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AARE blog, Georgina Barton, homeschooling, Katie Burke, Krystal Cathcart, University of Southern Queensland (USQ)

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Reading: What Happens With Home Schooled Students?

By Krystal Cathcart, Katie Burke and Georgina Barton

Reading is a critical skill to have for school and life success and there are multiple suggestions as to how to teach it effectively and quickly in schools – but what happens in home schooling?

Little is known about how Australian home educators teach reading to their own children, but early evidence suggests parents have a different set of values..

Reading approaches may differ considerably across home educating families with some adopting an organic approach to reading instruction with less urgency to see their child read by a specific age.

Growth in home education

Australian home education is visibly growing in popularity and [registrations have doubled in the past five years](#) with some hypothesising that the rise can be [attributed to the COVID-era](#). As of 2023, the registered numbers of home educated children in each state or territory demonstrated significant growth across the country:

| State/Territory of residence | 2018 | 2022 |
|-------------------------------------|-------------|----------------------|
| <i>New South Wales</i> | 4,249 | 12,359 |
| <i>Victoria</i> | 5,742 | 11,912 |
| <i>Queensland</i> | 3,232 | 8,461 |
| <i>Western Australia</i> | 3,563 | 6,151 |
| <i>South Australia</i> | 1,315 | 2,443 |
| <i>Tasmania</i> | 976 | 1,467 |
| <i>Australian Capital Territory</i> | 302 | 413 |
| <i>Northern Territory</i> | 110 | <i>Not available</i> |

A diverse population

Home educating families represent a diverse population and the approaches used in their children's learning vary significantly. These have been shown to range anywhere along a [continuum of autonomy](#) from greater parental-determined structure through to unstructured child-led "[unschooling](#)" approaches.

Our recent study has investigated how Australian home educators teach their children to read and why they make specific choices in taking these approaches. We have heard from 185 home educating parents throughout Australia about their own experiences, approaches and attitudes.

The families in this study fell into similar categories regarding the degree of structure in learning that have been [previously defined](#). Some indicated a formalised curriculum and parent-led approach:

What the families in this study said

I have used a [phonics-based approach](#) with direct instruction. This took the form of 15 minutes a day. However, I would read aloud to my child 30min-1hr a day with no expectation of it being 'reading practice' but rather them enjoying the story. Now my child is a bit older, she practises reading aloud 15 minutes a day of a book that she chooses. We sit together and if she gets stuck, I am able to help.

Others took a more child-led approach and allowed their children to teach themselves to read, following their child's lead and doing little formal reading.

[We did] no formal teaching. He learned to read through observing written text in real life, showing curiosity, and us reading aloud to him. He picked it up naturally, and we helped with reading difficult words. I expected it would be difficult, but he learned to read because he wanted to understand the world around him.

Creating a culture of reading aloud

The most common parental expectation around reading was creating a culture of [reading aloud](#) to their child, which was seen across the spectrum of structured and unstructured families. There were also those who expressed the importance of surrounding their child with a literacy-rich environment.

I've always read to my child, even when pregnant, so that is a big part of the reading process to me, as well as having plenty of age-appropriate books strewn around the home to explore. Currently [I'm] allowing my child the freedom to learn to read. We read novels daily and have simple picture books/early readers available for when she's interested.

A most interesting observance was that many families revealed an unpressured approach to learning to read that let go of [expectations regarding reading age](#). The concept of being a “late reader” was therefore not necessarily a concern to some home educating families.

Difficult to teach

One parent noted the challenge of a child who was “difficult to teach” and indicated that allowing them to learn at a later age led to no long-term reading disadvantage:

He was most difficult to teach and had major melt-downs. So around 8 years old we took a step back when he still couldn't read simple cvc words. I continued to read to him but wouldn't push for him to 'learn' to read – he is now 9 and by letting him figure it out on his own time with zero pressure he has used technology including computer games such as Roblox to understand how to read and sound words out and I would say he is now a very, very good reader no different to what my first 2 children were at his age! Who went to school at that age!

Other families saw their children become early readers without any intention or pressure.

At around 2 years old she showed interest in letters and the alphabet. 'B is for Butterfly', etc and singing the alphabet song... Then one day, around 3.5 years old, I found her stumbling through a picture book on her own. I then tried to provide books around the house that were about the right beginner-reader level and the right interest level (that was tricky)... I didn't push at all as she was so young so there was absolutely no stress or pressure on whether or not she could read yet. Now, at 4.5 years old, she's an independent reader and enjoys chapter books like "The Faraway Tree".

An organic approach

The stories from these families indicated that many took an organic approach to reading instruction that relied upon a range of avenues, including [environmental print](#), sibling interactions, singing, subtitles on television, [technology](#), and of course, reading aloud. The idea that children learn to read when they are ready was also widely recognised and supported.

These stories from home educating families encourage us to think about teaching reading as a joy filled and natural endeavour. Providing the right mix of opportunity and trust in a relaxing atmosphere may prove beneficial for some children who initially find reading challenging.



From left to right: **Krystal Cathcart** is a final year PhD candidate at the University of Southern Queensland. She is currently a home educating parent of four children. **Katie Burke** is a Senior Lecturer Arts Curriculum and Pedagogy at the University of Southern Queensland, Australia. She is also a former home educating parent.

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2 thoughts on "Reading: What Happens With Home Schooled Students?"



Ania Lian

November 20, 2023 at 9:03 am

Nice. Thank you . On another note, when I was living in Poland at the age of 9, I picked up a book for learning English and went straight to the end, where it had nursery rhymes. I heard English songs on the radio and had an idea of how English sounds. With that general concept, I made up how to read the rhymes, and to this day, I can recite those few that I have learned. My made-up reading was 100% accurate. The moral: yes kids can do a lot if they want to and when they want to. Thank you again.



Dianne Hartley

November 30, 2023 at 11:54 am

I like the thought that we need to "think about reading as a joy filled and natural endeavour" – so often children struggle with reading, not helped by the fact that so many school readers are dull and boring; that books are rarely read just for pleasure but are pulled apart and analysed constantly (what can you infer? what will happen next? how is the main character feeling?) – even with prep students! Teachers put on a video of the author reading a book (many of which are a dull, flat read) rather than reading the book themselves – and if they do actually read a book, they don't always read with expression in their voices and faces (I could have my whole class in the palm of my hand, putting on all the funny character voices in a story book). Reading so often becomes a " chore to be endured" at school; whereas my aim as a teacher is that I want my students in bed after " lights out" reading with a torch because they just have to finish reading the book/next chapter!

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