Getting Started with Homeschooling in SA


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Please note: Information provided in this document is of a general nature only and has not been prepared by a qualified legal practitioner: you are advised to seek legal advice if in any doubt about your legal responsibilities.

Congratulations on your decision to educate your children at home and within the community instead of at school! This information will give you some clues as to what to do next... There is a great deal of useful information available on the internet and hopefully this brief guide will help you get started.

Our family began home educating in South Australia in 1985, which means my three children are now all adults. Happily I can report they are all grateful for the opportunity to learn at home and in the community, rather than at school. My daughter, a stay-at-home mum with two children, now sells my books and booklets on home educating, through her online bookstore, www.alwayslearningbooks.com.au.

Support Groups

First of all, remember you aren't alone in your decision to home educate. There are hundreds of families registered with the South Australia Department of Education. Many join local or regional homeschooling groups for support. There are several homeschooling support groups in South Australia and these offer companionship and support for parents and children, as well as educational opportunities, excursions, activities and camps. Home educators seek the best education possible for their children and make use of the whole community, learning from many sources and in many different environments, as well as the home.

If you are interested in meeting other homeschoolers and going on educational and social excursions, please think about joining the very active and friendly Yahoo group for South Australian home educators: http://groups.yahoo.com/group/home-education-sa.

Your inquiry and questions will be quickly answered. There are dozens of active members on the list experienced with all aspects of home education, including getting approval for exemption from attending school, answering doubts about socialisation, different home education approaches, where to find resources and educational materials, etc. Check out the files and database sections for dozens of articles and links to other great homeschooling resources.

The HEA http://hea.edu.au provides support group listings for SA in their online Resource Directory: look under ‘Support’. Anyone can list a group using the online form. HEA members can elect to have their contact details displayed as individual contacts. If you wish to share your experiences as a home educator or would like to make contact with other homeschooling families in your area please consider listing yourself as a contact person on the HEA Support groups and Contacts SA page.

There are many other online support groups you can join. I belong to four active groups, two Yahoo and two Facebook groups – find links to these on my website http://theeducatingparent.com. Facebook groups are becoming very popular, especially those that connect local home educating families together for the purposes of organising excursions, play-dates, picnics, camps and other social and educational events.

The sharing of information, advice and tips that occurs through online support groups is invaluable and especially helpful during the early weeks and months of home educating.

You can also subscribe to the Home Based Learners e-Newsletter by visiting http://www.hblsa.net/. If you don’t have the internet you can arrange to pay for printing and posting of the newsletter. It is a ‘non-profit’ cooperative effort by homeschoolers to help families in South Australia (and beyond) stay in touch with each other and share information about activities and events local resources. The articles are written generally by other subscribers of HBL, (the parents and children) about various activities they are involved in, and wish to share with you. The editor would love to hear from you! The newsletter is the best way to stay in touch with what is happening in South Australia with
homeschooling. It contains a list of activities for the coming term and is a valuable networking tool. Please support and use the newsletter by sending news, announcements and information about useful resources to the editor for publication.

Different families organise several homeschooling camps each year. Camps are fantastic ways to get to know other homeschoolers and make friends. Please join http://groups.yahoo.com/group/SAHomeschoolCamps for more information and past and future camps. Information about camps is usually shared through the SA Yahoo group http://groups.yahoo.com/group/home-education-sa, HEA member newsletter www.hea.edu.au or my quarterly Homeschool Unschool Australia magazine http://homeschoolaustralia.com/magazine.

Home educators run an Ashton Scholastic Book Club for the Adelaide metropolitan areas. Please post an inquiry to http://groups.yahoo.com/group/home-education-sa to find out who to contact in your area. It may take a day or two to receive a reply from the coordinator in your area. If you don't receive a reply, please ask again.

The South Australian Network Library1 is a free service and is a part of the SA Home Ed yahoo support group, http://groups.yahoo.com/group/home-education-sa. The library database on is available to all yahoo group members, who can upload a description of any book they wish to add to the library, or peruse to find books they'd like to borrow. To borrow a book, please contact the book owner listed on the database to arrange pickup/postage and return delivery. To become a member of the library you need to become a member of the Yahoo group. You can elect to not receive emails posted to the list and simply use the library or other resources on the site if you wish.

