

Early Learning 101

Guide for Homeschooling 0-7 year olds

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Homeschooling the Natural/Fitrah Way

My children have never been to school. And if you count the initial years of parenting/tarbiyyah in it too, I have been homeschooling for a good 8 years. Well after all isn't homeschooling tarbiyyah too? Or at least that's how I see it; homeschooling, an extension of tarbiyyah, where tarbiyyah is not only the development of character but the ability to raise a child who despite being surrounded by falsehood, is able to stick to his truth and has the strength to call a wrong as wrong.

And you know what's the best place for all that to happen?

At home.

From a mother's lap.

However, I realized tarbiyyah isn't just listing down all the rights and wrongs and giving out commands. But it has to be done ever so mindfully and gently.

But a very important thing to keep in mind here is that children aren't our property.

Yes, yes we all know our children have been entrusted to us by Allah and we will be answerable for whatever we will do with them and unto them. But an important thing to remember here is that they are also individuals with their little personalities, likes and dislikes and a very strong need as well as a right to be respected.

Hence, our job as parents is not just to teach them and fill them up with facts and theories. But our job should be to nurture and preserve whatever they are already born with.

And you know what?

Learning happens alongside on its own, ever so spontaneously and naturally. All you need to do is facilitate it all and then stand back and watch the miracles happen.

In our home, we do what they call unschooling. Unschooling is when no information or knowledge is coerced. But instead, the child takes ownership of what and how and where they want to learn.

With that said, in this resource, I will be elaborating on few key areas listed below from my experiences and humble knowledge:

1. Teaching children Islam
2. Creating a learning environment
3. Creating routines & rhythms
4. Ideal curriculum for 0-7 year old
5. Connecting children to nature: how & why's
6. Our unschooling experiences
7. Final notes on what learning actually is

1. Teaching children Islam

A very common question I get asked is, how do you teach children Islam and what resources do you use?

It's a very valid question because we all want to raise well rounded good muslims don't we? We want our children to grow up to pray all their daily prayers on time as well as fast, do zakat eventually and also recite the Qur'an properly.

However, the most important point we miss here is that being a Muslim is more about who we ourselves are as parents and people. Because it's ultimately what we are and what we do which is translated into our children.

And that's how our children can be taught best, by seeing and copying us, the parents.

The truth is, we as parents can tell our children all the facts and theories and have them memorise the Qur'an and make them pray the salah perfectly. But if we they don't see us doing these things with heart, totally embodying and embracing the character of what we want them to be, then all of what we tell them, doesn't really hold any weight in it.

If we want our children to love Islam, they need to see us loving it and living it. We need to show our children Islam is life through every action we do, through every word we speak. They need to know Islam isn't just a subject to learn or something to be done on separately in a masjid or reserved for special occasions.

Our children need to see us living this life proudly and graciously so we are able to create meanings and experiences that become inseparable from our children's hearts, minds, souls and identities.

We need to show our children what it means to be a muslim in little everyday things we do like how even smiling can become an act of charity as taught by the Prophet as well as rewarded by Allah.

We need to show our children and everyone around us kindness so our children see and experience through us how beautiful this deen actually is.

Let them live, experience and breathe Islam truly and wholeheartedly through you by what you say and do every little moment, every single day.

Want them to learn and memorise a dua? Learn it yourself first or let them see you recite it.

Want them to love and learn the Qur'an? Let them see you loving and learning and earnestly reciting the Qur'an and wait for them to eagerly ask you to teach them the Qur'an as well.

Just read the Quran, Seerah, stories from the lives of all the pious people who lived yourself and relate them to your children. Or do it together. This can become a lifelong learning project that can be done with the children with so many memories to be made in between.

We don't necessarily have to reinvent the wheel or come up with extraordinary techniques. What I am trying to say is that teaching and learning is the little things we do ourselves every day.

