

# National Home Education Network

*Changing the Way the World Sees Homeschooling*

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September 22, 2002

Dear Members of the North Carolina Child Fatality Task Force:

The National Home Education Network (NHEN) thanks the Task Force for the opportunity to provide information on homeschooling in response to the questions provided to us by Tom Bennett, Executive Director of the Task Force. NHEN is an organization that networks thousands of homeschoolers, many of whom have homeschooled for over twenty years. We have access to the accumulated experience of families who have spent millions of hours homeschooling under all varieties of regulations.

NHEN's Mission Statement includes the simple statement that "we support the freedom of all individual families to choose home education and to direct such education."\* Homeschooling parents, by and large, wish to take full responsibility for the oversight of their children's education and do not see a need for routine government oversight of their children's education any more than of their children's nutrition.

With this letter, we include our responses to the discussion points suggested by the Task Force. If we can be of any further assistance to the Task Force after the September 30 meeting, please do not hesitate to ask.

Sincerely,

Nicky Hardenbergh, Legislative Director  
for the Board of NHEN

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\* *The National Home Education Network exists to encourage and facilitate the vital grassroots work of state and local homeschooling groups and individuals by providing information, fostering networking and promoting public relations on a national level. Because we believe there is strength in a diverse network of homeschoolers, we support the freedom of all individual families to choose home education and to direct such education.* <http://www.nhen.org/member/join.asp?id=348>

## Thoughts on Protecting Children in Homeschooling Families

The NHEN Response to Questions Posed by the  
North Carolina Task Force of Child Fatalities

*What, if any, new measures should be taken to help assure the safety of homeschooled children (particularly in reference to child abuse and neglect)?*

### **1. NHEN shares with the Child Fatality Task Force a strong desire to protect all children from parental abuse or neglect.**

We know that homeschooling parents, as a group, do not wish for any further regulation of their family's educational choice. Nonetheless, because no one wants to put any child at greater risk of abuse, many homeschooling parents have sincerely asked themselves the very question posed by the Task Force. Each time a tragedy occurs that involves a homeschooling family anywhere in the nation (rare as those occurrences are), we homeschoolers discuss and analyze at great length the question of what, if any, further regulation would have prevented the tragedies. We have never been able to conceive of new measures that would be more successful than the regulations already in place for the general population.

We would be pleased to discuss with the Task Force any particular cases of which they are aware, in order to provide the perspective of homeschooling advocates in examining what steps might have been taken, using available laws and regulations, to prevent such tragedies.

### **2. Traditionally, and in our constitutional system, the best way to protect children has been determined to be to presume that parents, rather than an agency of government, are "fit" to act in their child's best interests.**

We are all painfully aware that some parents do actually harm their own children. From viewing the horrific tragedies inflicted on some children by their parents, we tend to lose sight of the fact that the vast majority of parents fulfill their parental responsibilities in an appropriate and fitting manner.<sup>1</sup> For this very sound reason, our society presumes that parents are the proper agents to make decisions about their own children.

### **3. To remove the presumption of "fitness" from the entire class of parents who homeschool their children would be to harm the entire class of homeschooling children, simply because of the parents' educational choice.**

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<sup>1</sup> Statistically, parents who abuse their children represent a small fraction of all parents. Using statistics published by the U S Dept of Health and Human Services, we deduce that the number of children who suffer abuse at the hands of their parents is less than one percent of all children. [Rate of child victims is about 12 per 1000, about 80% of victims, or about 9.6 per 1000, are victimized by their parents.] Within that number, child fatalities account for less than .002%, a rate of 1.71 children per 100,000 children in the population. Information from the Children's Bureau Administration on Children, Youth and Families in their publication: *National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS), Summary of Key Findings from Calendar Year 2000*, published April 2002 and found on the web at: <http://www.calib.com/nccanch/prevmnth/scope/ncands.cfm>

We fully concur that parents who have shown themselves unfit have abnegated their responsibility as natural guardians, and therefore the State must intervene in order to protect the children. However,

designating the entire class of homeschooling parents as a group more likely to abuse their children has the practical effect of presuming homeschooling parents are not fit parents simply because of the educational choice they have made. While we all believe children should be protected, the opposite of protection occurs if a child's parents are presumed by the state to be unfit simply because of an educational choice. The message to homeschooling children in that instance would be: "Your parents are not trusted by society to take care of you."

