

"I could write a book about these wonderful homeschool conventions, the families that attend them, and the fabulous entrepreneurs who offer their products to parents who truly care about their children's well-being and happiness. If you want to see the beautiful benefits of educational freedom, go to a homeschool convention. You'll love it!" —Dr. Samuel Blumenfeld, author/educator

How to Get the Most Out of a Homeschool Convention, Curriculum Fair, or Book Sale

By Teri Ann Berg Olsen

The state homeschool convention is the largest and most anticipated homeschooling event of the year. Well-known homeschool leaders speak about home education and other parenting issues. Informative workshops are offered on a variety of topics. There may even be special sessions for new homeschoolers and teen students. Besides the annual state homeschool convention/curriculum fair, local support groups and homeschool resource centers often host their own curriculum fairs and book sales on a smaller scale.

Despite the prevalence of web-based resources and online booksellers, homeschool conventions and curriculum fairs remain popular for a variety of reasons. The personal aspect of attending a live conference is certainly part of the appeal. They provide a good opportunity to speak with publishers and vendors face to face, ask questions, handle products, and look at books.

I can still vividly recall the first homeschool convention that I went to over a decade ago. It was in a church basement that was crowded and hot; not the large air-conditioned civic center where it's held nowadays. Nevertheless, there was so much to see and learn! My husband and I continue to attend the state convention every year.

It's an awesome experience to be in the midst of so many homeschoolers from all walks of life gathered together in one place, to realize you are not alone in this endeavor. We always leave with a renewed confidence and enthusiasm about home education after listening to the inspirational, informative speakers. In addition, my favorite place for looking at homeschool materials in person is at the convention's curriculum fair.

The vast array of books, curriculum, and other materials in the exhibit hall can be quite overwhelming, especially for new homeschoolers. It helps to have an idea in mind of what you want to look for when you go there. We like to purchase next year's Saxon text first before they're sold out. Along the way, we stop by the software booth to check out their great deals. Then my husband prefers to leisurely browse around all of the exhibitors and see if there are any new products that catch his eye. Meanwhile, I get out my long list and methodically go from one bookseller to another on a serious search for particular titles.

Homeschool conventions are informative, interesting, motivational, exciting, and fun! They are tiring but at the same time exhilarating. Just try to relax and enjoy yourself. This is one special time each year that you as a homeschool parent can be truly encouraged and exhorted to the high call of home education. It's an event not to be missed if you are homeschooling or even thinking about it. I highly recommend that you attend!

BENEFITS AND REASONS TO ATTEND

What can homeschoolers get from attending a live conference that they can't find anywhere else?

- One of the biggest advantages of attending a convention that can't be replaced by online resources, printed catalogs, web forums, e-mail lists, etc. is the face-to-face interaction with other people – this includes other homeschoolers, speakers, and vendors.
- The convention gives you a great opportunity to interact with homeschool leaders from across the nation, and to benefit from their wisdom and experience. Speakers can broaden your horizons as they expose you to new ideas, thoughtful discussions, and creative approaches as well as remind you of the basics. Another benefit is the opportunity to meet the speakers in person and perhaps ask them questions at their booth. You may even have a chance to get some personal advice regarding your particular situation.
- There is no substitute for seeing and evaluating a curriculum first-hand. At a convention, large numbers of homeschool vendors are represented and the opportunity to actually see their products is a great advantage over merely reading about them. You can examine, compare, and purchase a great variety of the latest and best hard-to-find books and educational materials from hundreds of selections all in one convenient location.
- The opportunities brought together in this once-a-year event can renew and expand your vision for teaching and training your children. Be encouraged, rejuvenated, inspired, motivated, and better equipped to home school. Conventions can renew your spirit and strengthen your commitment to home education.
- Conventions are a great place to find kindred spirits! Homeschoolers can be an independent lot, but the convention provides an atmosphere of camaraderie by sharing with large numbers of families the strong conviction to provide for our children's education. It is revitalizing when we realize we are not in this journey alone.
- The convention is like a spiritual retreat where you can get away from the everyday cares of homeschooling and focus on why you are doing this—and how you can do it better. If it is a Christian conference in which a group of believers are assembled in His name, the Spirit of the Living God will be present which makes for an inspiring, energized atmosphere.
- The homeschool leaders in your state work hard to protect your homeschool freedoms all year long. They went to a great deal of trouble to provide this convention for your benefit. Show your support by attending, and consider joining your state's homeschool organization while you're at it.

