



HOMESCHOOLING:
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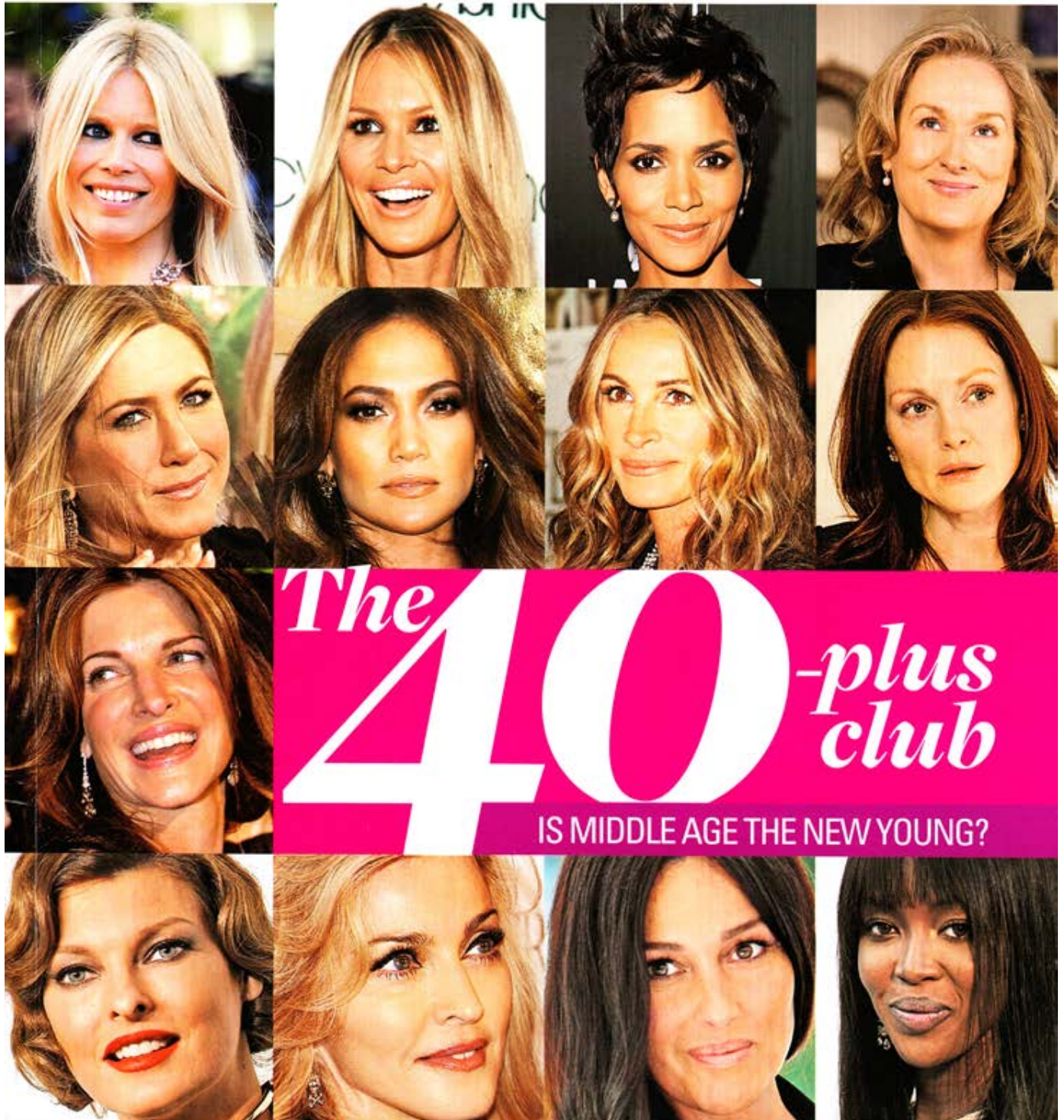
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THE AGE-OLD
TRADITION
IS CATCHING
ON IN THE
UAE

CLASSWORK AT HOME



HOME LEARNING: Rekha Thomas with daughters (left to right) Danielle, Darianne and Dorothy. Photo: Leslie Pableo

HOMESCHOOLING IS REGARDED AS UNCONVENTIONAL WISDOM, SO WHY DO CERTAIN PARENTS INSIST ON IMPARTING AN EDUCATION TO THEIR KIDS WITHOUT AN ORGANISED SCHOOL SET-UP? WE GIVE YOU THE LOWDOWN

BY MEGHA PAI

SIX-YEAR-OLD Darianne Thomas wakes up at 7am and gets ready for school. She heads downstairs, enters the "classroom" and settles into her seat. Her sisters Danielle and Dorothy are already engrossed in their books. Darianne switches on her desktop computer and opens the day's schedule saved by the teacher, otherwise known as Mom in the household. She has math assigned today. But she doesn't feel like tackling it just yet, so she takes up the next subject, Animal Science. It happens to be her favourite and she wants to be a veterinarian in her own zoo someday. Not that she is escaping math. She knows she will have to finish it sooner or later, but she can do it at her own convenience and according to her mood. So long as she covers the required portions, it's alright. She Googles African Safari, puts on her headphones and watches an informative animal planet video while taking down notes on the king of the jungle.

