



# Educational Benefits of Literature-based Homeschooling



Audrey wondered if she should give up. She wanted her family to enjoy homeschooling. But the daily textbook lessons felt so ... dull! Had she made a mistake trying to teach her children at home?

Audrey decided to change up her curriculum. In her own words, she gave a big “Goodbye to boring textbooks!!” and switched to literature-based learning.

Her family now uses curriculum that centers on “real” books. They learn history through biographies and historical fiction, her kids learn to read through engaging stories instead of dry workbooks, and together they learn about cultures and the world through gripping books. Audrey says:

*Our children (and I!) truly look forward to our school days now. I am so thankful for this opportunity to create such strong bonds with my precious children while they learn. –Audrey Z, Aug. 2011*

In other words, Audrey and her family love their homeschool now. But a big question remains: are her kids really learning with this new approach? Is curriculum built on literature-based learning just a *fun* option, or is it truly more effective than textbooks or computer-based learning?

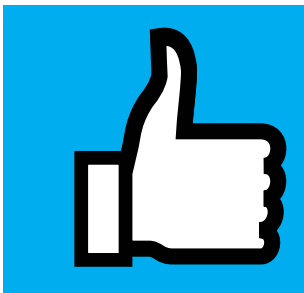
Of course, every homeschool family is different; you have the wonderful freedom to choose the homeschool style that fits you. But strong evidence—and the experience of thousands of homeschool families—shows that literature-based learning really does work.

Consider nine educational benefits of literature-based learning.

## **1. Literature conveys information in an enjoyable format.**

As a parent, you know that a bit of fun can make all the difference. As that cheerful nanny says, “a spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down.”

That’s what literature does. It takes valuable information and knowledge — that may be rather bland on its own — and wraps it up in an “easy-to-swallow” story.



Think back to your childhood for a moment. Do you remember the books your parents read to you? *Green Eggs and Ham*, *Good Night Moon*, *Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel* ... ?

Do you remember the books you read by yourself, after you “graduated” from read-aloud time? Nonfiction books about

dinosaurs, airplanes, and horses ... Fiction books like *Frog and Toad*, *Make Way for Ducklings*, *Homer Price*, *Old Yeller* ... Can you picture them ... remember the stories ... recall the characters?

Most of us remember our favorite childhood books in vivid detail. In fact, we often want our kids to read the same books we read as children.

In those books you read as a child, you gained valuable insights, practical information, exposure to various cultures, and a desire to acquire — or avoid — certain character qualities. Perhaps you learned about perseverance in *The Little Engine that Could*, the value of family in the *Little House on the Prairie* books, or the importance of loyalty in *The Boxcar Children*. You may have learned about Polynesian culture in *Island of the Blue Dolphins*, grappled with racism through *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*, or “visited” Japan in *Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes*. You had a world of knowledge and experience right at your fingertips. You wanted to enter that world ... and you enjoyed it when you visited.

This is the experience you can offer your kids today. Through literature, you can introduce children to people and places around the world and throughout history. You can give them worthy heroes who can inspire courage, integrity and generosity in your children. And you can do this in a way kids enjoy.

You may wonder how the enjoyable nature of stories helps kids learn. Well, we know that when kids read, they learn. And when kids enjoy learning, they want to keep on learning. Literature-based curriculum capitalizes on that fact.

Which type of student do you think will learn more? The one who protests against each assignment and book? Or the one who is sneaking off his “school” books to re-read at night because they’re just so good?

## **2. Literature conveys information in a format that is easy to remember.**

Facts and figures without context are difficult to remember. That’s why a lot of memory systems rely on mnemonics and other memory tricks to memorize raw data.

But put those same facts and figures into a story — give them context — and all of a sudden, it’s easy to remember the information! Stories serve as anchors for facts and figures that would otherwise be lost in the great sea of information in your mind.



Let's compare an excerpt from a common seventh grade American history textbook and a passage from a book that third-graders can read in literature-based curriculum. First, the textbook:

***The shot heard 'round the world.*** On the morning of April 19, 1775, the first shots of the **War for Independence** (sometimes called the **Revolutionary War**) were fired at Lexington, Massachusetts. It is not known for sure who fired the first shot, but it was a shot heard 'round the world, for it was to change the course of human history.

After killing eight Americans and wounding ten others at Lexington, the British marched on to Concord, destroying the military supplies stored there. **The Battle of Lexington and Concord** was not quite over, however. As the British troops headed back to Boston, patriots fired on them from behind trees, shrubs, and barns. Although 93 Americans died that day, the British lost 273 men. For a brief moment in history, little Massachusetts stood alone against one of the great empires of the world.

