

GCSEs and Home Education

The idea of teaching at GCSE level can be very daunting when you first approach it: it seems very much trained-teacher territory and most parents feel very inadequate to cope with this level of study. However, hundreds of parents have guided their children through these exams very successfully, and there is now more support than ever in the form of Facebook groups, yahoo groups, online tutoring, online classes, online ‘schools’ and local classes; also, most importantly, the internet allows parents not only to purchase textbooks easily, but gives them access to exam board specifications, past papers and schemes of work. It has never been easier to prepare a child for GCSE exams from home.

The pre GCSE years : Key Stage 3 (11-14)

It is not necessary for your child to strictly follow KS3 courses in the subjects he or she will take at GCSE level. Most parents allow quite a lot more freedom and interest led learning prior to the exam stage, and this wider learning helps children to bring greater depth and breadth to their GCSE level study; it also means that unlike their schooled counterparts they have not become thoroughly bored by going over the same material several times. Having said this, in some subjects, especially maths and the sciences, any form of study is likely to be covering basic material which would be found in any KS3 course. The difference is more pronounced in humanities in which children have the freedom to read widely in subjects such as history and literature, learning about areas which are not generally covered in standard KS3 courses. To sum up, there is no necessity or obligation to teach specific KS3 courses, but the material found in them can be a useful foundation especially in maths and science.

What is the best age to begin GCSE level study?

There is no need to wait, as schools do, to sit all the exams in one year at age 16 (Year 11). In fact most parents stagger GCSEs over two or even three years, as this makes things easier in terms of volume of teaching matter, cost of exams and the logistics of getting your child to an exam centre. There is no age limit, either upper or lower, at which a person can take GCSEs. Some children who are advanced in, say, maths, might take the maths GCSE at 12; others, who perhaps develop their strengths later, might take their exams at age 16-17 (bear in mind that so long as a young person starts a 16-18 course such as A levels or Btech whilst still aged 18, the course will be free. There is no obligation to start at age 16, the exception being some grammar schools which will only take pupils in the correct school year).

Most home-educated children will take GCSEs between the ages of 14-16, and will often complete a course of study in one year rather than two. Thus, if a child is advanced in one or

more subjects he or she might start studying for those exams at age 13 and sit them at age 14. More typically, children start studying at age 14 and take their first exams at 15. One common pattern is to sit three or four at 15 then three or four more at 16, staggering them for the reasons outlined above. Although many courses can be completed in one year, some (such as English Literature) might be covered over two years, as in school.

It is important to note that most home-educated children do not take as many exams as their schooled counterparts, simply because it is not necessary to take twelve or even ten GCSEs. Both grammar schools and universities (including Oxford) maintain that they require no more than eight good GCSEs for entry. For children who plan to go to 6th form college and perhaps follow a non -A level route, five or six GCSEs is usually sufficient to meet the entrance criteria. The key here is to work out your child's likely route through education post- 16 and base your exam choices on this. In the experience of the home-education community, children with 8 GCSES, staggered over two or three years, are not in any way disadvantaged when it comes to higher education options. For University entrance, A level results are of much greater importance. Taking three A levels simultaneously is considered much more essential than having taken 8 GCSEs in one sitting and sufficiently proves a child's capacity to cope with rigorous study and exam pressure.

How do you teach at GCSE Level?

There are several possible approaches to teaching, the main distinguishing factor being cost:

- The cheapest option is to buy the course textbook and set and mark your child's work yourself (some parents do this and then pay to have a few past papers tutor-marked as the exams approach to get some expert tips). This option would suit a child who is motivated and willing to study under his/her own steam. There are several support groups for parents following this route, such as the home-ed exams yahoo (and Facebook) group. There are also increasing numbers of subject specific support groups developing on Facebook which are very useful for parents to share information and get help.
- There are several online course providers who will set and mark your child's work. Some of the more popular are Wolsey Hall, the National Extension College and Oxford Open Learning. The quality of tuition varies greatly, and parents are often disappointed that the course might consist in little more than the textbook material written up into a weekly schedule. It is always advisable to ask experienced home-educators before signing up.
- Online schools are becoming a popular if expensive option, offering children the chance to work in a class setting with other home-educated children. Examples are Netschool and Interhigh.

