

Homeschooling and Preparing for a New Baby

Maureen Wittmann

I am not one of those superhomeschoolers. I don't raise my own beef, my children didn't build our house from scratch using how-to books borrowed from the library, and there is no way that I can even consider homeschooling anytime soon after the delivery of a baby.

Whenever a new baby comes into my family's life, formal academics are put aside for at least six to eight weeks. I need to do this so that I can concentrate on my personal healing and on caring for my newborn child. I have also found that I need to take time off for the sake of my other children. I believe that it is healthy for us as a family to focus on our newest member and to spend time getting to know one another.

However, it is not a good thing to have a houseful of bored children. Because a baby can only keep his or her siblings' attention for so long, I do make sure to keep the learning environment in our home alive. With a little preplanning, and I have several months to plan, children can be kept busy with good educational activities. With each new baby, I have sought to provide my other children with the tools necessary to spark their interest in various subjects.

Not Just Fun and Games

When my fourth child, Joseph, was born, I stocked up on board games and puzzles. Throughout my pregnancy, I kept an eye out for toy store sales, as well as garage sale and thrift store deals.

I kept the games locked away during my pregnancy, so that their newness would not be lost. I wanted the children to be enthused about them when the time came. I must say that there is nothing like telling a child that he or she cannot touch or look at something to peak their interest.

After Joseph came home, I introduced the games one at a time. If I brought them out all at once, it would have been overwhelming. The older children entertained themselves with Scrabble, Yahtzee, backgammon, and more. The younger children had fun with jigsaw puzzles and games such as Candy Land.

Not only did the children have great fun playing the new games, they were learning. In addition to reinforcing their math, spelling, and logic skills, they learned how to work together. Well, sort of. Remember, I am not a superhomeschooler and so my children do occasionally have, ahem, disagreements. However, if one is to enjoy a game that requires multiple players then one needs to learn to get along.

Playing in the Dirt

Baby number five, Gregory, was born in the summer. That year we concentrated on gardening. I helped the children get started, as Gregory did not arrive until June, but the children had to take it from there. I did not help with the garden's maintenance. The summer was spent weeding, pruning, and watering. Though I did have to nudge the children from time to time, they took responsibility of their garden.

Of course, when you take responsibility, you get to reap the benefits. The children enjoyed picnics in the backyard with carrots and cherry tomatoes sweet as sugar, while admiring their beautiful flowers.

Children learn quite a bit from gardening. They learn about photosynthesis, composting, responsibility, God's creation, organic gardening, math, and more.

By the time fall arrived, I was feeling good enough to teach the children to can their harvest. That was great fun. Sure they learned about food preservation and the science of canning, but most of all we all enjoyed time together as a family. The children worked together with me in making sauce, shucking corn, preparing string beans, and so on.

(For more, see my essay "Playing in the Dirt" in [A Catholic Homeschool Treasury](#).)

Ice Follies

Baby number six, Margaret, came to us in the dead of winter. This was shortly after my husband, Rob, built an ice-skating rink in our backyard. (To see our rink visit: <http://www.hpurchase.com/rwittmann03.htm>.)

Rob and the children began by clearing an area of our woods. Bonfires raged as fallen trees and brush were disposed. There were lots of roasted hot dogs and marshmallows through it all. To level the area, Rob rented surveying equipment. Next, sideboards had to be constructed. Since hockey was to be played on this rink, the boards had to be high enough to stop pucks from flying into the woods. Rob planned the rink to be next to the creek that runs behind our home. A pump was rented to pump water from the creek to the rink. Lessons about measuring, construction, and engineering abounded.

(There are premade rinks that you can buy, but Rob says that they are expensive, cheaply made, and small. It must be said that making your own ice rink takes an incredible amount of work and time.)

Once all was said and done, the children spent day after day entertaining friends, playing hockey, choreographing figure skating routines, and drinking an awful lot of hot chocolate. The best part is that this final scenario is repeated nearly every winter now.

(For more, see my essay "Reflections On Ice" in [The Catholic Homeschool Companion](#).)

Nature Science and Journaling

Early in my seventh pregnancy, I read an article in *Homeschooling Today* about teaching nature science by creating a backyard habitat. I knew immediately that this was what I wanted to do with my children when our spring baby arrived. The article told of a family that dug a small backyard pond and then made daily observations to study the creatures that came to the man-made habitat. Much to my husband's relief, I decided against the building of a pond in the end. Yet, the article was the inspiration that I needed to get started.