***The Second Continental Congress.*** Less than a month after the Battle of Lexington and Concord, on May 10, 1775, the Second Continental Congress convened in Philadelphia. John Hancock was elected president. The assembled representatives of the American people decided emphatically that they would fight. The **Continental Army** was established, a call was issued to the colonies to raise troops and funds, and **George Washington** (1732-1799), who had distinguished himself as a lieutenant colonel in the French and Indian War, was appointed commander-in-chief.<sup>1</sup>

Did your eyes start to glaze over? It's just information, laid out on the page, waiting for little minds to somehow absorb it.

But consider this segment from *Johnny Tremain*, a historical fiction work for elementary-age children. As a literature-based homeschool curriculum company, Sonlight Curriculum uses this book in our "Intro to American History, Year 1 of 2" program suitable for 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> grade students. This excerpt describes Boston citizens watching British soldiers return from their defeat at the Battle of Lexington:

Although no townsmen, except only the doctors, were permitted on the wharf, Johnny knew that hundreds of them stood well back and

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<sup>1</sup> Jerry H. Combee, Ph.D., Kurt Grussendorf, Beka Horton, Brian Ashbaugh, Susan Etheridge, *History of the World in Christian Perspective*, Third Edition (Pensacola, FL: A Beka Book, 1995), 310.

in the darkness, gloating. They were not saying much, only watching. Then one man began to whistle and the next took it up and the next and the next. The whistling was shrill as a fife. They had not forgotten the prophecy of that morning, 'They go out by "Yankee Doodle," but they'll dance to it before nightfall!'

'Yankee Doodle' filled the darkness....

Four more boats were coming in. Johnny dared move out onto the wharf, but he still kept well in shadow. More wounded. Could these be the very men who had started out so confidently? Bedraggled, dirty, torn uniforms, torn flesh, lost equipment. Faces ghastly with fatigue and pain. Some were twisting and crying out.

The first boats were filled with privates. They had been packed in, and now were being tossed ashore, like so much cordwood. Most of them were pathetically good and patient, but he saw an officer strike a man who was screaming.

Johnny's hands clenched. 'It is just as James Otis said,' he thought. 'We are fighting, partly, for just that. Because a man is a private is no reason he should be treated like cordwood.'<sup>2</sup>

The literature-rich approach to home education provides the context; it communicates information in the midst of a story. You can't miss the drama because "you are there." You feel the pain. You grieve the losses. You are there in the thick of things. And you understand and remember. You remember the years, or the general places and times in history. Because you understand the broader context.

Instead of a few paragraphs in a textbook, you get entire novels and biographies that you can't put down. When your children have watched and experienced the Revolutionary War through Johnny Tremain's eyes, they'll remember why the war happened, who was involved, what the costs were, what the conflict was, and what the results were. Pretty impressive stuff.

*My children remember the historical events far better with [a literature-based curriculum] than if they had read about them in a textbook. My children don't understand how anyone can say history is boring. –Steph W, Aug. 2011*

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2 Esther Forbes, *Johnny Tremain* (New York: Dell Publishing 1943), 240-241. Sonlight item [#DA04](#).

### 3. Literature encourages you to interact with your kids.

Many parents struggle to get their kids to talk to them. Maybe you've experienced this yourself. But when you use literature as the foundation of your homeschool curriculum, you may find it's much easier to spark conversations. *Good conversations. Significant conversations.*

With a literature-rich homeschool program, you'll spend some time each day reading aloud to your children. This reading will often prompt a question or two from your children. They'll ask about the story, the characters, or unfamiliar words.



As you interact with their questions, you'll sometimes find you and your children enjoying entire conversations — the kind of conversations that will shape their thoughts and values.

When your children read on their own, you'll find it quite common for them to initiate conversation with you without being prompted ... because it's enjoyable for children to talk about the stories they're reading.

But even if your children don't initiate a conversation with you, good literature-rich curriculum will provide direction and plenty of great discussion questions to help you along. One homeschool mom who uses Sonlight Curriculum wrote:

*Sonlight gives us a platform in which to explore and discuss the world in light of our beliefs. My kids are learning how to think critically and logically by reading all kinds of books and discussing all kinds of issues with us. Sonlight has become more than a curriculum. It is part of our lifestyle. —Elaine B of Massachusetts*

Interaction with your children helps you form meaningful relationships with them. Your discussions together are also vital to your children's education. Simply talking about their learning helps your kids remember what they're learning. And as you discuss with your kids, you can naturally assess how much your kids understand and where they need extra explanation. We believe that literature, more than any other educational medium, encourages this interaction.

