Beyond School

Living As If School Doesn't Exist

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Magazine

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Introduction

*"How could youth better learn to live than
by at once trying the experiment of living?"
~ Henry David Thoreau*

One of the hallmarks of my life – which includes my writing and my publishing business – is the notion that everything is connected.

As I pointed out in my book *Challenging Assumptions in Education*,[1] once we challenge assumptions connected to one aspect of life, we begin to question everything else; understanding the bill of goods we've been sold by the education industry often leads to an examination of economics, health, politics, food production, and so on. And we begin to understand that change in one area is dependent upon change in others.

Those interconnections are foundational to life and to learning. I define the term "life learning," which I use extensively in this book, as respecting the everyday experiences that enable children to understand and to interact with the world and their culture. As they are living from day to day, pursuing their interests and passions, the boundaries are inevitably being blurred between what is generally thought to be in the academic realm and what might be called life skills.

So it is that much of what I write goes far beyond learning to read, do math, or understand history…and yet fundamentally involves those aspects of life at the same time. The articles in this collection

are about life learning (often called unschooling or radical unschooling, although the definitions are hazy and I write about that in my first essay) but they all hold high the beacon of respect for and trust in children – not only to learn what they need when they need it, but to fully participate in the lives of their communities, to take their places in society.

Putting an end to coercive education and family life would be a big step toward creating a society that chooses action over consumption, that favors communication over weapons development, and that encourages conservation over production. And, for me, that is one of the goals of a well-educated society. I look forward to the day when school (at least in its compulsory form as we know it) doesn't exist; meanwhile, I offer you these thoughts as encouragement for living as if it doesn't exist.

Wendy Priesnitz, March, 2012

The Words We Use:
Living As If School Doesn't Exist

Schools sort, slot, categorize, package, and label. And they teach students that those activities are important. Most of us learned the lesson well. Even those of us who have rejected schooling for ourselves or our children carry those remnants with us.

However, few people fit as neatly into categories as our grade four teachers would have liked. I'm no exception and perhaps that is why I have long refused to label myself – especially with words ending in "ism" and "ist." Nevertheless, categories and the words used to distinguish them from each other are convenient if we are going to discuss ideas.

Now, as someone whose mission has long been to help create social change, I like discussing ideas. I also know that words are extremely powerful and can either help or hinder change. Since education and parenting are emotionally and politically charged, and change involves the challenging of some very deeply-held assumptions and beliefs about children and their place in the world, I like to choose my words carefully.

There are many words used in reference to education without school, of course. The generic term is "homeschooling." For the first decade or so of the modern homeschooling movement, that word worked fine, since the few thousand of us living that way shared a general understanding that we were experimenting with something that was as far away

from the school model as possible. However, as the movement has grown, the number of approaches used by families has grown too. And now, the word "homeschooling" has come to be identified with the parent-driven, school-at-home end of the spectrum. It no longer accurately describes a curiosity-based, learner-driven, self-managing style of education, which uses life and the world as its resources, and that doesn't look at all like school.

Naming Learning Without School

Since school is such a part of our culture, it initially made sense to describe a rejection of school (whatever one's motivation) in terms of school. The word "deschooling" was used in the late 1960s by author Ivan Illich[2] to help people realize that school is not the best way for people to learn and to describe the process of removing school from people's lives. It remains a useful word for that process. And those of us who are already living and parenting without school are at the forefront of deschooling society.

The word "unschooling" is used by many people to describe what life looks like after deschooling happens. It was coined in the late 1970s by educational reformer and author John Holt[3] to describe the learner-directed, trusting, and respectful type of education (and attitude towards children) that he championed. He said at the time that the word was inspired by a popular commercial for the soft drink 7 Up, whose ad agency was differentiating it from the pack by describing it as unconventional, hence the Uncola. "Unschooling" was a useful – and sometimes

in-your-face challenging – play on words that helped to differentiate not-school-at-home from school-at-home.

In recent years, some people have begun to preface "unschooling" with words like "radical" and "whole life" to further identify families who extend the trust in and respect for children beyond education and into their whole lives.

We are now seeing the next step toward a world without school. Web-based information and the devices to access it have become widely available, allowing learners to bypass schools altogether, even if they don't consider themselves to be "unschoolers" or "homeschoolers" or have never even heard the terms before. Nevertheless, the concepts of learning and schooling are still synonymous for most people. Most have yet to leave behind the belief that one "gets" (or is given) an education through attendance at school, and that "unschooled" therefore means "uneducated."

Moving Beyond School

So this is a good time to move beyond any terminology that involves the word "school." If we truly are living as if school doesn't exist, we can stop describing ourselves in school terms! We can de-couple learning – and the life we're living with our families – from the institution of school.

When we use words like "unschooling," we are reacting to school, rather than leaving it behind as the short-term social experiment it was. I believe we will help society to move beyond narrow definitions

of education when we stop defining our lives in terms of what we are not doing, rather than by how we are living. But there's more, especially relating to the use of extensions to the word "unschooling" to describe family life beyond academics.

To portray how we interact with children in school terms simply gives too much credence to the place of education in our lives. Learning is simply life. We are always learning and can never stop learning, no matter how hard we might try. Children emerge from the womb eager to explore and learn; they make no distinction between what we have come to call academic learning and the other pieces of the puzzle that make up their world and the way they relate to it.

As parents, we are here to facilitate that…to trust, respect, support, and love. I think that's too big a role – and too big a paradigm change for most people – to describe by sticking "un" onto the front of a word that describes an institution of training.

I look forward to the day when the transition from passive learning to active living has ended and we all see the word "school" and its various forms as a strange little artifact of the past. That will be the day when there is no longer a need to label how we live (and inevitably learn) in our families, to devise parameters for those labels, or to judge those who disagree about their definitions.

Meanwhile, I prefer to contribute to popularizing the use of different terms like "life learning," "self-directed learning," and "whole life learning," because

they put the emphasis on learning rather than on be-ing taught, and signify moving forward rather than looking backwards.

