

A GUIDE TO HOMESCHOOLING IN HIGH SCHOOL—
and Equipping Your Child for Success and Fulfillment in Adulthood

THEIR FUTURE IS SHINING BRIGHT



RACHEL KOVAC

FOREWORD BY GINNY YURICH, FOUNDER OF 1000 HOURS OUTSIDE

Rachel Kovac has written a remarkable guide for homeschooling parents who are navigating the high school years. With a gentle, mentoring tone, she equips families preparing students for college or one of the many other post-high school paths. What makes this book stand out is its holistic vision: Teenagers are nurtured not only academically but also through family, community, faith, and character. Beautifully woven with Scripture, poetry, and her personal story, this book is practical and inspiring—a trustworthy companion for parents who want to see their teens flourish. I would urge parents not to wait until their children reach high school to pick up this book. Read it early so that you step into those years prepared and confident.

LEAH BODEN, author of *Modern Miss Mason* and the Tales of Boldness and Faith series

Their Future is Shining Bright by Rachel Kovac is a powerful resource for families committed to guiding students through the evolving landscape of higher education. With a deep understanding of the homeschool experience and the demands of advanced academics, Kovac offers practical strategies and heartfelt encouragements that resonate with both educational leaders and parents. This book serves as a foundational guide, helping families make informed decisions while partnering with educators to support students on their journey toward college and beyond. It's an essential tool for any community invested in student success and academic empowerment.

ABEL R. GONZALES, PH.D., college access leader and coach

Rachel Kovac has written a book that desperately needed to be written. Finally, someone has written a book about home-educating high school students that is as inspiring as it is practical. *Their Future is Shining Bright* isn't a new paradigm; it is an older, more beautiful model of what it means to be an educated human, not just for school but for life.

CINDY ROLLINS, author of *Mere Motherhood* and *Beyond Mere Motherhood*

This book needs to be central on the shelf of all homeschooling families! Drawing upon a wealth of resources, research, and personal experience, Rachel Kovac masterfully provides an encouraging and informative manual that will bear the test of culture and time. With the swift rise of homeschooling as a viable and purposeful path for our children, Kovac's important guide is timelier than ever. Her practical yet ideological work manages to speak to the mind *and* the heart of what it means to be truly educated to the glory of God. Kovac lays out a careful path so we can ensure our children have every opportunity to become wise, loving, and flourishing adults. With Kovac's widely knowledgeable yet engagingly accessible help, our children's future shines brightly indeed!

DR. CAROLYN WEBER, professor at New College Franklin, homeschooling mum of four, speaker, and award-winning author of *Surprised by Oxford*

Rachel Kovac beautifully shows that homeschooling during the high school years brims with opportunities and benefits for your students—and for you. Sharing from her experience homeschooling her own children, Kovac imparts inspirational encouragement across the years. Keep this book nearby as you and your student pursue learning!

MARGARET AND JOHNNY HUMPHREYS, coordinators, Central Texas C. S. Lewis, an Austin-area C. S. Lewis reading group

When my oldest entered the high school years, I carried both excitement and a fair amount of fear. Could I really offer her the depth, opportunities, and preparation she would need for life beyond our homeschool? Reading *Their Future is Shining Bright* felt like a balm to that uncertainty. Rachel's mix of personal story and practical wisdom reminded me that I wasn't alone and that homeschooling your students through high school was not only possible but also joyful and deeply rewarding. This book is a steady hand of encouragement for any parent walking into these years with both hope and hesitation.

AMBER O'NEAL JOHNSTON, author of *A Place to Belong*, *Soul School*, and *Homegrown*

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and Equipping Your Child for Success and Fulfillment in Adulthood**

THEIR FUTURE IS SHINING BRIGHT



RACHEL KOVAC



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Soli Deo gloria



Contents

Foreword by Ginny Yurich *ix*

INTRODUCTION When Dreams Find Their Way Home **1**
What You've Wanted All Along

PART 1 Why Homeschool in High School?

1 Reimagining the High School Experience **9**
A Vision for Adolescence, Belonging, and Secondary Education

2 The Truth Will Set You Free **25**
Dispelling Fears from Within and Without

PART 2 Designing a Custom High School Education

3 The Best of Both Worlds **45**
The Powerful Synthesis of Core Academics and Interest-Led Learning

4 The Humanities and the Search for Meaning **65**
How History, Literature, and the Arts Shape the Mind and Heart

5 The Outsourcing Advantage **87**
Using Online Courses, Tutors, Co-ops, or Hybrid Programs Thoughtfully

6 Earning College Credit **105**
How CLEP, AP, and College Courses Can Save Time and Money

PART 3 Thriving During the High School Years

7 Cultivating Close Family Connections **125**
Late-Night Conversations, Family Traditions, and Defined Priorities

8 It's Not Good to Be Alone **139**
Building Community with Your Teen

PART 4 Preparing for the Future

- 9** Exploration as Preparation 159
*How Job Shadowing, Internships, Passion Projects, Apprenticeships,
and Certifications Provide Career Direction*
- 10** A Guide to College Applications 181
Essays, Tests, Scholarships, and Financial Aid