There is general information about homeschooling in SA on my Homeschool Australia website http://homeschoolaustralia.com/directory/States/SA/SAindex.html. There are also hundreds of articles plus links to her active online support groups (Facebook and Yahoo). I have been actively promoting and supporting home education to families since 1988, three years after beginning home educating my children. As an author I write books designed to help ease families into homeschooling, unschooling and natural learning: these are available through my daughter’s online bookstore, http://alwayslearningbooks.com.au.

Getting Started

A good place to start homeschooling is by reading as much as you can about home education. It will be daunting at first because there is so much information! You are able to develop your own education programs to suit your family and your individual children rather than buying a packaged one from one of the educational suppliers. It’s not hard and generally only takes two or three weeks to do. It helps to visit other families and join a support group so that you can see how easy it really is!

The Home Education Association Inc of Australia produces a regular newsletter, online magazine and resource directory for members: see http://hea.edu.au for more details. Don’t forget to sign up for the free SA homeschool newsletter mentioned above: http://www.hblsa.net/. The newsletter is the best way to stay in touch with what is happening in South Australia with homeschooling. It contains a list of activities for the coming term and is a valuable networking tool. Please support and use the newsletter by sending news, announcements and information about useful resources to the editor for publication.

Application for Exemption from Attendance at School

There is a small but growing body of literature available in home education in Australia: see Summary of Australian Research on Home Education2.

Home education is legal in South Australia. It is defined within the SA Education Act, 19723, and is further protected under the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights4. Centrelink legislation regarding the ‘return to work’ requirement of parents with school-aged children includes an exemption for home educating parents. Families interested in teaching their children at home are urged to obtain a copy of the Education Act and Children's Services

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1 http://groups.yahoo.com/group/home-education-sa/database
4 http://www.un.org/Overview/rights.html

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Act and become familiar with the regulations that apply to school attendance. Information about applying for exemption from attendance at school can be found on the Department of Education and Children's Services[^5].

From birth to the age of 6 years there is no legal requirement for a child to attend a child care centre, kindergarten or pre-school.

The SA Education Act requires enrolment (s75) and full time attendance for students aged 6-16; and/or enrolment in an approved course for those aged 16-17 unless they have already achieved the SACE or other approved qualification. Children of compulsory school age must be enrolled in SA. It is an offence to not enroll your children.

Enrolment requirements are easy to satisfy: parents are required to provide the principal or head teacher with the name and date of birth of the child, the place of birth of the child, and any other information required by regulations (of which there are none).

Compulsory attendance at school is required unless the child is exempted from attendance by the Minister of Education. The SA Education Act does not explicitly mention home education. Although expressed as ‘registration’ in many states, in South Australia home educating children are actually 'exempted from attending school'. The Minister of Education may, by written notice, if the Minister considers it appropriate to do so, grant or revoke an exemption from the attendance provisions of the Education Act. There is a maximum penalty of $500 for failing to comply with a condition of the exemption granted by the Minister.

Where a child is not attending school, each parent is committing an offence which is punishable by up to $500 fine (s76(3); unless the failure of the child to attend school did not result from any failure of the parent to exercise proper care and control, S76(4). It is prudent for families need to keep home education attendance records and a diary of education activities showing progress in key learning areas, etc., to demonstrate if necessary that 'proper care and control' has been exercised. Ultimately it would be up to a court to decide what was required as evidence.

If a parent is removing a child from school to home educate the child, it is advisable to present a written explanation for that absence to the school within a reasonable time. If this is not received by the school the principal is required to contact the parent. Parents who fail to ensure the attendance of their children of compulsory school age at school may be prosecuted and are liable to a penalty not exceeding $200. Persistent cases of non-attendance are referred to Families SA (FSA) (under Section 6(2)(d) of the Children's Protection Act 1993). Under this Act, truancy is defined as an 'at risk' factor for child protection, although it is not a mandated reason for reporting.

Home educating parents need to be aware that Police Officers and Student Attendance Counsellors are empowered to obtain a child's name and address and the reason for non-attendance if the child is observed in a public place during school hours. If the child does not have a proper reason for being absent, only the Police Officer (not the Student Attendance Counsellor) may take the child into his or her custody and return the child to someone in authority at the school, or to a parent or guardian of the child. If the child is accompanied by an adult, the Police Officer or the Student Attendance Counsellor may inquire into the reason for the child's absence. Police Officers and Student Attendance Counsellors have the authority to call at a home at any time, to seek the full names and ages of all children of compulsory school age living in the home and the schools at which the children are enrolled. However, this does not give them powers to enter and inspect the premises or children. HEA members can request student ID cards for their children from the Home Education Association. These may help your child explain his or her absence from attending school, although they are not a legal identification document. A copy of the letter approving home education from the Department of Education and Children’s Services (DECS) can be carried and will suffice to prove that the children are not truanting.