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Learning in the Real World

A retired school teacher acquaintance recently acquired her first computer. After plugging it in and connecting the components according to the instructions, she called me to ask if I could recommend a course that she could take to learn how to use her new toy. I said I couldn't recommend a course because I've never taken a computer course in my life. Then how in the world, she wondered, had I become such a proficient computer user? Well, I responded, I just began using it!

I hadn't given much thought to it before, but I realized then that I learn most things by just doing them. And I suppose that made me a good role model for our life learning daughters when they were young…or at least it helped me understand that "just doing it" can be an effective way to learn. And that, of course, is fundamental to my philosophy of living and learning.

It's also fundamental to how all children learn to walk and to talk. They don't take a course. They don't "goof off" while learning it because they're bored or it's too hard. They are not marked, tested, graded, or nagged to practice. They just do it. They are motivated by wanting to do it well, like bigger people.

To someone dependent on being carried or on crawling, walking must seem like a natural, easy, and fast way to get around. Their parents, older siblings, and other walkers in their lives have a mobility that they must envy, especially given their high level of cu-

riosity. And curiosity is motivating, especially to those who haven't had it bored out of them.

In order to facilitate our children's learning to walk, and aside from modeling the behavior, we create a safe environment, putting breakables away, toddler-proofing our homes so there are no stairs to fall down, no sharp corners to bang against. And we provide nourishing food so they developed straight bones and strong muscles.

We unconsciously encourage and stimulate our babies and young children to learn, bouncing them on our knee at first as they try to push their legs straight against our stomachs, then holding them at floor level and pretending they are walking, then holding out our hands just a few inches in front of them, encouraging them to take those first few tentative steps.

Then, when they finally take those first triumphant steps, we celebrate the satisfaction of accomplishment with them. We also reassure them when they have a setback, cuddling them when they fall, patching up a scratched knee, encouraging them to try again. And reassuring them they can and will eventually walk.

But perhaps most importantly, we trust them to learn to walk. Unless they are severely disabled, we don't think twice about whether or not they will learn to walk. People walk, so we know our children will eventually do it too. We take it for granted. We just let them get on with it, as we do the same. We don't worry that we might need a degree to help them

learn this important and difficult skill. We know that we're up to the task and so are they. They do it experientially, from real life, motivated by a real need. And they work hard at it. In fact, they relish the challenge to learn and put a lot of self-discipline to work.

In the same way, a child will teach herself the language spoken by the adults around her. And that same child can later learn to read it. She will do that as part of her real world experience – speaking and reading for real-life reasons.

Let's take another example, this time looking at how a child just off the breast learns about a cup. As she uses it, she makes many discoveries: What is it, what is its substance? What are its attributes, what does it feel like and taste like? How is it different from the last cup she used (or her spoon) in texture, weight, shape, and color? What will a cup hold? How much will a cup hold? Is it better to hold it with one hand or two? Where can cups be put down without spilling (and perhaps more interestingly to a young child, *with* spilling)? What happens when a cup is thrown across the room (first full, then empty)?

The child learns all this science experientially, not because somebody teaches her or tells her she has to learn it. She picks up the knowledge as part of her everyday life...in just the same way that we adults learn things. She didn't learn it because we got inside her head to examine her thought processes...and whether or not she was "doing it right" or even knew the name we've given to that type of science. But she

did challenge that curious notion that children have short attention spans! (In my experience, they only have short attention spans when someone is making them do something they are not interested in.)

But that sort of learning only happens when we believe that it will and that it should, when we allow the learner to be in control and give them enough time to "just do it." We need to give them the space to recognize or formulate a "problem," set about solving it, take it as far as they can go, consult with others about it or observe them doing it, reflect on that, and tackle it again.

Of course, we must make the real world accessible to them so they can have real-life experiences, instead of the sort where they are "allowed" to "help" within certain constraints (usually relating to cleanliness and efficiency) or where they pretend to do real work with the aid of toy tools. Life learning is about kids doing their own real work, motivated by their own real interests and goals…and being around adults who are also doing their own real work.

Unfortunately, there are few places where children can experience the adult world. Most children – and even many homeschooled ones – don't have nearly enough opportunities to be with adults who are doing their own thing in the real world and not, as John Holt once put it, "just hanging around entertaining or instructing or being nice to children."[4]

The working world of adults is not very accessible to children because we fear they will get hurt, get in the way of or slow down production, or abuse or

break the equipment. So we make childhood a rehearsal for personhood, replacing real experiences with pseudo experiences. Many of those pseudo experiences take place in schools, but they can also be part of the home-based learning environment.

Our daughters Heidi and Melanie grew up living and learning in the midst of our busy home-based magazine publishing business. They used all the tools of that business and never abused them. They respected the tools as part of our business and saw how carefully we used them. And, more importantly, those tools were an important part of their everyday lives too, so they had a stake in taking care of them.

But one of my homeschooling friends, who also happened to be a writer, was horrified to discover that our children were able to use my typewriter, then my word processor, then later my computer, as well as various photocopiers, typesetters, and other related equipment. She said her kids would wreck hers for sure if allowed anywhere near them. Maybe...or maybe not if given the opportunity and the trust.

There are many opportunities for children and young people to learn in and be of service to the real world. They include volunteering with community organizations, helping in their parents' businesses or at their workplaces, working for pay or as apprentices at neighborhood businesses, and running their own businesses. Our daughters often put all that office equipment to good use in their own money-making enterprises... and they were noticeably more pas-

sionate about those businesses than they were about stuffing magazines in envelopes for their parents' business!

Although I don't want to romanticize the past or ignore the abuses against children that took place a few centuries ago, there was a time when children had the opportunity to do real work at their parents' side, as well as on their own accord, and to be involved in the life of their communities. In our more complex modern world, this same type of opportunity and respect for children's abilities is still possible if we all share a sense of responsibility for helping develop the minds that will lead us into the future. In our current economy, no one has all the experiences and information necessary to prepare young people for a rapidly developing future. But we can share our skills and experiences with our children, or take on other people's kids as apprentices in order to pass along our knowledge and skills.