CONCLUSION The Future Is Shining Bright 211

Acknowledgments 215

APPENDIX A How to Build a Transcript 221
Coursework, Credits, and Grades

APPENDIX B College Bound 235
A Year-by-Year Checklist

APPENDIX C 265 Career Paths and Certification Ideas That Don't
Require a Four-Year College Degree 241
Notes 273
About the Author 287

Foreword

For much too long, homeschooling through high school has felt like stepping off the map. Families readily find guidance and cheerleaders to help navigate the earlier homeschool grades, but when it comes to the teen years many parents feel alone, unsure, and unqualified. It's one thing to guide a child through phonics or fractions; it's another to shepherd them through career choices, cultural pressures, SAT prep, high school milestones, dual enrollment, the fragile emergence of identity, and the monumental step into adulthood.

Today's teenagers are navigating a world more complex, more digitized, and more emotionally demanding than ever before. And parents are doing their best to walk beside them through it all, longing to offer security, wisdom, and freedom while quietly battling fears that they may be falling short. We all know these years matter. We know they go fast. But we don't always know what they should look like.

That's where this book comes in.

In *Their Future Is Shining Bright*, Rachel Kovac offers a guiding light to families who want their child's high school years to be rich in meaning, connection, and direction. This book is filled with hard-won insights, practical tools, and detailed information

parents are desperate for but rarely find all in one place. From job shadowing ideas to strategies for writing college essays, from thoughtful reflections on cultivating close family connections to deeply moving encouragement for the weary homeschool mom, Rachel delivers a comprehensive and heartfelt road map. She doesn't just claim that you can homeschool through high school; she shows you how to do it.

Rachel is a voice I trust. She is intelligent, curious, discerning, warm in spirit, and anchored in purpose. She approaches homeschooling with both wonder and realism, deeply honoring the child in front of her while never shying away from the grit it takes to chart an unconventional path. Her family life is infused with joy and creativity, and she writes not from theory but as someone who has walked alongside her family for many seasons. She is a woman who pays attention to her children, the world, the God who guides her, and the wisdom she has gathered through a lifetime of deep reading. And because of that her words carry weight.

If you're holding this book, you are one of the brave ones who is choosing to walk a less-trodden path. Let Rachel walk with you. Let her insights, her experiences, and her in-depth research calm your nerves. Let her strategies fuel your courage.

This book is a gift to the homeschool world. It is a balm to the parent who lies awake at night wondering if they're doing enough. It is a compass for families forging ahead into this season. And it is a reminder, again and again, that homeschooling through high school is not just possible but profoundly worthwhile.

Thank you, Rachel, for writing the book we've all needed and for doing the hard work of research and reflection. You've given us a path, a plan, and a renewed sense of purpose. This book will light the way for multitudes with a ripple effect that will be felt for generations to come.

Ginny Yurich
Founder of 1000 Hours Outside

INTRODUCTION

WHEN DREAMS FIND THEIR WAY HOME

What You've Wanted All Along



*"Hope" is the thing with feathers
that perches in the soul.*

EMILY DICKINSON

In the final weeks of pregnancy with my firstborn, Jude, I fell asleep each night to George Winston's instrumental album *December*. Its piano melodies evoked the longing, solitude, and expectation found in a season of waiting. Fittingly, it was a bleak midwinter in Wisconsin.

As I listened, I imagined holding my new baby in my arms. I wondered what he would be like, what kind of person he would become. I had so much yet to learn but knew a few things to be true: I wanted him to fully know our love and the unshakable love of God. And as he grew, I hoped to guide him toward what Frederick Buechner once described as "the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."¹

I was an expectant mother, yes, but also full of hopeful expectancy. Maybe it's an ancient instinct uniting mothers across time and place, each offering up prayers and dreams for the child they have yet to meet but whom they carry so close to their hearts.

One cold night in January, when the pine branches were heavy with snow and sparkling with promise, it was time. After forty-one weeks, Jude was finally here. He looked up at me with his

big saucer eyes, and I was never the same. It was a love I hadn't experienced before, so strong I physically ached.

Thomas Aquinas defined love as "to will the good of another."² As parents we desire and seek what is good for our children, but choosing it on their behalf can be complicated. Sometimes we struggle with self-doubt. The stakes feel high. What if we make a mistake? This love compels us to want to do our best.

