

How to enjoy your state convention

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by vicki bentley

If this is your first or second (or tenth!) homeschool convention, it is easy to be overwhelmed by the enormity of the exhibit hall and the long list of workshop choices. Here are a few helpful hints:

What to do BEFORE the convention:

Pre-register, if possible. This will save you money, time, and stress. See your state organization's website or convention brochure for registration information. If this is not workable, you can usually still register at the door, although the fee may be higher.

Read all the pre-convention info on the organization's website. The convention section of the website may contain:

- registration information
- biographies of the speakers with their Web addresses
- a session-by-session list of the workshops with descriptions
- exhibit hall hours
- a list of the exhibitors, including websites so you can check them out in advance
- graduation ceremony info, if applicable
- children's program hours, ages, prices, description, and instructions, if applicable
- hotel information
- local restaurant info
- parking information
- volunteer opportunities
- Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) on virtually everything

Determine your purpose(s) in attending. Are you looking for curriculum? Musical instruments? College admission info? Life skills helps? Encouragement for yourself? Just want to see what's available, to touch and see it all "up close and personal"? Or maybe you've been looking forward to asking the author how to best use the material you have. Want to pick up a few fun family games? Perhaps you need some books to augment a unit study, or to build your home library. And those workshops all sound so inviting! Looking ahead to high school, or checking out some relaxed options for your younger ones? Or maybe you simply want to bask in the company of thousands of others who will reassure you that your children can succeed if you do this!



Whatever your focus, be sure to allocate your time accordingly. Make a written list of priorities, because once you walk into that building, even the best intentions can get lost in the excitement!

Develop a plan. Determine in advance what time you will leave the house (well, you can at least AIM for that), where you'll park, how much time you'll devote to in-service training and encouragement (AKA workshops), and how much time you will spend in the exhibit hall.

If this is very new, research some of your options. Will you use a packaged curriculum to get started? Or will you choose

various books and games that fit into your plan? Are there some subjects that you can teach to all the children at one time in a multi-level approach? Do you prefer the security and continuity of a traditional textbook approach, or do you like the idea of an integrated unit study approach? Maybe the patriotism of the principle approach excites you, or possibly your maternal instincts go into overdrive when you read about Charlotte Mason's gentler approach to learning. As you read, you may find that the classical approach sounds like what you equate with home schooling, or maybe you are attracted to the relaxed approach of studying what is of interest in your family at the moment.

Feel free to borrow and re-arrange from all these different approaches; they are not mutually exclusive. That's one of the wonderful benefits of home schooling – you can create a custom curriculum!

Your state resource center (or your favorite catalog!) carries lots of resources to help you think through your teaching preferences, your children's learning styles, and the materials that would best suit your family. Several good "basics" volumes include Cathy Duffy's *100 Top Picks for Homeschool Curriculum*, Robin Sampson's *Heart of Wisdom*, Clay and Sally Clarkson's *Educating the WholeHearted Child*, and Mary Pride's *Guide to Getting Started in Homeschooling*.

Concerned that you're "covering the bases"? Take a peek at Sampson's *What Your Child Needs to Know When*—and be sure to read the first half to get her perspective on why and how we do what we do, then glean from the K-8th skills checklists.

Make a wish list. Make a list of the items in which you are most interested—based on the goals you have set for your children—with several alternative selections noted; having a second or third choice pre-selected helps me to think quickly. I make a list of all the topics we're covering this year in our units, so I can stay focused on my more immediate needs, and I can better resist the temptation to snatch up a bargain that won't really be useful to me for another year or two.

Specific titles are very useful, if possible. One year I accidentally purchased three copies of the same well-known science book because the publisher had changed the cover several times and I didn't recognize the title as a book I'd already purchased!

Remember items such as a homeschool planner, art supplies, educational games, and other non-traditional "curriculum" items.

Determine your budget. This is a biggie. Know what you can afford and stick to it.

Mark your schedule in advance. Print the online schedule or use the schedule-at-a-glance that will probably arrive in your confirmation packet before the convention. In each time slot, highlight the workshop most beneficial to you. Be sure to mark off exhibit hall shopping times, if needed, and be prepared to pick up a few CDs of the workshops you can't get to (or better yet, get the MP3 of the entire convention if it's available, so you review the great material you heard!).

If your children will be accompanying you, notice where your workshops are in relation to their program room, if there is a children's program, and be sure to plan to pick them up for lunch!

Pray for the convention staff, the speakers, exhibitors, and other attendees, as well as for your own decisions, safe travel, etc.. Make any last-minute preparations for any family members you are not taking with you, including meals, instructions for preparation, emergency numbers, and other needs.