That sort of real world learning experience is often easier to describe than to arrange. I've written elsewhere about a group of parents who came together in a community park to build a series of cob structures housing a sink, cooking fireplace, baby-changing station and, ultimately, a composting toilet with a rammed earth foundation. Cob is a traditional style of construction that uses a mixture of sand, straw, clay, and water and is people-friendly, low-tech, and community-building. Aside from filling a need for those facilities in the park, one of the purposes of the project was to offer people of all ages a

chance to learn how to build low impact shelter. And that included children of various ages. But the municipal bureaucracy enforced labor code regulations, which required the building of a six-foot-high fence and excluding the participation of children.

Georgie Donais, an unschooling mom who coordinated the project, devised a "workaround" whereby people mixing cob materials on tarps were located outside the fence and only work booted adults were allowed inside the fence. Besides segregating people by functions, this relegated children to the mixing function and prevented them from being involved in some of the more "exciting" aspects like shoveling, hauling materials, or filling bags of dirt.

Georgie, trying to see the situation through the bureaucracy's eyes, admitted, "I imagine it is a truly strange thing to be asked to listen to and support some woman who wants to – with barely any money and very few power tools, but with many bare feet and children involved – create a building out of mud that houses a toilet." [5]

That "strange thing" is something our children need much more of, especially if the well-meaning powers-that-be (whether they are municipal officials, business owners, or parents) can sort out the mindless bureaucratic requirements from the necessary safety concerns.

Kids need the sense of accomplishment that comes from being trusted with a real job to do in the real world. They benefit from the increased self-esteem that comes from participating – at whatever

level – in a functioning group. Everyone benefits when kids develop the grace and confidence that accompanies being in control of themselves and of their surroundings. And, of course, they don't need the sort of "protection" that results from lack of adult trust and preparation, and that keeps them sitting on the sidelines and away from meaningful work.

Aside from safety, there are other reasons for sidelining children. Showing respect for a child's developing skills takes patience and time. Doing a task ourselves is usually easier and more efficient than allowing the time needed for a child to do it. Children's results might be not good enough for the satisfaction of perfectionist adults. And some people just underestimate what a child can do.

Those might be the same people who question how unschooled children will ever learn how to function in the real world! Perhaps they misunderstand the concept of life learning, or maybe they mean that the real world is a competitive, hostile, and grim place – does that mean it's intentional that schools are so often such ugly places?!

If that's the case, I'd have to say that not only do life learning kids have the secure preparation of a joyous childhood to prepare themselves for adulthood, they are able to observe, experience, and celebrate the positive aspects of life by interacting with friendly, supportive adults. And who knows? That might be just the sort of childhood that's needed to make the whole world a better place!

Personal empowerment starts with the realiza-

tion of the value of our own life experience and potential to affect the world – whether we are babies, toddlers, teens, or adults. So as life learners, we need to find as many ways as possible to nurture this awareness of the value of experience in people of all ages. Our children especially deserve the same flexibility, control, access, and opportunities to be part of – and learn from – the daily life of the families and communities in which they live.

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Lazy Learning

*"Education is hanging around
until you've caught on." ~ Robert Frost*

Few things seem to trouble parents more than the possibility that our kids might be lazy. I guess it's the legacy of that old Puritan Work Ethic – and you don't have subscribe to any particular religion to suffer from it! Like our current style of public education, which is based on it, the belief that hard work makes you a better human being dates back to the Industrial Revolution. It might have been a useful tool for factory owners trying to make their employees productive, but it can actually be counterproductive today, when working smarter and more creatively are keys to success and happiness.

Funny, then, that our education system still embodies the Puritan Work Ethic. In school, learning is work. Children's time is regimented into study periods and programmed in pursuit of "learning outcomes," and even their out-of-school time is scheduled for homework, tutoring, and more lessons or organized activities. Parents and educators mistrust anything that looks like inactivity and bustle around trying to motivate our kids to "find something useful to do." Unfortunately for these children, work for its own sake – or because somebody else tells you it's good for you – just doesn't make sense.

The long hours that school students are forced to spend memorizing, cramming for exams, and doing homework seldom produce much real learning.

Some kids are luckier – and arguably better educated – because they are part of a growing movement dedicated to the realization that learning doesn't have to be work and that children don't have to be forced to learn. As life learners, their curiosity is trusted to do the job.

My family was part of the birth of the modern homeschooling movement, over three decades ago when it looked like "unschooling" does today. When Heidi and Melanie were children, they didn't attend school. Nor did they see learning as work. They didn't use a curriculum or workbooks, nor were they graded or tested. They learned math, reading, writing, science, and geography in the same way they learned to walk and talk. Their learning was experiential and inquiry-based, led by their interests and curiosity. They explored, investigated, asked questions, experimented, took risks, got ideas and tested them out, made connections, made mistakes, and tried again.

My daughters grew up living a rich and joyful way of life, with knowledge and skills picked up both purposefully and incidentally, guided by their innate need to participate in, explore, and make sense of the world around them. A lot of what they did day by day looked like playing or daydreaming. In our society, play is the opposite of work. As products of infamous work ethic, we think of work as unpleasant, something one does during the week in order to afford to play during the week and on summer vacation. We have made education into an industrial process, where facts are stuffed into people like so

many sausage casings. And that, of course, is work. We have turned a potentially joyful experience hateful with our schedules and rules and structure. And we have confused our children, who are smart enough to know the difference between the challenge of doing productive work and the numbness that results from busywork that doesn't accomplish anything.

The basis of life learning, on the other hand, is that children are born to be curious, independent, active, self-directed learners and will remain that way if school doesn't dampen their natural curiosity about the world by turning learning into something unpleasant – into work.

