



This PDF is a FREE chapter from our new book 'Better Education at Home'

www.functionaleducation.com/book

CHAPTER TWO

Establishing a learning environment at home

If you've been inspired by what you've read so far and you feel that joining this revolution in education is something you want to seriously consider, then you're probably asking, How would I go about doing it?

The first step is to revisit the list of possibilities for homeschooling families on page 23 and the list below, and work out which type you're going to be. Then you'll be ready to decide if the Functional Education system is for you. My system suits a range of scenarios; do any of these sound like yours?

- One parent working from home who wishes to school their children at home to allow for flexibility in travel and schedules
- A family who has tried traditional schooling and found it doesn't fit their child
- A family with a child who's been labelled and would be limited by other people's judgements and lack of understanding, compassion or empathy
- Sports-oriented families who are fitting schooling around rigorous training schedules
- Health-affected children whose learning environment needs to be carefully monitored
- Bullied children whose negative education experience needs to

be turned around

- Alternative-thinking parents who would like to step out of an old and tired system and embrace fresh, new styles of learning

Using the two lists, have you worked out what kind of homeschooling family you are? The Functional Education system offers options for each scenario, with choices for each of the hundreds of activities students engage in over the years.

WHO WILL HOLD THE ROLE OF TEACHER?

This is the next question to answer. Have you decided which parent will be primarily in charge of undertaking lesson delivery? Who will discipline and essentially carry the role of “teacher” during allocated lesson times? It’s important that all adults in the household agree on their roles, so you can begin the journey with a clear understanding of who’s responsible for what.

These conversations are essential before you begin. The role of each family member, including the children, needs to be established just as you would in a work environment, where everyone has a job description and responsibility for certain areas, and everyone knows who to give feedback to.

At a traditional school the roles are clear. The principal holds authority over the school, and the classroom teachers are responsible for the class and for delivering the daily lessons. They’re also responsible for planning the lessons, tailoring them to meet the needs of the individual learners, organising the required resources and ensuring that the learning is undertaken and completed.

This big role can also work well at home if there’s a clear separation between your roles as teacher and parent. Often the teacher and parent hats are worn simultaneously, but it’s necessary to have a distinction between them.

ALLOCATING TASKS

This is a simple, fun and enlightening activity that I recommend you

try. Write on cards all the tasks required to organise and run your home. Sit the family down around a table and allocate each task to the family member who usually does it, like dealing out a pack of playing cards. The number of cards can be very large if you go into a lot of detail.

For example:

- ✓ Feed the cat
- ✓ Load the dishwasher
- ✓ Unload the dishwasher
- ✓ Pay the bills
- ✓ Mow the lawns
- ✓ Wash the laundry
- ✓ Hang the laundry on the line
- ✓ Fold and put away the laundry
- ✓ Cook the meals
- ✓ Wash the car
- ✓ Fuel the car
- ✓ Weed the gardens
- ✓ Walk the dog
- ✓ Make the beds
- ✓ Wash the windows
- ✓ Clean the house
- ✓ Organise the resources required for school
- ✓ Plan the lessons
- ✓ Do the school work
- ✓ Clean the learning space each day
- ✓ Go to work

Obviously, parents take the lion's share of the tasks but it's important for the children to understand that they too, with their age-dependent chores, have an important role to play in the smooth functioning of the

household. Similarly, children need to contribute in order for the family to undertake homeschooling effectively. When you live, work, school and play at home, order makes everything go more smoothly.

Creating the job descriptions

Parent: This role might include running the household, overseeing the chores, paying the bills, doing the grocery shopping and disciplining the children.

Teacher: Learning happens in every situation at any time of day, but the role of the homeschool teacher is centred around delivery of academic school-type lessons. It includes lesson planning, delivery and resources, monitoring completion and holding the student accountable when required.

The Functional Education system does the lesson planning and delivery for you, freeing you from stress and time pressure, and ensuring stimulating learning experiences based on research and experience.