ANATOMY OF A HOMESCHOOL CONVENTION

Homeschool conventions vary widely in their scope and offerings depending on the organization that is running it, the size of the homeschool population in that state, and the number of years the convention has been held. Some of the bigger conventions have graduation ceremonies, talent shows, and special programs for children and teens. Whether large or small, homeschool conventions provide a wide variety of events to help and encourage home educators.

Keynote Address

The keynote address is an inspiring speech given by a nationally-known homeschooling figure. This speech is held in the largest auditorium or grand ballroom, and is scheduled so that it is the only event offered during that time period (which is usually at the beginning of each day). Announcements pertaining to the convention are also made during this time, so it is important to attend the keynote address if possible.

General Sessions or Workshops

Workshops provide practical training in various topics. These sessions are usually an hour long and deal with specific issues regarding home education or family life. State conventions often have sessions dealing with important issues and challenges that relate to homeschooling in your own state. Several different workshops run

concurrently so you have to choose the ones that best suit your needs. Most convention programs provide a brief description of each workshop to help you decide between them. If you are interested in more than one session that is being held at the same time, you and your husband or a friend can each go to a different one and compare notes later, or you can purchase a tape recording of the other one.

Teen Track or Children's Programs

These sessions offer a variety of activities and special messages particularly geared for young people. Parents are welcome to attend with their children.

Vendor or Exhibitor Workshops

These workshops are like "infomercials" for curriculum and other products. They give vendors an opportunity to describe their materials and answer questions from prospective buyers. These sessions are a great way to learn about a product that is new to you or to learn how to use it more effectively. If it's a smaller company, you may even meet the author of the curriculum. If you decide to make a purchase, you can buy it in the exhibit hall.

Curriculum Hall or Exhibit Hall

This is where vendors of curriculum and other homeschool products gather to display and sell their materials. Small conventions may have only a few vendors, while large conventions may have 100 or more. Some well-known curriculum publishers have been selling to homeschoolers for years. In addition, some experienced homeschool parents have developed their own products to meet certain needs or fill a particular niche. More and more mainstream vendors are also turning their attention to the homeschool market.

Used Curriculum or Book Sale

Some conventions may offer a used curriculum area so that parents can swap or sell their old books. However, in most cases such curriculum sales are separate events. Watch for book sales that local homeschool groups often hold in the spring and summer months.

Support Group Corner

Some conventions set aside a section where local support groups can place displays and brochures with information about their programs and activities. Allow some time in your busy schedule to learn about different groups in the area and see what they have to offer. Perhaps you will gain some ideas for things to do with your own group, or you can pick up a membership form for one that you are interested in joining.

Graduation Ceremony

On the evening of the convention there may be a graduation ceremony. Everyone is invited to join in recognizing and honoring the homeschool graduates. A commencement address is usually given by one of the convention's keynote speakers.

WHO SHOULD GO

• **Prospective homeschoolers, new homeschoolers, current homeschoolers, and veteran homeschoolers.** The convention has something for everyone, no matter where you are in your homeschool journey. If you are considering homeschooling, the curriculum fair is a great place to gather information and look at all of the resources that are available. Plus it will be reassuring to see how many homeschoolers there really are! In addition, conventions often have special sessions for new homeschoolers and you will come away feeling confident that you can actually accomplish what you are setting out to do. Meanwhile, current homeschoolers are

given the precious fuel they need to continue on the journey. Even experienced homeschoolers will find many resources for the high school years, including information on helping your student make the transition to college, the military, or a career.