That's particularly true in the most vulnerable stages of our children's lives—not just in infancy, when their fragility is unmistakable, but also in adolescence, when that vulnerability becomes harder to recognize. Instead of needing to be rocked to sleep, they need courage to stand in a world that often tries to tell them who they are. They need wisdom, discernment, and conviction. As parents, the sense of responsibility we feel to guide our kids toward lasting values and help them find their path into adulthood only intensifies as they enter high school. We know these years are formative and fleeting, and we want to give them what they truly need—not just academically, but emotionally, spiritually, and relationally.

It's these same convictions that draw many of us to homeschooling. My husband, Dan, and I hadn't started out homeschooling; in fact, we hadn't even considered it at first. But when Jude was in second grade, I couldn't shake the feeling that something needed to change. He was my stoic overachiever, full of grit and determination, but he was worn down. Each day, he came home with a stack of worksheets. Instead of enjoying our evenings together or making space for the wildly creative ideas born out of boredom, I was checking assignments and cajoling him to finish. Dan and I felt caught in a grind that didn't leave room for the childhood we had imagined for our kids.

That uneasy nudge that something was amiss kept building. Maybe it's one you're experiencing too. Over time, I've come to see that that niggling feeling, the one that refuses to be ignored, can be welcomed as a guide, even a friend. Like a compass, it gently points us toward the path that was meant for us. Dan and I decided to

trust it, and together, we began the journey of homeschooling in a way that aligned with our values and recognized the needs of our family. The transformation of our daily life was dramatic.

When it was time to begin thinking about high school, I knew I wanted to keep going. Homeschooling had been a great fit for our family, and we had found our rhythm. We loved spending our mornings reading aloud and discussing ideas together. Our kids had solid friendships. They attended a wonderful co-op once a week, and we'd discovered an excellent online math program that provided expert instruction for advanced concepts.

Still, high school felt like an entirely different landscape. I knew very few families who homeschooled through high school, and I lacked a road map for what was ahead. My confidence, at times, wavered, and some of the questions I had wrestled with when we were first deciding to homeschool returned: *Am I capable? What if I don't prepare him well for the future? What if I fail him?* There had been no shortage of voices offering advice and encouragement about homeschooling in grade school. So I was struck by the comparative absence of information surrounding the complex and defining adolescent years. In many ways, we were charting our own course and learning as we went.

If you've picked up this book, you might have some of the same questions, some of the same fears. We wrestle with these concerns because we love our kids deeply, and we want what's best for them. We consider all the angles; we count all the costs. From the beginning of our parenting journey, we dream big dreams for our children and our families. We envision close-knit, healthy relationships where our kids can share their innermost struggles, goals, and fears with us. We imagine them growing into the people they were meant to be, each with their own strengths and direction. Here's what I've learned and what I hope encourages you: Embracing homeschooling in the high school years can be a powerful tool to help you realize these deep desires, the ones you have carried all along, before your children were born. Whether you are thinking

of continuing your child's education at home or considering homeschooling for the first time, you can offer your kids a beautiful and exceptional education centered around your values and family culture while also preparing them well for the future.

Homeschoolers today have more options than many people expect. Some students take Advanced Placement (AP) classes or dual-enroll in college courses, earning both high school and college credit, sometimes even an associate's degree by the time they graduate. Others choose to job shadow, apprentice, or pursue a certification program. These experiences provide hands-on learning and practical skill-building, and they offer greater clarity as teens begin to imagine life beyond high school.

At the same time, the flexibility of homeschooling gives teens the freedom to explore their passions in ways that reflect their individual strengths and interests. Our son and five daughters have appreciated the gift of time, when they can discover what makes them come alive. Through our homeschooling co-op, neighborhood, local arts programs, and church, they have found friends and mentors of all ages. And I have found a community of parents and educators who support one another as we pursue this work together.

Homeschooling is no longer a fringe educational choice. It's growing rapidly around the world. In the United States, the number of homeschoolers is rising about seven times faster than private school enrollment, as public school enrollment continues to decline.³ Still, many parents wonder: Does it actually work? Over the past fifty years, researchers have looked closely at homeschooling outcomes, especially in areas like social, emotional, and academic development. Most peer-reviewed studies show homeschooled students are doing as well as, and sometimes better than, their traditionally schooled peers.⁴

In the chapters ahead, I will share both sound research and the stories of families, including my own, who've homeschooled through high school in different ways. My hope is that this will not only give you confidence that homeschooling in high school can

be a strong and rewarding choice, but that it also ignites a sense of potential and excitement. I'll offer a wide range of ideas not to create pressure to do them all, but to give you a sense of what's possible as you begin to imagine what your own days could look like.

