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The Purpose of Education

One of the biggest obstacles to freedom in education is the expectations that people place upon children. It seems as though they are hardly out of the crib before they are being asked what they want to be when they grow up.

University and Home Education

Sometimes home-educated children feel even more pressure to do well at University than children who have been to school. They may feel that they have to do particularly well in order to justify their parents' decision not to send them to school.

These young people are often particularly bemused by the low standards, the lack of originality and the pressure to give the 'correct answers' in examinations that characterise undergraduate life (not to mention aspects of University 'social life' which can be perplexing to people who have had a reasonably happy and trouble-free childhood.)

There is an argument that people must learn to lower their standards and to make compromises at some point, if they are to get on in the world – but I suspect that this is an argument only put forward by people who have lowered their own standards and made compromises. It is not an argument that would be supported by anyone who is truly successful, creative or fulfilled.

Perhaps home-educated children should not set themselves the goal of one day integrating into the education system (unless they want to) but should instead continue to learn things that they want to learn, do things that they want to do, and see where it leads them....

Children feel inadequate and guilty if they cannot provide an acceptable answer to this question and it is not long before they learn to say how much they want to go to school, and to describe what sort of career they hope to have, etc. All this is, of course, complete nonsense; no one in their right mind would expect a child to understand the implications of choosing one career over another. Instead of easing up, the pressure upon children to commit themselves to one course or another actually increases as they get older. What may start off as light-hearted banter becomes very serious as children are forced to make choices that will have an effect on the rest of their lives.

This applies particularly to the quest for qualifications and University places. Universities are often portrayed as institutions dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge – a place where young people can take stock of their lives and then make an informed choice about their next step. I believe that this is an outdated view of University life.

Having had time to reflect upon my own University education, I now believe that it was more about trying to make people conform than about helping them to think for themselves – and I believe that the past twenty-five years have made Universities worse. They have become more closely integrated into a system that has very little to do with education but which is concerned only with shaping people to fill specific roles in society.

I once knew a little boy who, when asked what he wanted to be when he grew up, answered, in all seriousness, 'A bird.' Shouldn't children be allowed to enjoy this state of innocence for as long as possible, and wouldn't it be better if they were allowed to gain a proper perspective on the world through being able to pursue their education in freedom from older people's expectations?

In particular wouldn't it be better if children felt free to say that they do not know what they want to be when they grow up; that they are not interested in passing exams; that they do not want to go to University; but that they are simply happy doing the things that they are doing?

What's it like growing up outside the school system?

This month my two daughters, Bethan and Wendy have written articles giving their perspective on the experience:

What is it like growing up outside the school system? There seems to be a paucity of accounts written by young people who were taught at home, and who have emerged confident, and strengthened by the experience.

I went to a Waldorf school until the age of nine. I know that that's probably a far cry from the state or private schools which most children attend, but relaxed as many of its attitudes were, it was still an institution, which grouped pupils of one age together, and sought to impart information in a fairly conventional way. To say that I disliked going to school would be untrue - I merely accepted it as I had so many things, nor can I remember a single unpleasant or distressing day; a claim which I'm sure few children are able to make.

Nonetheless, when my father suggested that my brother and sister and I see how we liked being taught at home for a while, I was completely delighted. In retrospect I wonder how it was that I had no reservations. School friends, group activities, a way of life which, through force of habit, had become familiar, counted for nothing at all. I'm sure that for me the transition was particularly smooth. While my parents were agonising about whether they had done the right thing; what would happen in the future, etc. I revelled in the one-to-one attention, and the opportunity to be myself. I don't think anyone realises how much of a child's individuality is lost in the school system. In order to survive, differences must be concealed, and views altered to conform. In this harsh environment anyone who stands out is ostracized. More and more frequently, in the last few terms I spent at school, I heard myself expressing opinions that were not my own, and often experienced a vague sense of confusion when I condemned something that I knew I had always liked. I remember one incident in particular: for years I had refused to wear hair ribbons, despite my mother's efforts to persuade me. At school they were looked down on as "soppy", and nothing on earth would have made me walk into class with my hair any different from anyone else's. Two days after I knew that I had left school for good, I went upstairs and tied a ribbon around my pony tail - suddenly there was no reason not to. Once again I could be who I wanted to be: if I had a passion for fairy stories there was no one to laugh at me; if I drew picture after picture of princesses and fairies no one would tell me to "grow up".

The first few weeks must have been difficult for my mother - who was doing most of the teaching at the time; she seemed to find it hard to find the right tone. Now and again I would have to tell her that she was using her "teachery voice", and point out that it was just her, talking to me, the same as we did the rest of the day.

