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Growing Without Schooling

**Children may be more capable of competent self-directed learning
than we give them credit for**

An Interview with John Holt, by Robert Gilman

One of the articles in [The Way Of Learning \(IC#6\)](#)

Summer 1984, Page 46

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John Holt is a leading spokesperson for what he would describe as "growing without schooling." How he came to this is a fascinating story that I'd like him to tell in his own words by using the following adapted excerpt from the introduction to his most recent book, Teach Your Own, (New York: Dell, 1981, \$8.95).

IT BEGAN in the late 1950s. I was then teaching ten-year-olds in a prestige school. I was also spending a lot of time with the babies and very young children of my sisters, and of other friends. I was struck by the difference between the 10's (whom I like very much) and the 1's and 2's. The children in the classroom, despite their rich backgrounds and high I.Q.'s, were with few exceptions frightened, timid, evasive, and self-protecting. The infants at home were bold adventurers.

It soon became clear to me that children are by nature and from birth very curious about the world around them, and very energetic, resourceful, and competent in exploring it, finding out

about it, and mastering. In short, much more eager to learn, and much better at learning, than most adults. Babies are not blobs, but true scientists. Why not then make schools into places in which children would be allowed, encouraged, and (if and when they asked) helped to explore and make sense of the world around them (in time and space) in ways that most interested them?

I said this in my first two books, *How Children Fail* (1964) and *How Children Learn* (1966). Many people, among educators, parents, and the general public, seemed to be very interested in and even enthusiastic about the idea of making schools into places in which children would be independent and self-directed learners. I was even asked to give a course on Student-Directed Learning at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. For a while it seemed to me and my allies that within a few years such changes might take place in many schools, and in time, even a majority. As people do who are working for change, we saw every sign of change, however small, as further proof that the change was coming. We had not yet learned that in today's world of mass media ideas go in and out of fashion as quickly as clothes.

Yet from many experiences during this time I began to see, in the early '70s, slowly and reluctantly, but ever more surely, that the movement for school reform was mostly a fad and an illusion. Very few people, inside the schools or out, were willing to support or even tolerate giving more freedom, choice, and self-direction to children. Of the very few who were, most were doing so not because they believed that children really wanted and could be trusted to find out about the world, but because they thought that giving children some of the appearances of freedom (allowing them to wear old clothes, run around, shout, write on the wall, etc.) was a clever way of getting them to do what the school had wanted all along - to learn those school subjects, get into a good college, etc. Freedom was not a serious way of living and working, but only a trick, a "motivational device." When it did not quickly bring the wanted results, the educators gave it up without a thought and without regret.

At the same time I was seeing more and more evidence that most adults actively distrust and dislike most children, even their own, and quite often especially their own. They also feel that the most important thing children have to learn is how to *work*, that is,

when their time comes, to be able, and *willing*, to hold down full-time painful jobs of their own. The best way to get them ready to do this is to make school as much like a full-time painful job as possible. As long as such parents are in the majority, *and in every social class they are*, the schools, even if they wanted to, and however much they might want to, will not be able to move very far in the directions I and many others have for years been urging them to go.

While the question "Can the schools be reformed?" kept turning up "No" for an answer, I found myself asking a much deeper question. Were schools, however organized, however run, necessary at all? Were they the best place for learning? Were they even a good place? Except for people learning a few specialized skills, I began to doubt that they were. Most of what I knew, I had not learned in school, or in any other such schoollike "learning environments" or "learning experiences" as meetings, workshops, and seminars. I suspected this was true of most people.

Based on these experiences, Holt began to make more contacts with families whose children were learning outside of school. These families are loosely referred to as "home schoolers" although the approaches they use varies widely, with some using highly structured "home school" programs while others are "unschooling" - providing loving support and encouragement for their children to pursue their own interests without any set curriculum. Seeing their need for mutual support and contact, Holt began publishing (in 1977) a small bimonthly magazine, Growing Without Schooling (\$15/year, 729 Boylston St, Boston, MA 02116), that is made up mainly of letters from families relating their experiences, plus news items and resources.

