

Success with Unit Studies

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I dedicate this book to my loving husband, Bruce, who is always eager to listen as I share the little everyday affairs of our household. He is my head cheerleader.

My children's names and ages at the time of publication (1996) are as follows: Michelle, 16 years old; Melissa, 14 years old; Robert, 12 years old; Raymond, 10 years old; Mandy, 6 years old; and Randall 1 year old.

Dedication

What are Unit Studies Anyway?

Is it not far better to be able to relate one subject to another and see how they work together?

When conducting a unit study, I generally try to find at least one biography to read aloud about a person that relates to our topic of study.

Biographies allow us to become intimately acquainted with an individual and walk in his path.

I think it might be best to start by explaining what unit studies are not. Unit studies are not textbook studies. Textbook studies entail the study of as many as eight separate subjects, having little or no correlation to each other. For example, you may study **Literature**, focusing on British poets, while your **Geography Studies** center on the Middle East. At the same time your **History Studies** may be concentrated on the Civil War era. You may be studying biology in **Science** and geometry in **Mathematics**, while learning about the accomplishments of the Greek mathematicians. Your **Music Studies** may take you to the baroque period, while your **Art Studies** are focused on the paintings of American Indians, and last but not least, your **Bible Studies** are centered on Noah and the Flood. You can put all of this into a pot and serve a very unappetizing helping of mush. Each of these studies has merit, but is it best to study them all at the same time? Is this the best way to learn? Is it not far better to be able to relate one subject to another and see how they work together?

For example, a few years ago, our family studied sign language. This was a topic that I was very interested in, so I decided that the best way to learn about it was to study it with my children. When conducting a unit study, I generally try to find at least one biography to read aloud about a person that relates to our topic of study. It is as we study real people in real space and time that history comes alive for us. History is not a series of dates and wars to be memorized, but rather the interacting of individual with individual.

Biographies allow us to become intimately acquainted with an individual and walk in his path. While studying sign language, I chose a biography of Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet entitled, ***Gallaudet, Friend of the Deaf***, to read aloud to my children. Gallaudet was the founder of deaf education in America. History came into play as the Gallaudet College in Washington, D.C. was used as an army hospital during the strife-torn Civil War years. Next we read ***The Story of My Life***, by Helen Keller. Helen's father was a captain during the Civil War, so we were able to draw a parallel to Gallaudet's biography.

Both biographies gave us an **Historical Perspective** of sign language. We used a sign language instruction video and book and learned hundreds of signs, thus developing **Communication Skills** and **Manual Dexterity**. As we read the autobiography of Helen Keller, we were introduced to Alexander Graham Bell. Helen Keller and Dr. Bell were intimately acquainted, and Dr. Bell was responsible for Helen beginning her education. We did not dive into an in-depth study of Dr. Bell and his accomplishments at this time, such as the invention of the telephone, but rather we focused on his work with sound, hearing, and the ear. This added a **Scientific Dimension** to our study.

We also studied the **Anatomy** of the hand, the instrument of communication of the deaf. The children drew their hands as they formed the letters of their names as designated in the manual sign alphabet, thus stimulating **Artistic Abilities** and appreciation for the complexities of the anatomy of the human hand.

The children copied and took from dictation select passages from the biographies we read. Our spelling, vocabulary, punctuation, grammar lessons, and reading comprehension exercises centered on these passages, thus enhancing our **Language Arts Studies**. We wrote and talked about what it would be like to be a deaf person in a noisy world, therefore adding **Social Studies** to our curriculum. My older girls made books with a sign language theme, thereby encouraging **Creative Writing and Art**.

We researched Bible verses pertaining to hearing and the ear. We noted the importance of each part of the human body and how it parallels the relationship of the members of the body of Christ. Bible stories were read and then pantomimed. These activities enhanced our **Bible Studies**.

We went to the park and I pretended to be a deaf person. My children had to communicate with me without speaking for an hour. This was very frustrating for them as I sat in the swing, not paying them any attention. Soon they forgot the rules of our game and called to me from the top of the slide. After getting no response from me, the children learned that they had to come and tap me on the shoulder or stand in front of me in order to be noticed. We discussed this afterward, thus strengthening **Observation Skills** and **Thinking Skills**.

We visited Helen Keller's home in Tuscumbia, Alabama and saw the out-door play about her life entitled, *The Miracle Worker*, therefore adding a **Dramatic Element** to our study. **Geography Studies** were strengthened as the children followed the road map from state to state as we journeyed to her home.

