

Standardized Tests for Home Educators

by Suzanne Day

One of the first questions people ask home schoolers is: "Do your children have to write standardized academic tests?" The answer is "No, home schoolers do not have to write them, and yes they do, for their own benefit". Although the Ontario Ministry of education does not require that home schoolers write standardized academic tests in order to be allowed to home school, there may be, nonetheless, many advantages for home schoolers in doing so.

First, standardized academic tests can allow parents to discover specific qualitative and quantitative strengths and weaknesses in their child's educational development. As well, the objective information obtained from tests results can provide assessment data for a child's educational portfolio, give parents a tool for their own accountability and thus encourage and challenge their home schooling efforts, identify a child's individual academic needs, and help reorient a family's academic and developmental objectives. Parents can assess their child's academic basic skills, covering grade 1 through to the end of the secondary level, in the comfort of their home school. The main tests Canadian home schoolers use are the Canadian Achievement Tests (CAT) and the Canadian Tests of Basic Skills (CTBS). These tests measure achievement in the academic basic skills generally taught in schools across Canada. The Canadian Achievement Tests (CAT) was first published in 1989. It was re-vamped and re-normed in 1992 and designated under the CAT/2. The up-to-date version with changes in the content and new norms, the CAT/3 was published in the year 2000. It provides a profile of strengths and needs in reading (word analysis, vocabulary, and comprehension), spelling, language (mechanics and expression), and mathematics (concepts and applications, computation). For the parents who also want to obtain information on the aptitudes of their children, they have the privilege of using The Canadian Test of Cognitive Skills (CTCS). This test assesses academic aptitude: the abilities important in learning, such as reasoning, problem solving, evaluating, discovering relationships, and remembering. The CTCS may be used in combination with the CAT to implement the popular "predicted achievement" concept. This procedure offers parents an effective and efficient method of estimating the extent to which their children are achieving in comparison with students of similar age, grade, and academic aptitude. For example, the parents would be able to analyze that their child, although at grade level in reading skills, presents aptitude scores in the high average, showing a discrepancy between his aptitude and his academic achievement. Predicted Achievement reports are especially useful in identifying students who are underachieving. These reports may be also very useful for parents who suspect giftedness in their child's profile.

Some home schoolers may need a "formal" academic assessment, in which case, rather than administer the tests themselves, they can retain the services of a qualified teacher who has experience in administering standardized tests. For families who are communicating with their school board regarding home schooling their children, such tests results can be given to the school board to serve as the formal evaluation of a child's academic achievement during the school year. For home educators who don't want their children to be obliged to write school board exams, a standardized test is a legitimate alternative method of evaluation and assessment. The standardized tests indicate how an examinee is doing in comparison with thousand of others at the same grade level across Canada. The results will not only yield a grade level and percentile rank for each subject, but also will help the parents identify which objective is not met. For example, the student may be at grade level or higher in vocabulary but have a low performance in

antonyms; be at grade level in mathematical concepts; but is weak on the measurement skill. New home schoolers may want to administer the test at the beginning of the year to identify specifically what their child needs to work on and then at the end of the year to evaluate the progress made during the year. The majority of the home educators like to use the test at the end of the year in order to reconsider their choice of curriculum and materials. They can then benefit from the various home schooling conferences where they can buy new and used material and save on shipping charges. Some home schoolers hesitate to use standardized tests because those tests are normed with a public school population. As a psychoeducational consultant and home educator, I see this as an advantage. Our children will be competing in the job market with graduates of the public school system and we need to know where they stand.

Our goals as home educators are often high and because of the amount of time we invest in home schooling and the low teacher student ratio, we should expect higher test scores. In 1994, the National Home Education Research Institute published a report revealing that home educated students scored, on the average, at or above the 76th percentile rank in reading, language, and math. Percentile ranks range from a low of 1 to a high of 99 and indicate the status or relative standing of a pupil in comparison with other pupils. In other words, the 76th percentile indicates that the student scored better than 76 out of 100 pupils in the norm group and that 24 students out of 100 scored as well or better than he or she did. The national average for conventional school norms is the 50th percentile rank. Thus, parents who have just taken their children out of the public school system should expect a 50th percentile ranking, but for home educated students who have been learning at home for several years, the results should be near the 76th percentile.

We strongly recommend that the parents who take their children out of school use standardized achievement tests prior to starting home schooling in order to have a "bench mark". The results of such a test would give an objective measure of the level of achievement attained in the public school system and should be put in the student's record file. This precaution is especially important when parents take a child out of school because the child seems to have or has been identified with learning disabilities.

Unfortunately, public school report cards are often so general as to not provide parents with a clear measure of a child's academic achievement, but a standard achievement test would. This precaution might prevent parents from having problems if confronted by a school board who wonders how a child can progress at home. Considering what we have just discussed, the student's results may indicate, for example, that he or she is performing at grade level or higher in reading but has learning problems in other areas that should be addressed. Or, a child may not be achieving at grade level because of learning disabilities that need to be identified and dealt with. Parents should not only look at tests results, but also at how a child is working at achieving these results. An analysis of the child's auditory and visual processing skills and of his or her verbal and non-verbal reasoning skills can be done by a professional in order to identify the reasons for these inefficiencies and, subsequently a tailored program can be built to work at remediating the problems. Academic standardized tests offer a reliable and well recognized instrument that can be administered in the comfort of your home. Do not hesitate to look into them and use them.

Home educators who desire their children to write the tests at home can order the CAT/3 and many other standardized tests through Wise Choice Educational Services (705) 726-5971. Copyright Suzanne Day

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