

## How Much is Too Much: the myth of socialization

I was one of *those* teachers: 30 years of classroom experience and I was sure that the only way for children to develop socially was in the group setting – definitely not in public education, but in group settings. No question. Firmly armed with that “fact,” I had been developing Enki Education for ten years, without even a thought as to how it might apply to homeschooling.

Into that air-tight “reality” came some very determined homeschoolers who wanted to use Enki in their homes. I resisted, told them the program was structured for the classroom, discouraged them. They were determined and so we began. There was lots of learning for all, and I came to really enjoy working with them and learning from them. BUT I continued to assume that these homeschooled children must suffer from a lack of socialization.

Then, after many requests, we agreed to do a ten-day homeschooling conference for them. The conference was to take place directly after our 4-week, classroom-teacher residential intensive. As the day for homeschoolers to arrive approached, we teachers met to make plans. Honestly, we were dreading the homeschool program. We had just completed four challenging weeks with kids who we believed were socialized – what nightmare lay ahead with 14 unsocialized children aged 2.5 to 12 years? YIKES! We planned; our longtime classroom teacher, with an assistant, would work with the children, and I would teach the parents. Glug. We were counting the days to completion before we even began.



Day one came; the children headed off with their teacher and the adults came with me. I worried all day, and when it was over, I headed off to find the children’s teacher and debrief together. As soon as I saw her, I could see the huge smile spread across her face. For the next hour I got to hear a teacher, almost giddy with enthusiasm, describe the many ways these children supported one another and played together. Most of them, she kept reminding me, had not met before this day. And, they ranged from toddlers to preteens! She could stop glowing. As she finished her tales, she shook her head and said, “In all my classroom years, I have never seen kids get along this well and this joyfully.”

A fluke? All ten days of this session were the same - small lumps and bumps, of course, but even with these, the children found ways to navigate together.

We both watched the children, pondering just what we were seeing. The best way we found to describe what we saw was in terms of elbows. Elbows? It felt as though all elbows were down. In

most groups, it feels like the virtual-elbows are kept up as the children push and prod to be sure their needs are met; the homeschool children seemed to assume their needs would be met and instead used their energy to find ways to help everyone participate.

Was it just that group? The next year, with a mostly different group of children, was exactly the same. And so was the next and the next. I quickly became an advocate for homeschooling, and by the fourth year I was especially grateful for the opportunity this learning offered me personally: I joined the ranks of homeschoolers and began teaching my first grandchild at home – the beginning of what turned out to be six wonderful years.

Then, on what would – for financial reasons – be our last year of offering this camp program, we had the honor of witnessing just how fully socialized homeschoolers can be – socialized, *and* deeply welcoming and accepting.

*Leila, seven years old, darted silently around the other children in the field, tapping one here, knocking one there, and disappearing before she could be seen. She smiled broadly with each mischievous prank and the others laughed with her trickery. Leila, long dark hair, big brown eyes, and a smile that wouldn't quit, was born with a significant physiological malformation causing a functional disorder in her mouth. The result was that at seven – and likely forever – she could not talk or eat solids. She could grunt and cry, but mostly she was "silent Leila."*

*I had been consulting with Leila's mother about her homeschooling for about two years when her mother raised the idea of bringing Leila with her to one of our weeklong workshops, which would mean putting Leila in our camp during the adult class time. Silent Leila in a group of talkers. For a moment I stopped breathing, just feeling fear for sweet Leila. But as I got my breath back, I was flooded with images of all the stories her mother had told me about her these last few years. With each breath, this rather wild idea felt more possible. Her mother and I talked it through and we decided to try, with the caveat that we would not push Leila if it was too much.*

*This was our fifth year of running these camps so we already knew that the homeschooled children were very well socialized – easily flowing together with interest in and care for one another, and doing so to a much greater extent than do most school groups. But integrating Leila? This would be a whole new level of challenge! The others in the group ranged from preschoolers who were too little to understand why she didn't speak, to ten, eleven, and twelve year olds, who we feared might find her difficulty threatening – so we were a bit worried. But as we talked about it and dug down for the deeper truth of the situation, we came up with a very simple approach: when the children had their initial meeting time, on Leila's turn the teacher would just say that "Leila has a different way of speaking and this week we will get to learn her way."*

*The teacher said just that. That was it. In total. Not another thing said, and all week, the other children took up learning Leila's way. By mid-week they were good enough at getting her meaning that they could help her with sneaky plots: she had them getting her another yogurt after she had been told no more, and hiding things for the others to find, and enticing the others into dash and tag games all over the camp.*

Socialization. What is it and how does it happen? True socialization is not about waiting your turn because you are supposed to. It is not about standing in line so you don't get in trouble. It is not about a rote "Sorry," because that is the drill.

