins for a weekend retreat, and begged me, her neighboring chef-in-residence, to quickly make the muffins for her before she ran out the door. Since I enjoy creating culinary delights -- you might say it's easy as pie for me -- I was glad to help her out. Unfortunately, I licked the spoon when it was over.

Mistake. The nasty chemical taste of the shelved mix clung tenaciously to my taste buds, making me wonder why on earth people do that to themselves. The calendar had me speaking to a group of homeschoolers a few days hence, so I made a plan to use this experience to drive home a truth in education. I made up another nasty batch of store mix blueberry muffins (with ARTIFICIAL blueberries!), and a batch of homemade blueberry muffins from scratch, with real blueberries, freshly grated nutmeg, freshly ground golden wheat flour, and raw cane sugar. The assembled folks got to sample a bit of each, and were then asked to comment on the flavors. They were extremely vocal about the experience.

Would you be surprised to hear that they overwhelmingly voted thumbs up for the homemade muffins (eagerly eating every morsel), and wouldn't even deign to finish half of the artificial-blueberry-storemix muffin? Why doesn't that surprise you? Yes, it's obvious.

Nothing can compare with homemade foods that use fresh, quality ingredients. You might say, "Quality in, quality out."

The same is true in education. Offer a child a stale bit of boring, artificially flavored facts and watch his level of enthusiasm drop like a brick. Then try offering the same child an interesting book to read aloud together, or a chance to build a replica of a medieval castle, or a trip to the zoo to talk to one of the zookeepers about lions. What happens to their enthusiasm for learning? It zooms up, doesn't it?

I know what you're thinking:

"I can't entertain my kids all day long."

"No one taught me that way, and I did pretty well."

"The real world isn't like that, and they better learn now that life is boring."

"How on earth would I keep up that kind of schedule?"

"How on earth would I teach all the subjects?"

"How on earth would we get anything else (like laundry) done?"

Did I miss your comment? Look, though most of you wish that it were possible to give your kids homemade, you have resigned yourselves to the "necessity" of the artificial mix.

But -- what if it were possible? Suspend your arguments for a moment and ask, "How much more would my kids enjoy learning if it were fresh and interesting?" Then ask yourself, "Would my kids enjoy learning if we could tailor it to their particular tastes and interests?" (-like, muffins with apples instead of blueberries?)

If you are willing, for the sake of a satisfying educational experience, to break out of the box, let me offer some guidelines and suggestions. Believe me, I have never been a proponent of the Martha Stewart-style approach to education -- where you have to earn 12 Ph.D's and build your own homemade printing press, use handmade paper for detailed lesson plans for self-designed curriculum for every child -- in order to give them "homemade" quality in their learning. Instead, I am talking about some adjustments, not a new lifestyle, that could have your children eagerly asking, "Mom, is it time for school yet?"

First of all, the analogy: What goes into making muffins from scratch? Very few people grow their own wheat, sugar cane, blueberries and corn (for corn oil). Not many own their own egg factory (a.k.a. *chickens*), or a dairy cow. When I made homemade blueberry muffins, I used flour, sugar, salt, oil, eggs, milk and blueberries, all of which were on my shelf. I read a recipe in a cookbook written by someone else. My part was fairly simple: buy the stuff and follow some directions. Actually, that is exactly what I did with

the artificially flavored, store-bought mix, too.

The difference is that I was able to make *choices* for the sake of my family's health and taste that were not available with the store-bought mix. For health, I chose to use raw cane sugar instead of white and freshly ground whole wheat pastry flour instead of white. For finances, I chose dried blueberries instead of prohibitively expensive fresh blueberries. For flavor, I chose to add freshly grated nutmeg (which wasn't even in the recipe) and to top the muffins with a raw sugar/cinnamon mixture, a trick from another recipe.

Second, the application: How is homemade schooling like muffin making? You have choices! You can look in an education "cook-book" to find a "recipe" you like; stock your shelves with good materials; and try something different now and then. Beginners would work with simpler efforts -- library books, modeling clay -- and others would stretch a bit to specialized ingredients -- poetry, color wheels. Sometimes an attempt is too difficult, but even then the interest factor and enthusiasm allow a large measure of learning and carry over into other attempts. Homemade also takes a few more steps and a bit more time, but the result is worth far more than the effort.

So, how do you know whether you should be concerned about the health and flavor of your homeschooling? If you have the feeling that your homeschooling consists of opening the box and pouring out the educational materials prepared by experts (all you add is EIGHT HOURS PER DAY!), then you are probably using an artificially-flavored store-bought mix. If you are governed by fears of "missing something" to such a degree that you can't take a day off for the zoo or children's theater production or a trip to the Candy Store (I mean, the library), you are probably using an artificially-flavored store-bought mix. If you are intimidated by how much other kids know and don't recognize the unique and valuable things your kids know, you are probably using an artificially flavored store-bought mix.

Third, the specifics: Let's get practical. Where does one start? Or, what makes a good cookbook and great ingredients for homemade schooling? You might start by asking these questions:

- Does this curriculum allow my children to interact and play with the material, to ask their own questions and have some guidance in how to discover the answers? If not, if it requires them to simply reiterate a prepackaged fact, then it is one of those artificially-flavored store-bought mixes.
- Does this curriculum allow my family to make choices, to make substitutions, to cater to our own needs? Or, does it demand that we do everything in that curriculum, using only those materials? If the latter, then it is one of those. . . (you know)
- Does this curriculum empower us to learn how to learn the subject area without being forever dependent on curriculum? Does it give us a list of resources or alternatives, like a bibliography, that we can use to pursue our own education? Does it call on my child's own

curiosity and interest to create self motivation? If not, then, again, it is one of those. . .

Homemade education, homemade schooling -- one where you make healthy choices, where you are free to cater to specific needs and interests, where you are given the freedom to add some of this and change some of that, where you are in control of what actually goes in the batter -- takes a little longer and a little more effort. But the tradeoff is MORE than worthwhile. Your children's delight and self-motivation will be incredible rewards. The proof is in the pudding!



Extremely happily married since 1979, Bill and Diana Waring homeschooled their three children nearly twenty years. The Waring kids (now all grown) were the proving grounds for all the concepts and encouragements Bill and Diana teach! Bill and Diana have worked in speaking and writing for the Christian home school community for more than twenty years. She is well known for her rapid-fire history recordings and presentations, and also for her workshops and books of home school encouragement, like Beyond Survival and Reaping the Harvest.