Maybe you've already made the decision to homeschool your high school kids and are looking for practical guidance. You will discover much of the essential information here. I'll walk you through how to develop a homeschool approach that not only supports your child's holistic development, but also prepares them for whatever comes next, whether that's college, a trade, entrepreneurship, a certification program, or another path. You'll find answers to frequently asked questions about what homeschooling in high school looks like, including how to

- overcome common fears like doubting your teaching abilities, concerns about time constraints, or not knowing where to begin;
- provide your teens with an excellent education while also giving them time and freedom to explore their interests;
- teach (or outsource) advanced subjects like math, science, and foreign languages with clarity and confidence;
- find opportunities that allow teens to participate in sports, band, clubs, and other extracurriculars;
- foster a solid peer group and build community during their high school years;
- strengthen family bonds through shared learning, conversation, adventures, and traditions;
- explore internships, passion projects, apprenticeships, and certification programs that teach hands-on skills and offer direction;
- help your teen develop a genuine love of learning;
- learn about dual-enrollment and AP courses that will prepare teens for college-level work and can save you money;
- apply for financial aid or scholarships;

- determine coursework based on your state’s graduation requirements, your child’s goals after high school, and their growth as a whole person; and
- build strong transcripts and application materials.

TIP: While I suggest best practices and general recommendations when it comes to homeschooling, coursework, and graduation requirements, each state has its own guidelines, which may change over time. For that reason, be sure to check with your own state for specific and detailed information on requirements.



As this book unfolds, we will explore these and other common questions and concerns about homeschooling in high school so you can approach these years with confidence and joy. These pages hold the most important things I’ve learned over the past twenty years, what I wish I had known when we first began. Some are the fruit of lessons learned through our mistakes and missteps. I hope to spare you those same stumbles and equip you with information drawn from experience, research, seasoned experts, and other families who have walked this road before you. You don’t have to navigate this journey alone.

These years may look different from what you imagined in those earliest days of parenting, but the hopes you held then—the desire to love your kids well, to guide them toward their calling, and to anchor them in the eternal—can still shape both their education and your family life together.

Your children and the dreams you hold for your family were entrusted to you for a purpose. In a world clamorous with competing opinions and advice, where fears may lurk without and within, like Lucy in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, we learn to trust the voice that guides us, strong and sweet, even when others don’t hear or understand it.

“Courage, dear heart.”⁵



PART 1

WHY HOMESCHOOL IN HIGH SCHOOL?



REIMAGINING THE HIGH SCHOOL EXPERIENCE

A Vision for Adolescence, Belonging, and Secondary Education



All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us.

J. R. R. TOLKIEN, *THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE RING*

In her final three summers of high school, my eldest daughter, Indigo, spent a few weeks each June volunteering at a family camp nestled in the mountains of Colorado. The sky was sequined with stars like the first day of paradise as Indi walked up the carpeted stairs of the lodge for a meeting. A guest spotted her staff name tag and asked how to get to the tennis courts. Indi offered to show her the way. They passed through the aspen grove under moonlit leaves while making small talk.

“So where do you go to school?” the woman asked.

“I’m homeschooled,” Indi replied, “but I’m also taking classes at a local university.”

“Oh really? But don’t you feel like you’re missing out on the high school experience?”

Indi shook her head. “No, I have great friends, I get to focus on the things I love, and I’m earning college credit. It’s working well for me.”

The guest paused and sighed. “I guess, looking back, I’m not sure my high school was really the right fit for me.”

THE HIGH SCHOOL EXPERIENCE

High school isn't seen just as an educational stage—it's wrapped in nostalgia, milestones, and cultural significance. For most of us this experience isn't just about academics; high school represents friendships, traditions, and the transition into adulthood. So when adults hear that my kids are homeschooled, one question often follows: "But what about the high school experience?" Most people, like the woman looking for the tennis courts, seem genuinely curious about what it means to step outside of what they see as a rite of passage, a defining season of life.

When we were first deciding whether homeschooling was right for us, I had the same concern. I worried that choosing a different path might mean my children would miss out on something essential, an experience so many view as a core part of childhood. Attending school felt like a given, as fundamental as learning to walk or ride a bike. It was simply what kids have always done.

Or was it?

Before I could even begin to ask the underlying questions, I had to first recognize the assumption I was carrying: the belief that traditional schooling wasn't just *one* way to learn, but *the* way. Once I stepped back from that belief, I began to wonder: Where did our modern idea of high school come from? Was it truly a time-honored tradition, or had it just become what we expect?

Wanting to get to the bottom of these questions, I fell down a fascinating rabbit hole into the history of high school as an institution. I was surprised to learn that high school, as we know it today, is a relatively new phenomenon. Of course, schools operated in places like ancient Greece and Rome, but formal education was largely reserved for boys from wealthy families. As I dug deeper, I realized that much of what we take for granted about high school hasn't always existed. The way learning is structured, the expectation that all teenagers follow the same paradigm—these weren't

universal constants but responses to historical, cultural, and economic forces.