As you can see, we touched on many subject areas during this unit study on sign language. Our attention was geared to our primary study of sign language; however, skills in other subject areas were strengthened along the way. Basic skills can be taught and enhanced in a meaningful way through unit studies. Children see the necessity for learning skills as they need them to study a topic.

It is obvious that this is a natural way to learn — focusing on one topic at a time. Our energies are not consumed by dividing our efforts in five or six subject areas that have no correlation. Multiply this confusion times two, three, four, or more children working at different levels on different subjects, in different textbooks, and calamity results! With unit studies, the entire family can study a topic together. Naturally, the older children will pick up more than the younger children, and their studies will be more in depth.

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A unit study is what each person makes it. It can be a brief topical study or a life-long quest. It can be tailored to meet the needs of individual families.

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My sons' zeal for knowledge in a specific area caused them to study on their own.

Unit Studies Made Easy

Hopefully this illustration will explain what a unit study encompasses. It is simply a study that focuses on one topic at a time. As this topic is explored, a variety of subject areas are explored. A unit study is what each person makes it. It can be a brief topical study or a life-long quest. It can be tailored to meet the needs of individual families.

As I plan unit studies throughout the year, I try to choose topics from a variety of key subject areas. A number of other subjects are integrated into each study; however, the main thrust of a particular unit study lies in a specific area. For example, during the year I select unit studies primarily based on **History, Geography, Science, Fine Arts, Literature**, and so forth. Each unit study is conducted in a manner to encompass one main content area.

I feel that selecting from a variety of key subject areas enables us to achieve a well-rounded course of study. The children and I may wish to conduct a unit study that corresponds to an interest we may have. This is fine from time to time, especially for children who are difficult to motivate or who are burned out on traditional textbook and workbook studies. However, areas of interest are opened as we explore new topics. I would like to relate a story that illustrates these two points. That is, how an interest can act as a catalyst to launch us into a study, and how an area of interest can be discovered as we investigate a new topic.

About a year ago, I purchased materials to conduct a unit study on flight. My boys, Robert and Raymond, had been begging me to do this study with them, but my disinterest in the topic caused me to be lax about pursuing it. I finally gave into their desires, and we began our formal unit study on flight. The books I had previously purchased had been patiently waiting for us on the shelf, or so I thought. As we began our study and I assigned chapters for the boys to read, I learned that they had already devoured all of the books! I said to them, "You've been begging me and begging me to do this study, and I find out that you've already done the study on your own." They explained they were not going to wait around for me!

Now this is a perfect example of what Gregg Harris describes as a delight-directed study. I would like to offer a brief quote from Gregg's new edition of *The Christian Home School*, page 123:

... Remember that delight-directed study is the goal for your students. As adults, this approach is the only way they will be able to be the life-long learners God wants them to be. Delight-directed study will teach them how to learn and how to keep up with all the changes in their field of interest. Textbooks must one day make way for reading "real books." Required classes must yield to voluntary study groups.

My sons' zeal for knowledge in a specific area caused them to study on their own. They were so enthusiastic that they decided to con-

tinue their study of flight with me joining them this time! We went to the library and selected some additional books on the topic of flight. Several of these library books were biographies. Reading about the lives of real people brings a unit study or topical study to life. Biographies and autobiographies allow us to experience the triumphs, defeats, excitement, and perils of the individual. Our studies take on a new dimension through this encounter with real people and real events.

While studying flight, we read a brief biographical sketch of Eddie Rickenbacker from *A Family Program for Reading Aloud*, which caused us to seek out his autobiography from the library. Eddie Rickenbacker designed numerous airplanes, as well as the Rickenbacker automobile. His autobiography is quite long, perhaps 600 pages, so we chose to read certain chapters that pertained to our study. One of these chapters was entitled, *Lost at Sea*.

Eddie's gift for expressing himself was evident as I read aloud this incredible account of how his plane crashed in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. Mr. Rickenbacker was on his way to give General MacArthur a top secret message that had been entrusted to him by the Secretary of War. Eddie and his crew languished through 24 days in life boats. He kept his crew alive through prayer and the singing of hymns. He said that there were three agnostics out of the eight men when they began their journey; however, there was not an unbeliever among them after the 8th day. Now, I will not tell you what happened on the 8th day, because you need to read the account with your children!

My children sat nearly motionless for two full hours while I read this excerpt to them, and I often had to choke back the tears. Even my six-year-old daughter, Mandy, was spellbound. This story has left an impression on me and my children that will be with us for a lifetime. The children still come to me, months later, and initiate a discussion about Eddie Rickenbacker's perilous account on the sea.