Children don't naturally think in terms of math or reading being "hard;" we create those feelings if we force them to learn these skills before they are developmentally or emotionally ready, or before they are interested.

When people memorize something without truly understanding it, they haven't really learned it. When a skill is mastered in the context of an interest and need experienced in the real world, it is truly learned.

Melanie is now a largely self-taught conservation horticulturalist who runs a native plant botanical garden that is part of a university-based environmental sciences center. Heidi is a talented, self-taught graphic designer, musician, and writer. They pursue their adult lives with the passion, joy, curiosity, and self-reliance that were hallmarks of their unschooled

years. Their "work" is fun, and they continue to learn about the world as effortlessly as they did as young children. I think that's evidence of a successful education and a successful life…and all a parent could wish for.

What Children Need

Albert Einstein once said that it is a miracle curiosity survives formal education. Unfortunately, it often doesn't. When my husband Rolf and I decided over forty years ago that we wouldn't send our then-unborn daughters to school, we knew that curiosity was one of the precious traits we didn't want to risk them losing.

In fact, we knew many things that we wanted to avoid about a school-based education, but nurturing the alternative – ensuring they retained their curiosity and other self-directed learning skills – well, that was another matter. But we learned how to support them as we went along, and by taking our cues from them. Here are some of the components that, through trial and error, we discovered were central to a successful life learning experience.

Ownership of the Process

When children are born, they want to learn about their world by exploring their surroundings in ever widening circles. And that is where learning should remain for a lifetime – in the learner's hands. Learning is not something that is done to us, or that we can produce in others. An education is not something we get or are given…it is something we create for ourselves, on a life-long basis. The best learning – perhaps the only real learning – is that which results from personal interest and investigation, from following our own passion.

Trust

Taking ownership of our own education and allowing our children to own theirs requires trust and respect in individuals and in the learning process. In the case of our children, that means having enough respect for them to expect that they will behave sociably, want to learn how to function in the world, and eventually want to learn things of a more academic nature. One of the ways in which formal education often fails is by concentrating on negative expectations, on teaching people what their incapacities and weaknesses are, rather than their strengths.

This doesn't mean we shouldn't provide assistance, but only when asked (and we will be asked, in direct proportion to the amount of trust we've built up and in inverse relation to the amount of correcting, quizzing, and forcing we do).

When we interfere with and try to control the natural learning process, we remove children's pleasure in discovery and inhibit their fearless approach to problem-solving, which can impede self-direction and creativity for a lifetime. We have all seen that sort of interference in action.

Here is an example of what I mean. Our three-year-old daughter Heidi wanted to put her own shoes on. She proudly put the left shoe on the right foot, then determinedly spent ten minutes creating a massive knot in the laces. Her grandmother, not being able to watch any longer and elbowing the child out of the way, said, "You're doing it all wrong. Here, let Grandma do it for you!" Heidi burst into

tears: She didn't want her shoe laces tied, she wanted to tie her shoes laces, but her grandmother didn't realize there was a difference.

Fortunately, I had the courage to intervene because that type of "help" had left me with almost life-long resistance to trying something new for fear of not being able to do it perfectly well the first time.

Our respect for learners should extend to those who opt out of school. Rather than labeling these conscientious objectors as "drop outs," which indicates failure, why not think of them as people with the motivation – or at least the potential – to control their own learning? The author of the *Teenage Liberation Handbook,*[6] Grace Llewellyn, calls leaving school "rising out" to a more individualized form of education, which is a much more respectful and empowering notion than "dropping out," with its connotation of inability to succeed.

Time to Muddle

Along with ownership, trust, and respect, goes time and space for muddling about and experimenting. Learning thrives (as does invention) when there is time and opportunity to explore in a safe, supportive environment, to investigate our theories, ask and answer our own questions, test out our ideas and methods...again, with assistance when it is sought.

Author and home education advocate John Taylor Gatto[7] says this was the basis for his winning the New York State Teacher of the Year award in 1991 (right before he quit teaching because he was no longer willing to hurt children). Here is how he has de-

scribed his teaching method: "The successes I've achieved in my own teaching practice involve a large component of trust, not the kind of trust conditional on performance, but a kind of categorical trust...a faith in people that believes unless people are allowed to make their own mistakes, early and often, and then are helped to get up on their feet and try again, they will never master themselves. What I do right is simple: I get out of kids' way. I give them space and time and respect and a helping hand if I am asked for it."

Solitary, reflective time can be rare in our overly programmed society. But what we call "daydreaming" may provide important time for thinking, analyzing, synthesizing, and other seemingly passive brain activity that is crucial to the learning process.

Security

The risk-and mistake-making processes are supported by a secure physical, intellectual, and emotional environment. Learning something new can sometimes feel like a dangerous adventure, at the same time as it is exciting. You might make mistakes and feel a whole range of emotions from disappointment and anger through to jubilation. Anticipating that, in order to get started on a learning adventure, most people need as much comfort, reassurance, and security as they can find.

Take reading, for example. The typical classroom, with other children ready to correct or laugh at every mistake and the teacher all too eagerly "helping" and correcting, is the worst possible place for a

child to learn to read. So one of the best ways to support the learning to read adventure is to avoid demanding regular demonstrations of what the learner might prefer to keep private. We'll still notice that the child is making more and more sense out of printed language – that she is reading road signs, for example.

I remember John Holt once describing to me how he helped his young niece learn to read. He said all he did was let her snuggle up on his lap and read to her, later letting her read to him. She refused to read unless she felt physically secure. He said that later, she moved from his lap to a corner of the room, shrouded in a tent made from a blanket. Eventually, she was confident enough to discard the blanket and read aloud wherever she was.

Authenticity

In the classroom, knowledge is presented in the abstract and people are expected to demonstrate their mastery of that knowledge in abstract ways. But passive, secondhand experiences can lead to secondhand knowledge. On the other hand, real-life discovery leads learners to find out about the world in an authentic way, which leads to concrete knowledge. Self-directed learners develop knowledge from observing and participating in real-life situations and activities. Because a life learner knows that all situations are learning situations, she can adapt and learn swiftly when change occurs.