Principal have delegated authority from the Minister to approve applications for temporary exemption from school attendance for up to one calendar month. Parents need to apply in writing and Principals are required to provide their responses on the school letterhead.

Temporary exemptions exceeding one month, and exemptions for the purpose of home schooling, are approved by the Director, School and District Operations. Home educating students are entered into a separate roll class set, and are not marked absent.

Applications for exemptions must meet the criteria set by DECs in its guidelines. These guidelines are not enforceable by law, but the Department does have the power to require a child to attend school.

All applications for exemptions for home schooling are to be set out on form ED175 or in a letter and addressed to the Director, Schools and Children's Services. Procedures for the processing of applications for home schooling is available from the Home Education Project Officer (see contact details below).

Not all families who choose to home educate their children register with the Department of Education and Children’s Services (DECS – commonly referred to as the Education Department) for an exemption from attendance at school. The reasons for this are many and varied – it is a personal decision. Before deciding to home educate your children it is advisable to talk to local homeschooling families, and perhaps attend a few homeschooling support group meetings or excursions. This will give a much better idea of what home education is and what it can be, and how different families teach their children at home. You will also glean much information about how to register as a home educator and what is required. This can save you time and worry!

Preparing to Home Educate
To be exempted from attending for the purposes of home education, students must be enrolled.

For children not yet attending school:
Enroll at a school. As you intend to home educate, your child doesn't actually have to attend. Advise the school in writing that enrolling is a requirement of ‘exemption from attendance at school’ for the purposes of home education. Public schools are not permitted to deny acceptance of your enrolment if they know that you are going to home educate. You need not give information beyond your child's name, date of birth and residential address. School fees will not apply. Private schools are under no obligation to accept an enrolment if the child will be homeschooled and may will charge school fees, even if the child is not attending at all. There are a few private schools in SA that welcome homeschool enrolments and charge approximately $30 per annum and may also consider part-time attendance.

For children currently attending school:
Children are required to remain in school until the registration process is complete, however in practice many people withdraw their children when they make contact with DECS seeking information about the process. You must advise the Principal of your child's school, preferably in writing, that you have applied for exemption from attending school for your child. Keep a copy of your letter and any replies. If possible, organise your learning program and resources before withdrawing your child. Arrange to collect all of your child's belongings on her last day and inform the child's teacher/s that the Principal has been notified of your intention to home educate her. Record in your homeschool diary that you have done this: this is your official home education starting date!

Contact the Education Department:
Request that they send you a pack called Application for Exemption from Attendance At School.

Department of Education and Children’s Services
Schools and Children's Services
6th floor, Education Centre, 31 Flinders Street, Adelaide SA 5000

Applications are made through the Home Education Coordinator at Department of Education and Children’s Services:
Sally Robbins (current 2009):
Phone: 8226 1327
Email: robbins.sally@sa.gov.au


Completing the Paperwork
A single application is used for all the children you intend to teach at home. Apart from ED175, the paperwork provided is a guide only: you can submit a written application detailing your home educating learning program using a different format. The application and form/guide was designed to assist the applicant in providing information required for assessing the application. It can be substituted with your own application materials and information. It is not prescriptive but does give an idea of the factors on which your application will be assessed.

Ask for confirmation in writing for any dates and times of meetings. In addition, ask for an agenda for each meeting. This will ensure that you will be adequately prepared which may save application processing time. Request that this...
information be advised in the letter from DECS which confirms the date of the meeting. Within reason, you are able to negotiate a different date for the meeting that suits you if the one offered is inconvenient. Keep a dated log of any phone conversations together with brief comments about what was discussed or resolved.

If you find the Application for Exemption from Attendance at School forms a little daunting, make contact with the local home educators through the support groups or the HEA. They will be able to help, either by providing an example of a completed application form, or put you in contact with experienced home educators who can personally assist you. In SA home educators are allowed great latitude with regard to the choice of curriculum/program and educational style to use.

The Education Department requires name, address, telephone and the names, date of birth and schools at which the child is enrolled and attending and the names of the person/s responsible for the education of the child/ren. This information is legally required and must be given. The paperwork also asks for more information about the home education program. Offering this information expedites the application for exemption from attending school process.