- Ideally, a **husband and wife** should attend together. The convention is a wonderful opportunity for you to spend some special “couple time.” We have found that attending the convention as a husband and wife is a wonderful opportunity for both of us to be recharged and our relationship to be revived. Whether we “divide and conquer” or simply enjoy being together, the convention is a nice “date” for us. Not only will you be able to discuss what you see while helping each other stick to your family goals and budget, but hubby can hold your bag or watch the baby while you look at books or go to the restroom, and he can run your large purchases out to the car for you.
- If it is not possible for your husband to attend because he has to work or stay home with the kids, it can be fun to go with one or more **friends** – such as a fellow homeschooler or someone you know who may be considering homeschooling. You might even carpool with several members of your church or homeschool support group. If you have any relatives or neighbors who homeschool or are considering homeschooling, invite them to come too.
- Invite **grandparents** to come along and learn more about home education, especially if they are not too thrilled with the idea. They will be encouraged by seeing how many homeschoolers live in the area, as well as personally observing how nice – and normal – they all are! Make sure they listen to the keynote speaker and have a chance to look at all of the resources that are available. By doing so, they will likely begin to realize that homeschooling is more mainstream and successful than they thought. Grandparents who have an understanding of home education are an extra special blessing!
- It is understandable that **nursing infants** will need to come with you. At any gathering of homeschool families, there will be lots of babies! Many large homeschool conferences set aside a Mother’s Room for nursing and changing, often with piped-in sound so you can listen to the current speaker. I remember how much I appreciated the convenience of this quiet spot where I could sit down and rest for a while.
- While **young children** are welcome at some family-friendly conferences, they may not be allowed at others that are geared toward parent/teacher enrichment. The organizers love kids just as much as you do, so they don’t necessarily want to leave your children out. However, we all know that little kids get tired and bored easily. This means that they will be a distraction and either you will not be able to get all that you can out of the convention, or you will not be able to give adequate care to your children. Besides, the kids will have more fun if they are able to stay at home, with grandma, or go to a friend’s house.
- If your convention offers special programs for **teens and older children**, consider bringing them with you. Teen tracks offer exciting, uplifting sessions geared to the interests and needs of young adults. Some conventions also hold a graduation ceremony or recognition night, in which they may want to participate or applaud their friends.
- It is advantageous to encourage our **pastors** to catch the vision and to gain an understanding of biblical home education, so invite your pastor to attend. Pastors may even be offered reduced rates on convention registration.

REGISTRATION

Anyone can register at the door, but in order to maximize your time and money, it’s better to register in advance.

- Pre-registering will save valuable time when you arrive at the convention, because you won’t have to stand in a long line to register. In addition, the early registration discount allows you to save money which you can put toward buying materials. If your name tags are sent to you in the mail ahead of time, don’t forget to bring them!
- A homeschool convention is planned and run by volunteers – lots of them! A few hours of your time can be a real help to the organization sponsoring the event, and you may be rewarded by a reduced entrance fee and/or other benefits. You may end up helping with graduation, hospitality, registration, in the exhibit hall, as a mentor mom, or an assistant to a speaker. You will also get to know some other homeschoolers while working with them.

- If you are not already a member of the sponsoring organization, consider joining it now. You will not only help support home education efforts in your state, but you may also receive discounts on your convention fee as well as on membership in the Home School Legal Defense Association.
 - Check to see if any reduced rates are available for couples, grandparents, teens, children, and pastors.
 - If the convention facility is a long way from home, you may want to stay in a hotel room overnight. It is well worth your time and money to attend a large convention on both days. This gives you ample time to see vendors, go to workshops, and do everything else you want to do while there. Your weekend at the convention can be a retreat from the kids while planning for the next school year. When making your reservations, be sure to mention the convention and ask for the special group rate.
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PLANNING

Planning for the convention should begin well before the actual event. First, you need to know in your own mind what you hope to accomplish at the convention. Do you want to:

- Find out about homeschooling vs. public schooling in general?
- Discover the benefits and uncover the myths of home education?
- Gain knowledge that will help explain your conviction to skeptical friends and family members?
- Gather tips for teaching your children more effectively?
- Learn techniques for dealing with toddlers or teens?
- Get wisdom and encouragement for educating your special needs child?
- Try out a particular program of interest?
- Attend vendor workshops for products you might be considering?
- Figure out which program will work best for your child's learning style?
- Speak to book authors or knowledgeable representatives?
- Hear encouraging words from expert speakers?
- Obtain a hands-on preview of curriculum?
- Save shipping costs by purchasing textbooks in person?
- See what new product offerings are available?
- Reignite your passion for homeschooling?
- Explore ways to experience more "joy in the journey?"
- Fellowship with other homeschooling families?
- Attend an inspiring graduation ceremony?