In order to help their kids learn authentically, parents often become chauffeurs and advocates.

Since the world isn't really a friendly place for young people, they might need help making it work for them.

As I've written elsewhere, providing access to the real world includes trusting children with access to the tools of our trades. In our society, children are kept away from most workplaces, on the grounds that they would damage either themselves or their surroundings if given free access to things usually available only to so-called "professionals," or because they would get in the way.

A true learning society would make the modifications necessary so that a wide variety of learning experiences could be accessible to people of all ages and abilities in community-funded spaces (libraries, museums, theaters, even school buildings)...to be used on people's own initiative and their own timetable. And it might even fund the professionals who could facilitate the learning process – people who would resemble librarians and museum curators more than conventional teachers.

Libraries are good examples of this principle and librarians are often great examples of learning facilitators who are able to engage in authentic sharing with learners. Kids, especially, pick up easily on phoniness or disinterest. And, like adults, they respond to people who are willing to engage in an authentic encounter on a person-to-person basis, without judging or evaluating.

Institutions should exist to be used, rather than to produce something. If they're effective, people

will use them willingly without having to be coerced for to use them for what their elders or other types of superiors or experts say is for their own good.

Companionship

While for some people, some of the time, learning can be a solitary pursuit, many of us gain inspiration from talking with others. As parents, we will find many opportunities to talk with our children (as opposed to at them). But it is also important to just allow kids to listen to adults talk with each other. I remember many times as a child being discovered sound asleep on the kitchen floor late in the evening after I had snuck out of my bed to sit in the dark and listen to the adult conversation. I have since noticed that it is very hard to keep young children in bed if a group of adults is having a lively conversation not too far away. The children will find a hundred different reasons for coming to check out what the grownups are doing. That can get exasperating, especially when the adults feel they need a break from the kids. But the kids are not being bad; they want to participate in family life.

Spending time with our children creates many opportunities for sharing and modeling learning, for acting as both resource people and fellow explorers. My children got me interested in many things I'd previously had no interest in and we learned about them together. And the inverse was true: often, they'd see me reading or going to the library or puzzling something out, and they'd want to do the same.

Technology can help connect learners of all ages and backgrounds who share a passion about a particular topic. I often hear about young people with a passion to learn about some esoteric subject (and a parent who knows nothing about it) who have accessed someone knowledgeable on that topic via the Internet. Mentors can also be found closer to home, in the person of grandparents, other senior family members, or neighbors.

Learners of all ages will be empowered to move forward by stopping to celebrate accomplishments (and I'm not talking about bribery or gold stars here). And we don't have to wait until "graduation" to do that…remember how excited everyone was when your child took her first step alone?

Keeping it Whole

Knowledge is an interconnected web of information and insight and doesn't easily submit to subject divisions and grade levels. In my experience, optimum learning occurs when the learner can ignore such arbitrary constraints and venture where her pursuit takes her. Keeping the world whole and not dicing it up into "manageable" pieces extends to boundaries between work and fun, between learning and other activities.

Freedom to Learn

A non-coercive learning environment that supports risk taking, curiosity, and exploration, and that encourages the pursuit of new challenges and knowledge in a supportive community of learners will de-

velop a flexible, resourceful self-directed learner able to create a happy, productive life.

Beyond School

Risking to Learn

I was a good student in school – or at least wise in the ways of memorizing and playing the test taking game, and quiet enough that teachers liked me. In other words, I got good marks. But school seldom drew me out of my comfort zone (except maybe in the gymnasium), didn't challenge me, and certainly never required me to take risks. More than that, I learned that I could survive – at least in that false environment, which at the time I didn't realize was false – by playing it safe. As an adult, I realized that I wanted to do more than just survive, and that I wanted to develop my creativity. That's when I realized that I needed to learn how to take risks and to deal with challenges. I've learned to overcome my risk aversion, and hope even to enjoy risk someday.

I think that in many ways I would have been a good candidate for learning at home, and have often wished that I'd been given that opportunity as a child. Most of what I actually learned came not from my school lessons from my voracious reading outside of school hours. But, since neither of my parents had much formal schooling, they revered the institution and their goal was for me to become a teacher. Learning at home as the only child of nervous older parents probably wouldn't have built my risk-taking muscles anyway.

In the previous essay, I described how, unlike both my childhood home and school, the life learning environment in which my daughters grew up sup-

ported the risk-taking, questioning, and mis-take-making processes by providing physical, intellectual, and emotional security.

Ironically, one of the criticisms I've heard most often as an unschooling advocate is that home-edu-cated kids are coddled and won't be able to cope with life's risks and dangers – that they won't know how to function in the real world. (More about that later.)

The reality, of course, is actually the opposite. In daycares and schools today, kids are being coddled like never before, on a physical level due to the fear of accidents and the attached liability, and academi-cally in order to meet standards imposed by govern-ments and supported by parents. And that's too bad, because risk-taking is basic to learning and to living in that "real world."

One local government in the U.K. has realized there is a problem with that and posted information on its website outlining the dangers of removing risk from the lives of children. They quote a report pre-sented to a risk conference in Hawaii: "If we persist in attempting to protect our children from all risks, we may find that future generations are risk illiterate. A nation of youngsters shielded from any challenges because of the risk of accident will be unable to cope with risk when they become adults."[8] Many people are also concerned that, as a result of that over-pro-tection, young people have greater difficulty than previous generations in bouncing back from prob-lems – that is, they have become less resilient.

Lenore Skenazy, author of *Free-Range Kids, How to Raise Safe, Self-Reliant Children (Without Going Nuts with Worry)*[9] gained notoriety (and a new career as an advocate of allowing kids less supervision and more risk) in 2008 for allowing her nine-year-old son to ride the New York subway unaccompanied. She argues that childhood is supposed to be about discovering the world, not being held captive.

