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## **What Makes a Good Teacher?**

*Many parents would like to educate their children at home but are worried that they may not be competent to play the role of being their children's teacher.*

*My daughter, Bethan, and I have each written an account of what we consider to be the qualities required by a good teacher.*

### **A Teacher's Perspective**

I reached the lowest point in my teaching career about two years after I started working as a full-time school teacher. I was working in a school in a 'deprived area', teaching a 'difficult class' when a particularly 'disruptive pupil' started to make an extreme 'nuisance of himself'. My reaction was to tell him to leave the room but he refused, I tried to force him to leave and, before I knew what was happening, I found myself engaged in a fight with a thirteen-year-old boy.

This incident made me stop and consider what on earth had happened to me in the few years since I had left school that could have led me into trying to play the role of a bullying and overbearing school teacher. These are a summary of the conclusions to which I came:

- I had modelled my own behaviour in the classroom on the way that teachers had behaved when I was at school.
- I went into each lesson with a pre-arranged idea of what should take place in that lesson, irrespective of what the children wanted to do.
- I placed greater importance on the views of superiors and colleagues than in those of the children that I was teaching.
- I had never stopped to consider whether or not the children wanted to be in school in the first place.

I realised that I had quickly fallen into the habit, that is prevalent throughout the education system, of blaming the children for everything that was going wrong and never accepting any of the blame myself. I had accepted those prejudices that are reflected by the use of such phrases as 'deprived area', 'difficult classes', 'disruptive pupil' and 'making a nuisance of themselves', which are used to imply that there must be something wrong with anyone who does not, or cannot, conform to what the teacher is telling them to do.

My initial response to these realisations was to try to carry on doing the same things but in a nicer way, but I soon discovered that something much more radical was required.

I took a break from teaching and did not return to it until I had children of my own, which naturally renewed my interest in education. I wanted to know whether it was possible to teach without having to resort to any of the tactics that I had disliked in my teachers when I was at school and which I had abhorred in myself during my own brief teaching career.

Since then I have done a lot of different kinds of teaching work, including working in a Steiner school, doing private tuition, teaching children excluded from school, and, above all, being involved in the education of my own children over the course of the past twelve years. Over this time I have found that it is indeed possible to be a teacher without being a bully, that all children, no matter what they have been through, are prepared to give a good teacher a chance to do their job, and that far from being a tedious and mundane activity, teaching is probably the most inspiring and exhilarating occupation that it is possible to imagine.

I have found that good teaching rests upon principles that include the following:

- Before you try to teach anything, get to know the person who you are teaching. (This shouldn't really need to apply to parents but it may if their child has spent a long time in school.)
- As a teacher you have to put the welfare of the person that you are teaching above everything else, even above your own wants and concerns.
- You have to recognise your own limitations. Children are not fooled when you pretend to know something that you don't know, it just makes them annoyed. It is always best to admit when you don't know something. Once you have managed to do this a few times, it gets easier and you soon realise that there is very little that you *do* know, and then you and your pupil can learn together, which is when it starts to become fun.
- Be open-minded. You *have* to be open-minded. For example, perhaps you think that exams and qualifications are a good idea but your pupil does not, in that case drop the idea of working for exams. Perhaps you dislike everything to do with exams, but your pupil wants to have a chance to test themselves against other people of their own age, in that case get the required books and work for the exam. It's not your job to be dogmatic and to try to persuade your pupil to come round to your point of view.
- Never allow yourself to be dictated to by superiors, education authorities, family, friends or anyone else not directly involved in the teaching situation. Your role is to provide a safe environment in which your pupil can work and learn. If you cannot provide this, you are not a teacher, you are someone else's puppet and your pupil will not respect you.
- Even if you are teaching more than one child, treat each one as an individual. Each of your pupils needs to feel that they you have their own especial interest at heart.
- Forget the idea that there are certain things that everyone has to be 'taught'. The activity that is really going on when a child is working with an adult is not that the adult is *teaching* but the young person is *learning*. When the adult starts to expound upon a particular subject, the child does not learn about the subject but does learn that the adult is capable of behaving very foolishly. It is surprising that so few adults are aware of this fact, because it is certainly something of which they were very conscious when they themselves were young.

When viewed from the perspective of how schools are run, this list may appear to be hopelessly idealistic but I receive messages every week from people who are working along these lines and who, as a result, find their teaching to be not only effective but also enjoyable.

Perhaps it is not surprising (but it is still shocking) that these messages do not come from practising school teachers, university professors, or educational professionals – the overwhelming majority of them come from mothers, and a few fathers, who have simply decided to put the needs of their children above any personal ambition and now find themselves educating their children at home. To their extreme surprise they are now privileged to be enjoying the activity that has always been regarded as the most important and the most worthwhile of all human endeavours: the successful education of the young.

Home education is not without its challenges and it is undoubtedly true that some people do find it hard to balance the roles of teacher and parent but it is also true that, in today's environment, it is much, much easier for a parent working at home with their own children to do the job of being a teacher properly than it is for anyone working in a school, and *no* parent should ever feel unworthy to be their child's teacher.

*Gareth Lewis*

## **A Pupil's Perspective**

What makes a good teacher? I'm sure that a child and an adult would reply very differently to this question. I remember that when I was little one of the things I least liked was when the teacher made me feel stupid. I could not understand long multiplication, and the obvious amusement of the teacher made me lose faith in myself and come to believe that arithmetic was impossible. Even when I left school I continued to fear mathematics, and it was the one subject that would regularly reduce me to tears. In the end I dropped it altogether (a freedom that, I know, most children do not have) and concentrated instead on subjects which I had never learnt to dread – I think that most teachers forget that, to a child, a long-multiplication sum is as complex a concept to grasp as the principles of rocket science would be to them. To be laughed at because you cannot understand something entirely outside your experience is both damaging and unfair.

