

The Self-Propelled Advantage

Joanne Calderwood

A momentous book. Homeschooling for developing complete, responsible adults.

Calderwood's three-part metaphor is a bicycle. The front wheel is self-mastery, the rear wheel the mastery mindset, and the cyclist himself, self-teaching. Here's how it unfolds.

First a child need master his or her self. As toddlers they start out learning how to feed themselves, how to go to the potty, and how to recognize the limits on their behavior. No means no, and tantrums are not allowed. As they grow up, the list expands. Children are expected to clean up after themselves, plan their own activities to some extent, and most especially, adhere to some standards of behavior. Those standards include respect for their parents, respect for each other, honesty and integrity. These elements of character are fundamental to homeschooling, and in fact, any education and in the undertaking of life.

A fundamental truth which public schools overlook, even willfully ignore, is that students learn, rather than teachers teach. A student has to actively create knowledge in his own brain. The teacher can help, the teacher can guide, but the student has to do it him or herself.

The self-propelled advantage is the recognition of this fact. In order for students to build knowledge they need to first have self-mastery. They need some be in control of their own lives, disciplined enough to go about the business of studying without somebody constantly at their elbow nudging them along. A teacher who prods and pushes the student is going to be unsuccessful in any case. As any teacher will tell you, a student who actively resists learning can defeat any teacher.

The first objective then is motivation. Get the child motivated to want to learn. Fortunately, every infant is born with a great desire to learn all about the world about himself. Their little eyes examine everything they see; their little hands touch everything. They want to learn things and they want to please their parents. There is nothing more thrilling than to watch a toddler go through this development.

The magic is in keeping it alive. It takes a lot of energy for a parent to respond to the toddler's enthusiasm for learning and to feed it. It can be turned off by shutting the child up, parking the child in front of a television, or ignoring him. And, later on, putting them in public school where the teachers will do the same.

Calderwood was trained as a public school teacher. She speaks more kindly of the profession than many. She observes that any public school teacher has a class of 20 or so students on average, and does not have time to work with individual children. This means that some move ahead quicker than others. The inevitable effect is that some children do not achieve mastery. If the children are learning arithmetic, some of them get it quickly and become bored, and others struggle.

Regardless of where the individual students are, the whole classroom of 20 must move forward according to the day's curriculum. This results in frustration for those who haven't mastered the subject, and boredom for those who master it quickly. The frustration compounds itself because most subjects are cumulative. In other words, if you have not mastered double digit addition, you will be unable to do double digit subtraction; the processes are related. The deficit accumulates until the kid gives up and says "I'm not interested in math; I can't do math."

Mastery is one of the topics that Calderwood pushes the hardest. You should not move on until the child has mastered a particular unit. If you have a set of spelling words that the child is supposed to master, or a set of vocabulary, do not move on until the child has thoroughly learned all of that vocabulary. Sixty or seventy percent is not good enough. Once you have taught a word, you should have the right to expect that that word is a part of the child's vocabulary.

This works well in the homeschooling environment. You can simply stay on the subject until it is done, because there is no press from any quarter to move on at a pace that is uncomfortable for the student. Conversely, if the student gets things quickly, you can move ahead much faster.

Most homeschoolers feel that their children have more potential than the public schools allow for. Even if not any smarter than the average kid in public school, they're smart enough to learn at a faster pace than the public schools. Public schools have a tremendous amount of wasted time built into the day: time to transition between classes, time traveling to and from school, and time in the classroom at the end of the period when the slower students are finishing work, as the quicker students are sitting bored, chatting, giggling and fiddling with whatever electronic gadgets they have smuggled into the classroom.

A homeschooling education is vastly more efficient in its use of time.

Calderwood goes on to observe that when students get in the habit of mastering material with the tutelage of a parent, they pretty soon get to the point of wanting to do it themselves. In other words, after they have finished doing one set of math problems, they may look ahead in the book at the next set. They become curious, and they slake their curiosity by going ahead in the next two or three lessons and finishing the chapter. This is that same curiosity that we observed the toddler, translated into education. That is, unless we have allowed the process of education, the rigid, stultifying structure imposed by the education establishment, to beat this curiosity out of a kid. What leads to is the child setting their own educational objectives? Instead of giving them lessons day by day, you soon get to the point mapping out a week, or a semester's work in advance, and letting them work at their own pace.