- Personal tutoring is probably the most expensive (and arguably most effective) option, but can be cheaper if a few parents group together and/or use Skype or an equivalent online forum.
- Finally, there are increasing numbers of local home-educating co-ops in which parents get together and run classes themselves for a minimal cost, or, if no parent is available for a particular subject, a tutor is often hired to teach classes instead.

How do I work out what subjects to study?

Most parents try to cover the usual range of subjects - maths and English, history and/or geography, one or more sciences and a language (classical and/or modern). Subjects with a heavy practical element such as art, music, design etc. can be difficult to take as private candidates so parents usually find alternatives such as music grade exams, Arts Awards etc. (see section below). There are some less well known GCSEs which are popular options such as Astronomy, Psychology, Environmental Studies, Classical Civilization, Classical Latin and Greek, and Ancient History. Economics is also an increasingly popular option.

The easiest place to start is to assess your child's interests and abilities at around age 13 and try to work out which subjects he or she is likely to be able to take early. Generally speaking, parents find that sciences are easier to take early as they are knowledge rather than skills based; humanities subjects such as English, literature and history require a keen grasp of exam technique and a certain maturity which most 14 year olds do not possess (though there are always exceptions). Maths is a good exam to take early if your child is very proficient. One issue to be aware of is that the subjects your child is ready to take early (usually because he likes them and is good at them) may end up being the ones he wishes to study after 16. If this is the case, it is a good idea to find ways to keep up his study from 14-16 so that he does not forget the material completely. Some grammar schools will want to see evidence of continued study if a GCSE was taken two years before an application to study at A Level.

How do I know which exams to work towards, and how do we actually take them?

There are several exam boards in the UK and most offer a similar range of subjects, so it can be daunting to know where to start. The main ones are AQA, Edexcel, OCR and CIE (some families also take exams set by the Welsh Board WJEC). CIE and Edexcel offer International (IGCSES) as well as regular GCSEs (see the section below on this distinction).

One very important factor to bear in mind before you start looking in any detail at specific exam options is that you need to find out where you can sit exams locally. You can only sit exams in a registered exam centre; this could be a local school or a centre which exists simply to cater for people taking exams (schools are usually cheaper). Finding a local centre

is a crucial first step: you do not want to study for a particular exam for a year only to find there is nowhere to sit it! Ask around local schools and centres until you find a suitable place; it is a good idea to ask local home-educators who have already taken exams for names of schools willing to help. No school is obliged to take private candidates; if they do, they are free to specify which exams they will allow you to take, or at least which boards you can use (generally, CIE can be the most difficult to find centres for). Schools can even insist that you enter for the same exams as their own pupils as this saves on admin costs. In the light of these possible limiting factors, the question of choosing an exam board becomes less daunting as your options for sitting exams may be limited.

GCSES or IGCSEs?

GCSEs are monitored by the UK government: if the Government decides they should be changed, the exam boards have to change them (as in the recent shift from A-C grades to 9-1 grades). IGCSEs are created for an international market - for those studying abroad who wish to have UK equivalent qualifications; the UK Government does not control them. Until the recent GCSE reforms it was generally acknowledged that IGCSE maths and sciences were more rigorous than the GCSEs, though now GCSEs have been toughened up the difference is not so marked. IGCSEs are important for home-educators because there are some GCSE exams which we cannot take as private candidates due to coursework, practicals or oral components. Science GCSEs remain closed to private candidates due to the need for practical assessment (the IGCSE replaces this with an 'Alternative to Practical' paper). Modern Languages retain an oral option which, whilst not impossible, can be difficult and expensive to arrange. Some parents choose alternative qualifications for languages. English Language has a 'Speaking and Listening' component which is also difficult to arrange, so home-educators usually opt for IGCSE English Language. Geography has a practical element so IGCSE is the usual option.

IGCSEs are recognised by the UK Government as equivalent to GCSES, and remain popular with independent schools despite the reform of GCSEs. Exam boards are in the process of updating their IGCSEs so that they are available with a UK 9-1 grading as well as the standard A-C grading. The content of the exams remains the same; only the final grade is different. This is useful for parents who are concerned that their children's qualifications are in line with those offered by the schools. Many home-educators continue to prefer IGCSEs even in subjects in which GCSEs are now available: they have more experience with the courses, and there are more past papers available as the courses have been around longer. See below for a list of which subjects are available to private candidates.