Understanding the historical roots of high school led me to even deeper questions. If the system isn't as timeless as I once believed, why do so many assume it's the right approach for every child? Where did ideas like compulsory attendance and grade levels originate, and what purpose do they serve? How is the curriculum determined, and by whom? And is this the best way to prepare young people for adulthood, or is it simply the model we've inherited?

The Rise of Public Education

Before the Industrial Revolution, families were the heart of both social and economic life. Most people lived in the countryside, working together on farms, in villages, or in shops. Parents relied on their children to help feed chickens, collect eggs, and plant crops, or if they were craftsmen, to learn handicrafts and trade skills to sustain the family business.¹

As industrialization transformed daily life, learning, once woven into family and community, began to reflect new priorities. Horace Mann, a nineteenth-century Massachusetts legislator who is often called the father of American education, saw schooling as the great equalizer, a means to bridge social divides and create a well-educated citizenry. He envisioned “common schools” where every child, regardless of background, could receive a tuition-free, tax-funded education from trained teachers.² His vision took hold, and by the late 1800s, publicly supported elementary schools had been established in every state.

Mann's ideas were influenced by the Prussian education system, which emphasized obedience, discipline, and national cohesion. He admired their structured, compulsory schooling framework, which required attendance and trained teachers in government-run institutions. The familiar school bell, regimented schedule, and standardized instruction all reflected this system. The goal

wasn't just literacy; it was order. Schools trained students to follow schedules, respond to authority, and work efficiently, mirroring the needs of an industrial workforce.³

Soon the purpose of public schools extended beyond academics. Reformers saw them as a tool for assimilating immigrants and instilling shared cultural norms.⁴ Schools became a central force in defining not just what children learned, but how they thought, behaved, and viewed their place in society. As Illinois's superintendent of public instruction put it in 1862, "The chief end [of common schools] is to make good citizens. Not to make precocious scholars . . . not to impart the secret of acquiring wealth . . . but simply to make good citizens."⁵

Historically, children learned in mixed-age settings, whether in apprenticeships, home education, or one-room schoolhouses, where younger students absorbed knowledge from older peers and older students reinforced their learning by teaching. But as public education expanded, grouping children by age became the standard, not necessarily because it was the most effective way to learn, but because it provided an efficient way to manage large numbers of students. The flexibility of home- and community-based education faded in favor of a more standardized model.

Mann's reforms revolutionized education, making schooling widely available in a way it hadn't been before. It's important to note, however, that the quality varied significantly. Barriers such as segregation, discrimination, poverty, and disability prevented many children from receiving the same educational opportunities. Moreover, "common" did not mean equal.⁶ Wealthier areas often had access to more resources, better-funded schools, and broader curriculum options, just like today.

As common schools expanded, childhood was being altered in another way: the rise of industrial labor. The same era that sought to bring structure to education was pulling children out of family life and into factories.

Child Labor and Educational Reform

The Industrial Revolution transformed society at a breathtaking pace. Steam engines powered trains and ships, textile mills mechanized production, and new agricultural tools reshaped farming. As factories multiplied, people flooded into cities in search of work, leaving behind rural life at a scale never seen before. Streets once filled with horse-drawn carts gave way to railways, and quiet villages emptied as towering smokestacks rose above crowded urban centers.⁷ The world was shifting, and childhood was changing along with it. Families were no longer working together toward a shared livelihood, and parents who once relied on their children's help at home now sought the income, limited as it was, that they could earn by industrial labor.

The plants needed workers, and children were highly sought after. Their small size allowed them to maneuver between machines, handle delicate tasks, and fit into tight spaces. They worked long hours in dangerous conditions for low wages, often suffering from injuries and illnesses. Little time was left for education.⁸

As child labor became widespread, reformers fought for change. In the mid-1800s, states introduced early labor restrictions and compulsory schooling laws, though enforcement was weak.⁹ By the early 1900s, reform efforts intensified. The National Child Labor Committee (NCLC) used photography to expose the harsh realities of child labor, with Lewis Hine's harrowing images of children in mills and factories shifting public opinion.¹⁰

When legislative attempts to limit child labor repeatedly failed, reformers turned to education instead. If school attendance was mandatory, children couldn't be sent to work. The lawmakers' efforts prevailed, and by 1918 compulsory schooling laws were in place nationwide, making formal education a requirement rather than a privilege.¹¹

Compulsory school attendance began as a way to protect

students from exploitation and also from idleness as their parents were away from home, trying to cobble together an income in factories and mills.¹² This safeguard against child labor became the framework for an educational system that still defines childhood today. For many families, school sets the rhythm of daily life. Mornings are a rush to get out the door, and evenings are filled with assignments and structured activities. Weekends, rather than offering rest, are packed with extracurriculars, commitments, and preparation for the week ahead. The days can blur together in a cycle of classes, homework, and obligations, leaving little unhurried time for family, creativity, or even just being.