Child: This role is for most of the day, when your child is living and playing at home. It may include their contribution to household chores, responsibility for keeping their own rooms tidy and taking care of their personal hygiene routines.

Student: This role is for homeschooling time, when your child is undertaking specific school-type learning. It involves arriving at the learning space at the appointed time, undertaking tasks with an attitude conducive to learning, giving new things a try and listening to the adult who's in the role of teacher.

HOLDING BOUNDARIES BY GIVING CHOICE TO EVERYONE INVOLVED

I once listened to a child psychologist advising parents regarding finicky eaters. She said there are areas of choice for the parents and areas of choice for the child. If both stick to their areas, mealtimes can be pleasant with even the fussiest of eaters. I believe this advice can also apply in a classroom.

The parents hung a clock on the wall and placed coloured dots on the

hour hand and at the family's mealtimes. These were the only times that food would be available throughout the day. The parents chose:

- What food was on the plate
- When the food was to be eaten
- Where the food was to be eaten (for example, at the dining table)

The child chose:

- Which food on the plate they would eat
- How much of the food they would eat

The child was to sit at the table with the rest of the family for 15 minutes while they all ate together. Then the child could choose to go and play. With free choice of what and how much to eat, the child felt in control of mealtimes. If they chose to eat barely anything, that was fine. Nothing was mentioned. The next meal would be served when the hour hand reached the next coloured dot.

This strategy removed the threats, pleading and punishment that had loaded this household with negative mealtime experiences: "You can't leave the table until you eat three bites of..." "There'll be no dessert until you..." and so on. All stress was eliminated.

A similar strategy for homeschooling is just as effective, with areas of choice for parents and for children. When children are younger there's more choice on the parental side of the equation, and as they go through their schooling, they gradually take more control of the choices. By the age of around 13, they have significant responsibility for their learning choices.

For homeschooling the choices might look like this:

The parent chooses

- When the schooling will take place (9-11 am)
- Where the schooling will take place (kitchen table)
- What the schooling will be (astronomy)

The child chooses

- How they will absorb the new content (books, educational

videos, documentaries)

- What artistic expression they will use to capture the learning (build a model, make a poster, write a poem)
- What area of the new topic they will delve into (newly discovered galaxies, how a star is formed)

When all family members have a clear understanding of each other's roles at different times of day, and who's responsible for what, it's much easier for each task area to be managed well and to enjoy the benefits of structure and order.

All Functional Education lessons are designed for maximum age-appropriate choice options to engage learners and encourage their creativity.

RHYTHMS AND ROUTINES

A homeschooling classroom needs to establish a rhythm and routine that suits the family. Several rhythms will be going on at any one time, and when you work with them, the day will flow more smoothly. Are you fitting your schooling around work, travel, sport training or extracurricular activities? Finding a regular time for lessons is important in establishing good habits and patterns in learning. In addition, research suggests that rhythm and routine are an antidote to anxiety in children.

Here's a simplified breakdown of some, but not all, of the main rhythms.

Breathing rhythms: When undertaking formal learning, it's counterproductive to simply sit and cram in hours of study. Research has found that short bursts of several activities, around 20 minutes each, increase focus and absorption of new learning, and that alternating breathing rhythms throughout the day has physiological benefits. This can mean an activity that moves the body (such as skipping or singing), followed by a quiet, more focussed activity (such as writing), then a different movement activity (such as a nature walk) and then something else more focussed (such as painting).

Daily rhythms: These coincide with larger household rhythms. They include the times to rise, to eat, for chores, play, lessons and rest.

Weekly rhythms: By keeping a schedule of sports and other extracurricular activities, you can clearly see where you need to be each day and at what time. Weekly rhythms also include trips to the library, visiting grandparents and other activities and events of daily life.