His autobiography offers us excellent material for a character study, as well as a glimpse of history and further insights into our key study of flight. I do not know of any textbook that would have entranced my children the way this autobiography did. My own interest in our study of flight was ignited in a way I would never have realized except through this incredible drama. Reading broadens our world. It is amazing what we can learn while absorbed in good literature. Basic skills and thinking skills can be taught and enhanced in a meaningful way through this intimacy with books. (For more ideas on how to effectively utilize good literature, please see my book, *For the Love of Reading*.)

Often parents come to me and say, "My child just doesn't like to read." My response is that he must like *something*, and that interest can be used to encourage him to read — to learn to love to read. If a child has a

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delight or interest, he will immerse himself in studying about that delight or interest in a way in which he would never immerse himself in textbook studies.

But what about textbook studies? Let us look at what Charlotte Mason says about textbooks in her book, *School Education*, which she wrote in the early 1900s. On page 171. Miss Mason states:

We give him miserable little textbooks, mere compendiums of facts, which he is to learn off and say and produce at an examination; or we give him various knowledge in the form of warm diluents, prepared by his teacher with perhaps some grains of living thought to the gallon. And all the time we have books, books teeming with ideas fresh from the minds of thinkers upon every subject to which we can wish to introduce children.

She also relates the idea that textbooks are an abridgement of an abridgement, and all that is left for the student is the dry bones of his subject, devoid of the stir of life.

I do not mean to disregard the use of textbooks in our educational endeavors; however, I want to emphasize that there is more education than is contained between their pages. Do not allow textbook studies to swallow up all your time so there is no time left for real books — books that will get your child excited about learning.

For those who feel rather insecure utilizing the unit study approach, textbooks can supply you with the framework around which to base your unit studies. Peruse your child's textbooks, searching for an interesting chapter or section. Utilize the information located within this chapter or section to develop a unit study. Select library books and other books you may wish to purchase that relate to the topic. You will be amazed at how easily many subjects can be integrated into this unit study.

Allow the child's other textbooks to rest on the shelf while conducting this unit study. Perhaps you will want to limit your unit study to two weeks, after which you can continue with your regular textbook studies. Then at a later date, select a chapter or section from another of your child's textbooks and conduct a unit study based on that. You will find that unit studies can easily be developed from literature textbooks, science textbooks, and history and geography textbooks. If you are working with a number of children of different ages, I suggest you use the older child's textbooks as a spring board for unit studies. The younger children can join in as they use materials geared for their reading and comprehension levels.

My daughter, Melissa, will be fifteen years old this summer. She has chosen to conduct textbook-based unit studies for the next school

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year. She utilized textbooks to a certain degree this school year and found she enjoyed the framework they gave her. (We school year round; however, we still talk in terms of beginning at the start of the typical school year.) Melissa is a good candidate for this type of study because she wants to work on her own, and the textbooks offer her a system by which to organize her lessons. She is also an avid reader, and therefore will read ample material to supplement this textbook method of learning.

It is important you use a system that works for both you and your children. Do not try to model your schooling efforts after a person or methodology that is not in keeping with your educational philosophy. (For additional information on developing your philosophy of education, please see the chapter in my book, *How to Create Your Own Unit Study*, entitled, *Defining Our Goal*.)

People often ask me, “Are unit studies appropriate for the high school student?” I feel that the answer to this is, “Absolutely!” In the example above I explained how one of my teenage daughters is utilizing a textbook-based unit study approach. She has also participated in a number of real life experiences that have strengthened skills in many areas. For example, at age thirteen, Melissa typed nearly the entire manuscript of my book, *For the Love of Reading*. She did this from my handwritten scrawl, which was not an easy task! As she was typing, she was constantly calling me to the computer and offering comments such as, “Mom, don’t you need an apostrophe here?” And, “Your spelling is terrible, but I expected that,” and so on.

I was amazed that this child who has difficulty editing her own work had no trouble in editing mine! I then realized that this is generally true of most people. It is difficult to edit your own work. (I know this from personal experience with my own books!) I told Melissa to change anything she felt needed changing, and that I would go over it later. I cannot think of any language arts exercises that would have been more beneficial. This real-life experience tuned her editing skills, and she was paid real money to do it!

