

Using the Internet for more than wasting time with friends

Online Learning Offers a Galaxy of Options

One of the areas where the Internet and the World Wide Web are best living up to their inventors' visions of an interconnected world is in education. Almost from the start, people have shared everything online from show-me-how-it-works videos to serious academic lesson plans and teaching tools as well as a fantastic wealth of information in all fields.

For parents, students, lifelong learners, researchers, professional educators, homeschoolers, armchair adventurers, the bored and the curious, the Internet has just about everything needed to learn and to teach anything at any level.

You can earn college degrees, become an expert web-page builder, learn languages, master math and science, and satisfy any itch to explore – and often it only costs you time. In fact, there's so much out there that the biggest challenge is not to find information but to locate that with the greatest value and utility.

So for this annual "Back to School" article, rather than look at the latest tech trends and hottest gizmos, we've asked a special ed teacher and several homeschooling moms for online resources and advice.

Their answers were somewhat surprising. In the first place, despite the huge sums government devotes to education, there seems to be little actual teaching resources for parents online produced by the US Department of Education. A visit to their **Parents page**, for instance, shows almost as many headings about disabilities, prepping for college, and student loans, as it does on early childhood topics. But for a parent *not* intending to do it all at home, it may be a good place to start, as there are guides to how to help with homework, math, and reading skills.

This site could also be highly beneficial for a caregiver trying to decide how to best help a special needs child. Information about special education, diagnosis, and the programs specially designed for such kids, could be very helpful in determining which way one should proceed. And for anyone looking into **financial aid**, that's the logical place to begin.

Links provided by the special education teacher also emphasize organizing studies, planning for college, getting scholarships, and other formal aids. For career and college advice to help plan your student's academic program for all age levels, **MyPlan.com** looks very useful. It deals with not only job information such as salaries and outlooks, and financial aid, but also skill and interest assessments and how to match them up with various majors and colleges.

Learning sites

There are plenty of sites to help your student learn. One that was recommended is **wikiHow**, which has simple, clearly illustrated step-by-step procedures on everything from life skills, such as balancing check-books and avoiding suicide, to organizing binders for school – although it should be mentioned that not all topics, such as how to make Jello shots, are for kids.

Math helps abound. One for all age levels and topics is **Math is Fun**, which also has puzzles, games, and teaching activities. For help with geometry, there are

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sites like [Math Open Reference](#), which uses simple animations to explore mathematical concepts.

But there are larger, far more ambitious websites. [Quizlet](#) builds study tools and applications; flashcards, tests, and games to make learning fun and easy. They claim they have been used by 100 million around the world so far; and while free for students, offer upgrades for teachers and schools for a fee.

Perhaps the biggest, as well as one of the earliest and most famous, free universal tutorial website is [The Khan Academy](#). It teaches just about every subject imaginable at any level from elementary to college – all for free. It began with simple videos of teachers and chalkboards, and the motto “You can learn anything”, and has expanded from its main [YouTube channel](#) to nine others that specialize in SAT preparation, computer science, math, and even medicine.

Homeschooling and unschooling

YouTube, in fact, can be quite a valuable resource for those wishing to do it themselves. History documentaries, how-to videos, even typing tutorials, are scattered among cat videos and the latest pop hits, so discretion – and some discipline – is needed.

But in these days with struggling public schools, many parents are opting to teach their children themselves, especially kids with special needs. The first step is to find out how they learn. There are specialized websites with questionnaires to help determine what works best for them. Once you find out the technical terms, search for homeschooling resources in that area. For special problems such as dyslexia, there are many tailored tools available.

Then, of course, you have to find out if you can handle sitting with the kid in front of the computer or doing activities all day. There are support sites, however, like [Understood](#), for parents of children with learning issues. The *New York Times* runs a site for parents and teachers called [The Learning Network](#) with a variety of blogs on current themes and topics.

Teaching your kids yourself can be more open and free than just using the kitchen table as a classroom. One arm of the homeschooling movement is called “[unschooling](#)” which emphasizes play, household responsibilities, social interactions, and so on, with many enthusiasts and home educators sharing their experiences online. One recommended site with podcasts is [Unschooling Support](#); others are [Living Joyfully](#) and [A2Z Homeschooling](#).

There’s no doubt that education is changing right along with everything else. There may be no magic answers to the problems and choices parents and students must face, but there are lots of online aids.

Thanks to Kris Lindholdt, Sandra Dodd, and Jae Gentry for their kind input.

Sending Private Messages by Email

Normally, email is about as private as a postcard – it can easily be read by anybody along the way. Edward Snowden and security experts agree that the *only* means to keep email truly confidential is by using strong encryption. But until now, that was often something only technical types had the savvy to use.

Now there’s [Mailvelope](#), a browser extension which allows you to send and receive encrypted messages using webmail clients like Gmail, Yahoo mail and our own Roundcube. Mailvelope uses [PGP](#) (*Pretty Good Privacy*), a well-proven double-key encryption system that’s been around now for almost 25 years.

PGP employs a long public encoding key that you give out to your friends and associates wishing to send you private communications, a shorter one for decrypting that you keep secret, and a private pass phrase. Using it on an email results in a message that looks like gobbledygook, and is very hard to crack, but easy to open and decipher with the program.

Mailvelope is a free, user-friendly client, but some set up is required. Instructions on how to do so can be found under the [Private Email](#) posts on our blog.

MakerFaire Returns to Albuquerque

“The Greatest Show (and Tell) on Earth” comes back to town with our own [Mini MakerFaire](#), at the [Albuquerque Balloon Museum](#) this [August 29-31](#).

MakerFaire celebrates the tinkerer and curious child in all of us, featuring cool things made by some of the most inventive folks in town. It’s a family-friendly, hands-on, interactive exploration of new and interesting technology that people just like you are using to do fantastic, fun things with real objects.

Tickets are just \$10/adults and \$5/children for two days of discovering model rocketry, henna art, caricature drawing, radio-controlled earth-moving toys and drones, and other fascinating projects. You can even learn how to solder, and teach making skills to kids. Food trucks will be present to keep you going.

Check it out at [Albuquerque Mini MakerFaire](#).



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