## 4. Literature helps your children develop a superb vocabulary

Do you know the single best way for children to acquire the enormous vocabulary they need to become educated adults? You guessed it. Reading!

Even simple children's books contain a much wider vocabulary than that which college educated adults use in day-to-day speech. Look at this excerpt from a classic children's story for preschoolers:

Little Bear stopped now and then to eat berries. Then he had to hustle along to catch up!

Because his feet were tired of hustling, he picked out a large clump of bushes and sat down right in the middle and ate blueberries.<sup>3</sup>

Just think of those words (in a book for *preschoolers*) – when is the last time you used the words “hustle” or “clump” in everyday speech? Or what about the phrase “now and then”? This is all vocabulary your children should certainly learn. When they read regularly, they will naturally absorb scores of new words without even realizing it.

You can buy special “vocabulary curriculum” such as flash cards and workbooks. Those can be a helpful supplement. But by themselves, they can't even come close to building the kind of vocabulary that reading will. As children learn new words in context and see them again and again in various books, they will absorb the new words as part of their toolbox of words.

We believe that reading is really the best (perhaps the only) way children can develop the extensive vocabulary they'll need for academic and professional success in life.



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<sup>3</sup> Robert McCloskey, “Blueberries for Sal.” *Make Way for McCloskey*. (New York: Viking 2004), 33-34. Sonlight item [#TA04](#).

## 5. Literature helps your children develop global awareness

Do you have money in your homeschool budget for a trip around the world? Probably not.



But as global commerce and politics becomes increasingly interconnected, we must prepare our children for the world we live in. As adults, our kids will probably interact and work with people from a huge variety of cultures. At the very least, they will see and hear about these cultures on the news.

So how do we prepare them for this? Aside from traveling, reading may be the best way to help children become aware of the world. Reading opens doors for children to walk in the shoes of people very different from your own family. Literature lets you see the perspective of characters who have lived throughout history and around the world. Fiction and biographies answer questions such as: How do children on the other side of the world live? What do they wear and eat? How do they play? How do they interact with their families? How do their families worship? What do they believe? How do they view the world?

As your children learn these points about different cultures, they also learn another, more important point: people are people. As you read “real books” with your kids, they learn to appreciate the uniqueness of different races and nationalities.

Good literature-rich curriculum should include books that help you get to know cultures very different from your own. You can meet characters (fictional and real) from Peru and Pakistan, China and Cambodia, South Africa and Switzerland. As you journey with these characters in gripping books, your kids will come to see people of that culture as real people, just like yourself.

You may be impressed with how similar people really are around the world. Maybe their houses are a little different, but they still have houses. Maybe their food is different, but they still eat food. Maybe their practical day-to-day struggles look different than ours, but these characters still have emotions like ours, families like ours and hopes and dreams like ours. If you help your children understand this, what a gift you have given them!



## 6. Reading develops cultural literacy

Vocabulary and global awareness may be part of a broader category: cultural literacy. As E. D. Hirsch, Jr. demonstrates in his bestselling work, *Cultural Literacy*, there is a certain basic set of background information people must know if they are to get along in a culture—let alone to influence it.

They must be aware of the key historical events, significant persons, movements, groups and ideas that have shaped the culture. If you want your kids to influence the world, to impact the world for good, you must place a premium on cultural literacy.



But how do you help kids gain the variety of background knowledge they need?

Literature-based curriculum does wonders to help with that. After laying out the case for why we must be concerned with cultural literacy, Hirsch discusses how we might create school materials that advance cultural literacy. He writes:

*The single most effective step would be to shift the reading materials used in kindergarten through eighth grade to a much stronger base in factual information and traditional lore. . . . What is needed are reading texts that deliberately convey what children need to know and include a substantially higher proportion of factual narratives.<sup>4</sup>*

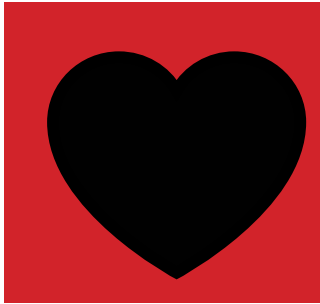
Literature-based curriculum does this by deliberately choosing books that teach your children history, cultural allusions (such as ancient Greek heroes like Hercules), and the way ordinary people have lived throughout history. Literature-based curriculum biographies and other “factual narratives” that convey specific information. And as we’ve seen above, the fact that this information is presented in an engaging and enjoyable format helps kids absorb the facts they read.

