

## Unschooling... over the edge

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**...people naturally and easily learn what is genuinely important to them, so applying teaching from the outside is beyond a massive waste of energy all the way to the point of being half-onside with the philosophy that doing so is inherently disrespectful of the victim...**

John Holt's philosophy of learning is that people naturally learn whatever they need to know, whenever they perceive a need to know it. It has been my experience and observation that this is absolutely the case, both personally and for my (now) teenage daughters.

I know that parents of younger children are always curious about 'how it turns out,' so I'll start with what they're doing now, in terms of living a well-rounded, healthy-citizen kind of life:

**Elder daughter, 17:** registered for private college starting in September; currently studying ballet with one of the premier dance companies in Canada for a summer intensive; employed at 2 different jobs –retail cashier at a large discount store, and gymnastics coach at a local gym; dances 6-9 hours a week fall through spring with a local studio performance company; capable of all normal housekeeping tasks including sewing clothing and costumes; has a core of 5 friends including her boyfriend, with a larger group of friends all over North America numbering in the 20s somewhere; babysits rarely but with a deep respect for children and their needs; manages money well, active Scout Venturer and volunteer counselor at week-long Cub Camp.

**Younger, 14:** signed up for a coaching clinic in September so she can take on work as a Program Assistant for figure skating club; works weekdays for an hour doing light housework; babysits frequently with deep respect for children in her care; capable of all normal housework tasks including baking; volunteers through school year with out-of-school care program; volunteers fundraising with a local teen centre; dances 4-6 hours with local studio performance company fall through spring; 'big sister' buddies with a young dancer from school to studio weekly; attends unschoolers' summer camp annually in the US where she volunteers as junior staff; avid reader; enjoys logic problems and word games;

has a core of 4 friends with a larger group of friends all over North America numbering around 15.

Please note: not a single one of these activities, for either of them, are my idea. Twelve years ago, I would not have guessed that any of these would have been things they chose to do, much less been really aware that most of them even existed as choices. I have not 'strewn' the paths of my children with activities they might be interested in... mostly, they've seen things or heard things and looked for them on their own. I never volunteered as a teen, nor did I take any classes outside of school. I do volunteer now, but not so my kids will see a good example but because I have my own reasons for doing what I do. I assume this is the case for both of my daughters.

### Natural learning

It has long been my opinion that people naturally and easily learn what is genuinely important to them, so applying teaching from the outside is beyond a massive waste of energy all the way to the point of being inherently disrespectful of the victim.

I recognize that this is a strongish statement. Working and volunteering within the breastfeeding/mothering realm, I know all too well the tendency of others to wail 'unfair' and 'guilt' about choices they don't feel others or themselves are empowered to make.

Acknowledging the superiority of breastmilk in public is supposed to be

calling all formula-feeding mommies 'bad humans.' So, too, I expect that saying out loud 'externally-applied curricula and teaching is a violation of respect for individual children' to be responded to much the same way. 'Lots of people can't choose this,' 'it's elitist,' and 'it's not fair.' To them, I'll say the same thing I say to bottle-feeding defenders: 'fair' doesn't enter into facts.

## No fair deal

My task (as a writer, and as a mother) is not to create a 'fair' world... but to provoke consideration that 'the way it is' might not be unassailable. The way it is might be the way it is, but it is not the only way or the best way. Failing to provide all the information available to those looking for ways to make their decision is disrespectful.

Don't tell bottle-feeders that necrotizing (flesh-eating) enterocolitis (infection of the colon) is only available to artificially-fed babies because it might make them feel appropriately hesitant to promote their previously-misinformed choice. No thanks. I'll take 'trust their intelligence' and give them all the information so they can make an accurate risk analysis about advocating for their choice, even if it's too late for them to make a different one.

## The real deal

So, here's all the information: children are already completely human. As humans, they have the same right to respect and honour as any other (age) human, including respect for their feelings, respect for their preferences, respect for their pace, and, respect for their time.

- ✓ It is offensive to willfully waste another person's time –and it doesn't matter how old the

person whose time is being wasted is any more than it matter how old the person wasting their time is.

- ✓ It is offensive to ignore other people's physical comfort –the majority of civilized etiquette is about maintaining comfort of the maximum number of people, not the opposite.
- ✓ It is offensive to behave as if people's natural talents and skills of are of no value.
- ✓ It is offensive to consider people 'broken' and in need of 'fixing' because they have weaknesses – no one is 'self-sufficient' and the idea that people can be, or should be, is deeply disrespectful of humans' innate cooperative nature as well as the real need humans have for other people.
- ✓ It is offensive to consider people, of any age, to be 'not yet human' or 'not yet qualified as respectable.'
- ✓ It is offensive, for a group of strangers, even expert strangers, to pre-determine the pace and subjects of learning.
- ✓ It is offensive to consider small humans 'empty' and in need of 'filling' –they have no need of anyone else's agenda to become whole.

## Lesson learned

Years and years ago, my eldest daughter taught me, in one subtle and effective lesson, that if I wanted to shut down her head from the outside all I had to do was tell her what it was she was interested in, or what it was she needed to know about it. The

implication, I realized much later was that *I* of all people, knew better than she what she was curious about, what she was supposed to learn next, and what she didn't already know. How arrogant is it possible to be?

In an instant, I watched a curious, engaged and lively little girl shut herself off from outside stimuli. *Wow! I thought... that's powerful ... and important. This I should pay attention to.* I vowed to never do it again. Of course, I slipped... but her open, engaged and intense face has always been a reminder –when it shuts down, it really is visible from the outside.

Over the years, I have watched in awe as these two engaged, curious and lively girls have matured toward citizenship. Now, I have a *huge* ego, and will take credit for nearly anything, but the only credit I'll take about my maturing children is for having stayed out of the way enough. They really are naturally that way...

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