

Oregonauthor.com

Jon Remmerde

Published in *Home Educator's Family Times*.

1396 words.

Math Times 4

We started reading aloud for our family in 1974, when Juniper was born. Amanda was born two years later, and we continued reading aloud until our daughters grew up and made their way into the world. Early, Juniper and Amanda realized Laura and I could never read to them enough to open the magic world of all the books they wanted passage into.

Juniper tried public school when she was six. It rapidly became a negative experience for her, and she discontinued her effort. Since public school didn't work, our daughters pressured us to begin their education at home. They wanted to learn to read, without further delay. We started immediately. Laura became the main teacher. I took care of the ranch we lived on, so I only participated in teaching part time, though I continued reading aloud regularly.

When Laura, always early to bed and early to rise, fell asleep in the evening cuddle centered around reading aloud, we sent her off to bed, and I replaced her in the rocking chair between warm daughters and finished the chapter. I also read from the Bible when Amanda and Juniper settled into their beds.

I still had a good grasp of math up to calculus, so I agreed to be the math teacher. Laura thought I should start immediately. I said, "Wait until they express an interest in math. There's no need to start math when they're this young, because they have no practical use for anything beyond basic addition and subtraction. We do all the math necessary for the family."

Laura felt nervous about home schooling when we started, in 1981. The state of Idaho had recently taken children away from their parents because they refused to send them to school. We didn't know the details of that story, but it was enough to know a state could rule over a family's approach to education. The superintendent of the school district we lived in threatened legal action because we didn't send our children to public school. I showed him an Oregon law that said anyone over thirteen miles from the nearest school was not subject to the law requiring every child to attend public school.

We were legal where we lived, but legislators could change that law. Circumstances might cause us to move to where that law didn't protect us. Laura thought the strongest way to defend ourselves against possible state interference with education within our family was to educate our daughters well enough to score well on any tests.

In principle, I agreed. Juniper and Amanda were eager to learn and intellectually gobbled up everything we could dish out. Their demands on us, their parents and teachers were simple: 1.) Don't cut too far into their time to play. That was easy to agree to, because we clearly saw play was also a creative process of learning. 2.) Don't get boring with the learning process. That was easy, too, because we respected their ability and willingness to learn. When they were the primary directors of their own education, learning proceeded rapidly. In a few months, they learned to read almost anything they wanted to read. They rapidly expanded their vocabularies and their command of the English language by reading, by asking for help when they needed it, and by learning to use our dictionary.

Reading gave Amanda and Juniper access to almost anything they were interested in, and they were interested in the universe. They said, "Color inside the lines is boring, because we know how to draw and color our own inventions." We dropped coloring inside the lines. Early in educational sessions at the kitchen table, when they studied "subjects," geography, history, mythology, world religions, science, we agreed with them when they said, "Review of what we've already learned is dumb. We've learned that, and there's no reason to go over it again. We can use the time for something new."

Laura and I learned too, not only about "subjects," but about learning, about the marvels children and all people are, about love. For the most part, we approached education each in harmony with all. By respectful discussion among the four of us, we agreed on what we wanted to learn. We figured out how to get whatever materials we needed, and we learned.

Math didn't quite fit that harmonious pattern. I had the reservations I've already mentioned about starting math. Amanda and Juniper's reaction to the subject was, "Sure. Learning's fun. Dish up the math."

Everything else I'd hesitated about and then allowed myself to be talked into was working out fine, and I wanted to participate in family education all I could, so we made room on the kitchen table, and we started addition,

subtraction, multiplication, and division.

But snow melted from the ranch's meadows, and I started irrigating. I had to repair fences winter snow had weighted down to the ground and fences galloping elk had broken through the previous hunting season. Sunshine and open ground said, "Plant the garden." Math withered.

The second time I started math lessons, again because of Laura's concern, Juniper and Amanda had retained very little math they learned during our first lessons, because they had no practical use for math to keep it alive in their minds. We had not come up with a way to make it part of their living. We started over, added, subtracted, multiplied, and divided.

We were shorter of money than I wanted to be, and that second time, when the opportunity came, I cut and sold firewood from dead lodgepole pine that needed to be cleared from the ranch. Teaching math didn't combine well with running a chain saw four hours and taking care of the ranch six or eight hours.

The third time we started math, our always logical daughters said, "This isn't going to go very far, because snow is melting. About the time we get to six times six, you're going to have to start irrigating meadows and fixing fences before they bring cattle up from the home ranch. There really isn't any use starting."

One reason Amanda and Juniper were so beautifully obedient, dependable, and easy to work with throughout childhood was that Laura and I weren't rigid. We listened to our daughters. We respected their intelligence and their vision. We yielded decisions to them when it made sense for all of us to accept their suggestions. So, instead of starting math a third time, we gathered up the papers we'd spread on the kitchen table, and Juniper and Amanda returned to the learning that was working well and that wouldn't be interrupted by ranch work or cutting wood.

We moved from northeastern Oregon to central Oregon, and we continued home schooling. By then, Oregon required periodic tests of home-schooled children. Amanda and Juniper scored well on the tests, except in math. They were ashamed that their education showed such glaring lack. Because of their very low scores, they wanted to learn math.

I worked part time then. Juniper, Amanda, and I worked together a few hours each week and laid a strong foundation in math. We found Saxon books in math and algebra excellent for students learning primarily on

their own, with only occasional guidance from a teacher. We found a few ways to keep the math in use. For example, as Juniper learned to drive, I threw multiplication at her, seeking fast answers. If she learned to drive well with that mental distraction going on, she would soon be ready for roads with more traffic. If she learned the math while distracted with driving, it would be more automatic to her. But the primary motivation for Amanda and Juniper both was that they did not want their education to show a low spot.

Juniper and Amanda each attended a year of public high school. They were required to take algebra. The foundation of basic math we had put down served them well. We found the remaining gaps in their math education and filled them in. In public school, they both achieved high grades in algebra.

Through our false starts with math, through our more effective following through with math education once Juniper and Amanda found motivation to learn math, through all our family education, we learned well and became a family living in love and respect, each of us for all of us.