I approached these new lessons with enthusiasm; it was just as much my responsibility to see that they worked as anyone else's. Although I had no confidence in maths - a legacy of the Waldorf school, where I had sat, gazing in bewilderment at the figures being chalked up on the board by the teacher and other pupils - I had not lost my appetite for learning. With no one to compare myself to I saw nothing unusual in deciding to read "Much Ado about Nothing" at the age of eleven, and read works of English literature for pleasure.

When I was seventeen I did an Open University Correspondence course in A-level English literature, and can honestly say that when I was ten I understood more about Jane Austen than the academics who dissect and analyse her work.

The A-levels were a mistake - a misguided attempt to re-enter a system which I had

outgrown. Home Education had allowed me to form my own opinions; here I was told that to pass the exams, repeating the theories of other people was the key to success. For years learning had been an end in itself; suddenly it was a step to something else, to be forgotten the moment the exams were over. Perhaps I was naive, but after having been taught at home for so long, I expected to be treated with respect, and was genuinely surprised by the condescending tone of the course books, and the uninspired, almost routine discussion of the texts.

It was my first, and hopefully, my last brush with conventional education. The natural progression from being taught at home is not, in my opinion at least, University or A-levels. The unique perspective on life which comes from being able to make your own decisions from an early age, and the knowledge that if you try hard enough you are capable of doing, or understanding, anything, stands a person in much better stead than a qualification issued by an establishment that sees nothing wrong with dictating what children should learn, and believes that that learning should take place in a controlled environment.

I may not be a maths whiz, but I feel confident that some day soon I will be able to understand the intricacies of calculus and trigonometry; I'm far from fluent in German, Hindi and Italian, but I'm sure that if I tried a little harder I would improve. Art and music are subjects which I know I will love more and more as I grow older. I'll probably never paint as well as Leonardo da Vinci, but why not have that as my ultimate goal? Why not aspire to one day read books in their original language; play the piano as well as Mozart, or know the history of every country and people? Being taught at home has enabled me to think the impossible, and allowed me to be who I want to be - someone whose love of learning hasn't been stifled and who, at the age of twenty, isn't ashamed to say that she still has a passion for fairy stories.

Bethan Lewis

I was six years old when my parents first began to teach me at home. I was going to a kindergarten in a nearby Steiner school and was soon to move up to the first year. I only had to think about this and I was filled with fear and dread; whenever it was mentioned I would declare I wasn't going. This reason, combined with others, resulted in me being told one day that I was going to be taught at home, with my brother and sister.

After that, my life seemed to take a different course. Instead of leaving the house every day, I would spend my time in and around it, and no longer was I struggling to accept the stressful situation that each new day brought, but I could stop struggling and be myself. School had given me a feeling that made me fight my siblings, which now faded away. Instead of arguing, my brother and sister and I became best friends and played with one another constantly.

My time soon came to be spent in drawing, going outside, learning to write and read, doing crafts, singing, cooking, playing and gardening. Being at home felt perfectly natural – I soon forgot about school entirely.

That was eleven years ago now, and, if anything, being taught at home has grown more and more enjoyable as time has progressed. I am sure that sometimes it wasn't easy for my parents as they wondered if they were doing the right thing and how it was all going to turn out, but I was never aware of this and I am glad they always did what they felt to be right.

When I was nine years old, I did return to school for a short time, and I was amazed

to see the lack of respect and trust with which the children were treated, distressed by how they fought one another in the playground, and horrified at how we had to be there even when the weather was beautiful outside. I had no freedom and no choice. School wasn't a place where I could learn, but a prison where every day was wasted. Before a term was out I asked to leave and then, once again, my time was filled with doing things that were creative and enjoyable.

For me, that is what being taught at home is all about: having the time to do the things that I enjoy. I have always loved drawing, like every child, and being taught at home has given me the time to practise and improve. Being taught at home has given me the time, each day, to play the violin and the piano, to read books, to write poetry and learn any language of my choice. It has given me the time to do crafts, cooking, gardening and embroidery. To watch the seasons turn, the trees blossom, the plants grow and the stars move across the sky at night. It has given me the time to go for walks, to weed in the garden and, most importantly, being taught at home has given me the time to be myself.

Here I can pursue my own interests at my own pace, simply because I enjoy them. At school all children are pushed down the same channel for the same goal just because somebody else wants them to. The joy is taken away and learning becomes an impossible task.

