

Scheduling, a frustrated mother's tale

I've managed to put this off for four years, but since I didn't get around to touting for contributions this time (oops, must have missed that off my schedule), I thought the time had come. Interestingly, I recently pulled out some old schedules (I'm talking ten years old here; is that *very* sad?) to see what had changed, what had remained the same. It struck me that I had spent several rather fruitless years trying to find that Perfect Schedule within which all things become clear and homeschooling transmogrifies into a happy world populated by contented, smiling, diligent children doing lessons and chores like clockwork, watched over by a gentle, unruffled maternal eye (probably to the sound of Mozart in the background). If it's out there, it's eluded me and quite frankly I've given up the chase, resigning myself to the fact that all I can hope for is a schedule which works reasonably well for me at this moment in time: six months down the line I'll be chucking it out and rewriting.

You might be thinking to yourself, 'Is it worth the trouble? Why schedule at all?'. I thought that too, falling for the old wheeze (well expressed in Holly Pierlot's '*A Mother's Rule of Life*') that scheduling would quell creativity. This may be true in a small family, but in a larger family what happens is almost the opposite: as Mrs. Pierlot observes, the mother is so busy trying in a disorganised way to see to the many pressing needs of the family that she finds she has no time left for anything remotely creative. By scheduling, she *might* be able to get all the day-to-day necessary stuff out of the way and leave just a bit of room for something more rewarding. Instead of always having half an eye (and half a mind) on the pile of ironing (write in whatever bugs you most), you can say, 'I'll be doing that on Thursday; it'll keep 'til then'. You might also avoid those dreadful moments which often occur around 5pm when you find yourself confronted by a bunch of hungry children, a crying baby, a whining toddler and an empty kitchen cupboard: 'What's for tea, Mammy?!' So, scheduling has its place and can certainly help, but with a few caveats: no-one else's schedule will be perfect for you, even if it's great for them; and all schedules are subject to change over time, so don't be too inflexible. If your schedule, which was working fine just a few months ago, is suddenly a burden, don't be afraid to change it! As that famous Chinese proverb says, 'The schedule was made for mothers, not mothers for the schedule' (you mean you haven't heard that one?).

So, with all this in mind, here is my present (and quite new) schedule, largely dictated by the number and ages of my children, and the various things I'm trying to achieve in their Home Education (by the way, this schedule mainly applies to my primary school aged children, as the secondary school age children work independently whilst I am with the younger ones).

We are all hopefully up, dressed, breakfasted and cleared up by 8- 8.30 (often earlier, but I'll be honest and confess that all my resolutions about rising at 6.30am for prayers and exercises have never made it off the pages of my 'to do' list). Now here comes the first huge change I've recently made: instead of, as usual, sitting the children down for lessons from 9am (ish) to 11am (ish), I send them upstairs to play – *noisily*. Doesn't sound much like education, I know, but the reason is this: 9-11 am is just the WORST time for me to teach! The boys, after breakfast, are ready to run around, jump on each other and generally get all that curious male energy out of their systems; at the same time, the baby is whingey but not yet ready to sleep and the two year old just needs mum. Now, I can happily put up with a crying baby whilst chopping vegetables or putting washing on, but have you ever tried explaining long-division, teaching catechism, sounding out phonics and doing jigsaws all at the same time with a crying baby in attendance? It's a nightmare! What's more, at the end of this session, the baby is ready to sleep, but those boys, if they have been doing 'seatwork', still have all that pent up energy to get rid of. In winter, with its inclement weather, this often means they will go upstairs and jump on and off beds (or each other), just as the baby needs a nap. It doesn't add up, and it leaves mummy feeling frazzled, facing the onset of lunch with nothing prepared, that pile of laundry still staring at her, and the kitchen a mess as breakfast was cleared up in a hurry to get lessons started...