You can do all this and more, if you go prepared and use your time wisely!

PREPARATION

Whether this is your first convention or your tenth, here are a few tips to help you make the most of your experience.

- The vast array of workshops and exhibit booths, combined with a limited time to take it all in, can be overwhelming when you walk into a convention unprepared. But if you go with a plan and focus on your purpose and priorities, you can spend your time more wisely and get the most out of the convention.
- The convention can be a good time to discuss with your spouse your homeschool goals and plans. Talk about what your purposes are in attending. If you spend time thinking through your goals for the coming year and deciding what you need from the convention, you are well on your way to having a good convention weekend.

- Do your research before you go. It helps to have an idea of which curriculums you'd like to look at, who you'd like to see, what you'd like to ask, etc. Preview catalogs, marking products you want to purchase or take a closer look at. If you are already acquainted with much of what is available, you can go directly to the items that seem most interesting or useful to you. Make a list, or clip selected product ads to take with you so that you will remember.
- Pray about the convention and seek God's wisdom to know which books and curriculum will best meet the needs of your children. He will direct your path. Ask God which workshops you should go to. He will show you!
- Make a shopping list of specific items or the types of items you will be looking for. It is most helpful to create three separate lists. One list is the items that you already have. (This is most helpful if you bought a bunch of books ahead of time and haven't used them yet. Believe it or not, I've gotten to the convention and forgotten, then bought another one!) The second is a list of products that you've heard about and you want to look at just to see what they are like and if they might work for you. The third list is the actual shopping list of things you truly need. If it's rather lengthy, you might also divide this list into two parts: 1.) curriculum (most important), and 2.) supplemental materials (useful extras). Once your lists are complete, you can better plan the order of the vendors you want to visit.
- Read the convention brochure ahead of time. Obtain a convention schedule, list of exhibitors, exhibit hall floor plan, etc. The more you can find out ahead of time, the better prepared you will be.
- Choose which speakers' sessions and workshops you're interested in, and highlight or circle them so you can easily refer to them on the day of the convention. Mark those that you "must attend" or "would like to attend if possible," as well as other sessions for which you might consider buying a tape.
- Compare your agenda with that of a friend who will also be attending. See if you can each cover several different sessions separately and then share the content with each other.
- If you are new to homeschooling or are entering a new phase (such as high school), you may want to do some preliminary reading before you arrive at the convention. Any information that you can gather ahead of time will help you to understand more at the convention, as well as to prepare for the coming school year.
- Make a list of questions to ask exhibitors, speakers, and/or others.
- Determine your budget with your husband. Along with your shopping list and goals, this will help you to make purchasing decisions.
- Find a friend or family member that you can depend on to care for your children. The convention is your special day! By leaving the kids with responsible caretakers at home or elsewhere, you will be able to concentrate on shopping and learning without distraction.
- Make your hotel reservations far enough ahead of time before all of the rooms are booked.
- If your husband cannot attend the convention with you, try to arrange a carpool with one or more homeschooling friends. It makes the travel time pass faster, plus you'll be able to compare notes about speakers and workshops on your way home.

THE DAY BEFORE

Here is a list of some last-minute things to do before you go to the convention:

- Spend some special family time with your children and husband. Prepare meals and make provisions to meet their needs while you are at the convention.
 - Confirm child care arrangements if your children will be staying with someone else.
 - Make sure you know exactly how to get to the convention facility and what parking is available so that you do not lose valuable time and become frustrated before you even get there.
 - Plan to get there early or at least on time for the opening. Otherwise, at the end of the day, you will wish you had another hour or two.
 - Look over the convention schedule one more time to plan your day. Don't forget to include breaks, lunch, and plenty of time for a tour of the exhibit hall.
 - Pack the items you will be taking with you. (See "Things to Bring" below.)
 - Eat a good meal the night before, lay your clothes out ahead of time, and get plenty of sleep.
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THINGS TO BRING

While you do not want to bring along too much stuff, there are some essential items that you will need:

- Directions and/or map.
 - Cash, checks, and credit card for parking, food, and the curriculum fair. (Keep in mind that some small vendors don't accept credit cards.)
 - Sturdy tote bag for carrying handouts and purchases.
 - Notebook and pens or pencils for taking notes.
 - Address labels to use for catalog sign-ups, free drawings, and other forms. (This saves time at vendor booths.)
 - Wristwatch to keep track of time so you won't miss any speakers or workshops.
 - Cell phone to check on the kids at home or for them to contact you in case of emergency.
 - Cooler with water bottles, lunch and snack. (Although food may not be brought into most convention centers.)
 - Light sweater (if you tend to get cold in air-conditioned spaces).
 - Tylenol (if you are prone to headaches).
 - If you have a baby, be sure to bring along extra clothes, blanket, diapers, wipes, pacifier, stroller, etc.
 - Don't forget your name badge if you pre-registered and received it in the mail.
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THE DAY OF THE CONVENTION

Hopefully you have already planned ahead, but there are still plenty of things you can do on the day of the convention that will make it a more pleasant experience.

- Start the day off right with everything in order and ready to go.
- Allow time to eat a good breakfast even though you're in a hurry. You have a busy day ahead and you will need all of your energy and brain power.
- Make sure you have everything that you need to bring with you.
- Leave home early so that you will have plenty of time to get there, secure a close parking space, check in, and find a good seat before the main speaker begins.

- If you still need to register, arrive as early as possible so you have time to register on-site without missing the first session.
 - Drink plenty of water (carry your own water bottle).
 - Wear comfortable clothes and walking shoes or sneakers.
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TIPS FOR FIRST TIMERS

Homeschool conventions, curriculum fairs, and/or book sales can be quite large and overwhelming. Homeschool conventions consists of many seminars and workshops that offer information, encouragement and advice, often with special tracks for new homeschoolers. The convention is usually associated with a curriculum fair in which there are hundreds of vendors and thousands of books and materials. With so much stuff to choose from, it will be easy to get sidetracked! But don't let the sheer amount of materials and information leave you frustrated. You certainly won't be using everything that you see. For the first time, try to get a broad overview of all that's available, and pick up brochures or catalogs to look at when you get back home. It took us a couple of years of going to the annual curriculum fair before we got it narrowed down enough to know what we really needed. That's why it's good to start planning early, and ideally you should attend a curriculum fair even before you begin homeschooling, to get a better idea of what it's all about.

AT THE CONVENTION

It can be a challenge to decide what to do first. Many people go with the best of intentions but once they get there, they find too many choices and end up leaving without accomplishing everything that they wanted. Hopefully these tips will give you an idea of how to make your homeschool convention experience a great one!

- When you arrive at the convention, you will receive a program and a bag of literature. The program will contain speaker bios, a list of vendors, a map of the convention hall, and a daily schedule. Look up the workshops you're interested in to verify their time and place, and see if there are any last-minute changes. On the floor plan, note the location of restrooms, concession stands, bag drops and other conveniences, as well as the booths of vendors or speakers you definitely want to visit. Check the goody bag as well for any vendor coupons that you might be able to use.
 - Follow your plan while budgeting your time. Take breaks to rest your feet, reassess your progress, and write notes while your impressions are fresh. Try not to pack your schedule so tight that you can't allow a moment to take advantage of an unexpected opportunity, such as meeting an old friend or viewing a demonstration of an exciting new product.
 - If you start feeling stressed, try to find a quiet spot off to the side (perhaps in one of the empty meeting rooms) where you can sit down for a while, or step outside for a breath of fresh air.
 - The convention organizers often include a survey form in the program. They need input from attendees to help them in planning future conventions. Please take a few moments to fill it out and drop it off before you go home.
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CONVENTION ETIQUETTE

Please observe these guidelines to show consideration to everyone involved at the convention.

- Follow the rules regarding children, strollers, cell phones, food and beverage in the exhibit hall, etc. (Food and drink is generally not allowed but bottled water is usually okay.)