Be packed the day before. Things to bring with you:

- Directions to the convention center (print from the site).
- Cash for parking.
- Comfortable shoes. You'll do lots of walking!
- Layered clothing. The air conditioning temperature varies by room.
- Change for the book-and-bag check. The stuff gets heavy. Consider buying a bringing a fold-up rolling cart if your facility allows them (put your name on it!).
- Address labels for mailing lists, drawings, etc. I like to use those little "freebie" labels that I receive in the mail from charities.
- Snacks to leave in your room or car. Some convention centers do not allow "outside" food in the facility, so be sure of the rules.
- Notebook and pen/pencil.
- A roomy, easy-to-carry purse or tote (or fanny pack).
- Your wish list.
- Your schedule.
- Your registration confirmation letter (not required, but helpful).
- Hotel confirmation info, if applicable.
- Money, as allocated.

What to do AT the convention:

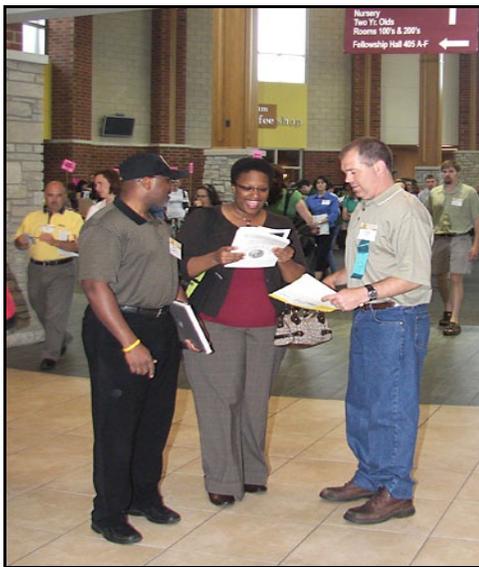
Pay attention to where you parked your car. There may be several parking garages—notice where you enter the convention center from the parking garage or street.

Check in at the registration table. Be sure to pick up any name tags or holders, maps, programs, restaurant lists, and taping order forms.

Look through your convention program. It's not just "for looks"; it's chock-full of helpful info, most likely including a workshop schedule-at-a-glance and a facility map. Take a few minutes to read about the hours, lost-and-found, info tables, and more. At some point, read it more thoroughly!

You may want to transfer your brought-from-home schedule notes to this program for ease of use and to check any last-minute room changes (those don't happen often, but it's always a possibility).

In the exhibit hall, I recommend that you make your first pass through without the wallet accessible! Take notes on what's where, then come back through and make your purchases. Of course, if you think something is a great find, it may not be there later and you must judge if it's worth a first-pass purchase. If there is a book-and-bag check for your convenience, it can be a lifesaver!



The exhibitors go to great lengths (and expense) to be there for you; in many cases, you are actually talking with the author of the book or developer of the material. If an exhibitor spends his time to answer your questions or explain various programs to you, please consider the value of his time/expertise and purchase from him rather than automatically making a purchase elsewhere to save a dollar.

In the workshops, turn your cell phone off or to "vibrate," and seat yourself near an exit if you have a baby with you. Because the workshops are probably recorded (among other reasons!), it is courteous to temporarily leave the room if your baby makes noise (happy OR sad) or if you must take a call. If you must exit or enter after the workshop has begun, please be careful not to let the door slam. If a workshop seems full, it is also helpful to scoot in along the row so the outer seats will be more accessible to latecomers.

Your workshop evaluations are very important to the coordinators. Please be as specific as possible in your suggestions, recommendations, praise, and criticism.

Join your state organization. If you aren't already a member, consider joining to support homeschooling in your state.

Order CDs of workshops you were unable to attend (or really enjoyed and would like to review). If it is available, an MP3 of the full convention is a great value!

Consider volunteering. Even an hour or two of your time will be a great blessing to the convention! Check at the volunteer table or the state organization table for needs.

Make new friends (and renew old acquaintances). If you are new, the other newcomers don't know if you are new or a veteran, so smile anyway!

Turn in your evaluation form(s) and your name tag holder before leaving.

What to do AFTER the convention:

Look through any goodie bags you received (and to which you probably added all weekend!). Take advantage of any special offers.

Consider sending a thank-you e-mail or note to those who made the weekend possible. If you have words of praise or polite criticism, be as specific as possible; your comments are very important and help the coordinators plan for the following year.

Start setting aside a few dollars each month for next year's convention!

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