



# THE HOMEGROWN PRESCHOOLER

*Teaching Your Kids in the Places They Live*

KATHY H. LEE & LESLI M. RICHARDS



# THE HOMEGROWN PRESCHOOLER

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BY KATHY H. LEE AND LESLI M. RICHARDS



## DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to Mrs. Diana Risher, who first taught me to write down my thoughts, and to the many women who showed me how to live at home. Thank you, Mom, Cindy, Debbie A., Suzanne, Debbie M., Susan, and my sweet Aunt Nell.

—Kathy

This book is dedicated to my aunt Bobbie Verges, whose love for children, education, and homemaking was quietly watched by a little girl whose biggest wish was to be just like her; and to God, who showed me that Auntie Bobbie's home was different because He was there.

—Lesli

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They are the realization of my childhood hopes and dreams.

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My dear friend Rachel Pate has challenged me to be the best me possible.

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Christy Montes, thank you for keeping me well in body and in mind.

—Kathy

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And thank you to Cyndy Roache for always spurring me on by your creative example.

—Lesli





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# INTRODUCTION

## OUR JOURNEYS TO GROWING OUR CHILDREN AT HOME

### KATHY'S JOURNEY

As a little girl I had one dream: to be a mom. As a teenager I had one main job: babysitting. As a college student I had one major: child development. As a career woman I had one career: early childhood. Do you see a pattern? I love children; I always have. To this day, I find great pleasure in hanging out with two- and three-year-olds, listening to them tell me stories and ask me question after question. I do have one small confession: Although I love everyone's children, I love mine more. On June 22, 1996, my world changed forever—I became a mom to a nine-month-old boy. Suddenly, my world of early childhood and motherhood collided.

Before I was married, I had decided that I would one day homeschool my children. I knew several homeschool families and had witnessed the benefits of this method of education. Thankfully, my husband desired the same for our family. I planned on educating our son at home; however, I had grown to love the world of early childhood education. I wanted our son to have the same great experiences that I had taught about, had even written books about. After much deliberation, we decided to enroll our son in preschool.

It was a great experience for him, for the 15 minutes he attended. Yep, he lasted (okay, I lasted) 15 minutes. The moment I walked away from that classroom, I began to question my decision. I was sad that those teachers would witness my son's a-ha moments. I was getting mad at the thought of those teachers reading him stories, watching him play dress-up, or making fly guts with him (more about fly guts later). I wanted to do those things. I wanted to make fly guts with





my son. I went back to the classroom, checked out my son from school, and never looked back. We went home and lived! We played! We dressed up! We read! And, we made fly guts!

Now, we have seven children who are all being grown at home. Over the 17 years of schooling, we have made great memories, and we have all learned. As my oldest approaches high school graduation, I now know firsthand how strong the foundation of learning through play is. Children who experience their preschool years discovering and experiencing are more willing to take risks later in their education journey. I am thankful that I have been able to incorporate my love for early childhood education into my homeschool world, and although it hasn't been perfect, it has been an amazing ride!

## LESLI'S JOURNEY

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Although Kathy and I have much in common, my choice to homeschool was born of very different circumstances. I consider myself an unlikely homeschool mom, especially for preschoolers! While Kathy was born to teach preschoolers and enjoys them immensely, I'm more comfortable with babies and kids who can read. Toddlers can be stubborn and unpredictable, and I bring enough of those qualities to the home already!





I can remember, years ago, talking doubtfully to a friend who had just made the choice to homeschool and thinking she was going to get weird and bake bread and wear denim jumpers to the gym. I enrolled my daughter in preschool at the earliest possible moment! I enjoyed my “me time” while she was at school. I could shop, clean my house, and play with my new baby boy. Why would anyone want to give up that little bit of freedom? I even paid extra for the after-school program.

My world changed drastically in the summer of 2002. After a whirlwind of medical appointments, MRIs, neurological consultations, and long nights of Internet research and pacing the floor, we had our diagnosis and prognosis: autism. With cold, professional detachment, the doctors said our precious, once-smiling, happy baby boy would never speak and would probably live in an institution by the age of 10. Our pediatrician gave us no hope of improvement, and he advised us to start saving for our son’s future care after we are gone.

I cannot begin to tell you what havoc such a diagnosis brings to a family. I am thankful for a friend who was only a few months ahead of me on the autism journey; she fought hard to bring me out of the shock and grief and encouraged me to do battle for my little boy. In those years, there was no medical coverage for autism in the state we lived in, and we had to fight for every bit of therapy and care our son received. We found an applied behavior analysis (ABA) program and spent 25 hours a week learning with him at a wonderful child development center. We put him on a gluten-free diet, and within a month we noticed significant improvement. This success spurred me on to find more help for him.