DECs request a reason to be given for the request for exemption: it is usual to simply state that after duly considering all other options you consider home education to be the best educational choice for your child/ren. There is no requirement for you to give personal or detailed reasons and it is not considered necessary by experienced home educators do to so.

You are also requested to give 'an outline of the proposed program of work including areas of study and essential skills and understandings, resources to be used and methodology of teaching'. In essence this is a brief, half page summary of the curriculum you propose to use for your child/ren. It is not meant to cover everything: simply give an idea that you know what is involved in teaching your children at home. For the annual review, a separate form is provided which allows space for a paragraph outlining educational progress and resources used in each of the curriculum subject areas, as well as an outline regarding educational directions and intentions for the coming year.

The form asks for an outline of a typical day as well as your long term goals for the education of your child. You will also be asked how you will assess your child's educational progress and to give a description of the learning environment. The last question on the form relates to social activity with peers and other adults.

Most homeschooling families find their children social sphere is broadened by removing them from school. Social activities include regular interaction with people from all age groups. List cultural, religious, sport and personal interest social activities, as well as participation in homeschooling group activities. Make it obvious that you are a member of the Home Education Association or are regular in contact with local or state based homeschooling groups for support, advice and social opportunities.

The information you provide at this stage is added to a report written by the Home Education Officer after the home interview. Both are used to assess the application and are forwarded to the Director, School and District Operations (to whom the Minister delegates responsibility for granting and revoking exemptions) for approval.

The final section of the form is a declaration signed by you regarding responsibility of educational program, access to resources, and review. If you are not certain about signing this declaration prepare your own application in your own words and sign that.

The application for exemption from attending school needs to be signed by both parents, unless one parent of the child/children has guardianship of the child/children to the exclusion of the other parent by Court Order.

The Interview with the Project Officer

DECs guidelines for assessing applications for exemption from attending school include an interview. By law, an authorised person may at any time attend (but not enter unless invited) the residential home and request the full names and ages of all children of compulsory school age and compulsory education age (effectively 6-17 years) living at the house, as well as the schools in which they are respectively enrolled.

During the application process, a Project Officer from the DECS will either phone and/or send a letter advising a date they would like to meet with you to discuss your application paperwork further. If the date doesn't suit you then you have absolute freedom to negotiate a different date.

You are not obliged to invite DECs into your home. DECs will request that the first interview to be held in the place where the learning will be occurring. It is up to you. Many families have had their first and subsequent interviews in a neutral location such as the local library or at the Education Centre building in Flinders Street, Adelaide. Most home
educators feel okay about a home interview. Some find it reassuring to meet with the Project Officer and discuss their proposed home education program whereas others find it intrusive and unnecessary. Talking to other homeschooling families about their experiences will help you make up your mind about the position you need to take for your family.

Several years ago a South Australian home educating family experiencing protracted difficulty in obtaining exemption from attending school for their child with special needs offered the following advice regarding the interview process based on information from their lawyer:

"Our legal advice has been that if they have seen your home once they have no need to do it again and that all future interviews should be done at a convenient place outside the home and a third person should be present because if you invite someone into your home a lot of your legal protection disappears because of the "consent" implied in saying "come in..." You need to ensure that the third person is someone who is not affected by any decision making on either side and who can take notes to support memory at a later date. You will need to inform the authorities a third person is present to take notes and help you remember the important points of the meeting."

If you have any doubt at all about your legal rights and responsibilities seek legal advice from a qualified practitioner.

There is no requirement for your children to be present during the interview with the Project Officer. Be firm and assert that it is the learning program that is under consideration – not the children's current educational abilities and understandings. As the approved home educator it is your, not the interviewing officer's, responsibility to monitor the progress of your child. Most families are happy to have the children greet the Project Officer, talk for a few minutes and perhaps showing a sample of completed or ongoing work.

Project Officers should always be polite and professional. It is our understanding that DECs Officers are not authorised to talk to your children or inspect any of the rooms or areas in your home without your permission. They may only inspect materials on desks and shelves with your permission. Meetings are usually quite relaxed with the Officer discussing each item from the paperwork you previously completed and returned to the DECS.

The Project Officer is in your home at your invitation, therefore you have the right to instruct the Project Officer to leave at any time during the meeting and to request that a different Project Officer be appointed to complete the interview on a different date, either in your home or elsewhere.