Welcome to home-schooling. A more popular concept in the US, homeschooling is gathering momentum in the region with more and more families choosing to take education into their own hands. According to clinical psychologist Mary John, "While, for the most part, expat families live a privileged existence in the UAE with children getting to experience different cultures, the flip side is that their academic stability is disrupted. So, many parents see homeschooling as a great solution," she says.

But there are other reasons too. At the Thomas household, for instance, disenchantment with the education system started when Rekha Thomas realised she spent most of her time teaching her children

— again — what had been done in school and ensuring they did their homework. Her quality time with them had decreased.

The last straw came when she heard her eldest and middle daughters describe the means used by the teachers to "discipline" the class — using threats such as stapling the mouth if a student talks or making the kids stand on a dustbin to publicly humiliate them.

"I do understand that it is a tough job to handle so many kids but I do believe these things are detrimental to the development of my daughters. So I decided to pull them out of school when Danielle and Dorothy were in fourth and first grade respectively."

Pulling the kids out of school wasn't an easy choice to make, says Ashish Thomas, the father. His mother, former head mistress of a school in Mumbai, was dead against it. "We found it hard to convince people. But we kept reminding ourselves that we were doing this for the kids and not to please anyone else."

"The current schooling system, which is more about pleasing the adults involved in the education process, was another concern that we had," adds Rekha. "Rather than focusing on the development of the kids, the projects and activities became more about pleasing the school, the teachers and facing the competition. It became a sort of rat race."

In retrospect, the parents say, homeschooling was the best decision they ever made. "Once they started school, the kids started turning quiet and distant. A year into homeschooling, they started becoming bubbly again," Rekha adds.

FLEXIBILITY AND BONDING

Many times, the schedule of a working parent is not compatible with that of the

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kids, says Susan Donovan, homeschooling mother of three. "In many traditional families we see that kids grow up not having the fathers around too much, who miss out on the childhoods of their kids. With homeschooling, it is easier for us to take family vacations and time off more frequently."

For home educator Krista Heath, homeschooling is not just good for the parent-child bonding, but also for the relationship among her three children, Drew (15), Joey (12) and Mackenzie (10). "In my experience, homeschooled kids get along with their siblings much better than their counterparts, probably because they spend a lot more time together," says the Texan.

GAINING POPULARITY

"What do Albert Einstein, Abraham Lincoln, CS Lewis, Thomas Edison, Agatha Christie, Wolfgang Mozart, Charlie Chaplin and Will Smith have in common?" Rebecca Lavellee, homeschooling mother of five and chairperson of the Abu Dhabi Home Schoolers Association (ADHSA), asks. "Besides the fact that they are all distinguished personalities, they were



WHAT DID EINSTEIN, EDISON AND MOZART HAVE IN COMMON? THEY ALL WENT THROUGH HOMESCHOOL

all homeschooled," she points out.

Lavellee, 51, has homeschooled all of her five children at some stage of their education because she believes parents have a duty to provide the best learning environment they can. "I have been homeschooling for 20 years since I pulled my eldest child out of grade one because I got the sense that the teacher didn't like him much," says Lavellee, whose children range in age from 10 to 24. When she moved to Dubai with her husband and kids in 2008, she started the ADHSA to facilitate homeschooling families.

ADHSA now has a group of over 35 families registered — an exponential increase from the original eight in 2008 — made up of 10 nationalities including India, Pakistan, Australia, US, UK, Canada and Lebanon. The group organises regular field trips, runs book, math and drama clubs and meets in a park every week to allow the children to play with other youngsters from the homeschooling families.

LOVING AND KNOWING YOUR CHILD

Seema Khan is always met with disbelief by other mothers when they find out that she homeschools her sons. "It's amazing how many people ask me, 'How can you be with them all day long?' to which I reply, 'I do it because I enjoy my kids! Don't you?' They



EDUCATION MADE FUN: (top to bottom) Arsalaan and Armaan Khan explore Chemistry; children from the ADHSA enjoy a doughnut eating competition and hone their acting skills at a drama workshop.

always say, 'Oh no! I need my time away when they go to school.' Nine out of ten times that's the response that I get,' she says.

The fact that no one knows the child better and no one is as motivated to see the child succeed as a parent figures high on the reasons why many parents are opting for this alternate route. Khan, who moved to Abu Dhabi two years ago, says despite enjoying a conventional education herself she decided she did not want the same style of learning for her own children. "I homeschool because I believe I can provide my children with a superior education in a manner best suited for my kids," says the 35-year-old, who educates her two sons Arsalan, 9, and Armaan, 5, at home.

"Every child is unique and uniquely motivated," concurs Ashish Thomas. "But in a school you are expected to fit into a mould. This stifles their vibrancy and creativity. Homeschooling ensures children get the breathing space to blossom in their own time, on their own terms, and grow as well-rounded individuals."

