

## Where Are the Kids?

When parents teach children at home, it's important they look at the lessons from their children's points of view. This will give them an appreciation of how their children see the experience and will help the parents understand their children's expectations and supply their needs.

This is especially true when giving training in complicated activities. One of the most complicated things to teach is writing. This is one of the reasons it is so important to have a well-organized writing program. When professionals write, the process is automatic. They have an idea of the information they want to give or they know what they want to say and it appears on the page much as they envision it. To young people this might seem almost magical. This is because the idea of written communication is at their level an abstract process. This is why we so often hear, "I know what I want to say but I don't know how to say it." This *not knowing how to say it* is the part that is so important for us to see from our students' points of view.

We must start the process of determining student needs with an assessment of what they understand about how to put words together at that time. Only then might we understand what the directions we're giving them mean to them. It's after we've made these calculations we can expect success with our training. It should help you see how important this is if we look in a more detailed way at the process of determining current student understanding levels.

It doesn't make sense in any training situation to propose a student begin learning a new skill unless there is an understanding on the part of the parent of what the student's abilities already are in that regard. You understand the importance of presenting complicated processes in small increments—teaching things in steps. You've worked with this process in arithmetic books. Mathematics courses always are organized this way. Each course identifies an end goal and begins with simple skills the students will need to use with each new step toward that goal. The writers of your math books have organized the courses for you based on an understanding of what the students know how to do at any given point and they then present experience with each new skill in small increments.

Generally, composition books aren't constructed this way. Almost all of them present the parent/teacher with a process—a way to get students to begin writing. These include such tactics as spider webbing, brainstorming, group reviewing, vocabulary and mechanics implementing, story starts or topic searches. What is usually not given to the parents is an end goal and a way to determine students' skill levels at each point before a new skill is presented.

In most cases, the parents are expected to be experienced enough at teaching writing to be able to know what their children's skill levels are at any given point and what skills they should be given next and how those skills should be presented. This is very complicated and too much to expect of most parents who haven't had this training. If you're using one of the writing courses that doesn't do this for you, you must make the effort to organize your training yourself.

This organizing should begin with establishing your long-term goals. You have to decide to what level you want to teach your children to perform when they are done with home schooling. If you're training for entrance to universities where they will be expected to write the complicated papers which will be demanded of them, your training, of course, will be different than it would be if you expected them to take over the family farm or retail business. This will take some research on your part for you will have to understand what universities require. Very few writing courses prepare children for this and almost none define the skills that universities expect. If you're using

a program which does not do this for you, your first step must be to contact a university to learn what will be expected of your children.

The same is true of any other goal you establish for your writing training. For example, if your long term goal for one of your children is to prepare that child for a life of fiction writing, you'll want a program which concentrates on the skills of writing fiction. You can see this training must be much different than the training for university work. Conversely, university students are not asked to write fiction and training in story writing will not give them the skills they'll need. If you want to train a child for business writing, you must find a program that teaches, in very precise ways, how to describe conditions; organize objects, ideas, information, situations and desires; and list procedures.

When you have established goals for each child and defined the skill level at which you want each child to perform, your next step will be to determine where each child is in terms of the identified goals. This will only be possible if you are using a program structured to allow you to recognize the skill levels as they are presented. If you're using a well organized program of writing training, the goals of the program are identified and the skills the students will be given are listed for each grade/level. If you have used such a program from the beginning of your child's training, you will have no problem identifying what your child's skills are at any given point. If you have started such a program somewhere in the middle, you will have to check your child's skills against those listed in the program prior to your entrance into it.

Any academic training program should have a scope and sequence. This is an ordered listing of the skills presented and shows the range of the identified experiences. If the writing program you're using has one, it will make this assessment easy. If your program doesn't have one, your problem is very complicated. In that case you must list the skills your child should have experience with on the way toward your established goal and identify the spot in the program where each of those skills is presented. An analysis of your child's experience should determine for you your child's place in the program. It's at this point that you can say you know the level of understanding your children have about how to put words together. Implementing these suggestions will remove some of the "magic" from expressing ideas in written form.