It was narrated that 'Abdullah ibn 'Umar (may Allah be pleased with him) said: I heard the Messenger of Allah (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) say: "Each of you is a shepherd and each of you is responsible for his flock. The ruler is a shepherd and is responsible for his flock. A man is the shepherd of his household and is responsible for his flock. A woman is the shepherd of her husband's house"

Narrated by al-Bukhaari, 853; Muslim, 1829.

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What choices are we ready to make for our flock?

You can read more about making the Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم in the blogpost below. The blogpost also has a FREE sunnah card printable:

<https://www.theoddmuslimah.com/parenting/making-muhammad-come-alive-through-his-sunnah/>

2. Creating Resources & a Learning Environment

I mentioned above that learning happens in the things we do every day. But how do we make sure that learning happens despite the things we do or don't do?

It can simply be done by creating the right environment within the home.

When we decide to homeschool, we should be ready to allow children some ownership over the space we live in. Meaning to say we should be willing to let the children move around freely, explore and experiment. But most important, we should create the space in our hearts and minds to accept the mess they make along the way.

A thing to remember is, it's very likely children will want to do all that we do or they see others do around the house: cutting vegetables, cooking, cleaning, etc. If they show eagerness they should be allowed and a chance to help with all that.

However, that doesn't mean they shouldn't have a space exclusive for their own learning and tinkering around with objects.

There should be at least one place in the house where they feel sole ownership of the space and can experiment, create and mess around at their own will.



Some ideas about how that space should be and what it should look like:

1. Safe
2. Well ventilated, bright and well lit. Ideally closer to windows
3. Good Material selection (books, objects, tools, visual aids, etc)
4. Appealing & inviting
5. Flexible. Can be rearranged according to needs and requirements

In this space, children should have free access as well as freedom to use the material however they like.

In our home, we have a craft/invention corner where we have craft supplies along with some material which has been collected from around the house like used boxes, egg cartons, broken toys & gadgets, packaging material, etc which children have full liberty to pull apart and make things and just let their imagination take full reins.

Speaking of imagination, nothing sparks a child's curiosity and interest better than a good book. Be sure to surround a child's environment with many books on various subjects and topics ranging from religious as well as secular topics.

When selecting books, don't restrict yourself to just age-appropriate books. While it is important and has its place, also make sure to select books that are rich in language as well as provide a broader view of the topic. This can provide an opportunity for the parent to learn along with their child.

Reading with and along with your child can help achieve following:

1. Positive association with books
2. Development of language skills, building vocabulary
3. Introduction to wider topics amongst other benefits

With that said, the role of the parent/ caretaker in the environment cannot be ignored. The role of the parent should not only be that of a facilitator and mentor but also that of a learner herself.

To nurture the love of learning in our children, our children should see us learning too. It's by seeing the parent that the child feels motivated to try to learn something herself as well.

Role of resources:

One of the things which really overwhelms and sometimes even puts people off homeschooling is resources as well as what curriculum to follow, where to source all the resources, etc etc.

However, it doesn't have to be as complicated as it's made or thought to be because everything a child ever needs to learn and thrive on is either present at home or can be easily resourced.

With that said, the number one resource a child ever needs to learn is his parents and the adults around him with those adults always keen and present to answer all the questions,

have conversations and be available to facilitate the little learners in whatever way as is required.

The number two resource which needs to be around children is good books which I have talked about briefly above. I will add this much here that the we don't have to spend an arm and leg on resourcing books. Get a library membership if there's one nearby. Books can always be exchanged with other families or you can work on creating your own home library. Some really good books can be easily resourced from second hand book shops.

As for other learning resources like manipulatives and other educational toys, always go for things which are open ended, have potential to be used many ways and can be used long term. If not then, many resources can easily be made at home with things lying around the house.