A good teacher, in my opinion, remembers what it was like to be a child themselves and acts accordingly. They treat their pupils with respect, and if a subject is found to be difficult they simplify or cease to teach it altogether.

A time will come when it becomes easier, and, until then, the pupil will derive no satisfaction from trying to understand it.

Another thing which is important – perhaps all-important – to a teacher is kindness. However clever, or passionate about their subject a person is, they cannot communicate that passion to their pupils unless they treat them with kindness.

The power that a teacher possesses is remarkable – in fact, to a child, the teacher is often more important than the subject; an unsympathetic teacher can make the most enjoyable things hateful, whereas in the hands of a good teacher even subjects that initially held no interest become a source of pleasure.

I disliked gardening for years simply because the teacher had no interest in his pupils and presented gardening as a series of irksome chores, whereas a subject which I would have expected to dislike – namely Trigonometry – was made enjoyable because of the enthusiasm with which it was taught.

## **When the Teacher is Also One's Parent**

I left school when I was nine and since then my teachers have also been my parents. In the right circumstances I think that a parent can make the best teacher – not that other people cannot be good teachers, but a parent naturally possesses that affection for, and interest in, their pupils which only the very best teachers can emulate. Sometimes, I know, parents remember how they were taught at school and try to recreate that situation at home. They remember the desks, the children seated in respectful rows, the blackboard and the omniscient teacher, who presented information in a certain way, and told his pupils how to interpret it, and what to think.

This is the situation that causes children to rebel – often it is one of the aspects that they most dislike about school, and look forward to ending forever when they leave. I know that when I started learning at home I loved the idea of being able to sit in my own kitchen, at the table at which I ate my meals, to get up and sit down when I liked, to talk as much as I wanted, and – most delightfully – to discuss History, when we were meant to be doing French, or to chat about what we were going to do that afternoon in the middle of learning about Ancient Rome. This may seem like a small thing, but it gave me a sense of freedom which I could never have experienced at school, and it meant that learning was no longer something that took place away from real life, in a controlled environment, but something that fitted into the rest of my day.

The aspect that I was most excited about was that my parents would now be my teachers – people who I knew, who I did not fear, and with whom I could be myself. As far as I was concerned, the hated relationship of "teacher" and "pupil" was over, and when my mother slipped into the authoritative tones which she no doubt associated with her own schooldays, I couldn't understand it.

We talked it over, and after that I would tell her when she was beginning to use her "teachery" voice, and she would laugh and once more become herself.

For me it was very simple: I wanted to learn and I wanted to be assisted in that process by someone who was my friend; whether they were "qualified" or not was not an issue – it was not even necessary for them to be an expert; their age automatically made them more experienced and enabled them to understand things which I would have been unable to grasp; the most important thing for me was to be treated with kindness and respect and someone who did that was, in my opinion, a good teacher.

*Bethan Lewis*

## Letters

*I have received a record response to last month's article on socialisation.*

Hi Gareth, how I agree with your article, why do we find ourselves trying to prove that our children are not socially isolated? Matt has been out of school since September, and he has continued with his out of school activities but so far we have not rushed into home schooling meetings. I guess we may when his brother goes to university, but at the present time they are really enjoying each others company. Since Matt has been out of school their relationship has blossomed.

I wish that I had taken him out of school ages ago! We adore learning, exploring and developing ideas at home. The love of learning has returned far quicker than I thought it would. All I can complain about is that the weeks whiz by too fast. It is wonderful to be released from that Monday morning feeling of, oh no it's school again.

I find most adults treat him with respect when we visit places of interest. They either leave us to do our own thing or discuss all the interesting things that might help. In fact I have found that if people do make comments, they are usually very favourable, as I think there are many who are disillusioned with the educational system of today. They also seem to like the idea of parents taking an interest in their child. I have found that Matt is able to question and discuss points of view that are directed at him.

His friends who go to school just accept that he does not.

Kind Regards *Liz Jolly*

Thank you for this particularly inspiring newsletter which I intend to forward to a few friends who have young children attending school and are not too sure as to whether it is totally beneficial. This newsletter has addressed a lot of the questions that these parents ask!!

*Guy Lawrence*

My son Christopher says that when other children ask what school he goes to, and he says that he is taught at home, they always say "Cool!" They never ask if he would like to go to school!

*Deborah Tomkins*

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One or two people wrote to me and pointed out that I was perhaps being a little too optimistic when I said that all problems between brothers and sisters disappear when children are taken out of school: problems can persist but they are reduced and there is greater scope for resolving them. Further comments on this important issue would be gratefully received.

*Gareth*

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Please send letters, articles, and information intended for inclusion in the newsletter to:

[newsletter@freedom-in-education.co.uk](mailto:newsletter@freedom-in-education.co.uk)

Questions and comments that you want to be treated in confidence please send to:

[garethlewis@freedom-in-education.co.uk](mailto:garethlewis@freedom-in-education.co.uk)

## Contacts

*Details of conferences, events, local groups, web sites, courses, etc*

<http://www.freedom-in-education.co.uk/newsletter/march.htm>

## Euclid

A new instalment in a series of articles that aims to demystify the subject of mathematics:

<http://www.freedom-in-education.co.uk/euclid3.htm>

## The Jamboree – the online e-magazine for children

Episode 13: Beauty and the Beast  
Final Instalment Bip and Bop Cartoon  
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Editor's Letter  
Real History  
Revamped recipe section.

<http://www.jamboree.freedom-in-education.co.uk/>



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