As students follow a literature-based curriculum, they will naturally become aware of important historical, cultural and societal events, as well as crucial aspects of literature that one must know (such as the concept of “Big brother is watching you” from George Orwell’s novel *1984*). Students must be aware of these books and their content so that they have a foundational base of knowledge and, more importantly, so they will be prepared to respond to these cultural influences in a strong and godly fashion.

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4 E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *Cultural Literacy*. (New York: Random House, Inc. 1988), 140. Sonlight item [#RR106](#).

## 7. Literature can help your children develop emotional intelligence and empathy.



Reading takes us out of our own thoughts for a while. We enter into another's world and experience life through their eyes. We consider their predicaments and hope for good outcomes.

In this way, reading—particularly fiction—helps children become more empathetic.

Empathy, in turn, helps our children develop a heart of compassion for a broken world. It helps them look beyond the “stuff” of life the rest of the world runs after and focus on what is truly important. Empathy helps us and our children see beyond our own feelings and be aware of those around us. It helps our children recognize and identify with the emotions of others. For example, it may not be until your children read *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* that they realize what others might feel like when they face discrimination for the color of their skin. Or maybe the classic story *The Hundred Dresses* will help your children grasp how hurtful it is to make fun of others.

Over the last few years, several studies in Psychology have pointed out how reading fiction helps develop empathy. As Dr. Keith Oatley of the University of Toronto writes,

Through a series of studies, we have discovered that fiction at its best isn't just enjoyable. It measurably enhances our abilities to empathize with other people and connect with something larger than ourselves.<sup>5</sup>

In real life, we may get occasional glimpses into other people's minds. A friend may tell us exactly what she's thinking or how she feels, and we can respond accordingly. Usually, however, we just have to guess at people's thoughts, emotions and motives.

Children aren't born with this ability to guess at people's inner worlds; it's something they must learn. And first, young children must learn that other people even *have* emotions and desires distinct from their own.

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5 “Changing Our Minds,” Winter 2009. Accessed March 2012 at [http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/changing\\_our\\_minds/](http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/changing_our_minds/)

Fiction helps teach this because it gives a free pass into other people's minds. We might see how a character feels when someone makes fun of her (as in *The Hundred Dresses*), how she reacts to a scary situation, and how she shows her family that she loves them.

What a valuable resource! Oatley writes:

We set aside our own plans and concerns for a while as we take up our book; we then take on the plans and concerns of a fictional character, and empathetically imagine what that character might feel.<sup>6</sup>

Fiction helps us imagine what others are thinking and feeling and trains us to feel empathy for others.

How does it do that? Since "novels can be thought of as simulations of how people react to combinations of social forces," reading them helps us "construct a mental model of the person to know what's going on inside their heads."<sup>7</sup> In other words, reading helps children guess and understand what others are feeling; it helps them grow in emotional intelligence. This ability seems to transfer over into real life.

You can [read more about Oatley's studies here](#). But whether or not you know the science behind it, know that with a literature-based curriculum, your times reading together serve multiple purposes at once. You're not just learning history, geography and culture. You're also giving your children lessons in empathy and emotional intelligence. That seems like time well spent!

## **8. Reading with your children can help them develop good character**

Most homeschool parents not only want their children to receive a great academic education, they also want their children to become good people. They want to raise their children to be people of integrity and character. After all, what good is knowledge without character?

So then, how should we help our children develop righteous and godly character?

We believe that "character is caught, not taught." People develop good character by observing the behavior of others whom they



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<sup>6</sup> "The Psychology of Fiction," September 2011. Accessed March 2012 at <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-psychology-fiction/201109/narrative-empathy>

<sup>7</sup> "Changing Our Minds," Winter 2009. Accessed March 2012 at [http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/chaning\\_our\\_minds/](http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/chaning_our_minds/)

respect and by letting the truths of the Bible sink into their life. Good character comes not during structured morality lessons, but through addressing issues as they arise in real life and discussing tricky questions with people you trust.

Children can also form character by meditating on and talking about the lives, moral dilemmas and ethical (or unethical) behavior of believable characters in realistic stories.

In order to provide plenty of fodder for this kind of meditation and discussion, good literature-rich curriculum includes books whose protagonists confront realistic ethical and moral dilemmas, work through them and overcome in the end to make righteous decisions.

We are convinced that the presence of true conflict and struggle in quality literature makes their moral or character-oriented “lessons” not only believable, but applicable as well.