Some examples of open-ended toys:

- Lego
- Blocks
- Magna tiles
- Toys which can be put together and pulled apart again
- Other learning toys which can be used many ways

Other things which are worth having around the house with a lot of potential as a play as well as learning material:

- Playdough
- Magic sand
- Beads & Buttons
- Rocks
- Pom poms
- Marbles
- Sea shells, etc

Besides all this a parent/facilitator can always prepare their own resources without spending a single penny but just putting in a little effort. Sharing some examples below:





3. Creating rhythms & routines:

Between ages of 1-5, a child completely revolves around the mother. Hence, the routine of children follows that of the mother mostly. So, whatever the mother does, the child follows.

However, maintaining a strict routine at this age can be rough and trying to stick to it can leave a mother frustrated and exhausted. In turn what should be sought is having a suitable rhythm to the day.

Having a rhythm means where things follow one after the other where there is a certain predictability without having strict boundaries related to time. These rhythms can eventually

help build up routines later as the child is older and ready to take on the responsibility of salah.

For this it's very important that the parents themselves have certain established routines and rhythms for themselves so in turn it becomes easier for the children to have rhythms and routines for themselves as well.

A good way for mother to keep track of all things she wants to do by having a simple planner for herself. Besides planning day to day activities around the 5 daily salah can help establishing good routines as well as have more barakah in the day. As example of a simple planner given below:

The image shows a printable planner titled "my barakah filled day" on a pink background. It includes several sections: a "to do list" with five checkboxes, a "salah tracker" for fajr, zuhr, asar, maghrib, and isha with checkboxes, a "daily quran" section with a box, a "health goals" section with checkboxes for water intake, exercise, vitamins, and other, and a "today's reflections" section with lines for writing. There are also sections for "alhamdulillah for" and "today's affirmation". The website "www.theoddmuslimah.com" is at the bottom.

Since at this age the focus is to build rhythms, children can be encouraged to have an overlook of all the things they need to do through the day and tick them off as they go. This can be done by simply drawing out things for them in a notebook or a white board. Or if you want to go hands on, this can be done with using a board and some things drawn/printed out which children can pin. An example given below:



Some things which can be included in a child's routine this small besides the usual changing, brushing, meals, etc is having exclusive one on one time with children. This can include reading books, doing crafts, having conversations, nature walks, etc. If you are someone who likes to keep a track of things and keep things organized, you can create folders and boards of things to tick off daily. At this age these folders can include a little calendar, days of the week, months of the year, tracking the daily weather, sing rhymes together, etc.



However, an important thing that should be kept in mind here is that all of these things should be done playfully, not forcing the child to keep seated. Do things as long as the child seems interested, focusing more on having conversation rather than trying to pass them on facts to memorise. Incorporating play is important here so the child looks forward to this time and asks for it.

4. Ideal Curriculum for 0-7 year olds

The ideal curriculum for 0-7 year olds should include:

- A lot of play! Let them run, jump, climb, swing, slide to their heart's delight!
- A lot of book reading on their loved ones' laps
- Story telling and a lot of heartfelt conversations
- Exploring & experimenting
- A lot of hugs and smiles
- Exclusive times with parents
- Running after birds + playing in mud puddles
- Building rock towers + collecting sticks
- Listening to their parents recite the Quran
- Going to libraries + museum + parks

5.Connecting Children with Nature:

Since children are born on fitrah, it's important to keep them connected them to nature. This helps keeping them on fitrah as well as there are so many learning opportunities in being out and about in nature.

Many of the resources for learning can come from nature itself and it doesn't really require spending any money.

Trying to keep children connected to nature is also really important to do so in this day and age when adults and children alike are so disconnected from nature. The best way to do so is to allow children as much as outdoor play as possible. Outdoor play allows a lot of time to explore different living things as well as how different things coexist and survive. For this exploration, child should be facilitated with different tools and some loose material lying around the house to aid their exploration and experimentation.



Something which should be done regularly is going on nature walks, planning outdoor family activities and travel. Children can collect different things on the walks to bring home later as collection or to use in their projects.