Seasonal rhythms: Working with the seasons is important. It's easier to plan activities that complement weather patterns than to work against nature. Hut building and making damper over the fire will be more enjoyable at some times of year than others. The living world also provides a lot of natural learning opportunities, and I encourage all homeschoolers to be outdoors as much as possible. Nature walks, insect and habitat studies, flora and fauna observations, and tracking weather patterns are all important for understanding and appreciating our environment. Simply sitting under a tree to knit or read while listening to the sound of the cicadas and watching the dappled light come through the branches is just magic.

This story illustrates the impact of rhythm and routine on children in their learning.

Rhythm and routine: the antidote to anxiety

In one of my classes, I had the privilege of teaching an exceptional boy, whom I'll call Jay. We spent four years together in the same class.

Jay was very bright and his brain worked in a unique and special way. Every day when he entered the classroom, he'd walk to the blackboard where the schedule for the week was written. He'd stand before it and check it carefully, to ensure there were no changes. Then he could begin his day. The schedule didn't change much over the four years, just little changes for special school events or tests, but I understood that the schedule was security for him.

The classroom was an unpredictable environment. Jay never knew who would speak to him, if people would be kind, whether he'd be invited to play, what questions he might have to answer. On many occasions the school day had the potential to go very wrong. But the schedule took away a lot of anxiety. Jay knew absolutely that after morning movement exercises, we'd have a story, then our writing and drawing time. After morning tea would be silent reading and then mathematics, and so the day would progress. Jay could always be in the right place at the right

time with the correct materials in front of him. This certainty gave him an enormous sense of belonging.

As the years progressed, because Jay was comfortable in his learning environment, his anxieties lessened. He didn't need to begin his day intently studying the schedule. He'd just give it a quick glance as he strolled into the room with his peers, to satisfy his curiosity that nothing was untoward.

There came a time when I could change the schedule when necessary. A quick word in Jay's ear before making the changes and he just went with the flow. The confidence he had in the situation, knowing it would return to its normal pattern the next day began to build resilience.

Because the classroom ran to smooth rhythms and routines, everyone knew their place and their role. In collaborative groups, there were changing roles: Sometimes a student might be a scribe, sometimes a reporter, the leader or ideas generator. Over time, these systems and processes finessed. Jay could work effortlessly within the framework and his anxieties continued to lessen. He might not know what questions he'd be asked, but he did know the procedure and what was expected. His resilience grew stronger. He could cope with change, he could participate fully in collaborative learning, and now his peers could begin to recognise the gifts and talents he had to share.

This sense of rhythm and routine created an environment where Jay could shine. He had remarkable engineer's logic, he could design and build complex machines, he had ingenious solutions all sorts of problems, and because he was comfortable in his learning environment, he could express his ideas and they could be heard and received.

I try to create the same environment for the students in my homeschooling programme. My lessons are delivered in a rhythmic, confidence-building manner as well.

RESOURCES

Homeschoolers have a lot of choice for resources. You can spend as little or as much as you like, depending on your budget and how creative and crafty you wish to be. These are the basic resources for the Functional

Education programme:

- ✓ Crayons, pencils or pens, ruler, eraser
- ✓ Paper or blank workbooks
- ✓ Scissors, glue, coloured paper, string
- ✓ Beads and counters, sand tray, pegs
- ✓ Wool and knitting needles
- ✓ Playdough or modelling clay
- ✓ Paints, brushes, art paper
- ✓ Recorder (musical instrument)
- ✓ Ball and skipping rope
- ✓ Access to the kitchen for cooking and baking
- ✓ Library card

With these supplies you can undertake most lessons. A few specialised items may be required for specific lessons but you can make most things at home. It's a good idea to keep everything organised in trays or on a shelf. Easy access is important so children can take responsibility for their own learning space by taking items out and putting them away.

Two beautiful aspects of homeschooling are flexibility and spontaneity. Schedules won't go to plan every day, and situations will arise that knock them out for a while. Never mind – once things settle down, just pick up where you left off. You can also pause your scheduled lessons to take advantage of something wonderful that arises.