When an opportunity came for my husband to take a new position in Georgia, we jumped at the chance. In California, where we were living, autism was deemed a developmental delay, and we struggled getting insurance to cover our son's care. The laws in Georgia were more favorable, so I was very excited that we would have many more options for Luke. After settling in, I found that the reality was that there was a 17-month wait for a spot for speech and physical therapy, unless we could be very flexible in the time slots. We made the decision to educate our daughter at home for a year, until we could get a better appointment time for our son's therapy. This was going to be a temporary thing.

Fast forward eight years, and here I am. I just spent my summer travelling around Georgia speaking on classical education in the home, and I am a regular speaker at our state and regional homeschool conferences. What started out as a desperate move turned into a year of tea parties and reading aloud to a delightful first grader. I grew in patience and confidence as I taught my daughter, and she blossomed at home. Much to my surprise, I was a natural teacher! When my son's special education placement became undesirable, we brought him home as well. I am happy to report that, at age 11, he has exceeded every medical and educational prognosis. He is doing grade-level work and does far better than he would in a typical classroom.

We have since added three more children to our family mix and have quite a busy homeschool! I have now educated three preschoolers at home and find myself teaching our five children, including one in high school. As my great-grandmother might have said, "Who would have thunk it?"

Not everyone has an inborn desire to school their children at home. Like me, you may feel forced to homeschool by circumstances out of your control, whether they be financial, environmental, or health related. And like me, you may be surprised at what my husband calls "the gifts the monster brought." Like me, you might buy desks and a flag, in an attempt to bring school home, only to abandon those props in favor of a life of reading great books on the couch, fingerpainting on the windows, and spending lots of time outdoors.

We quickly realized that life was school, and while structure is certainly necessary, much of learning can be done within the everyday rhythm of life—measuring flour, skip counting on the trampoline, bringing a meal to a shut-in, writing letters to friends, participating in interesting conversations about big ideas. This truly is a lovely life, one that I never would have expected.

You don't have to be perfect to teach your preschooler at home. You just need to be willing to slow down a bit and see the world through your child's eyes. It's a beautiful view!

# USING THIS BOOK

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This book has two sections. The first half will help you evaluate your priorities and goals for your child and family. It will also paint a picture of what life will look like as you embark on this new adventure. We have included sections on organizing your home environment to maximize the educational impact, along with stories and helpful tips from our years of experience in early childhood education and motherhood. We even address the seasons in life and the unusual circumstances that many families face, such as adoption, pregnancy, or children who have special needs or are chronically ill.

The second half is jam-packed with developmentally appropriate activities that will give your child a firm foundation for lifelong learning. We have divided the activities into target areas of growth that are necessary for healthy and happy preschoolers to be ready for kindergarten in any setting. Using the handy weekly activity checklist, you will be able to choose activities from among the following subjects to make sure that your preschooler is learning across all the developmental domains: home life, science, gross motor, fine motor, math, language and emergent literacy, art, music, and social-emotional.

Because you also need to juggle other responsibilities along with teaching, we have included organization and housekeeping tips, recipes, and sample schedules. Additionally, we have designed a light and sensory table and a Plexiglas easel and have included easy-to-follow plans for those who wish to build their own. Finally, we have included a comprehensive resource list of furniture, storage, and educational supply retailers; sources for children's books and educational resources; and our favorite books, websites, and blogs.







## Chapter 1

# HOME- SCHOOLING

## HARVESTING A BOUNTIFUL LIFE

**W**e think that gardening is a perfect metaphor for homeschooling preschoolers. When you plant a garden, you decide what you want to harvest, then you plan in order to make that vision a reality. Educating your child at home is similar: You consider the learning style and unique talents and interests of your preschooler as you design an educational program just for him. You choose from among the best of curricula, art supplies, music, parks, museums, and enrichment classes to plant in your child the seeds of learning. Teaching your child at home for the preschool years can be full of benefits for your child and your entire family.

