

Education in Ancient Greece

Step 1 Excite

Aristotle said, “Virtue, like any art or faculty, can only be acquired by education. Education must be regulated by the State. For as the end of the State as a whole is one, the education of all the citizens must be one and the same, and must therefore be an affair of the State. Every citizen should remember that he is not his own master but a part of the State.” This is the opposite of what most homeschoolers believe.

Review and update your family’s homeschooling goals in writing.

Step 2 Examine

Two contrasting types of education appeared early in ancient Greece: that of Sparta, wholly controlled by the state, and that of Athens, left almost entirely to the home and to private schools. Up to the age of seven, the education of both boys and girls was accomplished at home; at the age of seven, boys were gathered in barracks, where emphasis was placed upon physical development through games, exercises, and the pentathlon (running, jumping, throwing the discus, casting the javelin, and wrestling) and upon memorizing the laws of the Spartan lawgiver Lycurgus, and selections from Homer. The whole process was designed to develop endurance, resourcefulness, and discipline. At eighteen, definite training in the use of arms and warfare began; from twenty to thirty, service in the army and guarding the borders of the state were required, and even after thirty, men were required to live in barracks and assist in the training of the boys. Physical training was also emphasized in the education of girls and women, so that they might bear sturdy children. The whole purpose of education was to subordinate the individual to the needs of the state.

Education in general was considered a leisure pursuit only available to the privileged few. The majority of the population received no education. Girls in ancient Greece received no formal education in the literary arts, though many of them were taught to read and write informally, in the home. The pursuit of literature was considered the ultimate goal—an idle life of leisure devoid of manual labor. (This pagan goal of the idle rich exists in America today.)

The ancient Greeks’ interest in learning is evident in their art, politics, and philosophy. Teachers lived in their households; these teachers were often slaves from conquered states. Later, when the Roman Empire was at its height, its citizens also followed the practice of

having teacher-slaves, usually Greeks, attached to their households. The work of several Greek writers served as the model for the educational systems of ancient Rome, which stressed gymnastics as well as mathematics and music.

The basic divisions of knowledge were: Grammar, Rhetoric, Dialectic— these were meant to help students communicate effectively, and included a study of literature and language— and Arithmetic, Music, Geometry, and Astronomy. These seven subjects later became known as the Liberal Arts. They survive in one form or another in many universities today. Anatomy, Biology, and Botany were also considered valid fields of study.

By the 4th century B.C., aristocratic 18-year-old males spent two years in a gymnasium, a state school devoted to the overall physical and intellectual development of young men. More advanced education in philosophy, mathematics, logic, and rhetoric was available to the aristocracy in highly select gymnasia, like the Academy of Plato and the Lyceum of Aristotle.

Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and Isocrates were the influential thinkers on education. The Greeks were history's first humanists, believing that man was the measure of all things. The Greek aim was to prepare intellectually well-rounded young people to take leading roles in the activities of the state and of society. (By contrast, the Hebrews' primary purpose for education was to train for lifelong obedient service to God.)

The classical schools, with their intention to produce perfect citizens through education, produced only an artificial and cruel society. Men still look back on the "golden Days" of Greece for personal and cultural inspiration, but they fail to realize that the true nobility that they aspired to was never obtainable on any humanistic premise. True nobility, which the Greek and Roman ideal correctly identified, to some extent, is only available through the obedience to the Gospel of Christ, with its insistence on our recognition and confession of sin and its promise of containing sanctification. This is never attainable through education, but only through the free mercies of Christ our Savior. ¹

Compare ancient Greek and Hebrew (biblical) education. The text below is from *Our Father Abraham Study Guide*.

Education with a Difference

1. "All education was directed to this end: to be different was the law of existence . . . 'You shall be different, for I the Lord your God am different.'"— Leo Baeck, *The Essence of Judaism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1948), p.261.
2. The Greek world's view of teaching was that it primarily involved the transference of knowledge in the intellectual and technical areas, such as music, art, reading, or athletics.

Underlined text refers to Internet link at <http://HomeSchoolUnitStudies.com> site












3. In ancient Greek society, only the wealthy and leisure classes were enlightened through education. Indeed, our English words school and scholar derive from the Greek verb *scholazo*, “to have leisure,” “to have spare time,” “to have nothing to do.”
4. In contrast, Jewish education was for all people and concerned the whole person. Teaching had to do primarily with the communication of the Law or will of the Lord and was done by God himself, by the father of the family, or by a religious leader within the community.
5. To summarize, the Greeks learned in order to comprehend. The Hebrews learned in order to revere.