Alternative qualifications

Since some GCSE subjects with a practical element can be difficult to arrange, home-educators go down different routes. It is important to bear in mind that these

alternative qualifications are unlikely to be counted as exact equivalent GCSEs; so, if your child needs 5 or 6 GCSEs to enter a local college, that still ordinarily means 5 or 6 actual GCSEs/IGCSEs. However, in arts related subjects in particular, some colleges will accept alternative qualifications in lieu of GCSEs in those subjects (though they may still insist, in addition, on the standard requirement of GCSEs to be met in other subjects). The reality is that colleges and schools all have their own rules on admission and each needs to be approached individually.

Note that at the present time, due to government legislation, anyone undertaking a 16-18 course of study (A levels or alternative) must have a GCSE in maths and English. If they do not, they will be required to study for these alongside their chosen advanced courses.

Art/design

Trinity Arts Awards are project-based qualifications which can cover fine art, photography, dance, and more; their difficulty levels are accredited by Ofqual as follows: Silver Award is Level 2 - the same standard as a GCSE grade 4-9 (A*-C), but with half the teaching time (i.e. more difficult, so usually taken at 14+); Gold Award is Level 3 gives UCAS points equivalent to a grade B at AS-level (so usually taken at 16+). Bronze level is available for ages 11+, and there are courses for children from age 7. See the Arts Award website for details.

There is now a distance learning option for an accredited Level 2 award in Art and Design, from the Online College of Art and Design. The Certificate is awarded by ABC Awards, and is Ofqual-accredited at Level 2 (the same difficulty as a GCSE). OCAD offer a distance learning course with no exam. As with the Arts Award, whilst it may not be accepted as a direct equivalent of a GCSE equivalent, it is an excellent way to build up your portfolio (and the certificate itself may help you to be accepted onto a college arts course later).

Drama

Drama GCSE with all exam boards involves around 60% controlled assessment / coursework, and so is difficult to arrange for private candidates. A few theatre schools and home education groups offer GCSE drama, so ask on local home education groups to find out if there is anything in your area. There are alternatives, however. Trinity College (London), LAMDA and New Era Academy are well-known drama exam boards which are accredited by OFQUAL and the awards have been given official status as equivalent to GCSE or A-level standard. A Level 2 qualification is equivalent to GCSE grades. See also Arts Awards above.

Music

ABRSM Grades 4 or 5 are accredited by OFQUAL as Level 2 qualifications, ie GCSE level (though, as above, not necessarily accepted as *direct* equivalents for college entry). Candidates may enter any Practical or Theory exam grade without having taken any other, though there is a requirement to have passed Grade 5 Theory or Grade 5 Practical

Musicianship or Grade 5 in a solo Jazz subject before Grade 6–8 Practical exams can be taken. Passes in Grades 6–8 in either Theory or Practical exams gain UCAS points.

Computing

CIE do offer an exam only IGCSE in computer science but many home-educators have opted for British Computer Society vocational qualifications or ***The European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL)***. Some home educators have done the ***BTEC Level 2*** online with Kandu IT, or ***iDEA*** - the Duke of York's Digital Enterprise Award scheme, which is free, done online, and gives a verifiable certificate at Bronze, Silver or Gold level. ***Pembrokeshire College*** runs a Level 2 modular Gaming Qualification leading to a recognised certificate, and a full ***Level 2 diploma*** in Gaming Design and Development, which is equivalent to an IGCSE.

GCSES open to private candidates	IGCSE alternatives
Maths Further/ Additional maths Statistics Business Studies Latin Greek Economics History English Literature Classical Civilisation Ancient History Astronomy Psychology Sociology RE Modern Languages (<i>you will need to arrange for a compulsory speaking and listening test</i>)	English Language Physics Biology Human biology Chemistry Geography Computer science Accounting Environmental management Maths History English Literature Religious studies Latin Business Studies Modern Languages (<i>as with GCSE, you will need to arrange for a compulsory speaking and listening test</i>) If your child is bilingual, any IGCSE in a <i>First Language</i> can be taken
GCSES with practical element (difficult but not impossible to arrange) Art Design and Technology Computer Science	Alternatives Arts Awards LAMDA awards ABRSM music grades EDCL Btecs