Discovery is one of the fundamentals of learning. And while it requires the physical freedom that life learning kids have and those in school are denied, it also requires a non-threatening environment in which self-esteem can flourish. Then children are comfortable enough to take risks and make mistakes.

We can create that environment and keep children safe at the same time with a combination of trust and participation. That can be seen at work if we look at two different ways in which a parent can help a child learn about fire. In that same paper presented in 2005 to a Systems Design conference in Hawaii, the four scientists used that example in examining the problems with eliminating risk.

They suggest one scenario with a young child picking up a match, the parent becoming frightened, displaying their fear to the child, and hurriedly removing the match from the child. From that sequence of behaviors, the child gets the simple message that a match, and by extension fire, is dangerous and to be feared (but not that it can be safely managed). In an alternative scenario, the parent ob-

serves that his child is playing with a match, and supervises the process, allowing the child to feel its heat while engaging him in a discussion about fire and heat, thereby allowing him to learn about fire, while developing a healthy respect for and understanding of its very real dangers. [10]

I believe that our society fears not learning to read in the same way it fears fire...and we communicate that fear to kids in the same non-productive way. In schools, reading instruction is done in a high pressure, performance-oriented environment, in which kids recoil from taking the risks and making the mistakes that are part of learning. Their classroom peers correct or laugh at every mistake, and the teacher all too eagerly hovers, prompting, correcting, labeling, and marking.

On the other hand, when life learning parents respect and support their children's ability to learn to read on their own, the learning process can be just as effortless and as exhilarating an adventure as learning to walk or talk.

Some kids will conduct their reading activity in your presence and out loud – possibly needing the physical security of sitting close. And you will follow their lead, supporting and encouraging, responding with interest – just like you did when they started putting sounds together to make speech – and answering questions when asked. Other kids learn to read in relative silence, mostly working it out within their own head. You will respect that by not interfering with demands of regular demonstrations of what

the child prefers to keep private. You will be doing your part by reading in her presence and to her, and by surrounding her with print materials.

Gever Tulley, the author of *50 Dangerous Things (You Should Let Your Children Do*, understands that we all learn by "fooling around." In 2005, he founded a camp called the Tinkering School,[11] where he puts power tools in the hands of young kids and teaches them how to build things. Unlike me, Tulley was fortunate to grow up in a world full of adventures. He says that he and his big brother were free to explore their environment and invent their own projects while growing up. Their curiosity was encouraged by their parents, who instilled early on a sensible approach to their experiments. He points out that while there are aspects of danger in virtually everything we do, the trick is to learn how mastery actually minimizes danger. (Remember the playing with matches scenarios I described above?) "Most of us learn how to walk without toppling over at a very young age, so that walking is no longer dangerous. Next we learn to negotiate stairs. Why stop there? Why not practice and become proficient at walking on the roof or walking on a tightrope?" asks Tulley.

Sure, those things might sound risky. But one of the ways that I learned not to become my fretting mother was to ask myself what could go right with my daughters' adventures, as well as what could go wrong. That helped me separate my own fear baggage from reality, freeing me to help them assess each situation and its possible consequences. Often, I

realized that the worst that could happen would be them learning how to problem-solve themselves out of a mess!

The concept of mistake-making is foreign to a young child, who is continually experimenting with language, movement, and everything else in his path. But the idea is quickly planted by people and circumstances. Although we can't change that, we can help our kids avoid the self-consciousness that results and that can paralyze exploration and creativity. A good way to do that is to share our own "mistakes" and model treating them as our own learning experiences. Oops! Maybe we'll all eventually learn to relish risk.

Freedom or Control

Life learners trust kids to learn. We believe that learning is innate and doesn't require teaching, texts, or tests. We know that children are not blank slates or raw clay, to be written on or molded into shape by adults. We allow kids to learn by living. And our trust is well placed, as they grow into responsible, well-educated, sociable adults.

However, those of us who are dedicated to the philosophy of self-initiated learning do not always trust our children to make all their learning and other life decisions for themselves.

It is easy to agree with our kids' choices when they make the ones we want them to make. But is it really freedom to be allowed only to make choices about things for which an adult is confident the decisions will be "correct"?

What – to take a common example – do we do if our unschooled child yearns to accompany her friends to school? We might try to convince the child that home is better than school. We might let her try school for a while, hoping that she will find out quickly how unpleasant it is. Or we might consider sending her to a small alternative school. The venerable Sudbury Valley School, for example, embodies all the self-directed learning principles that unschooling does.[12]

However, even in this democratically-run institution, attendance is compulsory. I have always believed that it is impossible to completely understand

freedom unless you are free...and that you aren't truly free if you are compelled to do something, even if it is "for your own good."

While a Sudbury Valley School is a big improvement over the public school experience, it seems to me to be a faux-democracy, where children have a democratic experience within the broader context of coercion. So your local independent school may only partially solve the "who decides" conundrum.

Veteran alternative education and democratic school networker Jerry Mintz is familiar with many democratic schools around the world. In his book *No Homework and Recess All Day,* he has this to say about compulsory attendance at school:

> *It is important to look at this in terms of children's rights. All people should have a basic right to have control over their own lives and their own education – up to the point at which their actions affect somebody else. When you look at it this way, you can't be exclusively concerned with how effective this particular approach is....If you feel like working on your stamp collection, and that's how you'd like to spend your time, who is to say that you should really be spending your time joining a book club? It's just none of anybody's business."* [13]

Or is it? The choice between a stamp collection or a book club is different than, say, the choice between walking down the middle of a busy road or on the sidewalk. Or between eating healthy food or candy. Or playing outside or on video games. So

where does a child's business becomes a parent's business too – or does it? When my daughters were young, my solution to this dilemma was always to ask, "What is the worst that could happen?" In most cases, the problem turned out not to be a problem when examined in this manner; in other cases, the yardstick I used measured the child's safety, other people's safety, followed by my own principles and level of comfort. It turned out that there were relatively few situations where are they were not able to make their own choices in a safe and healthy manner. (Of course, running in front of a truck was just not an option.)