In our families, our children have benefited from spending their preschool years in the home. We have been able to provide a custom-tailored education for each of our children. For example, one of Lesli's daughters seemed to

*There is a garden in every childhood, an enchanted place where colors are brighter, the air softer, and the morning more fragrant than ever again.*

—ELIZABETH LAWRENCE,  
author, gardener, and landscape architect



respond well to sensory play; she learned to match upper and lowercase letters by putting a magnetic set of letters into a sensory table of colored rice. One of Kathy's sons spent most of his preschool years dressing up in costumes and dictating stories. Both of these children learned their ABCs and 123s, but we were able to teach them in the manner in which they learned best. A custom-designed education and a low child-to-teacher ratio are something many families pay hefty tuitions to get!

By choosing to homeschool your preschool-age child, you offer him social and emotional benefits. He will have more bonding time with family and will grow closer to his siblings. Your child will have opportunities to learn to express himself emotionally in a safe environment where he knows he will receive unconditional love. By organizing playdates with companions your child's age, you can provide opportunities to learn social skills such as sharing, cooperating, and taking turns. If you are fortunate enough to have extended family living close by, grandparents or other family members can participate in your child's learning. Lesli's mom lives nearby, and she loves taking Lesli's preschooler for the day. They bake, create art, and sing songs. Lesli's mom is happy to integrate any theme or skill Lesli and her daughter are working on. It has been beautiful to watch the baby in a large family being doted on and to see a grandmother reliving her younger days!

When you teach your child at home, the world is your playground, full of opportunities for developing your child's gross motor skills. Together, you can walk trails, climb rocks, turn somersaults, or skip down the sidewalk to the grocery store. Some children need to expel more physical energy than others in order to be able to concentrate on a task. Schooling at home is perfect for those high-energy children.

The flexibility of homeschooling can benefit your entire family. The slower pace lowers the family stress level. You can modify the schedule to best suit your family's needs. For example, Kathy's husband is an accountant who often works late hours during certain seasons. Kathy arranges for family time to be in the morning, and she does more schooling in the afternoons and evenings of those seasons. If a parent travels, the whole family can go. We know families who have followed a travelling parent all over the country, visiting landmarks and museums while still keeping up with their schoolwork. Using box and bag activities, preschool can be easily taken on the road!

A family who learns together grows together. For us, homeschooling has strengthened our families' cohesiveness. As we have taught our children, they have become natural teachers themselves. Even our preschoolers are eager to teach the baby! We enjoy working together on projects. When our older children study history, we capture their studies as opportunities for our preschoolers, by providing information, crafts, and costumes on their developmental level. For example, while our older ones were studying Egypt, we provided plastic Egyptian





people and buildings and a bin of sand for open-ended play for the preschoolers. When we studied Greece and India, our preschoolers loved dressing up in costumes. Even if your older children are in a traditional school setting, this a great way for your preschooler to feel a part of her siblings' lives and to look forward to what is coming next!

While the reasons a person may choose the homeschooling path are myriad, the rewards are just as numerous. You will find that you will grow personally through this experience. You have an opportunity to model your love of learning for your child, and you will learn to live more deeply and to pay more attention to detail—admirable and rare endeavors in our hurried world.

In taking on the responsibility of educating our children at home, we, too, have been challenged to learn. We have read up on the latest in early childhood education, learning about child development, learning styles, and educational domains. We have had the joy of discovering alongside our children, of fingerpainting and studying bugs, of witnessing the “a-ha” moments. The preschool years pass quickly, and we have loved experiencing those precious days with our children.

Through networking with other homeschooling families, we have found many social opportunities at co-ops, field trips, and park days. We have made friends and have been able to share ideas, approaches, and successes. We support each other through tough times and challenges such as illness, financial stress, or family crisis.

As you begin to plan for preschool at home, you will need to think about what type of little personality you are dealing with and must strive to allow your child to use her natural abilities to do extraordinary things, while pushing her to grow in areas that do not come as easily. What are your child's natural abilities? What are some more challenging areas in which she has room to grow? No one else knows your child as well as you do. Use your knowledge to formulate a custom educational plan to meet your child's individual educational needs. You are uniquely qualified for this task!

As you consider goals for your child, ask yourself the following questions:

- What natural talents and abilities is my child already showing? For example, some children are naturally compassionate and enjoy doing things for others; others display a keen interest in discovering how things work.
- What can I do to encourage these natural talents? Could I ask my child to draw pictures or make cookies for an elderly friend or for our new neighbor? Could I provide building materials, blocks, and small gadgets for her to construct and deconstruct?
- What areas do I need to help my child work on? For example, does he need to develop his self-help skills? Can she learn how to show empathy for others?





