

SHOULD YOU ATTEND THE HOMESCHOOL CONVENTION?

And How to Get the Most Out of It If You Go

By Nancy Manos

From my observation, homeschooling parents seem to fall into three categories as it relates to the homeschool convention ...

- 1) There's the "I wouldn't miss it for the world" crowd,
- 2) The "I already have my curriculum and don't really need to go" folks, and
- 3) Then there's the "I'd like to go someday, but probably not this year" group.

The majority of those who attend the annual homeschool convention tend to be "die hard" fans who would be very disappointed if circumstance caused them to miss even one year ... even if they've been homeschooling a long time and don't need a lot of resources or workshops to attend.

So, what's all the excitement about anyway? Why do homeschooling families around the country put such a high value on attending their state's convention year after year?

My husband, James, and I have two teenage daughters whom we have always homeschooled. Our first exposure to a state homeschool convention was when our girls were very young and we were living in Minnesota. James would stay home with the girls while I went off with a friend or two to explore the exhibit hall and enjoy a couple of days with the greater homeschool community.

In those early years, it never occurred to me to attend workshops ... I was having too much fun comparing resources and shopping for materials to bring home to share with our daughters. As the years passed, I started attending some workshops as well. I was pleasantly surprised at how much information I got, and how inspired and encouraged I felt after sitting through various sessions.

One of the first things we did when we moved to Arizona was to join the state homeschool organization and find out about their convention. It was a little frightening that first year to drive downtown by myself in a new city, and attend my first convention here without knowing anyone. However, because I had experienced the thrill of attending homeschool conventions back home in Minnesota, I knew it was worth pushing through the nervousness about a new location and new people.

I knew, without a doubt, that I would find the same energy and excitement, the same opportunity to sit under excellent teaching, and a place to browse and shop for new things to add to our bookshelves and our plans for the coming school year. I was not disappointed!

So, what are the advantages of attending the homeschool convention and how can you get the most out of attending?

In my opinion, there is absolutely nothing that can compare to being together with thousands of other parents who share the same conviction and passion for teaching their children at home. The atmosphere is charged when you get that many people together in one place, with one heart and one purpose. We are part of a greater community of parents teaching their children at home. It is invigorating and refreshing just to be there with so many of them!

WORKSHOPS

One thing I have witnessed in working with our convention directors is how much thought and prayerful consideration goes into selecting speakers and workshop topics for the homeschool convention.

You will find a nice balance of workshops purposefully chosen to share vision, encouragement, and inspiration, as well as a variety of practical, “how-to” sessions packed with ideas you can take home and use to strengthen and enrich your family’s home education experience.

Be sure to read through the Convention Workshop Schedule and the workshop descriptions (available for download from our website) before you head downtown. Highlight the ones you most want to hear in person and make a note of any that you’d like to purchase on CD to listen to later. Planning ahead will help you avoid the stress of last-minute decision-making or the disappointment of missing a workshop you really wanted to hear.

My husband and I enjoy attending workshops together when we can. I find that it’s very helpful to have him hear the information first-hand along with me, rather than trying to relate highlights to him later if I attended by myself. Attending workshops together can also be a great conversation starter for us. Some couples like to divide and conquer with the wife attending one session while the husband attends another ... covering twice as much ground.

EXHIBIT HALL

With over 200 exhibitor booths in over 80,000 square feet of exhibit hall space, you will find a delightful opportunity to browse myriad curricula and resources in person, save on shipping charges, and often find a number of exhibitors offering “Convention Specials” as well. Even if you already have a curriculum that’s working well for your family, you may come across a few good books to add to your home library or a new resource that might be the perfect addition to your homeschool plans for the coming year.

Some people, especially first-time convention attendees, might find the exhibit hall to be a bit overwhelming because of the abundance of materials available. However, if you do some research before you arrive, and familiarize yourself with the most commonly used curricula and resources, you'll find that it's not so daunting to experience in person.

Talk to other homeschooling parents, especially those that have been homeschooling awhile; find out what curricula they use and why they like it. Visit websites like GPA SmartStore to get familiar with major curriculum publishers and products available.

Be sure to stop by the **MENTORING MOMS** booth just inside in the Exhibit Hall. There are several veteran homeschool moms available to answer your questions and to assist you.

One suggestion to help keep you on track in the exhibit hall is to come prepared with a "Wish List" or shopping list. By doing some research in advance, you can create a list of items that you want to look for while you're at the convention. With the bounty of wonderful products and resources, it's easy to get distracted and go home without the items you specifically came to buy.

It might be helpful to make one pass through the entire exhibit hall to see what's available before making any purchases. Then, after you've had some time to think through what you really want to buy, go back through again. Talk to the representatives, compare products, and ask questions.

Whether you have a little to spend or a lot, it helps to come prepared with a budget. It isn't worth having that spectacular math or history program if it's going to cause stress in your finances and your marriage!

Also, keep in mind that you are supporting, in many instances, fellow homeschoolers when you purchase materials from them. Many of our exhibitors are families who have created products or resources from their own homeschool experience, or homeschooling families who run a business together supporting the homeschool community by offering quality resources you can use in your home.

HAVEN'T DECIDED IF YOU SHOULD ATTEND?

So, what if you're one of those people who fall into the second category I mentioned at the top of this article? The "I already have my curriculum and don't really need to go" folks.

I myself am a long-time homeschool mom who reads a lot of books and articles, has attended dozens of workshops, listens to many workshop recordings, and I probably already have more books and curricula than we'll complete in our home education adventure. However, I can tell you that I never lose the need to come and be

refreshed, re-energized, and refocused for the year ahead. As long as you're educating your children at home, there is always a benefit to this kind of experience.

For those in the third category, you may feel that the investment of time and money is too great at this time, but you've heard great things about the convention and hope to attend one day. It may be a wise decision to forego attending the convention this year, depending upon your financial situation. We serve an awesome God and He is well able to provide the encouragement you need through other avenues beyond the homeschool convention.

I would certainly never say that the homeschool convention is the only way to get refreshed, re-energized, and refocused for the coming school year. But, it is a unique, amazing experience ... the only gathering of its kind and size in the state of Arizona. I would encourage you to consider attending if you are able. Once you come, you'll see first-hand what all of the excitement is about!

Since James and I began serving on the AFHE Board of Directors five years ago, we have gained a much greater appreciation for what goes on behind the scenes to bring a homeschool convention to pass. It is a marvelous, high-quality event organized by a small committee of people and made possible by a large number of volunteers.

I am grateful for the vision and leadership of our convention directors, David and Valerie Monk, and for the excellence by which they and their team operates. You will not be disappointed if you attend. This event is well-organized and run with professionalism and integrity. And it is truly a lot of fun!

In this season of our lives, attending the homeschool convention for my family has changed. Now, our focus is on equipping and encouraging our fellow homeschoolers. But, I can tell you that the thrill is still there and I am one of those "die hard" fans who wouldn't miss the homeschool convention for anything! And, when I can sneak away from my responsibilities, you'll find me in the exhibit hall shopping for a few new items for our home library.