Another aspect of self-mastery is that instead of testing them on each unit, you allow the kids to test themselves. This is how it works. If you're working from a standard textbook you find that their answers in the back of the box. You can get a teacher's edition of almost any textbook. Rather than you, the teacher, testing the kids to see if they know it, you get the kids in the habit of testing themselves. So they can make their own progress through the book and tell you how they are doing. You need to supervise, of course, stepping in periodically to make sure that they are reporting their progress honestly, but if they're using the testing process themselves, they are in control of their education. It takes less of your time, and makes them self-confident, and most important it puts them in charge of the learning process. As an adult that's exactly how they're going to have to be. Functional, effective adults are people who continue to learn, on their own, without anybody to correct them as they go.

Most parents are comfortable teaching their children through grammar school and perhaps through junior high school. Very few of us are confident enough to teach any high school subject. This leads some parents to question whether or not they can homeschool at this level. The answer is, yes! Once the children are in the habit of teaching themselves, you find that they can teach themselves things that you the parent don't know. In fact, to your delight, you can probably let them teach you things that you wish you knew. For me this will be the new findings in chemistry, all about the energy levels of electrons, which was known when I was a kid, and the intricacies of cellular metabolism. What a thrill it is for a kid to teach you!

Also, if you as a parent can do it, you can find a network of parents one of them can. One of the raps against homeschooling is that the kids don't get socialized. I have met a number of homeschoolers myself, and I'll have to agree with Calderwood that they are the nicest, best socialized kids that I know. They are comfortable interacting with adults, and they have not been perverted by the youth culture to the point that they no longer trust adults.

You can probably find a network in your neighborhood, certainly somebody who can help them with material that you don't know yourself, and you can certainly find people over Skype to help almost anything. This again empowers the child to do their own research. To look for mentors, to build bridges into the adult world. They are not trapped into the passive role of the students when they should be coming should be growing into the role of active, results-oriented adults.

Calderwood talks about her kids and how well they did on the SATs, and the fact that the first four of them won scholarships to college. She attributes it to homeschooling. I demur just a little bit. SAT scores are quite highly correlated with intelligence. Her eldest child got a perfect score on the SATs. This certainly couldn't be done without motivation, self-mastery, dedication to learning, and all of the benefits that she extols about home education. However, on the other hand, it could likewise not be done without intelligence. According to the website I found a perfect score of 1600 on the SAT indicates an IQ in the range of 150. Her child may or may not be that smart, but I'm quite sure he is no dummy.

The results that you get from homeschooling cannot negate a shortcoming in native capability. What it does is to ensure that you get the most mileage out of whatever God gave the kids in the first place. To me this is vitally important. I have observed that the childhood friends of my grown family, all bright kids, have achieved spotty results

in the adult world because they are not motivated. Calderwood's approach promises the optimization, the maximization of the results that can be achieved with the child's innate potential.

Calderwood drops hints of faith here and there. The tone of the book tells you that this is a believing family. I find this to be very comforting and encouraging. I offer the observation that even if a one doesn't believe, some of the practices that she talks about are very relevant. The fifth commandment is to "honor your father and mother." This is the foundation for learning; if kids do not respect their mother and father, and their elders, they will not respect the learning process and they will not learn as effectively. The religious foundation simply makes it easy because it lays the rules out in black and white, beyond questioning by the kids.

Another element is prayer. She talks about family meetings, and individual counseling with the kids when there's a problem that needs be straightened out. All of this is done in a businesslike way, although certainly with mutual love, but it may end with a prayer. The prayer is a commitment to the process. In my words, not hers, it doesn't really matter whether there is a God listening to that prayer. The prayer represents the mutually expressed hope of the people within the group that are praying.

The most valuable part of the book, in my view, has nothing to do with home schooling. The first pages of her chapter on self-mastery have to do with establishing discipline. It starts young, with a toddler. She writes that the parents have to be in control, and "We are not in control if our children repeatedly:

- * yell or scream
- * do not obey the first time they're asked to do something
- * whine or complain
- * fight with siblings
- * slam doors out of anger
- * throw things out of anger
- * lie
- * talk back to parents or others
- * ignore parents or others
- * regularly do things they know are not allowed"

This is absolutely key, and kids start to manipulate their parents well before the age of one year. A parent needs to have the self-assurance that, per Calderwood's web site, "You are the mom." If you do not establish a harmonious family environment by requiring some discipline on the part of your kids, you are setting yourself up for long-term headaches and heartaches. By being too lazy, irresolute or indecisive to take charge in the beginning, you make your lifetime job much harder, and the results immeasurably worse.

That's enough for a review! You need to buy the book! It is destined to be a classic. On a personal note, I sent my grown family through Maryland's best public and private schools. The results were unsatisfying. My new son, now a toddler, will be schooled largely in accord with Calderwood's plan.