So, I decided to swap things round, putting lessons later, during nap time and using the morning slot (with whingey baby in tow) to get my head around the day: bake the bread (a hobby of mine, and a very rewarding start to the day), work out what is for lunch and sort it out, leave the kitchen in a decent state, get the washing on, make sure lessons are prepared etc. One added bonus has been that my two year old has had a good hour and a half each morning of one to one mummy

time: he drags his jigsaws, shape sorters, threading beads etc. into the kitchen where I can help him, or just joins in and makes pretend soups and stews with the leftover veggies. This, to me, is exactly where a two year old should be! Contrast his behaviour when I try to do 'lessons' at this point: I can't focus on him (kitchen work leaves my mind free to really talk with him; lessons do not) so he messes around and gets into trouble. By about 11am, the baby is really ready to sleep (she's grown bored with the washing machine, though it's good for at least half an hour most days) and the boys are ready to have a snack (elevensies!) and settle down to some mind-work. Like most families, we focus on maths, English and catechism in the morning slot. By about 12.30, they are finishing up, and I need to get back into the kitchen to see to that bread and get lunch ready. Cue more tearing up and down by small boys, but that is fine as the baby has napped and I'm not trying to use my brain.

The next big change is that I have begun putting out our main meal (of the meat and two veg variety) in the middle of the day, about 1.30- 2pm, rather than in the early evening. This has been quite liberating in terms of avoiding that awful early evening 'everyone is tired and stressed and hungry at the same time' feeling (I have seen 5-6pm referred to as 'the suicide hour' for mothers of small children and it is not too much of an exaggeration). This shift has also freed us up for our new 'teatime' (of which more anon). After lunch clear up (everyone is assigned chores for setting up and clearing up at mealtimes: these have been in place for a good few years now, and run fairly smoothly) we settle down to a fairly relaxed afternoon slot of project work (everyone chooses and works on his own subject which makes for more enthusiasm; lapbooks feature hugely and in a year we cover a good variety of history/geography and science subjects). This gives me time to read to the two year old, and play with the baby, whilst being on hand to help hunt for scissors and glue, assist with spellings, and answer all manner of arcane questions on subjects about which I know very little (I like to think of this as 'facilitating learning', i.e. teaching them how to look up information in books for themselves!).

By about 3.30 - 4pm, they've had enough and are raring to go again. Cue another running around session, until they realise they are hungry and, at about 5pm – conveniently - it's time for tea. We've decided to make Something of teatime. Why? In no particular order: No.2 son adores drinking tea; I love baking; I wanted a time to read aloud to all the children at once (as opposed to the separate bedtime stories they have); I dreaded going through the whole eating-at-table rigmarole more than once a day (we're working on table-manners, honestly we are), so we have tea in the living room, play some music, play games – and eat good food! It's worked very nicely so far, and, again, had unlooked for bonuses: I often discover a willing helper who wants to choose a treat and help bake it (maths in action? Domestic Science?), you'll hear lots of curious conversations about the relative merits of crumpets versus muffins, the history of wigs and bath buns and so on (History?), and everyone has something to look forward to at the end of the day, rather than the dreaded 'Mammy in the kitchen peeling veg and screaming at people followed by huge clear up and chore session' scenario.

After tea, a modest clear up, our much needed five decades (it's easy now with so many old enough to lead) and then, from about 7 until 9pm, the epic event that is Bedtime in our house (stories, songs, chats...and where *is* my glass of wine??). Then I'm ready to collapse, or start planning the next day's events!

This schedule only runs Monday-Wednesday, which seems enough 'lessons' for little ones when you cut out all the 'busy-work' that goes on in schools: Thursday is for seeing friends or working on our own projects (like writing magazine articles), Friday is the Day of Cleaning Doom (it has to come under the heading of penance-with-possible-eternal-reward or I'd never do it).

From my perspective, these alterations have made a huge difference. I only wish it hadn't taken me quite so long to let go of those deep seated habits which dictate things like lessons at 9am and main meals at teatime. Taking control of the schedule and making it suit our own individual requirements has allowed me to feel more in control of the day...and as another old Chinese proverb goes, 'A happy mother makes a happy home-school' (you mean you haven't heard that one before either?). Reading this through, I can see lots of holes in the day (where is my slot for spiritual reading, for those essential post natal exercises, for rigorous healthful walks in the freezing cold?) but at least I have a working framework into which such things could be slotted. Oh dear, I can feel another attack of hunt-the-perfect-schedule coming on! Off we go again...