- Feel free to leave one workshop and catch the tail end of another. But if you think you might not stay for an entire session, sit near an exit so you can leave without distracting anyone.
- If you are attending a workshop or seminar with a baby, sit in the back or off to the side near an exit. The sessions are being recorded and you don't want to disturb anyone, so promptly remove your crying baby or disruptive child from the room.
- If you enjoyed a lecture, be sure to thank the speaker when their session is done. Whether or not they are being paid for their work, they put in a lot of time and effort to share it with you.
- Support the exhibitors from whom you've gathered valuable information. It is in poor taste to visit a vendor, take up a large amount of time at his table, and then go buy his book at another booth or order it later from a discount supplier. Even though the book may be a little bit cheaper elsewhere, you have essentially cheated the vendor who helped you by telling him that his time is worth nothing. Many exhibitors are home-based businesses trying to earn a living to support their families while serving their fellow homeschoolers. It's these vendors that make the convention possible by paying the majority of the facility cost through their exhibitor fees, so please treat them with respect.

SEMINARS AND WORKSHOPS

Lectures and workshops present opportunities to glean from the wealth of information presented by home education experts. Don't underestimate the value of attending these sessions.

- Homeschool speakers and workshop leaders have first-hand experience with many of the same things that we are going through. Therefore, they are someone we can really relate to as their talks are down-to-earth and often quite funny but extremely helpful.
- Try to obtain a list of workshops ahead of time, either on the organizer's website or you will probably get one in the mail if you pre-register. Mark down which ones you definitely want to attend and other ones that might be nice to see. Use this as a reference for prioritizing your time at the convention.
- If two sessions of interest to you are scheduled simultaneously, arrange with your spouse or a friend to attend the other, then you can exchange notes and ideas afterwards. Or if you have to choose between two seminars you really want to hear, attend the one that uses more visuals/demonstrations and buy the recording for the one that's more of a lecture.
- Remember to turn off your cell phone as soon as you enter a session.
- Sometimes speakers offer handouts to help you understand the information they're sharing. Be sure to jot down some notes, too. Don't assume that you will remember every word of advice that you hear. If you attend a workshop or lecture that gives you lots of good information, go ahead and invest a few dollars to purchase the recording.
- Don't take any one teaching method as the "only way." Not all homeschooling techniques are for everyone, so it's okay if you don't agree with a speaker. Glean the information that fits your style and the needs of your family.
- Don't be afraid to ask questions at the end of the session, or whenever the speaker invites questions during the session. Chances are, you won't be the only one who has that question.
- Check to see if recordings are offered for sessions that you can't attend due to schedule conflicts. Virtually all workshops (except vendor workshops) are recorded. This way, even if you decide to spend all of your time in the

exhibit hall, you won't have to miss out on any of the encouraging and informative workshops. You may listen to them at your convenience later.

- Before you go home, remember to buy recordings of the sessions you missed (or the sessions you enjoyed so much that you want to hear them again).

THE EXHIBIT HALL

An exhibit hall is packed with a huge assortment of every kind of homeschool book, curriculum, and supplemental resource imaginable. The vast array of products can be quite overwhelming, especially for new homeschoolers. So many things to look at, so little time, and so many decisions to make! The following tips will help you make the most of this part of the convention.

- Leave yourself plenty of time to peruse the exhibit hall between workshops. If you can't do it all at once, keep track of which aisles you go down and which ones you need to do next.
- Make time at the vendor hall to visit each booth, talk to the vendors, ask questions about their products, and look through the books.
- Use lists to help you remember important products that you want to look for and questions you want to ask.
- Look at the map and mark those "must see" vendor booths that you don't want to miss. Do these first, then if you have time you can go back through the exhibit hall to look at more things.
- Pick up free samples, catalogs, and brochures. If you end up not needing some of them, pass them on to homeschool friends who weren't able to attend the convention.
- Sign up for free newsletters, mailing lists, drawings and giveaways.
- Bring home a small souvenir for each of the kids, something fun such as an activity book, craft kit, colored construction paper, modeling clay, etc.
- If you left the kids at home, call them occasionally to see how everyone is doing.
- Make your large purchases at the end of the day, or take a walk out to the car to put away large purchases rather than carrying them around for hours. The convention may also offer a "bag check." This donation-based service is typically available at the registration area and is invaluable for helping to lighten your load.
- If there is a vendor that you really want to talk to, try to get there before they give any workshops. Workshops greatly increase traffic to a booth. If the sales representatives that you want to talk to are busy, go on to the next booth and plan to return later, or browse their booth while you wait and perhaps listen to the current discussion.
- If you are able to attend the convention on both days, don't buy anything until the second day you are there. Use your first day to gather information. Then take all of the literature back to your hotel and look through it before making your final decisions.
- Don't feel that you have to buy everything at once. Focus on things that fit your needs now – elementary curriculum if you have young children, high school curriculum if you have teens.
- In addition to the main curriculum of interest to you, be sure to take a look at all of the other fine exhibitors.