In contrast, one homeschool mom, Jill, tells about trying to teach morality through simplistic moral tales such as “Never Tease a Weasel.” Her children listened to the tales, but saw through the thin veneer and didn’t apply the morals to their lives. Sure, they learned why you shouldn’t tease a weasel, and that ducklings must obey at the first call from their mother. But the tales were contrived and abstract. They didn’t translate into real life and help Jill’s children understand that they shouldn’t tease each other, or that they should listen when Mom called. You can [read more of Jill’s frustration here](#).

If moral tales don’t really work, why do “real books” do the trick? Because kids pay attention to believable characters in believable situations. When kids read about someone who honestly struggled and came out on top, they perk up.

Kids often view courageous characters as heroes. And we believe that helping children find true heroes to emulate will help them develop their character more fully than will simply memorizing facts about character traits. Moreover, we believe that when children read of real people (or believable fiction characters) who face significant challenges, remain faithful to God and overcome their circumstances, they will develop heroes worth imitating. Children will be inspired to live with courage and faithfulness, just like their heroes, and character will grow out of this inspiration.

Plus, literature gives you many opportunities to discuss character and morality with your children. If you’re reading the quality books included in a literature-rich

curriculum, your children will learn to enjoy them and be eager to talk about them. You'll be able to discuss characters they admire (like brave and compassionate missionaries, or children who overcome great obstacles). As you read these compelling stories together, you can ask questions such as:

- *What would you have done in this situation?*
- *What kind of consequences do you think could come with this character's actions?*
- *How do you think this character showed bravery (or kindness, or honesty, etc.)?*

When children see good character in books and honestly discuss it with their parents, they gain inspiration and practical know-how to grow in virtue.

(And in case you're wondering, Jill didn't stick with the moral tales for long. She discovered the power of reading real books as fodder for discussions on character. Click to read about [five of Jill's favorite "real books" that teach character.](#))

## 9. Literature helps students become great writers

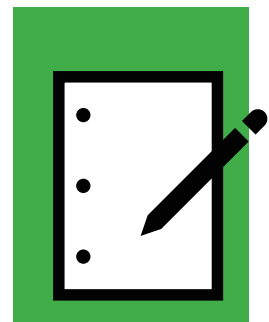
The best writers read ... a lot. Any good writing course will teach you this. Before your children become the next Mark Twain, they must first learn to imitate the style, flow and cadence of established writers.

Even if your children don't hope to write stunning novels, they will still need to learn to write clearly and winsomely. Reading is the best way to help your mind absorb the grammar, syntax, vocabulary and rhythm of good writing.

Your children can't stick to comic books and dry textbooks if they are to learn how to communicate well. Consider what one home educator wrote:

*I have a BA in English, emphasis on Literature. I teach writing/composition to our local homeschool co-op. Do you know what I have found? Without exception, the best writers have been kids who read quality books! The kids who use textbooks just don't get it. –Sarah M. in MI, June 2010*

Perhaps your children can learn to write without reading widely. But why give them that extra burden? You can train their ear to recognize and imitate good writing from their earliest days of cuddling on the couch reading aloud together.



When your homeschool centers on great books, your daily times reading together will reap yet another “double-duty” benefit—you’ll help pave the way for your kids to learn to write well.

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So there you have it. Literature-based learning isn’t only fun. It’s also a very effective way to learn! In short, using a literature-based homeschool curriculum:

1. Gently encourages your children to love learning, even as it ...
2. Helps them remember what they learn, and
3. Helps you learn alongside your children and engage them in meaningful discussion.

Plus, literature-based homeschool curriculum capitalizes on the huge benefits of reading quality books. At the very same time as they teach history/geography and culture, your “real books” also

4. Help your children naturally build vocabulary,
5. Develop global awareness and
6. Increase cultural literacy.
7. Help your children develop emotional intelligence as they learn how to see what other people are feeling (which in turn helps them become empathetic people).
8. Give your children worthy, virtuous heroes to emulate and provide prime opportunities to discuss what good character looks like in the real world.
9. Lay the foundation for your children to become great writers.

*Phew!* With all that rolled into one relaxed homeschool experience, is it time you considered literature-based learning for your homeschool?

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If you’d like to see what literature-based learning could mean for your family, consider Sonlight Curriculum. For over 22 years, Sonlight has helped parents give their children a remarkable book-rich education. With complete homeschool guides that walk you through each day, you’ll have everything you need to sit down with your children, read, grow and learn together. In fact, you and your children will *love* to learn together with Sonlight. We [guarantee](#) it.

**See what it’s all about: [discover Sonlight today!](#)**