The trouble with the notion that controlling children's behavior over important issues is acceptable is that there is no consensus about which issues are important and which are trivial...and the definitions might vary depending on our mood or the situation. At any rate, how do we know that even very young children are not capable of making good choices about things we might feel are on the important list? My daughters taught me that children are more able to make good choices than most of us give them credit for...and certainly don't need to be subjected to as much benevolent protection as our society provides.

As a T-shirt that my daughters wore when they were toddlers said: "Kids are people too." What the shirt merely inferred was that kids have rights too.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child[14] put those rights on the world's agenda; it is the most

widely ratified treaty in the world. Adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1989, the Convention promises children around the world the right to life, liberty, education, and health care. It provides protection to children in armed conflict, protection from discrimination, protection from torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, protection within the justice system, and protection from economic exploitation, in addition to many other fundamental protections. Despite the convention's near-universal ratification (only the U.S. and Somalia have not ratified it, although the U.S. has signed it and thus signaled its intention to ratify), many children are still denied their basic rights.

Even in the developed world, the essence and the delivery of these rights is often so protection-oriented as to be counterproductively restrictive and paternalistic. The term "paternalism" in this context refers to preventing others from doing harm to themselves, or providing for their needs without giving them rights or responsibilities. A paternalist, by definition, believes that she knows more than the person she is trying to prevent from harming himself. The paternalist destroys the freedom of choice of the person "harming" himself in exchange for his well-being.

But as life learners, I believe we should be doing everything we can to protect our children's rights as well as their well-being.

Power to Control

*"Most of us are tactful enough with other adults not to point out their errors but
not many of us are ready to extend this courtesy to children." ~ John Holt*

Holt died over twenty-five years ago, but this tendency for adults to ignore tact and courtesy when interacting with children is still alive and well. In the same time frame, we have learned it's not cool to discriminate against other adults on the basis of ethnicity, economic status, gender, sexual orientation, and physical abilities. But adultism is still entrenched in our culture.

Adults still have a special status of control over kids. It's socially acceptable for adults to make decisions for children and young people (their own and other people's), to create rules which govern children's day-to-day lives, and generally to tell them what to do. That often manifests in ordering, yelling, directing, preaching, disciplining, demeaning, embarrassing, questioning, patting and other touching without permission, yanking, ignoring, and referring to children in the third person.

This behavior isn't usually undertaken with abusive intent; indeed, most adults wield power over kids because they assume it's their duty, as well as their right. Adults are thought to be entitled to these behaviors on the assumptions that they are superior to children and young people, and that they know best what's good for the younger generation. Dealing with kids in this manner is also thought to be easier

and less time-consuming than treating them with respect, tact, and courtesy.

Scratch below the surface, and you'll find that this sort of adult disrespect is inherited. It's most likely how we were treated as children by our parents and in our schools…and how our parents were treated by the generation before that. Most of us were raised with parents who told us what to do "because I say so." They didn't believe that they should explain to us children what their reasoning was. I would say they didn't have enough respect for us to explain, because, as John Holt pointed out, they'd never treat another adult that way. Thus, we children were told what to do, when, and how; if we didn't comply, we were punished.

This is the patriarchal definition of respect with which I grew up. My mother demanded automatic respect for herself, my father, and other adults simply because they were my "superiors," but they had none for me. On the other hand, my husband and I brought our children up with the understanding that respect should be universal, rather that dependent upon age or stage in life, or the amount of education or money some has, but that it can be increased or damaged via behavior.

The power-over treatment by adults of children is reinforced by other social institutions like school, churches, and medical systems, as well as by laws such as those that create curfews and permit spanking. The context of the adult-child relationship in our society is power, hierarchy, mistrust, and coercion.

However well-intentioned, this disrespectful mistreatment can result in lowered self-esteem for its young recipients, as well as resentment, demotivation, learned helplessness, and even mental health problems because people who feel powerless cannot be well adjusted – or even truly happy.

One of the places that adultism appears most blatantly is in our educational institutions. Most people believe that children and young people must be made to go to school and be subjected to an agenda created by so-called educational experts, or else they won't learn. So we have created factories in which children are processed and warehouses where they are stored until it's convenient for adults to have them around.

Life learning families, of course, are living a different reality, one in which the archaic power-over attitudes are being overturned, not just in terms of academics but in all aspects of life. Life learners strive for respectful relationships between adults and children, where adults accept their nurturing and mentoring roles without becoming controllers and enforcers based on their size, age, personal agendas, or ability to invoke fear.

In that way, life learners are not just rejecting the factory model of education. We are challenging a variety of agendas related to adultism and other sorts of power, such as who manages the affairs of our communities and how corporations make profits. I am chronically surprised that otherwise progressively-minded people who care about issues like

self-government, environmental abuse, and over-coming corporatism and patriarchy have a blind spot about how we are really treating children, especially in schools.

That's why I believe that life learners are at the leading edge of this attempt to change the definition of childhood – to respect children as whole people who are functioning members of society – and thus we are setting an example for the rest of society.

I hope that someday respectful parents and others working for children's and young people's rights will be able to scale up this trend to a tipping point. But arguing against adultism is difficult and not just because it's so entrenched. Giving up power can make people fearful and leave them feeling threatened.

As Edgar Friedenberg wrote in his book *The Vanishing Adolescent*, "[The word] 'Teenager' seems to have replaced 'Communist' as the appropriate target for public controversy and foreboding."[15]

The fear behind having a more respectful relationship with kids is also embodied in many of the reactions we see to media coverage of unschooling.

For instance, people who have watched a few-minute clip on television have ranted that the parents portrayed are "unparenting," and that their children will end up uneducated and therefore fit only for a job in the fast food industry.