Melissa has conducted a number of self-directed unit studies. She is a serious ballet student. This love has caused her to study various related topics. First she conducted a study of ballet, including the historical aspects as well as the technical aspects. This led her to a study of France, and now she is studying the French language. Melissa’s enthusiasm for dance, singing, and drama has encouraged us to find alternate means for nurturing these desires. She has been taking ballet since she was three years old, and this coming school year she will be taking chorus at a local private Christian school. She is currently undertaking a unit study on Shakespeare. The highlight of this study will be a family outing to see a *Shakespeare in the Park Production*. This is an outdoor event, and this

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year's drama is entitled, *All's Well That Ends Well*. This annual occasion has been a family tradition for several years.

My oldest daughter, Michelle, has just recently graduated from her home education program. She was registered with a private school, which maintained her transcripts and provided annual testing. Fortunately, the administrator of this school is an avid proponent of unit studies. She does an excellent job of translating unit studies into course credits. During her high school years, Michelle conducted several self-directed unit studies.

Nearly two years ago we were blessed with the birth of our sixth child, Randall. In preparation for this special event, Michelle read a 600 page midwifery manual, along with several books related to the human body and nutrition. She also did most of the cooking while I was pregnant and during Randall's first year, thus integrating her findings in her nutrition studies in a very real way. (Fortunately, she is an excellent cook. This she did not inherit from me!) She received hands-on practice as she learned to detect the position of the baby within the womb, take blood pressure, and listen for the baby's heart beat. She assisted in the actual delivery as well.

How is that for biology lab! And to think if she was in a traditional high school, she could have been dissecting frogs! (She did dissect the placenta, but I will not go into that!) This summer Michelle is going to a midwifery school for three months. She will live at the clinic-school which accommodates four students per session. Michelle will assist with between 50 to 100 births while at the school. She took a class this spring at a local community college, studied numerous midwifery textbooks, assisted in deliveries at a local birthing center, and participated in childbirth classes, all in preparation for attending the school this summer.

Some of Michelle's other endeavors included organizing our catalogue business. In 1995 she did the entire layout for our 48 page catalogue. This also involved reviewing materials to be included in the catalogue. This provided an excellent outlet for her to practice her computer, layout, writing, and editing skills. She has illustrated several books that I have written including *The Francis Study Guide*. (2004 note: A few years after *Success with Unit Studies* was first published, Michelle designed the puppets for my book *Successful Puppet Making*, described on page 332. We are currently working together on a Bible story puppet making book to be released in 2005.)

Michelle has designed logos and fliers for sporting events too. She is an accomplished martial arts student as well as a student teacher. She is currently working at a health food store where she is learning about herbs and nutrition. This herbal knowledge will prove useful in her midwifery studies.

By engaging in these various activities, her writing skills have im-

proved through note taking, her spelling abilities have been strengthened, her computer skills have vastly improved, her ability to read technical information and assimilate it has soared, and her organizational skills have been well developed. Through collaborating on the catalogue, our mother-daughter relationship has been nurtured.

Often the teenage years are difficult years for our children. As parents we tend to shy away from them because they are so moody. I realize, however, this is the time to cultivate a new relationship with our teens. Teens need to be able to express themselves and use their talents at this time more than ever. I have found through the years of conducting unit studies this method of instruction has allowed my children to develop the talents and abilities the Lord has given them. They have not been forced into a mold that stifles creativity and does little to prepare them for real life.

If Michelle attended high school or even college, what classes would offer her practice with the skills outlined? Perhaps a biology or physiology class, a journalism or publishing class, a graphic arts course, Business 101, and home economics. In order for students to participate in hands-on activities such as Michelle has done, often contrived or artificial means are employed. For example, students may be given an assignment whereby they pretend they are designing logos for a sporting event or creating a catalogue for a book store. At the end of the course, the instructor reviews the projects and then what? The student receives a grade and the project is often laid aside. It is exciting that homeschooled children can participate in real-life events, not just teacher-contrived situations.

I mentioned earlier that my boys, ages 10 and 12 were intrigued by their study of flight this year. They are also involved in martial arts. They have a keen interest in computers, which continues to be a source of study. Because I have teenage daughters who conduct their own studies now, the three younger children generally study the same topic. My daughter Mandy is nearly seven years old, and although she participates in the studies I conduct with the boys to some degree, I carry on special studies with her. Often we are able to include her little brother, Randall, who is nearly two years old, in these studies. He definitely wants to be one of the gang!

This year I have been reading the Little House on the Prairie series, by Laura Ingalls Wilder, with Mandy. (I am on my third time reading this series aloud. I read it to my other children when they were younger.) These excellent books generate activities and academic exercises. Each day I read one or two chapters from one of the books to Mandy. Then we discuss the chapter, and I devise simple sentences relating to the chapter for Mandy to read. Mandy enjoys composing sentences about what we read too. This helps to strengthen her observation skills as she must recall

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the story. I write the sentences we make on index cards, one or two words per card. I lay the cards out on the table in the proper sequence, and then Mandy reads the sentences aloud.