If many of these things are not possible due to whatever reason, at least try to have some outdoor and indoor plants in whatever little space you have. Children should see parents caring for these plants so they see the plant growing and thriving as a result. There are so many questions and conversations that can stem as a result of seeing these this activity. Perhaps children can also be encouraged to journal and chart the plant's growth.

Another thing which can be done is to keep a bird feeder and/or a water tray for the birds to come and feed on it. This will also give the child to observe Allah's creations, make him ponder and open more venues for learning.

To encourage children to observe their natural surroundings, they can be asked to observe and note what the weather is like outside.

Also, some outdoor learning space can be created specifically for learning and play to encourage more outdoor time.



If screen time is an absolute, then instead of cartoons, children can be shown some good nature documentaries about animals and their habitats, about different natural phenomenon and also about how people around the world survive in different situations and climates.

I will end this discussion by sharing my own unschooling experiences and some reflections on how we should perceive learning.

My Mistakes & Trying to Make up for Them

I started out things with my son a very natural and relaxed way in being in close synchrony and in contact with nature. I had the most beautiful experience in discovering this world

through the eyes of my child. I loved taking him on long walks as it was such a pleasure seeing him so curious and awed about the world around him.

He loved to run after birds, dig around in mud, play with bugs and splash in water puddles.

It was such a joy to see him explore the world around him. It was when he would copy everything I would take on, I felt I needed to better myself as a person as well as improve myself in my pursuits.

I would read the Quran; he would pick up a book and pretend to read himself.

We prayed, he prayed along, I cooked, he wanted to help.

One day I wrote out his name for him and he picked it up so well that next day he wrote it down himself.

He was only three then.

I was so overjoyed at this accomplishment I felt as if I had a genius prodigy at my hands.

I instantly started daydreaming of the possibilities!

Maybe we will get him reading all these big books by the time he is five and imagine how he will become the envy of all friends and family!

In my enthusiasm I got all these books to teach him how to write and learn ABCs and 123s.

I never thought that would be the beginning of our little nightmare and the end of our joy as a mom and son duo.

I would literally coax the poor little guy to trace a letter or a number every single day, correcting him where he didn't do it right, rubbing it and making him do it again. He just didn't want to do it and the promise of a golden star in the end didn't help either.

We both ended up really frustrated and the worst part of it all was, the spark of it which was happening all too naturally and spontaneously was gone! He didn't want to do anything with a pencil or a book anymore.

It took me a while to realize my mistake. But Alhamdulillah realized I did and from that's where our unschooling journey began.

And what a wonderful journey it has been since then. I would let my children be in the backyard for hours doing "nothing" except climbing trees, making tents, making a home for ants, being creative with bits of wood lying around.

Learning I realized shouldn't be forced on a child. It's built in a child to learn things on his own, just like he learns to walk and talk. Our job in it all is to be a loving and watchful facilitator and enjoy it all.

Some Unschooling Experiences

Few days ago, all tucked in bed, ready to doze off, me reciting azkar to children, little Miss turns to me reflectively, "Mama, when we enter tomorrow, tomorrow becomes today, day after tomorrow becomes tomorrow, and today becomes yesterday."

I was trying to process it all with a half-asleep mind when little Mr interrupts. "Mama I just figured out the five times table!" And he goes on to narrate it till 12 and beyond and concludes, "Mama you know what? I think times tables are just the same number added again and again!"

That's the joy of children taking the lead of their own learning or unschooling (which has become quite the buzzword these days).

If you let children be, they have it in-built in them to learn. Because they all observe, experiment, build connections between observations and all the happenings in their surroundings and lives. Hence they can come to conclusions very easily themselves.

This is how knowledge should be gained and built upon.

How things are imparted in schools with things separated out from one another as "subjects" is nothing but learned facts and crammed information. And with this crammed information, most of the time they don't have an inkling how to apply that in real life.