**4. Parents who homeschool their children, as a group, have not been shown to be more likely to abuse or neglect their children than parents who send their children to public or private school, and whose children are seen on a daily basis by "mandated reporters."**

In fact, most child fatalities (85%) occur in children younger than six years of age.<sup>2</sup> These children are not in school, but are at home with their families. Yet, because of the presumption of parental fitness, no one proposes routine investigation of all parents of children under six in order to screen this highest risk category.

Without data clearly indicating that homeschooling parents are more likely than other parents to abuse their children, special regulation of homeschooling parents is not warranted. Proposing regulation "just in case" is not advisable, given the adverse effect of such regulation on innocent homeschool families, as well as the unjustified costs and burdens of implementing such a program.

**5. Seeking to protect all children through removing the presumption of fitness of all parents who homeschool their children would be inadvisable for reasons of policy, law, and practicality.**

**Policy:** An agency that seeks to protect children should not have a blanket policy designating an entire class of parents as unfit without indisputable empirical evidence that warrants such a special class designation.

**Law:** Our constitutional system presumes that parents, unless evidence is shown to the contrary, are "fit" to make educational and childrearing decisions for their children.<sup>3</sup>

**Practicality:** It is virtually impossible to conceive of a regulation that would have the practical effect of sorting out those few parents who might, in the future, victimize their children.

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<sup>2</sup> As above: <http://www.calib.com/nccanch/prevmnth/scope/ncands.cfm>

<sup>3</sup> In the 2000 decision, *Troxel v. Granville*, the United States Supreme Court reviewed the history of the Court's ruling on the issue of the presumption of parental fitness, and restated a long-standing tenet: "... so long as a parent adequately cares for his or her children (*i.e.*, is fit), there will normally be no reason for the State to inject itself into the private realm of the family to further question the ability of that parent to make the best decisions concerning the rearing of that parent's children." The decision may be found on the web at: <http://supct.law.cornell.edu/supct/html/99-138.ZO.html>.

## **Suggestions for Positive Steps the Task Force Might Consider**

The Task Force apparently is concerned that homeschooling families can too easily maintain their children in social isolation. NHEN does not share that concern. Because we deal with thousands of homeschoolers nationwide, we are well aware of the numerous social activities of most homeschoolers. Homeschoolers have developed their own broad networks through which to arrange for group activities, sports, field trips, small group classes, textbook exchanges, and so forth. Nonetheless, there are some ways a government agency might contribute to a reduction in the potential isolation of some homeschooling families by speaking out against some current policies and practices that actually serve to promote isolation of homeschooling families from the rest of the community.

A welcoming attitude from the community would do much to reduce the feeling that some homeschool families have that they should keep out of public view during school hours. Older homeschool children, in age appropriate ways, might be much more likely to visit libraries, stores, parks or other public facilities were it not for daytime curfew laws in a few communities and unfriendly questioning by law enforcement officials in many communities.

Communities can welcome homeschooling families through library programs given during school hours, or courses given at the community center. Many families would not necessarily choose to avail themselves of such services. Any lack of interest in participation should not be viewed as cause for alarm; rather, it may simply be an indication that the children's social needs are otherwise being met through the vast array of activities in which homeschoolers are already involved. But, whether or not they choose to participate, all families would know the community was not profiling them as child abusers, but rather welcoming them and respecting their educational choices