Most families find that if they are prepared and know what to expect, the application for exemption process is not as daunting as it first appears. The senior Home Education Project Officer is very familiar with the practice of home education and understands that it takes a while for families to settle into a definite routine or find the best learning resources and methods to suit each of their children. Families should ask for copies of the South Australian Curriculum Guidelines (or National Curriculum Guidelines once they become available): these have been made available to home educators free of charge and are also available on the internet. Some Officers are less familiar with home education and may demand to see a school-like approach to home education: if you find yourself in this situation please get in touch with other South Australian home educators as soon as possible for reassurance and help. HEA are happy to supply brochures and information for you to pass on to the Home Education Project Officer.

Some time shortly after the meeting/interview you will receive a letter advising the outcome of your application. The normal outcome is to be granted a 12 month exemption from attendance at school, however sometimes it may only be granted for 6 months (this is uncommon). Exemptions are available for up to 24 months. If you are only granted the legal minimum of a 6 month exemption, or your application is denied (this is rare), then you are within your rights to be given clear and detailed reasons why, and you would have the right to re-apply.

**Annual review**

You won't hear from the DECS again until about 10-11 months later when they will phone or write to you to organise your annual review. You are able to negotiate this date: families in the middle of moving house or on holiday, for example, usually request a date once they are settled back into their home education routine. If DECs asks for an appointment prior to the end of your 12 months exemption period then it is justifiable to set a date that matches the month in which your original interview was held.

If you wish, you can complete and return the forms prepared by the Department of Education, or you can prepare a 'progress report' using your own format.

At the review interview you will be required to demonstrate the educational progress of the children for the period of exemption from attending school. This necessitates some degree of record keeping – once again ask local home
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In South Australia exemptions are granted generally on a 12 monthly basis, but 6 and 18 month exemptions are sometimes given. Once your review is completed, you will receive a copy of your child's exemption in the post.”

Part Time School / Home education

Although it is a legal alternative in Victoria and a couple of other states, the South Australian Education Department does not formally recognise or encourage part time attendance at school.

There are many reasons why families consider part time attendance at school in South Australia. Some just starting out on their homeschooling journey's feel apprehensive about how successful they will be teaching their children at home and aren't ready to leave the security of the classroom. It can take a year or so to 'find your feet' with home education and even longer to identify your child's preferred learning style and the approach to learning that works best for him or her.

Other families find that they need respite from home education for a variety of reasons: financial considerations may mean that full time homeschooling is no longer possible; or the child wants to 'try' school; if the family lives in a socially isolated location school may offer the contact with others the child needs; the school may offer specialist instruction in subjects or areas of interest to the child unable to be found elsewhere in the community; parent ill-health or disability; and so on. Returning to school should never be considered as 'failing' at homeschooling or 'homeschooling didn't work out'. In fact, families continue to contribute to their children's education in a very hands-on way when their children are attending school.

Although formally discouraged, in some circumstances it is possible to attend school part-time and be home educated in South Australia. In the past families have approached school principals and classroom teachers and suggested the idea. Some schools are okay with it and will allow it but others take a more conservative view and refuse. You can only ask. The Education Department of SA does not encourage or support part-time school/homeschool arrangements. Private schools seem more open to the idea. For some schools it can be an advantage, particularly if the child is talented or gifted in a particular subject, such as dance, music or sport and participates in interschool competitions.

There is provision for part-time attendance at government schools on the basis of medical reasons. Exemptions can be granted for up to 12 months at a time. There has to be a plan in place to re-integrate into full-time schooling sometime in the future.

Kirinari Community School6 a private school situated in Unley in the Adelaide metropolitan area that offers a part-time program for home educated students. It is small, cosy, homelike, multi-aged primary school, very similar to the Yankalilla Annexe, with a long history of supporting home education. The curriculum is flexible and the teachers communicative and supportive.

Sunrise College at Marion, an exclusively Christian school, offer subject-based enrollments in secondary school (not primary school) by negotiation.

Families needing respite have been able to access Family Day Care. Family Day Care can care for children up to 12 years of age and need to provide age appropriate activities in the course of the day. The challenge is to find a family that is happy to take on school age children and is supportive of what you desire educationally for your child.

If you hear or know about any other permanent part time arrangements for home educating students in South Australian schools that can be added to this page please email Beverley contact@beverleypaine.com, and the HEA Secretary admin@hea.edu.au.

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6 http://www.kirinari.sa.edu.au/

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