Significantly, a number of



A HEALTHY DISCUSSION: Mackenzie and Joey Heath study together

studies show that in most cases homeschooled children fare equal if not better than their counterparts, if they have committed parents for support and a good curriculum.

A 2009 (revised in 2010) meta-analysis study from the US Department of Education indicates that virtual students outperform their traditional model peers academically.

Jeffrey Herr, senior director of K12 Middle East, a private online school that offers competitive curricu-

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lum to homeschoolers, attributes this to the fact that virtual or online students generally are more independent, more organised and more committed to their studies since they have more ownership in their education.

"The ability to work at your own pace and to your abilities enhances the chance for success. There are many good virtual schools, such as the ICademy run by K12, that have tremendous curriculum and structure and students do very well in those programmes. A 2009 study by Interactive Educations Systems Design (IESD) titled 'Evaluation of the Social Skills of Full-Time, Online Public School Students' shows that students in full-time online programmes per-

form better socially, especially later on at university and the workplace."

LEARNING IS NOT A CHORE

Laura Noueihed pulled out her son, Maher, 10, from kindergarten six years ago when she saw how learning started becoming a chore for him. "I was raised in a family that has a long love of learning. To this day you will find my parents with a book in their hands at any point. I decided to do a better job trying to make him fall in love with learning the way I did."

Rekha Thomas says, in her household, the focus is on viewing things with a sense of wonder and joy as opposed to comprehending it as dry theory. "I ensure that the girls don't move on until they have understood everything. They're competing with their previous performance and have nothing to prove. When you read a book for the joy of it, you are more likely to remember what you read than if you were reading because you were going to be tested on it."

SHIELDING THE KIDS

Most homeschooling



IN IT TOGETHER: Susan and Jack Donovan with sons Rob (14), Cooper (7) and Rory (9). Photo: Nezar Balout

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parents are glad to be in charge of deciding what to expose their kids to and when — a choice they don't have when the kids attend traditional schools. "My motivation for homeschooling was of course related to academic reasons but I also had other reasons, the most important one being transmitting values to the children which wasn't always compatible with what was going on in school," Rebecca Lavalley states.

Ashish Thomas finds it is unsettling to read about what is happening around the world in schools, especially in the US and the UK, and even back home in India. Every day you read about violence, drugs and sex scandals. "In the UAE, fortunately, the environment is safer but not completely insulated," he says.

Surely you can't shield your kids forever? The Thomases are aware of it, they say, but they would like to expose them to it "at the right time and in the right manner."

THE DOWNSIDES

As with everything, there are shortcomings in homeschooling too but you pick your poison, Lavalley points out.

"It is a path that requires an immense amount of

QUALITY TIME: Seema Khan enjoys the company of her sons Armaan, Arsalaan and six-month-old Rohaan. Photos: Nezar Balout



NO ONE KNOWS THE CHILD BETTER OR IS AS MOTIVATED AS THEIR PARENTS

self-discipline and commitment, not just from the kids, but from the family as a whole. You have to make it a way of life. When there are no formal commitments you may tend to slack off, or let life and its distractions get in the way. That is not an option," she

says, adding, "If you do not have that kind of commitment or time then you are perhaps better off not attempting it."

The key is to remain consistent. "There are going to be days that are going to make you want to quit, but you need to remind yourself on such occasions why you got into it in the first place."

Another flip side is that moms don't perhaps get that much time for themselves due to their involvement with the kids all the time, feels Laura Noueihed. "It is really important to take time out and have a mothers' night out once in a while."

Mattie Hildebrand, a homeschooling mentor at ADHSA, says it is important to stay connected to a group or association not just to provide kids with the opportunity to socialise with other children but also for the sake of mothers. "Groups such as ADHSA are like life support systems. Mothers get together and share resources, experiences and other means necessary to pull homeschooling off."

The biggest downside to homeschooling is the fact that you can't escape anything for a minute, says Susan Donovan, although

Jeffrey Herr, senior director of K12 online academy, spells out the cardinal rules of homeschooling:

> **Many families** allow their emotions to influence their decision to homeschool. This is a huge mistake and the utmost care, reason and research must be used before making any decision about your child's education.

> **Parents have** the obligation to provide the most challenging intellectual and academic curriculum for their child. They should make sure that they secure that type of curriculum and do their research.

> **To be successful**, schooling at home takes a lot of time and energy. Make sure that you are willing and able to commit yourself to being your child's teacher.

> **Make sure** that you have a dedicated learning area for your child away from distraction.

> **Ensure that** your child has plenty of enrichment activities — field trips, cultural and historical experiences etc to help him/her become well-rounded.

> **Search out** other families who are homeschooling and develop coops and social groups.

> **Above all**, parents need to make sure that they are willing to make the commitment needed for their child to receive a great education.

this isn't necessarily always a bad thing.

"As a regular school-going kid, when you're at trouble in school you can get away from it at home and vice versa, but when you're homeschooled, forget it. You are grounded 24 hours a day. So contrary to what people believe, there are definitely consequences for not doing something!"

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FOR THE LOVE OF LEARNING: Laura Noueihed with (L to R) Maya (7), Samer (4) and Maher (10)