HOW MUCH TIME TO ALLOCATE

This is dependent on each individual learner and family. Some families take their time to complete the daily lessons offered. They intersperse two or three video lessons among other activities they do as a family or homeschooling community. It may take two or three days to view one day's videos. Other families like to follow along with the programme and complete a full day of videos each day. Still others are fitting schooling around sporting events, travel or medical procedures, so they

choose to intensively school and complete two days of videos each day in order complete them quickly, knowing they'll soon be taking a break.

Extensive research has shown that you can undertake a considerable amount of focused learning in as little as one to two hours a day. With homeschooling there are no breaks, class changes, instructions, disruptions and all the other down time of traditional schooling environments. An hour or two a day of home learning, approached with a receptive attitude, can be the equivalent of a full day at school. That's easy to fit in while allowing for lots of free play, adventuring, sports, arts, music and imagination in the remaining hours.

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

Living, working, schooling and playing together every day in the same space can be an awesome experience for families, and it can sometimes be a challenge. Effective and respectful communication is important so everyone has the opportunity to express their needs and be heard by others.

Nonviolent Communication (NVC) offers a clear and dependable framework for effective and respectful communication. I've found the NVC feelings and needs cards to be a very helpful tool in my own classrooms and household. These cards help parents and children focus on the exact problem at hand, how it is making them feel and what's needed to remedy the situation. It helps remove emotion and backstory and provides the correct vocabulary to get messages across effectively. You can download the cards free and learn more about NVC at www.nvc.org.nz.

How do you currently communicate as a family – between adults, between children and between adults and children? Do you have rules around communication? Have you talked about what will or will not be accepted during heated conversations and when expressing your viewpoint on a topic you feel passionate about? This is the same basic respect required in a workplace or in any situation where you're communicating with others.

Do you have a withdrawing space? When a family lives, works and schools at home, having a dedicated space for time out undisturbed by

others can be important. It's a space where children can withdraw to be alone with their thoughts before returning to the family, for example, to prepare for a conversation about their feelings in a situation that needs to be resolved.

Boundaries can be tested when you school at home. It's important to have the conversation before you begin and a plan in place. Make sure you discuss in advance what will happen when you receive the first NO around completing a school task. A teacher in the classroom has a number of strategies ready and waiting, and the children know the consequences of their choices. Challenging situations don't have to escalate to a big fight or punishment. It's all in the framing and remaining calm. Choice and clear boundaries play important roles.

PITFALLS AND TRAPS

Homeschooling is mostly awesome and fun. It allows freedom and time for discovery, and you can journey alongside your children as they learn. If organised well and with real commitment, so everyone undertakes their roles wholeheartedly, the homeschooling life is very fulfilling. Lessons become a joy and your children are able to express themselves fully and delve into topics they love with as much time and enthusiasm as they wish with no harsh deadlines or other unnecessary constraints suppressing them. You get to learn lots of new and wonderful things together. Often the children pick up new learning first and then teach their parents.

But there can be hiccups. Problems usually centre around the non-teaching parent, who may be trying to run a home business while schooling is taking place a few metres away or who leaves home each day for work. What do they return to? Does the house still look like a classroom? Are they expected to sit through a recount of the entire day? Do they have discipline to deal with in the aftermath of "Just you wait until your ... gets home, then you'll be in trouble"? Has a lot of money been spent on activities or resources that weren't in the budget and they weren't asked about? How do they feel about missing out on fun activities at home and trips and other experiences away from home?

Burnout is a concern for the teacher parent, as well as personal time

away from the children.

Each family is different. Some are juggling travel, sporting events, training sessions or doctor appointments. Planning schooling around your own circumstances needs to be discussed.

Have all of these conversations first. Establish what your homeschooling will look like and everyone's roles within it. Put everything out into the open. Again, it all depends on respectful relationships and establishing clear boundaries and expectations for how your schooling and your home will function together. If you get the preliminaries right, the rest is a piece of cake.