Holt estimates that probably no more than 10,000 to 20,000 families in the U. S. are involved in some form of home schooling, so percentage-wise it is not a large movement. Yet as a social experiment, the results so far are fascinating. All the indications are that, on the average, the children in these families are growing up better educated, better socially adjusted, and better personally adjusted than their schooled peers. As always, there are both success stories and horror stories, and it is hard to estimate the impact of the self-chosen nature of home schooling on these results, but at the very least, the information Holt has gathered shows that home schooling is a viable educational approach in today's world.

The following interview took place in Seattle where John was speaking at a homeschoolers conference.

Robert: *What are some of the changes and challenges you see parents going through as they have gotten involved in home schooling?*

John: The hardest one is learning to trust their children, learning that they don't have to *make* learning happen. Learning that you don't have to be stimulating them all the time. Parents start teaching their kids because they feel a strong sense of responsibility but they tend to sometimes feel more responsible than they really are. The hardest thing to do is learn to back off. There are surely millions of people in this country who are pretty indifferent to what their kids do, but they're not home schooling. Home-schoolers ask questions like, "How can I be sure I'm giving my child enough?" I have to say, just the world out there as it is has plenty of food for thought. You don't have to make your life one long field trip or turn your home into a miniature of the Smithsonian or the Metropolitan Museum.

Robert: *What about getting help from the schools?*

John: Families who report that their school districts have offered them the option of part-time voluntary use of the schools have for the most part not made very much use of it because in fact there isn't that much interesting going on in most schools. I can think of one high school student who goes in to take a drama class, or I think of some kids I know who've gone to school for an art class. Of course there may be a lot more happening than I know about. We haven't made any systematic attempt to find out what these forms of cooperation might be, so I'm drawing on letters and people saying to me that in fact they don't use the schools very much because there's not very much in there to be used.

Robert: *What resources do you find people drawing on that seem to be really effective?*

John: Well, you can use libraries. If you like music, there's a lot of collective music-making, and some kids are involved in that. You have Scouts; you have 4-H for kids who live in the country. In a sense the whole world is a resource - it's hard to draw a line between things that are a resource and things that aren't. Homeschoolers tend to get into the working world of adults faster

than non-home schooling people do. These kids tend to be involved with their parents' work or with some adults, working in museums, in co-op groups.

Along with many other people, I'd like to re-constitute the element of apprenticeship, but it's often not easy to find adults who will do that. One boy wrote a letter to *Growing Without Schooling* about getting a part-time job with a veterinarian and how exciting this was. One of our local home-schooling kids got terribly excited about this and went around to a couple of local veterinarians, but they wouldn't do it. Now he's working in a pet store. He feeds animals, cleans cages and watches. I am really interested in opening up for kids the possibility of doing useful work, which they very much want to do. The most interesting things in the world for them are the things that adults actually do.

Robert: *There are those who say that home schooling is all very nice for relatively well off middle-class people, but how about those who are somehow or another more socially disadvantaged?*

John: Home schooling is not expensive *per se*. It's not like downhill skiing or hang gliding or flying an aircraft. It's probably a little harder, but everything's harder if you're poor. It's probably less harder than almost any other activity you can name.

Robert: *Do you know of cases, for instance with single parents, where the parents are not able to spend all their time with the children because of the demands of their work?*

John: This is fairly rare percentage-wise, but there are families, single or two parent families, where the parents work out of the house in an environment where they cannot take the children, so the parents go off to work and the kids stay home. In some cases staying at home may mean going to someone else's home, but very often it's goodbye Mom, goodbye Pop, and they're home with their books or their projects or whatever it is they want to do.

Robert: *What would you see as a minimum age for that?*

John: It depends a little on the child. I don't have any problem with an 8-year-old doing it. As long as the children have had some preparation or practice for the responsibility and self-reliance they can do it earlier than that. It would very much depend on what the child wanted to do.