When my two oldest children were small and in school, I was so stretched by the pace. Sometimes I felt like I was just hanging on for dear life. Then in a moment I have often returned to, I read the passage, “Teach us to realize the brevity of life, so that we may grow in wisdom.”¹³ It was arresting. My kids had only this one childhood, and I had only one chance to experience it with them. And as I sat with that thought, I couldn’t shake another line—the poet Mary Oliver’s haunting question: “Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?”¹⁴

Was this how we wanted to spend it?

We made our decision to homeschool knowing that traditional schooling works well for a lot of families. There are many talented, dedicated teachers and excellent schools. I am grateful for their good work. This book isn’t about drawing battle lines. But if you’re reading this, you might be wondering whether the current system is working for *your* family. I want to show you that while it’s one way, it’s not the only way.

What if education could provide strong academics while still allowing time for close-knit relationships, personal passions, community involvement, and hands-on learning? What if it could feel less like keeping up and more like ordering your days around your pace, your affections, and your vision for your family?

The Movement Toward Standard Secondary Education

It's easy to assume that high school has always been part of growing up. But just over a century ago, most teenagers weren't in classrooms at all. Even with compulsory education laws in place, relatively few students completed high school in the early 1900s. In 1910, only 9 percent of students earned a diploma.¹⁵ But the US saw an opportunity to lead the world in secondary education, and the role of high school began to shift.

Until then, secondary schools had catered to an elite few, primarily preparing students for college through subjects like Latin, Greek, and advanced math. But as the workforce changed, so did high school. Classical studies gave way to vocational training in fields like typing, bookkeeping, and shorthand, skills that were considered more practical for an expanding economy. By 1940, graduation rates had climbed to 50 percent.¹⁶

After World War II, this transformation accelerated. The GI Bill opened college, along with other educational options, to millions of veterans. As a result, the number of degree holders doubled in a decade.¹⁷ My own grandfather, and maybe yours too, was among them. He was raised by farmers and unable to afford college, but his military service paved the way for a career as a surgeon. For many families, this was life-changing.

By 1958, Cold War tensions led to another change in American education. After the Soviet Union launched Sputnik, Congress poured funding into high school and college math, science, and technology programs, believing the nation's future depended on staying ahead in the space race. Schools followed suit, prioritizing STEM subjects not just to advance knowledge but also to maintain global standing in an era of rapid technological competition.¹⁸

By 1970, high school graduation rates climbed to 80 percent.¹⁹ And the high school experience as we know it was born. What had once been an option for a select few had become the default, driven as much by economic and political forces as by students' needs.

Along the way, high school took on a life of its own; more than just an academic institution, it became a cultural milestone, filled with traditions, expectations, and a sense of importance.

THE SHIFT TOWARD PEER ORIENTATION

Many of those high school traditions and experiences center around teenagers spending much of their time with their peers. While friendships have always been an important part of growing up, this level of age segregation, where teens primarily learn social and relational skills from one another rather than from adults, is new in human history.

In the absence of strong multigenerational connections, teens have done what humans always do: They've built their own culture, defined by its own style, language, and social norms. This isn't inherently negative, but it can create distance between generations. Parents and adults often find themselves on the outside, not quite knowing how to bridge the gap. At the same time, teens may struggle to relate to adults in meaningful ways or form genuine relationships across generations.²⁰

Instead of growing under the steady guidance of people with more life experience, high school students often turn to their peers for direction. Of course, adults don't have all the answers, and young people bring their own insights. But wisdom often develops with time, through mistakes and seeing beyond the present moment. When teens are left to navigate relationships, identity, and decision-making primarily among themselves, they may not have the stability or perspective needed to do so well.

Without trusted adults playing an active role, teens absorb messages about love, belonging, and who they are from those who are still figuring it out themselves. And when those messages go unexamined, they can leave lasting imprints, affecting how adolescents see themselves and relate to others, sometimes long into adulthood. Many of us know this firsthand, having carried the wounds of those early impressions, never realizing at the time

how they would come to inform our sense of self, our experience of friendship and intimacy, our ability to trust, and our understanding of love.

Peer relationships matter. They always have. Even in homeschooling, we work hard to intentionally create space for connection and friendships. But in a world where peer influence is stronger than ever, it's important to ask: Who is influencing our kids *most*? Are they being drawn toward their peers as their true north, or are they being anchored in relationships that will guide, strengthen, and prepare them for the years ahead?

Understanding Conformity: A Social Experiment

Looking back on your high school years, whose influence guided your decisions? Did your choices, big or small, align with your own values and aspirations, or was there an unspoken pressure nudging you in a certain direction?

