

real life families

Why I was right to home school my daughter

Parents who choose to educate their children themselves are not all hippies with unruly kids. Here Lesha Chaplin-Park, 36, explains why she turned teacher...

Standing outside the school gates, my stomach twisted with nerves. 'Am I doing the right thing?' I wondered over and over. Looking at the envelope in my hands, I chewed my lip anxiously. It was a letter to the head teacher stating that I was withdrawing my daughter from school.

Yes, for the next year, I'd be teaching my eight-year-old daughter Georgia at home. And not everyone could understand my decision. 'Are you mad?' one of my closest friends, Jessica, asked, her face crinkled with concern. 'Do you know even the first thing about teaching?'

I could understand her concern. With just three GCSEs myself, I knew people would judge me. But what my daughter needed now was one-on-one attention.

Georgia had recently been struggling with several subjects, including reading and spelling, and she was showing the early signs of dyslexia.

I didn't want her to fall behind

the other children, and I was sure that some extra help from me would make all the difference.

After talking it over with my ex-husband Anthony, I was more determined than ever to make it work.

Georgia liked the idea too. 'How long will it be for?' she asked me.

'A year, then you'd go back to school with your friends,' I told her.

Georgia thought about it for a moment, then nodded. 'That'd be good,' she said.

However, I did warn her that there would be rules.

'You have to respect me as your teacher,' I said. 'If this is going to work, I'll expect the same discipline that you had in your classroom.' 'That's okay, Mum,' Georgia said. And I was sure she meant it - she was a good girl, and I knew she wouldn't play up.

So for the next few weeks, while Georgia enjoyed her summer holidays, I frantically prepared to become her teacher.

My first call was to the council, which arranged for a home

education co-ordinator to visit us.

'Do I get given a curriculum to follow?' I asked when he arrived.

'No, there's no curriculum to follow,' he answered. 'And you only have to teach Georgia for a minimum of 45 minutes a day.'

'What?' I gasped. 'Are you joking?'

He explained that in a normal classroom, the amount of time spent teaching each child on an individual basis is around 45 minutes a day.

And as long as I taught Georgia maths and English, I could fill her day with whatever else I wanted.

I bought every book I could get my hands on, about everything from how to teach to things I knew her classmates would be studying.

Admittedly, I was worried Georgia would miss out socially, but she was already in plenty of after-school clubs, and my friends came over with their kids all the time.

September soon came around, and on the first day of her new 'school' I had Georgia at the dining-room table for 9am.

'What do you want to study first?' I asked Georgia, as we looked

through all the books I'd bought.

'I'd like to do a project on the Romans,' she beamed, delighted at being able to pick a subject.

As we got into our studies, I could see how much Georgia was enjoying herself - and I knew I'd made the right decision.

A few days later we brought her studies to life with a day trip to Bath. When we got home that afternoon, Georgia settled down to write up her homework.

Reading through it the next morning, I could see that it was littered with mistakes.

'This is sloppy, Georgia,' I told her. 'You need to give me your absolute best - try it again.'

Georgia pouted for a minute or two, then she sat down and rewrote her project.

And bit by bit her work improved. Suddenly the subjects she'd been struggling with improved in leaps and bounds.

I tried hard to help with her problem areas. One day she pulled a face as I set her some sums.

'I hate fractions,' she grumbled. 'Tough,' I said, determined to



Georgia enjoyed trips abroad as part of her studies



She was studying by nine every morning



She learnt how to make pizzas

maintain the discipline of teaching her the subjects she hated. 'We need to keep doing them until you understand them properly.'

'I hope I'm getting her up to the right level,' I confided in my husband Richard. 'It's hard to know whether she's at the same standard as the other children in school.'

But Richard was reassuring. 'You're doing a great job,' he said. And my fears were brushed aside when the education co-ordinator came back to visit us a few months later.

Looking at the exercise books full of her work, he was delighted. 'You're going above and beyond what you need to do,' he said.

Georgia and I continued to study,

and her enthusiasm never wavered.

She picked more topics, and with each one we'd include some fantastic day trips and holidays.

For a project on Egypt I took her to the British Museum, and then her grandad took her to Egypt.

To be able to see another culture and explore the pyramids gave Georgia an amazing insight into what she was writing about.

We did a project on the media and spent a day at the BBC where she got to see the Tardis from *Doctor Who*. We had a day out at Pizza Express making pizzas, and instead of PE lessons I took her ice-skating and horse-riding. Georgia even came to the

hospital with me when I was pregnant with her little brother Luca, and helped the sonographer take the ultrasound pictures.

'That was cool,' she said, having had an impromptu biology lesson.

Of course, we had our 'off' days.

'I've had enough for today,' Georgia huffed one afternoon.

I felt the same - we were starting to annoy each other.

'Okay,' I replied. 'I'll see if Grandad is free to take you out.'

Luckily, my dad was always more than happy to help and

it gave us some breathing space.

All too soon, our educational year drew to a close. And as I got Georgia ready to return to mainstream school, I asked her if she was looking forward to it.

'I've liked learning at home, but I'm ready to go back,' she told me.

Georgia quickly settled in to classroom learning, and her understanding of maths, geography, English and science is so much better. She's in the top maths set and has been voted on to the school council. She hasn't missed out on anything.

I'm proud of how much we achieved together - I got to know my daughter better, and gave her a great boost in her education. Home education really was the best decision for my little girl. ■

HOME SCHOOLING: How to get started

- You don't need to be a qualified teacher, but you are required to ensure your child receives a full-time education suitable to their age and ability.
- Write to your child's head teacher to inform them that you will be home schooling from now on.
- It is also advisable to inform the local authority of your decision.
- There are no fixed school hours, days or terms that you must observe.
- For more information, go to www.direct.gov.uk and type 'home education' into the search box.



Georgia is enjoying being back at school