During my time of waiting for Baby Brendan's birth, I collected books related to nature studies and nature journaling. I also collected book lists to take along on library visits. (See MacBeth Derham's excellent website <http://charlottesmason.tripod.com/macbethsopinion.html> for nature study reading lists.) Trips to the arts and crafts store were necessary to stock up on sketch books and art supplies for journaling.

Shortly after coming home from the hospital, I sent my children out to the woods and creek behind our yard with their journals to observe nature. We had not done much in

the way of journaling in the past, so this was a new experience for us. Of course, the children did not immediately fill their art sketch books with gorgeous watercolor pictures and beautiful poems about nature.

They were unsure at first as to what was expected of them. I reassured them that this was a fun project and that they should fill their journals with things that interested them. One child pressed wildflowers while another child chose to draw them with colored pencils. My oldest son wrote about the small animals that he tracked. When they brought their journals to me, I praised them for their efforts and gently offered ideas to expand on them. Soon the collections, artwork, and writings became more intricate.

You would be amazed at what your children can find in your backyard, even in the most urban of areas. Raccoons, foxes, pigeons, hawks, and others have adapted themselves to city life. Though in the past we had seen a variety of animals in our “little piece of country in the city,” new observations were now made. Muskrats were discovered, holes that housed woodchucks were unearthed, and deer tracks identified.

The homeschooling article that was my inspiration suggested that children spend at least 15 minutes in one spot to make their observations. This is good advice. I stress the importance of quiet time in the woods to my children if they want to observe animals and other creatures. It was in this way that the muskrat family was discovered. It was also in this way that my oldest son, Christian, had a close encounter with two deer. He was sitting quietly, partially hidden in the brush, when the deer walked up so close that Christian could reach out and touch them if he so wished.

(See http://heart-and-mind.com/archives/natural_science.pdf for a full-length article on this topic)

A Baby Unit Study

If I am ever blessed with another child, I would love to create a unit study designed around my pregnancy and our family’s newborn baby. The possibilities are nearly endless.

I imagine young children charting my weight and measuring my tummy, and then creating all kinds of graphs. I would love to teach them relaxation techniques, such as using pressure points. They could use the scientific method to determine what techniques work best on Mommy at different times of the day.

The study of nutrition would be a natural tie-in to pregnancy and breastfeeding. The older children could research vitamins, carbohydrates, the food pyramid, proteins, and more. They should also study such things as embryology and fetal development. I would also like older children to study birthing alternatives such as water births, home births, doulas, midwives, and more.

A great way to bring in religious studies to this unit would be the researching of saint names and feast days. We might look for saints who have feasts near Baby’s due date, have qualities that we would like to see in our child, or perhaps find the patron of a cause near and dear to our hearts.

Once Baby arrives, the charting of Mom’s weight can shift to the charting of Baby’s weight. Babies can be weighed before and after eating (don’t change Baby’s diaper until after weighing) to see how much he or she ate. Journals could be filled with pictures and notes about changes in the baby. Observations can be made about Baby’s

mood. Again, put the scientific method to use by noting the time of day, the use of infant massage, diaper changes, etc. and how these things affect Baby's disposition.

My dear friend Dawn Smith is studying to be a midwife and would be a huge help to me in coming up with more ideas. If you would like to create a unit study built around your pregnancy and upcoming birth, enlist the help of your labor support person.

Meanwhile, here is Dawn's suggested reading list for pregnancy and birth. (Make sure that you review these books before sharing with your children. Birthing can be a sensitive issue.) I found most at my library:

[*Before You Were Born: The Inside Story*](#) by Ann Douglas. Great guide for young children curious about their beginnings or expecting a sibling. Filled with interesting science experiments related to a preborn baby's world.

Dover's [*Human Anatomy Coloring Book*](#). Good resource for middle school to high school. Be forewarned that it does feature reproductive organs.

[*See How You Grow*](#) by Dr. Patricia Pearse. Does address where babies come from briefly: Mom and Dad have a special cuddle.

[*Life Before Birth*](#) by Dr. Marjorie England. Pricey, but good illustrations

[*Your Amazing Newborn*](#) by Klaus & Klaus. There is also a video for this, perhaps by Johnson & Johnson.

[*Baby, Come Out*](#), by Fran Manushkin. Children's book with very humorous depiction of a baby's choice to come out when she is ready. Also could incorporate teaching the virtue of patience and accepting God's will.

[*Angel in the Waters*](#) by Regina Doman. A sweet story of a preborn baby who talks to her guardian angel.

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Homeschooling goes beyond academics. Homeschoolers can create wonderful educational environments for their children in many different ways, even when their routines are turned upside down by events such as a new baby.

This article originally appeared in the online newsletter, *The Catholic Family Home*, found at <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/TheCatholicFamilyHome/>.

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