Fundamental to human nature is a desire for belonging, and this is particularly strong in the teenage years. Dr. Laurence Steinburg, a leading expert on adolescence, has spent decades studying the brain, and he has written extensively about the changes that take place in “the social brain” during the adolescent years. Neuroscientists have discovered that these changes make teenagers more sensitive to what other people think of them, to social rejection, and even to facial cues. Peer pressure plays a stronger role in their decisions, and they are more likely to engage in gossip than in other stages of life. Rejection is painful at any age, but due to changes in the brain, it is especially acute during adolescence.²¹

Because students spend so much time together in school, the pressure to conform is immense. Social psychologist Solomon Asch demonstrated just how strong this influence can be in a now-famous 1951 experiment. Participants were shown a set of lines and asked to identify which two matched in length. The task was simple until they were placed in a group where actors deliberately

gave the wrong answer.²² Faced with unanimous but obviously incorrect responses, over 72 percent of the study's participants conformed at least once, and over a third did so in every round.²³

Reflecting on his findings, Asch concluded, "That we have found the tendency to conformity in our society so strong that reasonably intelligent and well-meaning young people are willing to call white black is a matter of concern. It raises questions about our ways of education and about the values that guide our conduct."²⁴

Asch's findings were only the beginning. They became a foundation for decades of research on peer pressure, group behavior, and conformity. Study after study has shown that the pressure to fit in often overrides personal values, critical thinking, and even the truth itself. If young adults struggle to resist conformity in a brief experiment among strangers, how much stronger is that pull in a high school environment, where friendships and social status are precarious? When fitting in becomes the priority, students may silence their own convictions, not because they've changed their minds, but because standing alone feels too costly.

I've heard it said that we become the average of the five people we spend the most time with. Research confirms that children naturally adopt the behaviors of those around them. If they are surrounded by aggressive peers, they are more likely to act aggressively. If their closest friends struggle with depression, their own risk increases. The stakes are even higher in high school. When classmates glamorize drinking, drug use, or other risky behaviors, whether in person or online, teenagers are more likely to follow suit, even when it contradicts their values.²⁵

Fitting in is a double-edged sword, isn't it? Acceptance brings a fleeting sense of belonging, yet it can also create internal dissonance. When we conform in order to be liked, we often sacrifice authenticity. The person being accepted is not the person we really are. And that disconnect can be deeply isolating.

Unfortunately, research bears this out: Teens today are lonelier than ever.

The Psychological Effects of High School Social Environments

As homeschoolers, it can sometimes feel like the onus is on us to prove that our children will be socially and emotionally well-adjusted. But when we step back and look at the broader picture of adolescent mental health, it becomes clear that today's teenagers are in crisis.

The CDC conducted a ten-year study on US high school students, and the findings were concerning. They reported, that

Unfortunately, almost all . . . indicators of health and well-being in this report including . . . experiences of violence, mental health, and suicidal thoughts and behaviors worsened significantly. . . . As we saw in the 10 years prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, mental health among students overall continues to worsen, with more than 40% of high school students feeling so sad or hopeless that they could not engage in their regular activities for at least two weeks during the previous year.²⁶

One in five students had considered suicide, and one in ten had attempted it.²⁷ Among girls and minority groups, the numbers were even more dire. Fifty-seven percent of female students reported persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness, and 24 percent had made a suicide plan.²⁸

While these statistics are heartbreaking, they are not the whole story. One of the CDC's top recommendations was centered around connectedness.²⁹ Strong, supportive relationships within families, with trusted adults, and in the broader community play a critical role in protecting adolescent well-being. A secure sense of belonging helps teens build resilience, navigate challenges, and feel anchored in a world that often feels unmoored.

Connection matters, and as parents we have the ability to nurture it.

Homeschooling isn't a cure-all for the struggles of adolescence. No one educational model is. But it creates space for connection to flourish. It allows time for formative conversations, thoughtful guidance, and nurturing relationships that offer a sense of security in a season of life that can feel both exciting and challenging.

Yet some families wonder whether choosing a different educational path might come at the expense of social development or future success. It's a fair question, one that researchers have explored in depth.

So how do homeschooled students fare?

Dr. Brendan Case, associate director for research at Harvard's Human Flourishing Program, and Dr. Ying Chen, an empirical research associate and data scientist, conducted a comprehensive study on student outcomes based on school choice. Their research examined multiple factors, including mental health, overall well-being, character strengths, academic performance, risky behaviors, social engagement, and physical health.

Interestingly, their findings showed no significant differences between public and private school students in adulthood. However, homeschooled students stood out in several key areas. They were more forgiving, and more likely to volunteer and to attend religious services—something prior research has linked to lower risks of substance abuse, depression, premature death, and suicide.³⁰

Challenging common misconceptions, the study's authors concluded, "The picture of the home-schooled student that emerges from the data doesn't resemble the socially awkward and ignorant stereotype to which . . . others appeal. Rather, home-schooled children generally develop into well-adjusted, responsible, and socially engaged young adults."³¹

Made to Belong

Research confirms what we've intuitively known all along: We weren't made to go through life alone. The story of creation itself reminds us that aloneness was the first thing declared not good.³²

From the very beginning, we were created for one another, drawn toward love and connection. Psychologists recognize belonging as a fundamental need, as essential as food and water.