- Don't forget to visit nonprofit and other organizations' booths (such as your state organization, local support groups, Home School Legal Defense Association, etc.) to find out what services they offer.
 - When appropriate, give a vendor feedback about your needs, opinions, and experiences. Customer input can help them produce products and services that better meet the needs of homeschoolers.
 - Before you go home, double check your list and your bag to make sure you purchased everything you wanted to get, saw everything you went there to see, and have everything that is yours. Did you leave any packages at the bag check? Don't forget to pick them up!
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MAKING CONNECTIONS

Job seekers and business people call it networking. Church goers call it fellowshiping. In any case, it means meeting people and making their acquaintance.

- Smile and be friendly. Talk to other attendees. Greet old friends and make new ones. Sit with someone you don't know at lunch. Examples of questions to break the ice include: Where are you from? How long have you been homeschooling? What are the ages of your children?
 - Ask others for their opinions and experiences regarding curriculum and products. You may get your most valuable information and encouragement from another homeschool mom who is flattered that you would ask her for advice.
 - Volunteer to assist a speaker or exhibitor. Be a mentor mom to a new homeschooler. Ask to help a mom who's struggling to hold a baby while carrying a large bag. If you don't mind standing, offer your chair to someone else if there is not enough seating.
 - Bring along some personal cards or business cards and hand them out to anyone with whom you would like to maintain contact.
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SHOP WISELY TO SAVE TIME AND MONEY

In addition to the time- and money-saving tips that are listed under "Registration," there are even more strategies that you can use for saving time and money.

- Though there are costs associated with attending a convention, there are savings as well. You will have the ability to compare products and prices. It is a great time to get free shipping. In addition, some vendors offer special discounts at conventions.
- Write down what you already have, make a list of what you need, and stick to your list. It is less easy to be persuaded to spend money you don't need to spend if you have your list in front of you. In addition, you won't make the mistake of buying a duplicate of something that you forgot is on the shelf at home!
- Look at catalogs and websites to plan exactly which materials you would like to examine and consider. The more you know beforehand, the more you will profit from the opportunity of hands-on comparison shopping.
- Take a quick sweep around the exhibit hall first, quickly checking out the booths to see who is selling what and to compare prices before you buy anything. While you're at it, pick up free catalogs to add to (or begin) your homeschool catalog collection.

- Don't feel pressured to buy at a convention just because you will receive a super deal. Choosing the right homeschool curriculum for your family is a very big decision that takes time and research. You don't want to waste money on a curriculum that doesn't work for you, then have the headache of finding another one. At the convention, you can get recommendations and advice that may help you avoid costly mistakes.
- If you have trouble deciding on something, seek your spouse's input or a friend's advice, and pray about it as well.
- Figure out how much money you can afford to spend on convention purchases and stay within your budget. If you do find something else such as a nifty new product that you think you will really use, you can pick up a catalog and order from them later.
- If you know what curriculum you will need for next year, purchase it here. You can avoid shipping costs as well as take advantage of special convention discounts offered by some companies.
- Even if you don't buy something right now, the ability to compare products side by side can save you money down the road. Use this opportunity to evaluate how well a product will meet the needs of your family. After all, the most cost-effective product is the one that works for you!
- It's easy to overspend on things you don't really need and might not use. Before making a new purchase, give yourself some time to think about it first. Keep browsing, then go back and look again at what caught your eye.
- If you are attending the convention on both days, gather information on the first day, and then think and pray overnight about the purchases you are contemplating before making the actual purchases on the second day.
- If you're really not sure what curriculum you want to purchase, don't feel that you have to buy it now. You can always purchase your main curriculum later. Pick up some odds and ends that will make learning fun.
- Don't feel that you have to purchase anything at all. A convention is well worth going to even if all you do is attend workshops and listen to the speakers. Just don't enter the exhibit hall if you think you will be tempted to buy too much stuff.
- If you have trouble avoiding impulse buying and overspending, take a small amount of cash and leave your checkbook and credit cards at home.
- You might want to keep your money in a business size envelope on which you've written your shopping list. You can keep a running total of what you spend on the other side. You can place all your receipts in the envelope, too.
- Food at the convention center is high-priced, lunch lines are long, and nearby restaurants are generally crowded. If there is a park nearby, bring a cooler and a picnic lunch, but leave it in your car. When it's time for lunch, walk to the park where you can relax for a while and get some fresh air. Or go out to your car and get a drink and a snack. A quiet break from the commotion of the convention will help to clear your head.
- Don't feel pressured to make any quick decisions. You will have gathered a bag full of information and will be able to order virtually anything you see in the convention at a later date, once you've had time to carefully decide if it's something that you really want.

