

Relaxed Homeschooling: An Interview With Dr. Mary Hood By Kristen Hamilton

The term *relaxed* often gets tossed about within the homeschooling community, but not everyone who has adopted this term is using the same definition. What does *relaxed* mean? Is it a method? Does it mean you can't use textbooks? In this interview with Dr. Mary Hood, the author of ***The Relaxed Home School: A Family Production***, she explains both her original intent of the term *relaxed* and how to be more relaxed in your homeschool.

TOS: What is "relaxed homeschooling"? Is it different from unschooling?

Dr. Hood: The philosophy of "unschooling" developed out of the free school movement of the 60s and 70s. Unschoolers came to homeschooling due to their dissatisfaction with institutional schooling and a desire for a freer, more individualized and organic way of learning. Starting in the 1980s, another style of home education joined the movement, driven more by the lack of values and discipline in the public schools. Most of these were Christians who felt that their familial values were not being served by the public schools. Many began doing "school at home," trying to imitate the methods used by institutional schools.

Relaxed homeschooling represents a middle ground between these two philosophies. I think of it as a mindset. The tenets of relaxed homeschooling include these:

- You are a family, not a school.
- You are a dad and the head of a household, not a principal.
- You are a mom, not a teacher.
- You have individual relationships with your children, not a classroom.

The relaxed homeschooling philosophy frees families to learn in a more family-oriented environment. Parental goals, plus the goals, personalities, and interests of each of their children, guide their learning experiences.

TOS: How would you advise a family to move from the traditional school mindset to the relaxed homeschool mindset?

Dr. Hood: The first thing I'd suggest is that the parents take time, individually and together, to determine goals they desire for their children to achieve by the time they turn 18. In addition, try to accurately describe your family's perspective concerning the learning process. In other words, examine and challenge the assumptions you have made as a result of your experiences in institutional schools.

If the desire for a more relaxed atmosphere is coming from the mother, be sure to share with the dad what some of the reasons are, how you are hoping to alter things, and why. Begin keeping a journal to write down your plans and goals, and then track them to see what is working and what isn't.

The next step is to talk with the kids. Don't let them wonder "what Mom is up to this time." Explain to them that you've been re-thinking some of your ideas about the way you've been doing things and want to make some changes. Then, involve them in the process. Especially if they are over 10 years of age, try to help them think through some of their own goals and ask them if there is something they've always wanted to learn.

Don't try to change everything at once. In the beginning, you may want to continue doing one or two subjects the way you have been doing them. Math may be one area where you might want to continue with your current materials, but perhaps supplementing. For example, set up a learning center that revolves around math and encourage the children to use it or to play math games, rather than just doing the exercises in their books.

In the meantime, go to the library once a week and have reading times together several times a day. Select one day a week to get out of the house and have some fun together. Consider putting aside the grammar books and asking them to write a paragraph about their "day out" instead. For example, go to the zoo and ask them to write about their favorite mammal. Then work with them as an editor, not expecting perfection every time.

As you begin to make a few changes, you need to be flexible. All of your questions about this relaxed way of learning won't be answered immediately, but the fact that you are asking questions and experimenting is a great start!

TOS: What exactly do you mean by "learning centers"?

Dr. Hood: To adapt the idea of learning centers to a homeschool setting, first decide what you hope to accomplish with your children. For me, it was all about keeping things accessible to the children and making them interesting enough to attract their attention. This, of course, also requires that things be changed from time to time, or they just wind up blending into the woodwork.

One constant for us was an art center. I had a designated cabinet with a variety of art materials, including things such as egg cartons, construction paper, scissors, and crayons. On a higher shelf, away from the toddlers, we kept things such as calligraphy pens and leather tools. We liked to keep some of their recent creations on display on a shelf or bulletin board.

We often had other centers, like a nature center near the picture window, where we observed the birds and animals in the backyard; a science center where we kept our current project; a music center by the piano; and a math center in a corner of the living room. One of the things I always did was to incorporate good books into the centers. When we went to the library, I would get a different book about an artist or a type of art and place it on display in the art center. Sometimes we would take it down and read it together, but sometimes it just sort of sat there like a decoration. That one practice helped all of my children to grow up enjoying art and knowing a lot about it. One of my daughters has an art history degree! (Check out my guidebook, ***How to Set Up Learning Centers in Your Home***.)

TOS: Is there ever a place for the use of textbooks and workbooks in a relaxed homeschool?

Dr. Hood: There is definitely a place for textbooks and workbooks in a relaxed homeschool environment. The key when selecting them is to pay attention to the individual needs of your children, as well as your own desires. If you were to select an entire curriculum, insist on using it for everyone in the family whether it works or not, and do it exactly like the publishers say you should, including using an artificial timetable for completion, that certainly wouldn't be very relaxed!

When deciding whether to use resources like workbooks, you need to select them with your goals in mind, think of the needs of individual children, and listen to their input, regardless of their age. In order to stay relaxed, you have to be willing to make your own decisions about the best way to use resources and how quickly you should work through them. You also need to be willing to admit when you have wasted money on items that aren't working for your family and then put those resources away or sell them at a used curriculum fair!

One of my sons used quite a few workbooks and textbooks. A couple of the others probably never held a textbook until they went off to college, and they did just fine in making the shift then.

TOS: What can you tell us about your organization, **ARCHERS for the Lord, Inc.**? What is its purpose and what are some of its future plans?

Dr. Hood: *ARCHERS* stands for the **Association of Relaxed Christian Home Educators** and also derives its name from Psalm 127, which likens our children to arrows in a quiver. We are a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization. Our current projects include a mentoring program in which experienced moms assist younger moms, homeschooling classes and retreats near Atlanta, and a capital campaign to purchase land for a regional conference center in the Georgia Mountains. For more information, to donate, or to purchase materials, visit archersforthelord.org.

TOS: Thank you so much for sharing your expertise with us, Dr. Hood. You've greatly encouraged me to pursue a more relaxed manner of teaching and learning in my own home.

*Kristen Hamilton and her husband, Kevin, have been home-educating their five children since their eldest's birth in 1998. Kristen is the Senior Editor of **HomeschoolBlogger.com** and an admitted curriculum junkie. She blogs about her homeschool experiences at A Day in the Life (HomeschoolBlogger.com/kristenph). She also enjoys reading, crocheting, and hiking with her family in her very limited free time.*

*Mary Hood and her husband, Roy, began homeschooling their five children in the early 1980s. Mary has a Ph.D. in education and is a nationally known speaker and the author of books including **The Relaxed Home School, The Joyful Home Schooler, and The Enthusiastic Home Schooler**. You can follow her blog, www.therelaxedhomeschooler.blogspot.com, her **Yahoo! Group** (groups.yahoo.com/group/ARCHERS-HS), or you can friend her on **Facebook** to be invited to her ARCHERS page ([Relaxed Homeschoolers-ARCHERS](https://www.facebook.com/RelaxedHomeschoolers-ARCHERS)). Mary Hood also accepts speaking engagements and can be contacted at mary.e.hood@gmail.com. Please visit her website to learn more about ARCHERS for the Lord, Inc. (www.archersforthelord.org).*