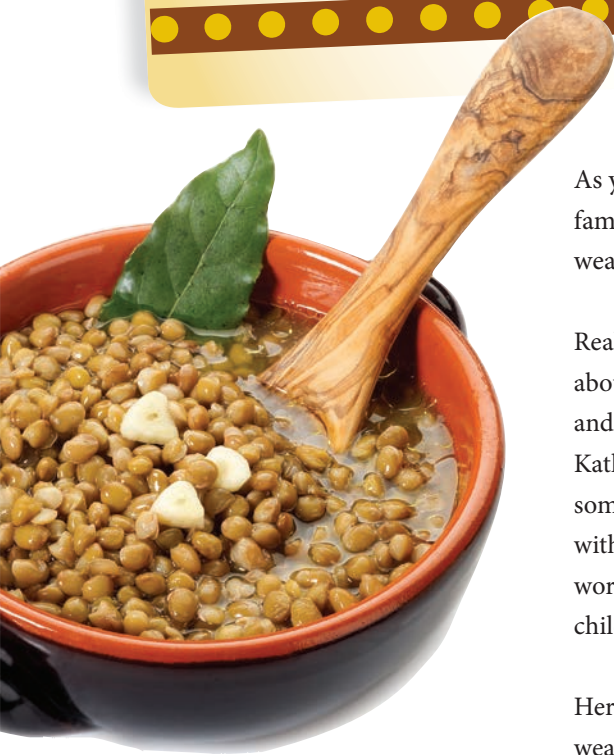
- What things have I noticed that help my child truly thrive? Does he need structure, extra sleep, small frequent meals, time alone, extra snuggle time? The answers will be as varied as the children.
- How can I enrich the environment so that my child gets enough of these things? Do we need to have a well-defined schedule? Should I change our meal times? Should we create a quiet space?

## Lentil and Kale Soup

2 bags green or brown lentils  
 2 boxes chicken broth or 8 cups of homemade broth  
 2 cups water  
 2 large carrots, diced

1 onion, diced  
 1 bunch of kale leaves, finely chopped  
 1 package of gluten-free kielbasa\*  
 Salt and pepper as desired

Combine all ingredients in a large pot and boil for 30 minutes. Turn heat to low and continue simmering for another 20 minutes. Serves eight. If you make a double batch, you can freeze half for an emergency meal. \*Note: Substitute any type of sausage that your family likes.



As you look at your goals for your child and assess the opportunities that your family's circumstances offer, you will also need to consider your own strengths, weaknesses, and expectations.

Realistically examine your own personality. You might have definite opinions about what a child should learn and when. There are many theories of education, and even the two authors of this book hold differing opinions on the subject: Kathy prefers an eclectic developmental approach, allowing her children to direct some of their studies toward their interests and leanings. Lesli teaches at a co-op with other homeschooling families, where even the preschoolers learn memory work in a classical school setting. Despite our different approaches, all of our children are growing and blossoming

Here are some questions to get you thinking about your own strengths, weaknesses, and expectations:

- Are you okay with letting the kids get messy, or will you need to plan the messier activities outside or away from your home?
- Do you appreciate a well-planned day, or do you prefer to wing it?
- Will it be hard for you to do open-ended activities without being concerned about the end product?
- What about my personality will make me a terrific teacher for this child? (If you are naturally self-deprecating, ask one of your most honest and encouraging friends.)

- What about my personality could potentially cause problems?
- What plans and boundaries will I put in place for myself to head off these problems before they occur?
- Is there anyone in my life (partner, friend, experienced homeschooling mom) who will hold me accountable on days when I just don't feel like following through on my homeschooling commitment?

We all have strengths and weaknesses that can affect the atmosphere of the home. It is important to honestly assess yourself and seek accountability for those areas that could prove detrimental to your child's education. For example, if you tend to be a person who struggles with consistency or spends too much time on the phone or the computer, you will need to address these issues before you begin. It could be that you agree to check your email only twice per day or that you find an accountability partner to make sure that you are actually schooling your child. If you are the type of person who loves to have a spic-and-span home, it can be very tempting to pop your child in front of a video and just clean. You may need to come up with a plan to handle these temptations in advance.

As a family, you will need to assess your priorities and circumstances. Use the opportunities provided by your circumstances to teach your child. For example, perhaps you are caring for an elderly parent. As your child sees your example and even participates in caring for this family member, he will learn patience and sacrifice and will develop a heart for serving others. There is nothing like learning history from an eyewitness, and spending time with someone who has seen a great deal of life can provide a rich learning experience for your child. Be encouraged that your unique situation, however inconvenient or unconventional, can be mined heavily for treasure to invest in a precious little person. If you approach teaching your child with a positive attitude and endeavor to enjoy learning along with her, it will be a winning situation for your entire family.

