Socialization

Homeschoolers call this the S word. This is because whenever a mother says, “I’ve decided to homeschool my children,” the inevitable reply is, “but what about socialization?”

The implication is that when you homeschool, your children are not “socialized”, and that children who go to a school do get “socialized”. We can see immediately that the main point is what do we mean by this word, “socialization”? What do we consider good “socialization” of a child?

Many homeschoolers who return to school for high school indeed find themselves to be aliens in a strange world. They usually do not swear, do not use broken sentences peppered with “like” and “cool”, do not interact in a “law of the jungle” manner, or in other words, do not behave like typical schooled teenagers.

Are they “unsocialized”? Rather, we are in a strange situation where children who go to school enter a sub-society of our real adult society, where people are categorized by age. The top of the pecking order is the child who is in the same age bracket. How many of you have seen an older sibling bring home some classmates (otherwise known as “friends”, for they are synonyms), and kick out of the room a younger sibling who wanted to join in? In fact, older siblings develop a segregational attitude and behavior toward their own younger sibling/s only after going to school. It is indeed so prevalent that such behavior is often featured in children’s programs on television. And the situation is not solved in a satisfactory manner most of the time.

By the time an young adult graduates and starts working, it is no wonder that they get along best only with other young adults within a few years of their own age? They cannot stand old fogies and find little children very annoying. At work, they have to learn how to get along with co-workers from different age or cultural strata. Most new young graduates are arrogant and think they know better than the old timers. I myself at that age was no exception. It took a lot of years of experience to figure out the truth in the Chinese adage: “I have eaten more salt in my lifetime than you have eaten rice in yours.”

On the other hand, if you care to go visit a park on “park day” for a homeschool group, you will find children playing in groups of varied ages. Often you will see an older child pushing the swing for a younger child, or helping up a toddler that fell down. On field trips, all families come with babies in strollers as well as teenagers striding on their own. Many of these also read to their grandparents or serve in other elder people’s homes. They delight in listening to history coming live in front of them.

Homeschoolers are also much more tolerant of diverse cultural backgrounds. You find them attending all kinds of multi-cultural events and eager to learn more about them. Whereas in the rare instances when I have seen mainstream high schoolers pulled to a cultural event, they would shyly sit in a corner as unobtrusively as possible, and not mix with the rest of the “aliens”.

I believe that true socialization is the ability to survive socially successfully in our society. By society, I mean the society at large, not pockets of sub-cultures.

While homeschooling, the mother is 24/7 with her child. She remembers to nag him/her to say please and thank you. The mother of a schooled child does too, but she get the child only 1/3 of his waking hours versus the school peers who model wanted behavior for 2/3 of that time, usually when s/he is most awake and his/her brain is at peak function.

Think about it. Suddenly at the age of three, a child goes to preschool. From then on, the highest authority in behavior is the teacher, and the strongest models are his/her peers at school. Teachers have an extremely important modeling role in character education that few are actively aware of. When a child interacts inappropriately in school, how many teachers intervene immediately and steers the child to the appropriate one?

Or, to take the opposite extreme, how many teachers are aware of a special child who acts or thinks outside the box? How many punish them for being different and force them back into a peer-approved or teacher-approved box of conformity? But then again, who are we hiring as teachers in our schools? And that takes us back to the original question. School or socialization? Is school-type socialization good or bad? Does it handicap the graduate or enhance it? Is there an alternative to it other than homeschooling?

I guess the jury is still out on these questions.