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By Amy Hood

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Reaching Out To Homeschoolers Through an Environmental Education Program

By Amy Hood

Picture a leisurely walk in the woods with a six-year-old. He walks slowly, finding everything around him interesting. He literally aims to leave no rock unturned, and is delighted with the discovery of ants busily moving across their landscape under one of those rocks. The most common finds in our part of the world – a bright red maple leaf, an acorn – are amazing to him. Every few steps, he stops, crying out, “Look at this!” Not much ground is covered this way, but to this child, this walk in the woods is the best walk ever – at least until the next one comes along. He does not need any structured activities along the way, although if he asked for them, they could be provided.

It may not seem like much of a program. But for many homeschoolers, this sort of learning is preferable to a structured program or a hike with a specific goal. These homeschoolers are not the ones likely to sign up for homeschooling “classes” offered through environmental education (EE) centers; however, this does not mean they are not a viable or receptive audience for the resources EE professionals can provide. Reaching them may just require a more nontraditional approach.

According to some estimates, the number of homeschoolers in the United States has increased from 850,000 in 1999 to 1.1 million in 2003; the percentage of homeschoolers in the student population also increased during this time.¹ Among the many styles of homeschooling is one termed “unschooling,” in which parents trust that their child’s natural curiosity will lead to sufficient learning. Parents encourage this process by exposing their children to interesting ideas, resources, and materials, but no specific curriculum is forced upon the child. Outside tutoring or classes are sometimes used, but generally only at the child’s request. An unschooled child, especially if unschooled since birth, has had little or no exposure to a typical classroom experience. Patrick Farenga, President of Holt Associates Inc., estimates the number of unschoolers in New England to be 20,000-30,000, about 10% of the total homeschool population in the region. He estimates that more than 1.5 million children are homeschooled nationally, with approximately 150,000 of them unschooled².

For these homeschoolers who choose not to replicate the traditional classroom experience at home, a homeschool program offered by an EE center that mimics a school group program may not be appealing. Certainly, many homeschoolers take advantage of these offerings. But

¹ National Center for Education Statistics website (<http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2006/homeschool/estimated.asp>), accessed 23 October 2006.

² Patrick Farenga, email, October 23, 2006.

what can you do to attract homeschoolers who take a more relaxed approach to their children's education?

First, consider this outreach as an opportunity to cast aside concern with state standards of education. While homeschool families, no matter what style is used, must conform to state law (see Sidebar), not one New England state requires results of a standardized test to the exclusion of any other method of assessment, and Connecticut requires no testing or assessment whatsoever³.

Second, think about alternate definitions of "program." The traditional EE program has specific content and objectives, but "program" can also encompass sharing your knowledge of and passion for the land on which you work. While families can take self-guided hikes, not every family contains a naturalist. Consider the six-year-old on his nature walk; while his parents may be able to identify oaks, maples, and common bird songs, many questions of "What's that?" are apt to involve much paging through field guides and perhaps not a definite answer. This is not always considered a bad outcome; many parents feel that teaching a child how to find out the answers to his questions is more productive than simply answering it themselves. But a nature walk with a knowledgeable, passionate guide – who has set aside the time to hike at the pace of a curious child – is an invaluable resource. If the guide is also experienced in working with children, encouraging their curiosity, piquing their interest, and engaging their fascination with the natural world, that walk is definitely going to be up there in the list of "the best walks ever."

Third, evaluate the resources your center has that could be shared with the homeschooling community. Many homeschool families operate on a strict budget, since often one parent's income is considerably reduced, if not nonexistent. While your center may already allow homeschoolers to make use of any teacher resources you have available, resources meant for classroom use may not be attractive to some homeschoolers. If your center operates a summer camp, are there supplies that go mostly unused during the school year? Could a homeschooling family rent or borrow ponding nets, magnifiers, field guides, and other field resources from your center, instead of purchasing these items to use only one or two times a year (or, more likely, going without)? Perhaps a separate membership category could be established for homeschooling families, which allows for borrowing these materials as a benefit. If safety is a concern, could a training program be established so that all are comfortable with allowing homeschooling families to use nets in the pond or stream without staff supervision?

Fourth, assess interaction with all visitors at your center. Often, visitors' centers offer games and challenges such as scavenger hunts to occupy younger visitors, but not all children require these activities. Unschooling children in particular can be alienated by such task-oriented, reward-focused activities. This holds true whether they are casual, such as a scavenger hunt in a visitors' center, or more focused, in a classroom-type program.

³ Homeschool Legal Defense Association State Law links page (<http://www.hsllda.org/laws/default.asp>), accessed 23 October 2006.

Once again, consider that six-year-old boy. Thoroughly entranced by a display on salt marshes, he is repeatedly offered a scavenger hunt to complete, interrupting his enjoyment of the exhibit. While such activities do encourage children to view the entire center, often comprehensiveness comes at the expense of depth. Homeschooling families have as much time as they desire and can visit your exhibits repeatedly; comprehensiveness in one visit is most likely not the goal. If children and parents, homeschoolers or not, seem engaged and occupied, most likely staff members need say nothing more than, "Let me know if you have any questions."

As the homeschooling population grows, so does the opportunity for EE professionals to engage with this group. It can be useful to explore the various styles of homeschooling and brainstorm ideas on how best to serve those with differing educational philosophies. It can also be exciting to exchange ideas with this community and develop different, creative ways to share your knowledge of and passion for the natural world.

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Resources for Reaching Out to Homeschoolers

State laws regarding homeschooling: Homeschool Legal Defense Association State Law links page (<http://www.hslda.org/laws/default.asp>)

Support groups by state: Home Education Magazine lists state support groups at <http://www.homeedmag.com/groups/10.html>; this link contains all New England states plus New York and includes a wide range of homeschooling groups (ie, Christian, secular, unschooling).

Additional information on unschooling can be found at Unschooling.com (www.unschooling.com) and John Holt and Growing Without Schooling (<http://www.holtgws.com/index.html>).

The website of Home Education Magazine (www.homeedmag.com) is a good source of general information about homeschooling and unschooling.

Contacting unschooling/homeschooling groups: Most support group websites contain a "contact" link, and posting to homeschooling lists (such as those operated through Yahoo! Groups) can be accomplished through the list moderator. If your program or center is considering ways to serve the homeschooling and unschooling community, you may consider conducting a needs assessment and, later, advertising your program via the contacts and lists.