Homeschooling allows us to educate our children while cultivating the atmosphere and family life we envision. And home can be a soft landing place where our children grow in direction, character, and their own gifts, free from the pressure to conform to arbitrary or unhealthy group standards, where struggles can be shared, not hidden, knowing it is in those moments that we need each other most of all.

We can show our children that belonging is rooted in family and community, in loving and being loved in return. We can model discernment when forming close relationships, reminding our kids that real love wills the good of another. This stands in stark contrast to the conditional acceptance of unhealthy peer groups, where conformity is often the price of inclusion. True love looks like light in the darkness, healing in brokenness, a refuge where they can be fully known and truly loved, the way God loves us.³³

EDUCATION ACCORDING TO THEIR WAY

It's easy to feel uncertain when we step outside the familiar, especially when something has been the norm for as long as we can remember. But understanding the origins of schooling in the United States helped me see it for what it is: a useful tool for many, but not the authority on what learning should look like for all. For many students today, traditional high school provides structure and opportunity. But for others, it can feel limiting, impersonal, or disconnected from their aspirations and values. The expectation that all teenagers must follow the same educational paradigm is a modern construct, one that doesn't have to define every child's path.

The high school system that now frames adolescence is barely one hundred years old. It emerged, in part, in response to economic shifts, political agendas, and national priorities. Conformity

was a central aim, and in many ways, its influence remains. While schools continue to evolve, the emphasis on standardization and efficiency still defines much of how students learn. These priorities can be at odds with the kind of education that cultivates well-rounded, inquisitive, and critical thinkers. Education has adapted to fit society's needs, but that doesn't mean it was designed with the individual child in mind.

As our culture increasingly values flexibility in work, family life, and learning, homeschooling offers a natural extension of this. It isn't just about opting out of one approach. It's about reclaiming the possibilities, asking, *What kind of education truly serves my child?* Instead of following a system designed to accommodate many, it allows families to reimagine learning as a living, dynamic experience—one that nurtures curiosity, fosters wisdom, and prepares students for life in a way that aligns with who they are uniquely created to be.

The Power of Home

The ancient proverb “Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it” is often interpreted as a call to moral instruction. But many scholars see another layer as well: In Hebrew it literally translates “in accordance with their way”—according to the way they were made, the particular bent of their soul, with the strengths, longings, and talents that make them unmistakably themselves.³⁴

Education, then, is not about pressing a child into a mold, nor is it leaving them to drift. It requires both structure and freedom, discipline and delight. A tree does not grow because we command it to. And an oak will never be an olive tree, nor a maple a pine. Each grows according to its nature and flourishes under the attentive care of the gardener. So it is with our kids. Learning is not one-size-fits-all. Children thrive when they are guided with intention, given both roots and room to grow, in keeping with the way they were made.

This is one of the treasures of homeschooling: the ability to deeply know your child and nurture and educate them accordingly. It becomes a way of seeing, of growing in knowledge of our world and one another. This allows for learning that is both rigorous and relational, forming not only the intellect but also the character. And home is the shelter where this formation begins. In a society that often pulls teens away from family, homeschooling offers a countercultural way: an education grounded in relationship. It gives our kids a strong foundation and the confidence to step into life knowing they will always have a place to return.

A different kind of high school experience is possible, one that embraces both academic excellence and the brevity of childhood. A place where ideas flourish, where exploration is encouraged, and where connected relationships provide a secure sense of belonging. Instead of being swept along by a relentless pace, we can give our kids the time to understand who they are and what they are called to before others try to define it for them.

When my children were small, people sometimes said things like, “Just wait until they’re teenagers! You think they’re cute now, but you’ll see.” I know adolescence can bring challenges, and these warnings are often spoken from a place of pain. Still, it doesn’t feel honoring to project such pessimism on a child a decade before they reach that stage of life.

The teen years don’t have to be something to survive, for them or for us. Instead of leaving peer relationships to chance, we can guide them toward friendships that foster growth, kindness, and integrity. We can anchor them in a wider multigenerational community, offering wisdom beyond fleeting trends. They can take on new challenges within the presence of those who see them not just as they are, but as who they are becoming.

Our teenagers need our support, our love, and our confidence in their future. They need the reassurance that, even as they enter adulthood, they are not alone. To know, deep in their bones, that belonging is not conditional, but promised. T. L. Haines once

wrote, “Home should be made so truly home that the weary tempted heart could turn toward it anywhere on the dusty highway of life and receive light and strength.”³⁵

No matter how far they go, they will always have home.