KEEPING YOUR CHILDREN SAFE ONLINE

Before embarking on an online schooling journey, it's important to establish how access to the computer will be handled for the different age groups in your home.

The Functional Education programme is safe, with no chat rooms of unsupervised children having conversations without their parents' knowledge. We have a closed and private Facebook group where parents can upload samples of their children's work to share with the other students and ask questions of the teacher and one another. However, unless you watch your children every second of the day or have strict parental controls enabled on your devices, children can use a search engine any time they're in front of a screen.

I recommend *Keeping Your Children Safe Online: A Guide for New Zealand Parents*, by John Parsons, New Zealand's leading authority on cyber-safety for children. This book is a real gem. It details contracts between parents and children, different for each age group, that clearly outline access, responsibility and consequences if contracts are broken. Parsons also writes wonderfully about respect, relationships and caring for others. An early conversation and boundaries give everyone a clear picture of what is and isn't acceptable online behaviour and stop a lot of nonsense from happening. I recommend Parsons's book to anyone with children who have online access on any device. I've found that, thanks to his guidance to parents, the good online habits children develop carry through into their teenage and even adult years.

CULTURAL AWARENESS AND ACCEPTANCE OF OTHERS

While on a learning journey with any education programme, particularly one with a large history component, you'll inevitably encounter differing beliefs and opinions. As we all well know, people don't always agree with one another, and that's okay. We don't have to. What's important is that we respect one another's viewpoints.

As a teacher, when I deliver historical content, I try my hardest to embrace love, understanding and acceptance of all my students and their cultural beliefs, as well as feelings of kindness and empathy. That doesn't mean I hide from the truth. I know the world isn't perfect. I know that atrocities happened in the past that still linger in today's society and influence our culture, and are still happening.

In any virtual classroom you're exposed to a wide variety of people. Students in the Functional Education programme come from all over the world and they've had a range of experiences that have influenced their views. They carry beliefs that have been passed down through their families and their societies, and understandings that have been implanted by the media they're exposed to.

It's up to parents to decide how to handle information delivered by the teacher that might not align with their belief system. If you belittle the teacher, what will be the impact on your children's future learning? Or will you have a conversation around the history and viewpoint and offer another perspective? Perhaps you'll undertake a project on an aspect of that history and bravely display it on our closed Facebook page so that other students can learn a different viewpoint and become more fully educated.

How can an education programme that includes world history remain impartial? I stick as closely to the facts as I can, not imposing my own ideas and letting children form their own opinions. I also bring in guest speakers with new knowledge and alternative viewpoints.

I'm not interested in allowing the children in my care to become caught in the chaos and distraction that leads to division and hatred among humans. Instead I embrace the history of the world, all cultures, all viewpoints, and educate to understand what happened and why, so that history won't repeat itself. I don't celebrate or condone the actions of the

past but hear the truth of adherents of each viewpoint, acknowledge what occurred and ensure that a new future arises.

It isn't possible to teach what I don't yet know, despite the constant upskilling and personal education I undertake. I pledge to you that I will present historical content in the most respectful way I can and endeavour not to impose my own opinions on my students. I will ask you as parents to think about how you will handle any information delivered in the programme that inadvertently disagrees with your personal beliefs. As with teachers delivering content in classrooms anywhere in the world, I can only teach what I know at this stage in my life and I do so from a place of acceptance, love and respect.

YOUR EASY HOMESCHOOLING CHECKLIST

- Establish what type of homeschooling family you wish to be and who will lead the learning.
- For a smooth-running household, allocate jobs and responsibilities to each member of the family.
- To help establish your routine, draw up daily and weekly schedules listing all your commitments.
- Gather together your classroom resources.
- Establish guidelines for communication when living, working and schooling at home.
- Put a plan in place for cyber safety.
- Decide how you will respond to viewpoints that differ from course content delivered by the teacher.