

From home-school to classroom: Kids face challenge of transition

Parents have to adjust as well when they're no longer in the role of teacher

By Rebecca Dube

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Evidence suggests that home-schooling in America is a growing trend. In a weeklong web-only series, TODAYshow.com reports on the challenges and creative opportunities presented by this approach to education.

Mackenzey Blackwell woke up with a huge smile on Sept. 7. "First day today!" he reminded his mom — as if she could have forgotten.

While her son had slept soundly, dreams of third grade dancing in his head, Jillian Blackwell had been up half the night worrying.

The first day of school was a bigger deal for the Blackwells than it was for most families, because Mackenzey had been home-schooled since kindergarten.

"I teared up afterward as I walked away from the class, and I was the last parent to leave," said Blackwell, a marketer in Farmington Hills, Mich. "But I realize that for him, it was something I needed to do."



Stephen Moege / for msnbc.com

Mackenzey Blackwell, 8, puts on a rain jacket before heading to school as his mother, Jillian Blackwell, combs the hair of his 3-year-old brother, Robert, on Tuesday in Farmington Hills, Mich.

More than 1.5 million children, [about 3 percent of the school-age population in the United States](#), are home-schooled, and every year a number of kids go from home-school to traditional school, and vice versa. Making the switch from home to a regular school can be challenging: a new social scene, different academic expectations, and a teacher who doesn't answer to "Mom." Sometimes, though, the ones who have the toughest time adjusting are the parents.

The reason for switching from home to regular school may be financial — the parent who was the teacher has to go back to work. In other cases, parents decide that a traditional school environment would be better for their child.

While no organizations track the number of children who switch from home-schooling to regular school, the struggling economy may sway families in both directions this year. Some families are turning to home-schooling because they can no longer afford private school; others, like Carissa Brown, are sending their home-schooled children to public school because they need to work full-time.

Brown, creative director of a clothing line called [Carissa Rose](#) in Dallas, said her daughter, Paisley, loves first grade, and the transition has actually been easier than she expected. Still, her two sons, third-grader Payton and fifth-grader Paris, aren't so thrilled.

"The boys don't like it because they had a lot more freedom at home, from what they wore to how they learned," Brown said. "I said, 'This is the plan for now, and I need you to drop the bad attitude. The situation is not going to change; you have to change.'"

Brown's sons have a common complaint of formerly home-schooled kids: too many rules. "All our time is spent organizing, not learning," Payton said. Lining up in the hallways, writing your name in the top right-hand corner of your three-hole paper, using the proper color pen for assignments — depending on their personality, home-schooled kids may get impatient with the regulations that govern traditional school settings.

[Today Moms: I lost the home-school burnout battle — and I'm OK with it](#)

"It does seem very silly to a lot of kids. It depends on the individual child, how willing are they to play that game," said Anna Knapp. Her 18-year-old daughter, Jen, did a mix of home-schooling and regular school, and Knapp consults for the Upattinas School, a non-traditional school in Glenmoore, Penn., that works with many home-schooling families.

And although most home-schoolers are not the stereotypical socially awkward types, the social setting of the traditional classroom will be new and different for them.

"They go from a quiet environment to walking into the lion's den," said Russell Hyken, an education counselor in St. Louis. "Imagine being a kid who has been at home and then walking into a middle school. There's a whole new level of noise."

Many home-schooled children have done group activities such as music or sports with other kids, Hyken said, "But that's not like going into a class with 20 kids in a classroom, all chatting with each other, who have known each other for seven years."



Stephen Megee / for msnbc.com

Jillian Blackwell drops her son Mackenzy off at school in Farmington Hills, Mich., on Sept 28, 2010. To help him to prepare for transitioning from being home-schooled to attending a traditional school, they discussed all sorts of social situations, from raising your hand to get the teacher's attention to sticking up for yourself with other kids.



Most make the transition smoothly

Most home-schooled children who switch to regular school do so successfully, he said, fitting in academically as well as socially. The key to a smooth transition, he said, is preparation.

"I suggest the parent call up the school and say, 'Hey, I've got a kid that's been home-schooled; is there anyone you could buddy him up with?' And do any pre-school activities offered, like orientation," Hyken said. And then follow up with kids to troubleshoot any problems, he advised: "When a kid comes home, ask specific questions, like who did you sit with, what are you excited about, what's worrying you. Of course, you should have these conversations with all kids, not just home-schooled."

Blackwell and her husband had many conversations about school with their son over the summer. He's shy — one reason she wants him to attend regular school is so he can get more comfortable with kids his age. They discussed all sorts of social situations, from raising your hand to get the teacher's attention to sticking up for yourself with other kids.

"I told him just to be prepared that it's not one-on-one with Mommy or one-on-one with the teacher," Blackwell said. And, of course, she worried about how he would fare on his own. "You're going from an environment where it's just your family, who adore you, to a place where you're going to meet some people who may not like you for whatever reason."

Doing a walk-through of the school building and meeting teachers ahead of time is a good idea, if possible. "The teacher is key," Knapp said. "Having the teacher understand why you home-schooled and what the child has done is probably half the battle."

Of course, you don't want to come across as an overbearing home-school parent. There's a fine line between being involved and stepping on the teacher's toes.

"The parent needs to still be involved, but don't try to micromanage," Hyken cautioned. "Sometimes home-school parents can be overly meshed with their child, so they've got to learn to separate."

It's a learning process for both parent and child. Blackwell was a bit surprised by all the rules for parents at her son's public school, from the strict pick-up process to the ban on peanuts. She found herself doing an Internet search for "nutmeg" late one night, just to make sure it wouldn't set off a classmate's nut allergy (it won't).

"Coming from a home-school environment where we call all the shots, that was a whole education for myself," she said.

[Discuss: Has your child switched from home-school to a traditional school?](#)

So far, her son loves school, and comes home every day telling his mom about a new friend he's made.

"It's good," said Mackenzy, who recently celebrated his 8th birthday and whose favorite subject is science.

What would he tell other home-schooled kids about transitioning to public school? "You're going to have lots of fun," Mackenzy promised.

But just to be sure, Blackwell did a surreptitious drive-by of his school at recess time last week. "I kind of spied on him," she admitted. Was he fitting in? Was he happy? What she saw set her mind at ease.

"He was running around and having a ball," Blackwell said. "I think he was the happiest kid on the playground."

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