Robert: *What sort of influence do you find home schooling has on that sense of responsibility and self-reliance, and is there a time period that seems to be required for the rhythm of responsibility to develop, especially if you have a kid who has been in school for a time?*

John: It's harder if kids have been in school. What you lose when you're in school, of course, is the ability to control your time, so it takes you a while to rediscover that. No, I think there's no question about it. Homeschooled children tend to be more self-motivated, self-starting, and responsible in that sense.

Robert: *So while someone might not be immediately able to leave their children at home, there's enough experience now of the kids growing into a level of maturity where this can work?*

John: You see historically, it would be very difficult to explain to the average American who lived 200 years ago what is meant by the word baby-sitter. Nobody had time! I mean, when children were tiny babies they needed to be cared for, even when they're maybe 3 or 4, but in an ordinary small town, rural community, or farm, children began to be useful citizens when they were 4 or 5 years old. You know, the Little House books; they start doing things early. In traditional societies 7 or 8 year old boys would be shepherds, given charge of a flock of animals, and those animals were valuable; that was no small responsibility.

Robert: *How about social life? Is there already enough structure and opportunity within the society for social interaction or are there places that if we were to provide more social interaction it would be useful for home schooling?*

John: Well, there aren't enough public gathering places in the city. I once went to a university and was talking with some students. We were sitting around the student union, great big building, all kinds of meeting rooms, lounges, and I said, where's the citizen's union in this town? There isn't any. There are very few places where people can just get together, nothing very comparable to the French cafe. In your warm climate cultures, your Mediterranean cultures, along the street was the cafe. The street was the public place, the social gathering ground. In Paris the cafes used to do this. When I was over there in 1952, you could go into one of these places and get a dime's worth of cheap white wine, a glass, and nurse it all evening long. Nobody kicked

you out or anything like that. But there aren't many places like that in most cities.

I always think of trout streams. If you've got a stream running along, and a tree falls into the water or a rock rolls in, and you've got a pool, trout appear - the space creates the activity. There's a marvelous social experiment that took place in a suburb of London called Peckham in the late 1930s. In this very moderate income working class suburb there was a building - a couple of stories with a swimming pool in the middle, and a lot of rooms around it. The people who designed and built the building, the Peckham Family Center, created it as simply a space. All the programs and activities that took place in the building were invented by the people who used it. As the British working class went in the late 1930s, they were not on the bottom edges of British society. They were respectable, but they were not college educated, they didn't own cars, and they were of much lower economic standard of living than we think of now. Yet they invented all kinds of programs. They had ballroom dancing because somebody liked dancing. A couple of people liked music so a little dance band was formed.

It wasn't like the Y where you've got some hardworking college-trained program director trying to think of things to interest you. At first when they got interested in an activity they sometimes hired a professional, such as swimming teachers or diving teachers for the pool, and they found out it simply inhibited most people. They said the best teacher is somebody who's a little better than the person who wants to learn whatever it is. So people who were not particularly good swimmers but could swim a little could teach people who couldn't swim at all.

Robert: *One of the things I hear you saying is that the natural process of learning goes on very well if left to itself. But I wonder if you could also talk about what can be done to provide support for that process, not only now but in the ideal sense. What directions might we go?*

John: I guess my ideal educational system would be a society in which knowledge was widely free and widely and freely shared, and children were everywhere trusted, respected, safe, valued, and welcomed. The adult world is full of signs saying off limits to kids. If we could take down all the signs that say "children can't come in," or "no children allowed in except accompanied by

adults" we'd probably do most of what needs to be done. I don't think the mostly unconscious processes by which children explore the world and make sense out of it need much help. I think practically anything we do to help is mostly going to be harmful except for very limited things - answering questions, showing people things if they ask you, being there as a kind of friendly, sympathetic companion if they have things to talk about, giving them comfort if they need that.