Separating the words onto cards enables her to focus on one word at a time. The large print is also effective. I try to use words that Mandy is capable of reading. When Mandy is introduced to an unfamiliar word, I teach her the sound for the phonetic combination used at that time. For example, the sentence may read: **Pa fed the cow some hay.** If Mandy has not yet learned the rule that *ay* says **a** as found in the word *hay*, then I will teach her that rule at this time. We will write numerous other words on index cards utilizing this same rule such as: *bay, day, ray, may, and clay.* Then Mandy will copy the sentence on large lined paper.

This Little House unit study has allowed us to incorporate many educational and fun activities. Although there are several excellent Little House study guides, we have not used them, but rather we have let the study take its own course as we read the books aloud. Mandy's personality and academic skill level dictate the course this study takes. We have found many related materials such as *My Book of Little House Paper Dolls, My Little House Cookbook, The Little House Calendar, My Little House Sticker Book, Laura Ingalls Wilder: A Biography, Dear Laura: Letters from Children to Laura Ingalls Wilder*, and the picture book series entitled, *My First Little House Books*. The books in this series are beautiful full-color books with simple text based on the book, *Little House in the Big Woods*. There are currently eight books in this series. See page 323 in the Resources section for listing of all the books. We have gone Little House crazy, but we are enjoying ourselves! Mandy helps make goodies from *My Little House Cookbook*, and Randall helps eat them. (I told you he likes to participate in our studies too!)

I even made prairie dolls for Mandy and Randall. In *The Little House in the Big Woods*, we read that Laura had a rag doll named Charlotte. Mandy decided it would be nice to have a rag doll too. She named her doll Laura Elizabeth Rose. Elizabeth is Laura's middle name, and Rose is Laura's daughter's name. Randall decided that he needed a doll also. So we have named his doll Almanzo after Laura's husband. I found a pattern for a rag doll complete with a cloth carrying case and wardrobe. With a little improvising, the clothes were transformed into prairie clothing complete with calico dresses and bonnets for Mandy's doll, and plaid shirts and overalls for Randall's doll. Mandy selected the fabrics for the clothes; after all, she is certain she knows what Laura and her family wore! Reading the stories has created a visual image in her mind.

When we selected the fabric for Randall's doll, he insisted on carrying the large bolts of cloth to the cutting counter. He is not about to be left out! I am sure that many of you will be anxious to know what pattern

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I used, so I have included that information in the Resources section on page 328.

My daughter, Michelle, made some additional clothing patterns for me to complete the prairie doll wardrobe. These include two different bonnet patterns and an apron pattern. I have included these special patterns for you to copy in the Appendix on pages 296-299. The children were so enthralled with their prairie dolls that they wanted me to make prairie costumes for them too!

I succumbed to their desires and Mandy and Randall were transformed into “Laura” and “Almanzo.” It is rewarding to see them playing “Little House” together rather than being held hostage to the imaginary play produced by television and animated movies. (See page 328 in the Resources section for information about the clothing patterns I used for the children.)

Mandy has several authors that are her favorites. Besides her admiration for Laura Ingalls Wilder and The Little House on the Prairie series, Mandy enjoys Beatrix Potter’s works such as *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* and *The Tale of Mrs. Tittlemouse*. Her love for these two authors has inspired her to start her own special book series entitled, The Little Mouse on the Prairie series. Her first book in this series was “published” recently. It is titled, *The Little Mouse Family on the Prairie*. Mandy spent two weeks dictating the story to me, which I wrote on notebook paper. Her big sister, Melissa, typed it on the computer.

Mandy’s creativity flourished while composing this manuscript. It is evident to see that she is modeling her writing after these two favorite authors. Mandy’s story was about 33 pages handwritten in length! Mandy helped to make this book into a beautiful hard-bound, hand-sewn edition, which she illustrated herself. This book will be treasured for a lifetime! (Please see page 331 for details about my book, *Creating Books with Children*, which will lead you and your children through a six-week, book-making unit study.)

I could go on telling you more about my children’s studies and activities, but I do not want to bore you! In the next chapter, I will explain how we integrate the **Five R’s of Unit Studies** in our homeschooling. This includes: **Research, Reading, Writing, Recording, and Reporting**. Read ahead to discover how the incorporation of these disciplines gives the children the foundation they need to be self learners.

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