

Emily Graff on homeschooling (parent of four children who attend extracurricular classes at Ashland's Willow Wind Community Learning Center) May 2023

What factors figured into your decision to homeschool?

Simply put, homeschooling keeps children longer. It gives them the space to play, be outdoors, imagine, create, and pursue individual passions just because they have the time to do so. There is no ahead or behind, there is no track. The goal is continuous personal growth and fostering a love of learning for whatever sparks that particular child. Mine have all been wildly different, despite all being born within 6 years and having the same home environment.

I also wanted to homeschool because it truly preserves the family unit in a way that's difficult to replicate when children are separated at age 5, put into groups of only others their age, where they will likely split into friendships only within their own gender. This was my experience growing up. My sister (4 years older) entered kindergarten, beginning her journey on her public school educational track. By the time I entered a few years later, we were in completely separate worlds. She had her friends, her class, her birthday parties, her playdates, her sports, and I had mine. Disconnect prevailed. I wanted something different for my kids, and the simplest way to do that was to just not put them on the track.

What's been most satisfying?

Aside from enjoying watching my children pursue their passions, and getting to experience their "light bulb moments" alongside them, I would say that the friendship piece has been the most satisfying. Both within our home and outside of it.

Homeschoolers are not bound by traditional classroom age separation rules, and I've always believed that there is tremendous value in having older children mixed with younger in learning settings and everyday life. So many lessons can be learned and skills practiced when ages are mixed. It has been satisfying to watch how different the idea of friendship is among most homeschoolers. Instead of in only age-based groupings, they've lived as children much more like they will as adults, where you are mingled with people of all ages and backgrounds and stages of life.

This was highlighted recently when my eldest sat down to make her 13th birthday invitee list. At her party were boys and girls of all different ages, families and neighbors, as these are the people she's closest to and has grown to love through everyday life. Friendship, clearly, is a much broader concept for her than it was for me at 13 and I think that's beautiful.

What's been most challenging? How are you trying to address this?

The most challenging aspect has been finding other homeschoolers to be in community with, as there is no one designated meeting place like you get with public school. You have to hunt for others who are doing what you're doing, and especially when first

beginning or moving to a new place this can feel very difficult. Almost a decade into my official homeschool journey though, I've learned some tricks. Other homeschooling families are out there, and now that we've found them my kids have wonderful social lives and community. But it takes time and a ton of effort. It would be amazing if there was some sort of unifying agency built for connecting homeschoolers within a region.

What does Willow Wind add to your child(ren)'s learning that you value most?

Throughout our homeschooling I've always searched for part-time school opportunities. Willow Wind has been the perfect answer to this for us. Being able to join a school community where new friendships can be formed and different experiences gained has been invaluable for us. My children love the experience of school and all that it offers, and they also love that we still get to have slow mornings, flexibility in our schedules, and time to dig deep when we're inspired and go down the rabbit holes.

The homeschool community at Willow Wind has also become quite close-knit, forming a sweet little pod within the larger group. My kids have found friendships within the homeschool group and also the broader pool of full-time students. This adds so much richness to our homeschool life. I wish more schools would adopt such a model to give more homeschooling families the ability to participate in such a program.