Children are better at thinking than we are for the most part. There are certain kinds of specialized thinking that we are better at than they are, but for the most part if we look at those components of the scientific method - observation, wondering, speculating, theorizing, testing theory - point for point they do this better than most of us. People who are as good as kids at doing this are usually distinguished scientists, geniuses, prize winners, and so forth. The old saying that children go to school to learn how to learn doesn't make sense. They're better at it than we are!

I've learned more from them than they have from me. I'm much, much closer to being able to learn the way they do than I was several years ago. I started the flute at 34; I was a very bad learner, very tense, very scared of mistakes. I started the cello at 40. I was better, only played a couple of years because I was lecturing and had to quit. Took it up again at 50; I was a still better learner. I've taken up the violin now at 60, and I've gone much further in the first year - with 10 to 15 minutes a day on the violin - than I did in my first year on the cello. Some of it is a transfer but some of it is that I'm much happier at the whole business of learning something new. Much of it is just by hanging out with these little guys and seeing what they do.

Robert: *What you're saying doesn't leave much room for the sort of professional intervention that teaching has represented. If someone was in teaching but wanted to move in the direction you're describing, is there anything that they could do?*

John: I have many times talked to teachers who wanted to teach in alternative schools, or I'd meet some young guy who'd say, "I want to work with kids," so I say, well, what do you know that is so interesting that kids of their own free will will come up to you to learn how to do it. Usually they don't have any answer at all. My reply is, you don't want to work *with* kids, you want to work

on kids, do things to them or make them do things that you think would be good for them.

The place to start is with something that really interests you, and then make yourself available to help others get to really *do* it also. There's a guy named John Payne in Boston, a very good jazz musician, plays sax, flute and clarinet, a very gifted jazz musician. Within the last few years he's started a little school, and most of his pupils are adults. He says if you want to play a musical instrument, forget everything you ever heard about talent. He has organized his students into what he calls the John Payne Sax Choir and they play gigs in nightclubs in places around Boston. The routine when the choir is playing is that these 30 or 40 people - all odd shapes, sizes, men, women, the youngest kids will be down around 9 years old - work up these arrangements (with John Payne's assistance) and they fix it so that somebody who's just starting has got very easy notes to play and the more experienced players have the hard parts. They adjust the arrangements to the skill of the players, and he and his professional jazz quartet play behind them to provide the rhythm section. He also divides the students up into small ensemble groups when they get a little better, so they're actually doing a solo. My office friend Pat Farenga has been a jazz pianist for a number of years, and this last year he decided he wanted to play the sax. He took it up, and he'd had only 5 weekly lessons before his first appearance with the choir performing in public in a place where people come in and buy a drink and pay money to hear him! It's just marvelous.

The philosopher wants to empower us while the expert wants to stand over us and make us dependent on him. A true teacher - and we're all teachers, the human animal is as much a teacher as it is a learner - basically likes showing people who want to know, here, do this and do this. The essence of teaching is working yourself out of a job, getting a person to the point where they don't need you. The home schooling movement is, of course, a marvelous paradigm of that, and that's why it generates self-reliant learners, teachers and leaders.

A Personal Footnote

Through our 12-year-old son, we have had some direct experience in growing without schooling. It has been quite an eye opener for me, and I'd like to share some perceptions.

Like many parents, we had some ambivalence about sending Ian to school. Our local schools are fairly good, and we certainly wanted him to get a good education, but we couldn't help noticing the stress he was under and the way that during the school year he made relatively poor use of his after school time. During the first few years, we didn't see any alternative, and we just figured that what he was going through was a normal part of the growing up process. Then when he was in the 4th grade, we moved temporarily to another town. His school situation there was worse, and that gave us enough of a shove to explore teaching him at home with the help of a correspondence course. We were able to make the appropriate arrangements, and he finished out the 4th grade using the Calvert home study course.