AFTER THE CONVENTION

When you get back home after the convention, you will have a lot of information to process. Over the next week or so, take time to review what you've learned while everything is still fresh in your mind, to get the most out of your experience.

- Go over your notes and talk to your spouse about the ideas and products you came across at the convention.
- Sort the literature that you received into four categories: 1.) take action; 2.) save for future reference; 3.) pass along to someone else; 4.) discard.
- Read the books you bought, browse through the catalogs you picked up, and listen to the workshop tapes you purchased.
- Visit websites and gather any additional information that you would like to find out.
- Share your notes and information with your support group or someone who was not able to attend. Write an article for your homeschool newsletter.
- Think about what you saw in the vendor hall, what the speakers said and what will you do differently in your homeschool because of what you learned from them, what you bought and how you want to use it with your children.
- Put into practice at least one new idea that will make a difference in your homeschool.
- Send a note of thanks to a mentor mom who helped show you around, a speaker who ministered to you, or an exhibitor who took time to answer your questions. They will be pleased to know that their efforts were appreciated.
- Were there some speakers and workshops that were especially helpful? Was the convention well-organized? Was it worth the money you spent to attend it? Whether you were pleased or displeased, let the convention organizers know.
- Hopefully by attending the convention, you came away with a renewed enthusiasm for homeschooling. You can maintain that feeling long after the convention is over by doing the following: Listen to the taped sessions that you purchased now and again. Read books about home education. Subscribe to a homeschool magazine. Visit homeschool websites. Join a homeschool support group (if you haven't already done so). Attend support group meetings and volunteer to run at least one group activity per year. Just like at the convention, being around other like-minded families is the surest way to keep up your energy and enthusiasm for homeschooling!

Teri Ann Berg Olsen is the author of a book, "Learning for Life: Educational Words of Wisdom," and an e-book, "How to Write a Homeschool Mission Statement." Teri has been attending the annual Arizona Families for Home Education convention each year since 1995. She had her own exhibit booth at two educational conferences and also organized a small local book sale. This has given her a unique opportunity to view these events from differing perspectives. Visit Teri's website at www.KnowledgeHouse.info for homeschool information, links, and resources.

CONVENTION CHECKLIST

Things to Wear:

Comfortable Clothes

Walking Shoes / Sneakers

Light Sweater (optional)

Things to Bring:

Map / Directions

Brochure / Schedule

Name Badge(s)

Shopping List

Cash/ Checks/ Credit Card

Sturdy Tote Bag

Notebook

Pens and/or Pencils

Address Labels

Personal / Business Cards

Wristwatch

Cell Phone

Water Bottle

Lunch / Snack

Tylenol / Kleenex

Baby Supplies (extra clothes, blanket, diapers, wipes, pacifier, stroller, etc.)

Things to Purchase:

Curriculum

Books

Supplemental Materials

Things to Look At:

Curriculum

Books

Supplemental Materials

Things That I Already Have:

Curriculum

Books

Supplemental Materials

Questions to Ask:

Who-

What-

Who-

What-

Who-

What-