As you consider your family's priorities and circumstances, ask yourself the following questions:

- What unique opportunities can be found in our current season of life that can be used to teach our child life skills and good character?
- Are there unavoidable difficulties (financial hardship, illness, and so on) that I need to think through and mine for treasure?

### *A Note from Lesli*

This last exercise can seem a little discouraging. Take heart. You were chosen as the parent of your child—strengths, weaknesses, and all. Acknowledging the areas where we are weak helps us build up and fortify. Your love for your child can give you resolve and impetus for change and growth like nothing else!

When I started homeschooling, I knew that I tended to be inconsistent and flighty. I love my children too much to allow those character flaws to interfere with their education. I resolved to be consistent, and I asked my husband to hold me accountable. Just acknowledging my shortcomings and resolving to address them made a huge difference in helping me to overcome these personal weaknesses.





- How can both parents be involved in this child's educational experience? Do we need to adjust schedules to allow for more involvement for the working parent?
- Are there opportunities for business travel that we can use to our benefit to educate our child?
- Are there service opportunities that we would like to take part in as a family that we can incorporate into our preschool experience?
- What values are important to our family, and how can we incorporate these into our preschool curriculum?

Not only will you be able to prepare your child for kindergarten, but also you will be able to teach him life lessons. One of the wonderful things about educating your child at home is that you can instill the unique values and characteristics that your family esteems. We have emphasized the following character traits with our families. Your list may differ.

- Understand that actions have consequences.
- Tell the truth.
- Share.
- Put others first.
- Empathize.
- Be fair; don't show favoritism.
- Be a good steward.
- Be neat.
- Don't complain.
- Work hard.
- Respect authority.
- Be thankful.

So, how will you make this all work? How will you reap the harvest? As you read, you will see that this book encompasses a lot more than just educational information. When you decide to educate your child at home, life is no longer compartmentalized. Homeschooling integrates all parts of life, and you will need to make adjustments in all areas to achieve a healthy balance. After all, the time has to come from somewhere! We have included housecleaning and organizing tips, recipes, and advice for tough times. Teaching our children at home has grown us in so many areas, and we are eager to share with you the way others have shared with us.

## Chicken Enchiladas

- |   |                                 |
|---|---------------------------------|
| 3-4 chicken breasts or whole chicken, cooked and shredded | 16 tortillas                    |
| 1 can chopped green chiles                                | Black olives, pitted and sliced |
| 2 cans enchilada sauce                                    | Tomatoes, diced                 |
| Cheese,* shredded   |                                 |

Combine shredded chicken with green chiles and one can enchilada sauce. Fill each tortilla with a large spoonful of the chicken mixture. Roll and place filled tortillas crease-down in two 9" x 13" pans. Pour remaining can of enchilada sauce onto the enchiladas. Sprinkle with cheese. (If desired, cover with foil and freeze for later use. Thaw enchiladas in the refrigerator.) Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Bake enchiladas for 20-30 minutes. Garnish with sliced black olives and diced tomatoes. \*Note: Our family likes Rice brand cheese alternative. Use any cheese that your family prefers.



# Transform your home into a learning environment that rivals the best preschool classroom!

Find exciting learning opportunities in everyday occurrences, from using laundry to teach sorting to exploring growth cycles in the garden, with the easy-to-organize, simple-to-start ideas and activities in *THE HOMEGROWN PRESCHOOLER*.

As straightforward as a parenting how-to book and as easily applicable as a formal curriculum, *THE HOMEGROWN PRESCHOOLER* will inspire parents to use their homes as classrooms and take advantage of the naturally rich learning opportunities that exist in everyday life.

Anecdotes and advice from the authors, based on their own homeschooling experiences, offer support and encouragement when it comes to setting goals, organizing materials, planning lessons, and, ultimately, juggling it all!



Together, **KATHY H. LEE** and **LESLI M. RICHARDS** have more than 20 years of early childhood and homeschooling experience. Both are highly sought-after speakers and presenters in the fields of early childhood education and homeschooling. They are also seasoned homeschooling veterans. (Kathy is the mother of seven children, and Lesli is the mother of five children.)

Kathy H. Lee is the author of *101 Easy, Wacky, Crazy Activities for Young Children* and *Solutions for Early Childhood Directors*.



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