We chose to use a correspondence course for a number of reasons, but especially because we wanted to make sure that he "kept up" with his peers and we wanted help in making sure that all the basics were covered. The course material was of high quality, but it was very definitely "school work." We spent about 2 hours a day on it. While it went fairly well, as parents we found ourselves in the position of having to enforce somebody else's curriculum, often against our own best judgment. If we wanted credit for the work, we had to play the game the way Calvert expected.

Having Ian home definitely reduced his stress level, and now that he had more control over his time, he made more creative use of it. Yet the rigidity of the correspondence course continued as a sore point. We looked for other options, and in the process came across Holt's *Teach Your Own*. By the time Ian had finished the 4th grade material, we were ready to try free-form unschooling, although not without lots of nagging questions about "how can we be sure he's keeping up?"

The rhythm we worked out was based on a trip each week to the major library near us, but Ian was free to focus his learning attention wherever he wanted. He spent the first half year or so of this time "decompressing" - withdrawing into himself and spending a lot of time on things that didn't seem very educationally significant, like reading Marvel comics. It was a hard time for us as parents, but we stuck with it.

Gradually, he began to develop more focused interests. The Marvel comics led to a book called, "How To Draw The Marvel

Way," which turned out to be an excellent guide, and helped him get more deeply into drawing. He began to spend more (and more) time programming our home computer. There was more variety in the books he would bring home. He also spent growing amounts of time with his new baby sister.

To our delight, we found that having him home under these conditions was actually *less* demanding than having him in school. No longer did the school bus run the schedule of our lives, nor did we have to deal with the after-school wind-down. The correspondence course had been a fairly even trade-off in terms of time and emotional energy, but unschooling was a clear plus, *quite in opposition to what everyone assumes*. Being more at peace with himself, Ian was also more helpful within the family.

During this time, his social life continued at much the same level as it had been in school. Most of his friends were either children of our friends or neighbors, and he would frequently spend the late afternoon with the kids next door.

After about 2 1/2 years of this, he decided he wanted to go back to school. He was never completely clear about just why, but it seemed he wanted to see what was going on, and he was also getting tired of always being a "self-starter." We enrolled him in the 7th grade (his age level) with no problems (in part, I'm sure, because we have a good relationship with the local schools). But we all got it straight that this was his choice, and if he wanted to go, he had to take responsibility for getting up and to the bus, making his lunch, etc. He had matured enough during the past few years to understand what that meant, and he ran his own show just beautifully.

When he got back in, he found he had to catch up on his multiplication tables and long division (which he did in a week or so), but other than that he was not behind. Indeed, he was genuinely surprised at how little the other kids knew and how turned off they were to learning. During the first quarter, he was an ideal student. He was interested in the subjects and studied conscientiously. His teachers remarked on how mature he seemed to be. Socially, he fit right in although he didn't add any close friends beyond those he already had. Not surprisingly, he did quite well at report card time.

During the second quarter, his motivation began to slide a little. He realized that he was putting out more effort than he had to, so he began to explore how little he had to do and still keep up the good grades. School became easy, but it also lost its interest. By the end of the second quarter, it was clear that he had proved he could handle school and he was now feeling that he was wasting his time. Once the decision was made, it didn't take us long to make arrangements so that he could go back to growing without schooling.

While this is only one case, it has so much in common with the experiences of others that I sense some general principles are at work. I was surprised to find how deeply ingrained my own belief in "courses of study" was. How could you learn unless you were following some organized program, if not in school at least through some kind of independent study course? I also found that as a parent, I wanted verification that my child was indeed progressing. It took me a while to perceive the progress made in the subtler areas of emotional maturity and general learning skills. Part of me wanted him to be "preparing to be an adult" rather than letting him be a child. All of these feelings were intensified and brought to the surface during those crucial months of "decompression."

Now, of course, I'm very grateful that we allowed him as much freedom as we did. The growth that took place during these past few years was often not easy to track, but it seems to have been broad, deep, and in retrospect, remarkably fast.

Perhaps kids are much more capable of being competent self-directed learners than we give them credit for.

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Last Updated 29 June 2000.

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