Biblical Education



1. The primary purpose of education in Bible times was to train the whole person for lifelong, obedient service in the knowledge of God (Proverbs 1:7; Ecclesiastes 12:13).
2. The aim of learning was holiness in living—to be set apart unto God in every dimension of life. This holiness required a knowledge of God’s acts in history and a commitment to observe his mitzvot (commandments), which instructed one how to live.
3. The center of education was the home.
4. “Education is a matter which rests primarily with the parent, with the father. The teacher is but a representative of the father, according to Jewish tradition. Thou shalt teach them diligently, not vicariously. Now parents act as they please—commercialism and vulgarity blare from the loudspeakers—and little children are expected to listen to the voice of the Spirit. Religious instruction, like charity, begins at home.” — Heschel, *The Insecurity of Freedom* (New York: Schocken Books, 1972), pp. 54-55.
5. In the Hebrew Bible, teachers (priests) are called “father” (Judges 17:10; 18:19), and the relationship between teacher and student (e.g., Elijah and Elisha) is expressed as “father” and “son” (11 Kings 2:3,12).
6. In traditional Jewish homes today, when a child prays for his parents he refers to them as “my father, my teacher; my mother, my teacher.”
7. The Bible teaches that study ought to be, above everything else, an act of worship, one of the highest ways by which a person can glorify God.
8. Paul makes no distinction between the so-called “sacred” and “secular” areas of life. He taught that all of life was God’s domain. Every detail of life, therefore, must be set aside and consecrated to the glory of God.
9. “Study is not an ordeal but an act of edification; the school is a sanctuary, not a factory; study is a form of worship.” — Heschel, *The Insecurity of Freedom* (New York: Schocken Books, 1972).

Do research to compare the differences between ancient Greek and Hebrew education. Use any resource (an encyclopedia, nonfiction book, or the Internet). We recommend the following:

Books

-   The Usborne Book of the Ancient World  ★
Read: “Children and Education” (148), “Learning” (174).
-  Our Father Abraham  ♥
Read: “A Life of Learning.”
-  Sketches of Jewish Social Life by Alfred Edersheim (1876)
Read “Subjects of Study”; “Home Education in Israel”; “Female Education”; “Elementary Schools”; “Schoolmasters”; and “School Arrangements.” Available online (see Internet Sources).
-  Far Above Rubies: Wisdom in the Christian Community  ★
Read “Christianity, Classicism, and Chaos”; “Greeks, Romans, and a Paradox”; “The Greek Roman World as the City of Man”; and “The Greek Paideia.”
-  The Life of Greece (The Story of Civilization II) ♦
Read: All references to education.
-  Handbook to Life in Ancient Greece  ♦
Read: “Education” (253-254).

Internet Sources

-  Home Education in Israel
Description: Chapter 8 from Sketches of Jewish Social Life by Alfred Edersheim. (Also see “Female Education”; “Elementary Schools”; “Schoolmasters”; and “School Arrangements.”)
-  The Greek Foundation of Modern Education
Description: An article illustrating how the roots of modern America’s educational system and traditions reach back to the Greeks.

Step 3 Expand

Choose and complete one of the following activities:

**Activity 1: Contrast and Compare**

Make a contrast-and-compare graphic (see page 26) comparing the definition of education according to: Greek philosopher, Aristotle; the faithful Christian, Noah Webster; and a modern dictionary. Each is noted below:

Education according to Aristotle: The ordinary branches of education are: 1. Reading and Writing, 2. Gymnastics, 3. Music, and 4. The Art of Design. Of these, reading/writing and design are taught for their practical utility. Gymnastics promotes valor.

Webster's 1828 Dictionary: The bringing up, as of a child; instruction; formation of manners. Education comprehends all that series of instruction and discipline which is intended to: 1. Enlighten the understanding, 2. Correct the temper, 3. Form the manners and habits of youth, and 4. Fit them [youth] for usefulness in their future stations. To give a child an education in manners, arts, and science is important; to give them [children] a religious education is indispensable: an immense responsibility rests on the parents and guardians who neglect these duties.

American Heritage Dictionary: 1. The act or process of educating or being educated. 2. The knowledge or skill obtained or developed by a learning process. 3. A program of instruction of a specified kind or level: driver education; a college education. 4. The field of study that is concerned with the pedagogy of teaching and learning. 5. An instructive or enlightening experience.

**Activity 2: Write a Letter**

Write a letter to your parents and other adult instructors, thanking them for their dedication to Christian education. Be sure to include why this is important.

Step 4 Excel

Share your work from Step 3 with someone. Explain what you have learned in this lesson. Correct all written work to demonstrate correct punctuation and spelling, and effective use of grammar. Add corrected written work or any illustrations to your portfolio.

Footnotes

1. Kandel, Gary H. (1996). *The Demonic Roots of Globalism: En Route to Spiritual Deception*. Huntington House Publishers.
2. Mulligan, David. (1994). *Far Above Rubies: Wisdom in the Christian Community*. VT: Messenger Publishing. 284 pages.
3. Wilson, Marvin R. (1989). *Our Father Abraham: Jewish Roots of the Christian Faith*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company; Dayton, OH: Center For Judaic-Christian Studies. ISBN: 0802804233.