Real socialization happens when inner security and stability are nurtured. To be deeply socialized, one must genuinely be interested in and caring of others. That comes naturally from a sense of safety, fulness, and plenty. Being in a large group in most school structures, more often than not, results in overwhelm; that much is too much. And with that overwhelm comes closing down and holding a defensive – and hungry! – stance. That is not socialization, at least not one I want for the children. The homeschoolers I have seen, almost universally, greet each other with interest, and do so far more fully than most school educated children.

Can this happen in a classroom? I have seen it happen, but it takes real attention to the issue of overwhelm. In the Enki classroom, rhythm of the day and coherence of the environment have always been a central focus for just this reason. But, in great part because of our experience with homeschoolers, we also put a lot of attention to ensuring that the children have the personal space they need. So the very thing that in the classroom demands a lot of attention, at home, is a given.

The big question: given how well socialized homeschoolers can be, why do we offer an online peer program at all?

Human beings are "community creatures." We long for connection to one another – so much so that we will even accept superficial or false connection rather than have none at all. The child's first community is his or her family – that community is first and is #1 throughout life. But by the time we are toddlers, we start to notice and ache to connect with others. Virtually every homeschooling family I have ever worked with recognizes the importance of social time, and carefully balances just how many group activities and play dates the children participate in.

However, when the children hit the Middle School years, their need to explore who they are begins to center around relationships with their peers. They need to step away from their parents as the all-and-the-everything, and move into a more independent and peer-functioning world. Still, especially in preadolescence, they are very



vulnerable to, and overwhelmed by, the push and pull of the group.

To meet these conflicting needs for the homeschooler, we offer our live-online, Virtual Community School. This part-time yet comprehensive program allows the students to make meaningful connections with their peers, in real time, and to connect with an adult who is not their parent – and it allows them to do real and relevant work together, i.e. to exercise their socialization skills! The details of how we do this can be found on our web site, but far more important is hearing from the children. Meet Rebecca, now 16 years old:

*I joined the trial run of the Enki Virtual School when I was in 7<sup>th</sup> grade. On the first day, I remember showing up, fiddling with the confusing microphone, and feeling awkward in front of the camera. I expected an impersonal experience: a teacher lecturing, and the students and me glancing uncomfortably around. That was not what I received. Instead, I found a warm and welcoming environment where the other children and myself were allowed to talk and joke about the things important to us, with the teacher there to guide conversations and, when necessary, to focus us on the content. After the first day, people began showing up early for the sole purpose of talking before class.*

*Then during class we were often put in virtual meeting rooms, with one or two other pupils so we could get to know each other and hold more in-depth discussions. It was in one of these rooms that I met my friend Hazel. We were given topics and told to debate for and against, I hadn't really spoken to her before that point, but we worked well together. It was a few weeks later that we were assigned to do a project together. We got on a private meeting room in our free time, and started in on our topic. Three hours later we were laughing and eating lunch together like old friends, despite the miles between us. Eventually both of us graduated middle school, and left the online Enki program, and still, almost two years into high school, we remain friends. She came to Denver to see me, and I visited Chicago to stay with her. It was strange the first time seeing her in person, but after two minutes all that faded away and we were able to settle in.*

*For me, the Enki Virtual School was a perfect transition in a social sense. It got me out of my shell and provided a way for me to spend time with other kids in a “classroom” setting, while still within the familiar environment of Enki’s curriculum and teachers. It gave me my best friend, and now looking back, I also see how graceful it made my transition to high school and how much it gave me socially.*

Even with the experience of the homeschooler camps we offered, I expected that in the Virtual School a lot of focus would need to be on learning the give and take of working together. Once again, I was wrong. The ease and care with which [the students give feedback and find compromise has just been astounding](#). And the creativity that fosters is quite something – be sure to stop in and see the amazing group work they have with [their projects](#).

The [Enki Virtual Community School](#) offers a program in which real relationships are made and in which the children can explore their own creativity and responsibility in working with others. And yet, held within the homeschool environment, they are not overwhelmed. Our rich and relevant [curriculum content](#) helps the students to have meaningful discussions, and the open-ended group projects give them a chance to test their wings both socially and creatively. All told, it has proved to provide a wonderful balance for the homeschooling preadolescents.