## **General Information on Homeschooling**

### **Number of Homeschoolers Nationwide**

There are no truly accurate figures for how many families or individual children homeschool in the United States. Some states do not require homeschoolers to register and some states require only a one-time registration with no follow-up in subsequent years. This makes it very difficult to obtain an accurate count. Our best "educated guess" is that homeschooling children make up about 2% of the school-age population. Two pieces of research have helped inform that estimate: a survey done by the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES)<sup>4</sup> and a technical paper, "Homeschoolers: Estimating Numbers and Growth," by Patricia M. Lines.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The survey completed by the National Center for Educational Statistics is found on the web at: <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2001/HomeSchool/>. From the survey: "In the spring of 1999, an estimated 850,000 students nationwide were being homeschooled. This amounts to 1.7 percent of U.S. students, ages 5 to 17, with a grade equivalent of kindergarten through grade 12. Four out of five homeschoolers were homeschooled only (82 percent) and one out of five homeschoolers were enrolled in public or private schools part time (18 percent)."

<sup>5</sup> "Homeschoolers: Estimating Numbers and Growth," by Patricia M. Lines. This paper is published on the website of the United States Department of Education at: <http://www.ed.gov/offices/OERI/SAI/homeschool/>.

## Profile of Homeschooling Families

Families choose to homeschool for a wide variety of reasons, including being able to give their child a better and more individualized education at home, the ability to more fully integrate their religious beliefs into their children's education and the opportunity to create a better learning environment. Based on the same NCES study, homeschooling families look much like the general population, although there do tend to be fewer black or Hispanic families who homeschool. Income levels for families mirror those found in the general population but homeschooling parents tend to be better educated than non-homeschooling parents. Moreover, according to Patricia Lines' paper *Homeschooling Comes of Age*, "parents who homeschool their children are more likely to vote, contribute money to political causes, contact elected officials about their views, attend public meetings or rallies, or join community and volunteer associations."<sup>6</sup>

There is no data to support any substantive differences among homeschooling families based on regions. There may be differences in statistical information based on reporting requirements in individual states that could make it appear as if homeschoolers vary in number or philosophy. It has been our collective experience, however, that homeschoolers do not vary significantly among states or regions.<sup>7</sup>

## Homeschoolers Academically and Socially

Homeschoolers, in general, compare well with their publicly schooled counterparts on standardized tests.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Homeschooling Comes of Age, Patricia Lines <http://www.discovery.org/viewDB/index.php3?program=Misc&command=view&id=277>

Parents who homeschool their children are more likely to vote, contribute money to political causes, contact elected officials about their views, attend public meetings or rallies, or join community and volunteer associations (Smith and Sikkink 1999). This holds true even when researchers compare only families with similar characteristics, including education, income, age, race, family structure, geographic region, and number of hours worked per week.  
<http://www.discovery.org/viewDB/index.php3?program=Misc&command=view&id=1068>

<sup>7</sup> Karl Bunday, who has maintained an informative website about homeschooling for many years, reports on the growth of homeschooling by state, using states which make public the number of homeschoolers reporting in that state. According to his figures, the percentage of homeschoolers by state ranges between 1% and 2%, according to official figures. There does not seem to be any particular pattern regionally. Most likely, the differences in percentages among the states reflect the differences in reporting requirements among the states.  
[http://learninfreedom.org/homeschool\\_growth.html](http://learninfreedom.org/homeschool_growth.html)

<sup>8</sup> To the extent this issue has been studied, it has not been studied in a completely random sample. Many homeschoolers have no interest in participating in studies, perceiving that participation might bring their program under inordinate scrutiny. Homeschoolers perceive that they are expected to make exemplary progress in order to continue homeschooling. This perception is accurate, at least according to the regulations in some states, in which homeschoolers must score above the 40<sup>th</sup> percentile in standardized tests in order to continue homeschooling. In that same state, on the other hand, a child in the public schools who scored below that percentile would certainly not be removed from school. On the other end of the spectrum, there are many homeschoolers whose children score well above average in standardized tests, but they have no wish to have their children's scores become part of a database on home education, since they are convinced that high test scores, while perhaps a side effect, are not the goal of a homeschool program.

Our subjective perception, as experienced homeschoolers in contact with homeschoolers across the nation, is that we can safely say that homeschoolers can hold their own with their public and private schooled contemporaries in terms of academic achievement. We see no need to make a larger claim, that homeschoolers consistently score higher than their contemporaries, though all the studies that we know of show that result.

