Deciding to homeschool your children is a huge commitment, but in many ways it is simply an extension of the commitments made by many other parents. Parents who send their children to public schools often volunteer in the schools so that they can identify the best teachers and ensure that their children are assigned to their classrooms. Some parents also use grievance procedures and the special-education IEP (individualized education plan) process to make sure their children get exactly the right instructional program. Parents who pay for private schooling or who start new charter schools also make sacrifices in order to give their children a particular kind of education. It is the American way: except for paying taxes and avoiding criminal activity, determined families can influence or opt out of collective activities that conflict with their self-defined values or needs.

Home schoolers alone, however, are forced to face the criticisms that they've abandoned the public schools or so cloistered their children that they're unlikely to develop the skills they need to function in the outside world. Answering the criticisms, Mitchell Stevens portrays home schoolers as communitarians, not isolationists. Stevens, a sociologist, conducted in-depth interviews of several dozen families and participated in home-school association meetings throughout the country. Though he admits his study is not statistically representative, his findings clearly reflect the experience of home schoolers who cooperate with one another and are open about their practices. These parents, probably the majority of home schoolers, are mainly middle-class parents who believe in prolonged intimate contact between family and child, but who do not mean to impede their children's access to higher education and jobs or their ability to act as good citizens.

Stevens's portraits of home-schooling families are sympathetic and vivid. Of the homes studied, the overwhelming majority have intact marriages, and both spouses have the skills required to work successfully for pay. Spouses decide to live on less money because they think it is good for their children.

Christians and “Inclusives”

These limitations aside, Stevens provides much that is new and intriguing. He shows that home schoolers' ideas about what is worth learning and how to teach it are not far outside the main-stream. Christian home schoolers (members of evangelical and Baptist congregations), whom Stevens estimates make up as much as 80 percent of the home-schooling families, want their children to learn traditional subjects, and they use familiar teacher-centered methods. Christian home-schooling parents organize learning around traditional grade-level expectations. Parents buy (and on occasion publish and sell) instructional materials. Children hear lectures, use published workbooks, and write papers. They often work in spaces modified to look like classrooms.

There is a second group of home schoolers, whom Stevens calls the “inclusives,” a broad category that covers left-wing and counterculture groups as well as Jews, Catholics, and mainstream Protestants who are not comfortable with the Christian home schoolers' pietistic style. Inclusives, especially the nonreligious majority, tend to emphasize child-directed learning via projects and
Much depends on the actions of mothers whose children have “aged out” of home schooling.

When threatened by government action, the Christians turn for help to the Republicans, the inclusives to the Democrats.

One fact unites all home schoolers: dependence on the efforts of mothers. Women do the lion’s share of the work—searching for materials, planning lessons, guiding children through their studies, and sustaining mutual-help organizations. Fathers in home-schooling families face pressure as sole wage earners, and many do some tutoring and help with housework. But Stevens shows that home schooling is a woman’s enterprise, in which men are usually junior partners.

Some of Stevens’s most thoughtful passages concern how home schooling coexists with the late-20th century liberation of women. Stevens argues that women’s role in home schooling is more consistent with broader social tendencies than it first appears. Christian home schooling creates a new quasi profession, which allows women both to stay with their children and to do intellectually challenging, nonroutine work. Home-schooling organizations are dominated by women, some of whom become well known as leaders in the movement or as sources of good teaching ideas and materials. Christian home-schooling mothers get emotional support and validation from their churches and from one another.

The more left-wing women among the inclusives are often well educated but dedicated to living counterculture lives. They are self-sufficient mothers who have bonded so deeply with their children that they cannot bear to entrust their education to anyone else. Many others (and sometimes fathers) find ways to make modest livings, often in counterculture food and crafts organizations.

What is the future of home schooling? More than a million children are taught at home, more than now attend charter schools. But a number of factors will limit home schooling’s growth, not least the difficulty of raising a family on one income. That, and the self-defined fringe character of the bohemian lifestyle, will probably rule out any significant growth of “inclusive” home schooling. However, Christian women face very different rewards and supports. And evangelical Protestant churches can offer a constant flow of potential recruits.

Much depends on the actions of mothers whose children have “aged out” of home schooling. Will they find other work entirely, or will they stay connected to home schooling by running organizations, writing and selling materials, and advising less experienced home schoolers? Stevens’s evidence suggests that there is a future for Christian home-schooling mothers who want to build the movement and draw income from their reputations and expertise. If even a few do this, Christian homeschooling might continue to grow. It might also lead to the formation of cooperative enterprises among current and former home-schooling mothers. These might come to be called schools.

One can only hope that there is a new Stevens in the wings, studying the actions of home-schooling mothers whose children are grown, and tracking the growth of the market for home-schooling materials and advice. We also need a nationally representative study of home schooling and its effects. But future work will all build on the foundation Stevens has laid.

—Paul T. Hill is a professor of public affairs at the University of Washington and a visiting fellow at the Hoover Institution.