My plans for the future are very scarce, in fact, I have no rigid plans beyond today. When people ask me what I am going to do, then I'm lost to know how to reply. But strangely enough this is the way I want to keep it. The future never seems to come, only now, so as long as I'm happy now, I won't need any plans. When I hear about someone who has been home taught, but are taking exams or going to university, I feel a sense of disappointment. It seems such a pity that they saw no other option but to go back into the system.

I am very grateful to my parents for taking me out of it when I was only six and teaching me themselves. I know that if ever I have children of my own then I would not even consider sending them to school - at least until they are old enough to decide for themselves - because I have learnt from my own experience, that being taught at home is not only infinitely preferable, but also thoroughly enjoyable.

Wendy Lewis

Christmas Special

This month's Jamboree contains new cartoons, a new Christmas poem, and a new Christmas story.

www.jamboree.freedom-in-education.co.uk

Letters

Thanks for the newsletter as someone else said it is 'mighty motivation'. Even the most confident of home educators must at some time get full of self-doubt, but reading an article such as your last, blows all that doubt away.

Many thanks. Mark and Jo Lawrence.

After your great article on reading ...another one!!! Holly and I loved the article on writing. Caran d'Ache make some crayons that are also water soluble, a bit expensive but worth it. At one time W. H. Smith had boxes of 100 coloured pencils (they were obviously made by Derwent) and got sold off for £6.00 a box. It is worth looking in W. H. for art materials at sale time, they have great bargains. Wallpaper lining paper is great for murals. At the moment all the free Christmas catalogues are out and come in useful for collage. Thanks for articles that help Holly understand we are not alone.

Angie, Jeff and Holly Cox.

Great Advice!! When you see it in black and white, it makes you realise it all makes so much sense.

We have begun scrapbooking and it is amazing how my child responds to this form of art. It encompasses so much. We even scrapbook his work, presenting it in photo-album form, with a bit of writing and arty-type scribbles, with stickers, etc.!! Add a few digital pix, recording where we have been and the whole process is much more meaningful and enjoyable.

I admit to having been one of those homeschooling mothers who had been looking for '*clever ways to make my child do some writing*' - but not any more, it always seemed so false, and in any case, as you say, it is better coming from him.....so much more refreshing.

Again you stated that it can take several years for the experience of school to dissipate.

We don't do school at home.

I have printed a version of something I read (author unknown) and I have it placed around my home and it says:

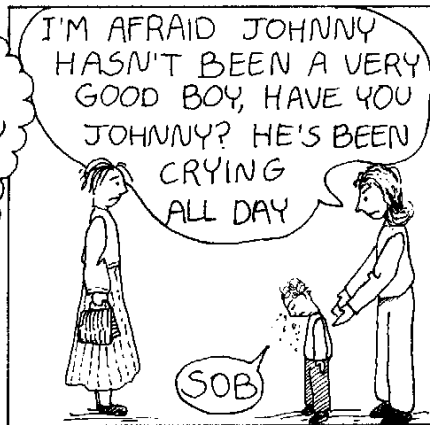
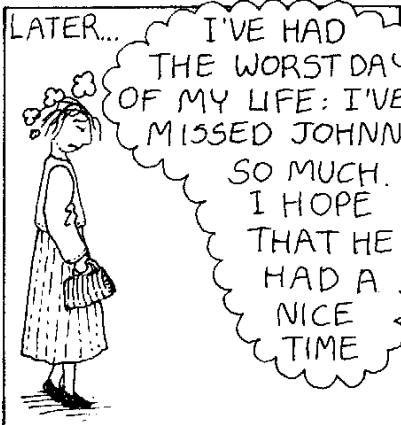
**Mix Life Up
Scramble Ideas
Sprinkle Your Days
With Granulated Information
Whatever You Do
Don't Do School**

**After All if That Works
Why Would You
Keep Your Children Home?**

Best wishes
Sonia Crane

We had quite a lot of editorial discussion about whether or not to include the following cartoon, because our overall policy is to try to maintain as positive a perspective on education as possible. However, it is undeniable that many children do not enjoy their first day at school so we decided that it should be included. (For readers of a sensitive disposition, Johnny and his mother do find a method of education more suited to their needs in future instalments.)

JOHNNY'S FIRST DAY AT SCHOOL



TO BE CONTINUED...

Freedom in Education Newsletter

We started this newsletter in June 2002. It now has over 300 subscribers, mainly in the UK but also in North America, Europe, Japan, Singapore, Australia and New Zealand. I am happy to use it to promote anything that supports greater freedom in education and welcome any information, letters, articles etc. for inclusion in future issues

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