<http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v7n8/> Rudner study

<http://hslida.org/docs/study/comp2001/default.asp>

These findings are not surprising since many studies have indicated that parental involvement in a child's education is highly correlated with academic achievement. Homeschoolers are accepted into the most prestigious colleges, all military services, and technical training programs. And it is not only academically talented students who benefit from homeschooling. Many parents attest to the remarkable gains of their special-education children, who flourish at home, gaining skills to help them become productive adults capable of living independently.

Homeschoolers often chuckle when they are asked what they refer to as "the S (socialization) question." Social skills, homeschooling parents quickly realize, are best learned not from a classroom of 29 other eight year olds, but in a caring family and community setting. Homeschooled children learn social skills in surroundings that more accurately reflect society as a whole. The limited research on the social skills of homeschooled students, compared to their public school counterparts, supports our collective belief that homeschooled children have at least as high self-esteem as children in school.<sup>9</sup> As more homeschoolers

grow to adulthood they are gaining recognition as involved citizens, creative entrepreneurs, good parents and reliable employees.

All indicators, and our own accumulated experience, reveal that homeschooled children as a group can certainly hold their own in terms of academic, social, and life skills.

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<sup>9</sup> Studies about socialization of homeschooled children have shown that homeschooled children are not lacking in socialization skills. A 1992 study performed by Larry Shyers compared seventy homeschooled children with seventy public schooled children of the same ages. On the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale, a widely used measure of self-esteem, no difference was found between the two groups. However, trained counselors who watched the videotapes of the children at play, without knowing whether the children were homeschooled or not, observed that the homeschooled children had fewer behavior problems. The study itself is not available online, but information about it as well as how to obtain it can be found at <http://learninfreedom.org/socialization.html>

Also in 1992, Thomas Smedley conducted a study of religious homeschoolers in Virginia. His study is available at <http://members.aol.com/tomsmedley/smedleys.htm>. He also finds that there is no adverse effect on homeschooled children's socialization or interpersonal skills. In fact, he comments that homeschool groups are remarkable for their "orderliness and pleasantness."

One of the most unnatural aspects of the public school environment is the age segregation. Learning to groove with peers on such weighty matters as the color of shoelaces does not necessarily prepare the student for interactions with older and younger people in real life.

In the home school family, on the other hand, people of various ages and generations mix easily together in a variety that more accurately mirrors the outside society. There is an emphasis on service and responsibility that turns differences into opportunities for compassion. Younger siblings are best friends, not embarrassments. When 100+ home school kids roller skate together, the crowd is noteworthy for its orderliness and pleasantness. (Ch. IV: Discussion of Results)

Anecdotal reports by long-time homeschool parents reveal that their children are at ease with adults as well as with very young children. Homeschooled children learn their socialization skills in a setting that more accurately reflects society as a whole, rather than a classroom of thirty same-age children.

Furthermore, an honest appraisal of the vaunted social benefits of public school attendance would show that for a certain number of public school students, the social experience is not positive. Our jails are filled with people who attended public school. Clearly, public school attendance is no guarantee of proper socialization. As with academic performance, homeschoolers can certainly hold their own with their public schooled counterparts in the areas of socialization and interpersonal skills.

## **State Regulation of Homeschoolers**

All states have some provision for home education as an exemption from their compulsory attendance laws, either as private schools or as some category of “otherwise educated.” States vary widely in how much regulation is imposed on homeschoolers. Information about requirements in all fifty states is available at the NHEN website at: [http://www.nhen.org/LegInfo/state\\_list.asp](http://www.nhen.org/LegInfo/state_list.asp). An interesting fact to note is that, although there is a wide range of regulatory situations in the various states, there is no discernible difference in homeschool outcomes. What fuels homeschoolers' success is the parents' commitment to what they deem to be the best educational choice for their children. Homeschooled parents care deeply about the quality of the education their children receive, for parents would not otherwise make the commitment of time and finances necessary to take on the full responsibility of their children's education.

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