Thinking about the time how I memorized the time tables still horrifies me and it wasn't until many years later when it dawned on me what they really meant. Numbers never really were my thing. I was more crafty, sporty, empathetic....those were my strengths and intelligences. I was still a good student, considering my grades but had I been tested in things I was "intelligent" in, it would have been a whole different game.

Anyhow, I feel it's very supercilious of most of us adults to think that children need to be taught by us. As is apparent from the Qur'an how Allah created Adam and taught him the names of everything (Surah al-Baqarah:31). Considering that, Allah has already sent down each and every child knowing what it wants to know. Every skill, every piece of information just needs a proper time to come out. It's just because of that knowledge a child knows how to suckle at his mother's breast right after he's born, that's how he knows how to cry to have his demands met, that's how he knows how to use his hands to put food in his mouth and not in his ear. And that's how he eventually learns to walk without any intervention. When we try to intervene in our gist to make them learn, we usually do more harm than good.

Our job as parents and caretakers is to "facilitate" them through this all. Yes, the keyword here is "facilitate". To assist, to support, to help, to make an environment conducive to learning whatever that they want to learn.

And how is that?

Here is what we do. We have some (if not many) books and other resources lying around the house which children are free to choose from, observe and try to read. We try to answer whatever questions they have, listen to their own made-up theories, have a dialogue, and look up things that we both can't figure out. It's a very holistic way of leading their interests and curiosities where they come to conclusions on their own rather than try to pump facts down their throats which does no one no good.

And did I tell you, it's such a joy to see their faces light up when they figure out things on their own? That joy honestly knows no bounds. And that's the kind of knowledge that sticks through life rather than forgotten right after giving an exam.

However what I don't get is, why do these philosophical and mathematical realizations have to come at night when after a tiring day a mama could really use some sleep 😊

What is Learning?

As parents we often get anxious and fussy about whether our child is learning. And if our child is learning, is he learning enough.

However, an important question we need to ask ourselves is, what is learning?

Where does begin? Does it even have an end?

Does it begin when a child is sent to school?

Or does it start happening long before a child even opens its eyes in this world, resting away in its mother's womb. Stretching, rolling and kicking to the sound of its mother's heart beating.

Then the child arrives in this world and it knows to have its needs met, it just needs to cry.

Isn't it learning when a mother knows what cry means the baby needs to be fed and what cry means it needs to be held?

There's learning when an infant stretches out her hands in front of her, observing them, putting them together then letting them go in the process becoming aware of her existence.

And isn't it learning how a child observes his parents' faces and adapts many expressions as his own?

And the miracle of how they learn to talk all on their own! Thinking about it fills me with awe of The Creator.

This goes to show, learning is not only in the classroom being endlessly instructed or sitting at a desk, filling away workbooks or just going to college to pursue a degree.

Learning is, I have come to learn, in making relationships and trying to maintain them.

Learning is in learning skills and using them for your survival and for the betterment of others around you.

Learning is in the people you meet and the stories they tell you.

Learning is getting to know how to exist in harmony and synchrony with nature and not to trample on it and destroy it for every benefit of yours.

Learning is in observing and pondering over all the signs in nature and coming closer to your Lord through it.

It was learning for me to shed off all the years and layers of conditioning and shine through as the true authentic me just as Allah made me to be.

That's what the highest form of learning is. It is not in pursuing a doctorate degree and becoming a PhD. But it is in becoming aware of yourself, your purpose and trying your best to live it.

And you know what the tragedy is? They teach none of that at any school or college.

Don't kill me when I say school kills much of that learning process when learning can happen despite school every waking moment of the day, day after day till the last day.

As long as you are alive, learning will keep happening till you take the last breath.

But the question is, are we willing to learn?

"The illiterate of 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn." - Alvin Toffler

You can find me blogging over at:

www.theoddmuslimah.com

Upcoming project for homeschooling families:

www.instagram.com/home_ed_aspirations