

Choosing and Ordering Standardized Tests

Standardized test publishers regulate the use of their tests closely in order to protect the reliability of their norms. Thus, they do not sell tests directly to the public, including homeschool parents. Christian textbook publishers, curriculum suppliers, and correspondence schools make standardized tests available to homeschools in a variety of ways. They must guarantee the test publishers that certain conditions are met in administering the tests in order to be able buy the tests.

Which test should I use?

Four common tests are listed here. Your choice will most likely depend upon what is available to you. The scores are more helpful if you consistently use the same test from year to year. The different tests vary somewhat in the sub-scores provided to you. One test may give language sub-scores in mechanics, spelling, and expression. Another may give scores in capitalization, punctuation, spelling, and usage.

If you prefer one set of categories over another, you can choose which test you want to use on this basis. The actual content (the subject matter and skills) which the tests cover in elementary grades is quite standardized. The selection procedures, involving input and consensus from curriculum specialists and teachers, tend toward uniformity. Content is checked against widely used textbooks. Since textbooks have the same standardizing pressures they don't frequently change.

Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS)

This is a top-rated, nationally standardized test designed to evaluate thinking skills. It is very similar to the Stanford Achievement Test, except that it takes less time to administer, permits greater flexibility for students taking a test out of grade level, and permits a wider grade range of students to be tested at the same time. Administrators must meet certain qualifying requirements, and the "Directions for Administering" are supplied and returned to the Iowa Administrators. The ITBS tests listening skills through grade 2. The test may be ordered from Bob Jones University on line or by calling 1-800-845-5731. The publisher no longer allows distributors to sell to individual parents in Iowa. They may sell to schools in Iowa who will often allow homeschoolers to come and take the test in a supervised setting.

Stanford Achievement Test

This is another top-rated, nationally standardized test. The Stanford tests listening skills through grade eight, and includes the scores from Science/Social Studies in the Complete Composite score. To test your own children, Stanford no longer requires two additional non-family members to be tested along with your children (this change was made in 2009, <http://www.bjupress.com/testing/stanford.php>). Test administrators are required to meet certain qualifying requirements, and "Directions for Administering" must be purchased. Tests may be ordered from Bob Jones University Press, 1-800-845-5731.

California Achievement Test (CAT)

This test is popular among Christian schools. It is available for purchase by homeschool parents and does not require a bachelor's degree for test administrators. It tests K through 12th grades. Tests may be obtained through a variety of sources including <http://www.hslda.org/highschool/testing.asp#standardized>. Be sure to specifically request percentile scoring and/or stanine results, otherwise some providers will send only raw scores and grade equivalents.

Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills (CTBS)

In addition to what many other tests cover, the CTBS covers science, social science and reference skills for grades one through twelve. With the CTBS scores you will also receive a professional critique. The test is available from the Sycamore Tree, 2170 Meyer Place, Costa Mesa, California 92627, 1-949-650-4466.

Practice Tests

Many people ask, "Should we order practice tests?" About half of homeschoolers use them and half do not. It is up to each individual family to choose what is best for their children. Some families feel that problem areas are discovered before the achievement test and can be dealt with in a timely manner. Others feel like it is a waste of time because they already know the weak areas.

How Should You View the Results?

Keep in mind that there may be only three questions on a particular skill and on the basis of those, a child is scored as average, below average, or above average on that skill. If you spend any time at all helping your child with his studies, you already have a more insightful assessment than such a test score gives.

Parents may get upset or depressed because their "brilliant" child did not score brilliantly on a test. They have even considered taking their child out of the home study situation and placing him back in school, all because of one test! You may rest assured that no school would change the course of a child's education over such an incident.

On the other hand, there is a danger in trying to down-play the value of tests. If the parent decides to ignore the test scores as meaningless, he may, in the process, ignore a learning problem. A balance is necessary.

Be sure to praise your child for the strong areas and work on the weak areas. The weak areas may be the priorities for your next year. When you have to skip some classes because of a time crunch, skip the strong areas. There may be areas that you have not even covered because you didn't realize they were basic skills. The scores can also help you choose curricula for the following school year.