So in order to defeat adultism in the broader society as we are doing in our own families, we need to continue to be present in our communities, leading

with how we speak to (and about) children, and how we treat them. This means that we need to be mindful of our own actions, which can, because nobody is perfect, fall off the edge from time to time.

We also need to remember to put our kids' needs and opinions first, rather than bother with what other adults (including ourselves) want or think.

One of the more important gifts that life learning parents give to our kids – predominantly by example and experience – is learning how to make good choices, independently. In an article in *Life Learning Magazine*, Robyn Coburn notes that the regular adult world is far less filled with rules than the world of any ordinarily parented child. And, she explains, what regulates the adult world is mostly a set of customs and laws based on principles, which "engage the reasoned co-operation of most of us."[16] So, too, life learning children are helped to choose and understand the principles on which their family life is based – rather than those unexplained "because I say so" rules that encourage short-term, mindless obedience.

There are many other ways in which adults can communicate respect to children, such as giving them our full attention, which includes making eye contact rather than physically looking down on them and – as John Holt put it – not talking "cutesy-wootsy" to them.[17]

In his book *Unconditional Parenting*, Alfie Kohn[18] notes that "controlling parents" are actually conveying to their kids that they love them conditionally –

that is, only when they achieve or behave. Respected kids feel loved unconditionally, and comfortable in their own skin. And that will help them grow up with their self-esteem and confidence intact, ready to take on any opportunities and challenges life offers.

Questioning Socialization

I thought that we'd long ago lost the concern about life learning kids and socialization. But I am still asked about how kids who learn outside the school system "get socialized," have reporters knowingly tell me that home-educated kids become "overly dependent" upon the parent who stays at home with them, and read too many blog comments suggesting our kids will turn into ill-functioning morons without exposure to school.

Whenever I am asked a question about unschooling socialization, I ask some questions about schooling in return. Using questioning to point out that school isn't what it's cracked up to be – and that the school experiment is, in fact, failing – is a useful way of turning the conversation around and encouraging people to think outside their boxes. (When I'm subjected to a know-it-all rant, I just walk away.) I ask about things like this:

- How much social interaction do children actually require?
- What is the quality of the socialization at school compared to what is available out of school?
- In school, is a free verbal exchange allowed among the students, or is the emphasis on preserving the quiet?
- Do shared group learning experiences regularly take place in school, or is it more

efficient for the teacher to talk and the students to listen?
- Do young people interact across class, gender, and racial lines, or do cliques and bullying predominate?
- Do speaking skills get as much attention as listening skills?
- How does regimentation encourage creative thinking?
- Does compulsion help or hinder an understanding of democracy?
- How does standardization contribute to self-esteem?
- Does school's systemic lack of trust in children hinder the development of self-confidence?
- How do people become self-regulating without practice?
- Does mandated volunteerism create involved, compassionate citizens or just resentment?
- Does today's typical classroom prepare students for the desirable jobs of the future?

Okay, so some of the questions are rhetorical and present my bias! But there's lots of research to support that bias…and also strong suggestions that parents, teachers, and school administrators are in denial about the negative socialization that happens in schools.

According to environmental psychologist Maxine Wolfe, the problem involves both the physical sur-roundings of the typical school setting and en-

trenched ways of adults relating to children. In her paper entitled *Institutional Settings and Children's Lives: An Historical, Developmental and Environmental Perspective on Educational Facilities* (presented at the Edusystems 2000 International Congress on Educational Facilities), she describes her twenty-year study of the use of space and educational practices in a variety of schools with different educational philosophies. She writes:

> *Daily life in schools is an unvarying series of events taking place in an endless repetition of similar spaces, built into an unvarying time schedule, all defined by some outside power. The overriding goals of these settings take precedence over children as people...Very little time or space belongs to the child...Spontaneity is viewed as impulsivity, as disruptive to ongoing plans and as expendable in light of more important educational goals...." and "Life for children in school is public. They have virtually no time or space to which adults can be denied access...Privacy is so antithetical to the institutional goals of order, control, and enforced sociability, that children's attempts to seek out privacy are defined as their problem...Children who find psychological privacy by daydreaming are labeled as inattentive or disinterested....*[19]

In contrast, life learning situations are much more active and positive. And, not being segregated into age ghettos, kids spend time with older and younger children, as well as a variety of adults within

the family and out in the community. Developmental and social psychologist Dr. Urie Bronfenbrenner of Cornell University wrote in his book *Two Worlds Of Childhood, U.S. and U.S.S.R.* that young children can greatly benefit from the modeling and reinforcement that results from relationships with older children, but laments the lack of such opportunities in the education systems of the western world.[20]

One of the socialization-related criticisms I hear the most is that kids should be pushed out of the nest early so they can learn to fly on their own. You may have been told to cut the proverbial umbilical cord or the apron strings, to let your child go out into the world and toughen up.

I don't know where this unfortunate idea comes from other than parental convenience. In reality, feelings of security and self-confidence are best developed when children have the freedom to venture into sophisticated social situations at their own speed. Interaction with loving parents (or other primary caregivers) who respect children is one of the main ingredients in a child's social development, far outweighing the contribution of plentiful social contact in helping a child to function well in society. Like all the other things children learn through living, they will find their own level of comfort with exploring the world, and their own balance between public and private time.

In fact, Bronfenbrenner cites research which found that regimented school attendance has a devastatingly negative effect on self-worth. The re-

searchers apparently discovered that eighty percent of students entering school feel good about themselves; by grade five, only twenty percent have retained that positive self-worth; by the time they are seniors in high school, only five percent still have positive self-worth. In his own work, he tied that lack of self-esteem resulting from early institutionalization to increased peer dependency. Ironically, learning to withstand peer pressure, as well as many other negative aspects of life, is one of the arguments people make in favor of early institutionalization!

Many years ago, one school superintendent asked me: "How will your girls ever learn to cope with peer pressure, time limits, restrictions, and frustrations if you remove them from these pervasive aspects of daily living?" There are two answers to this rather sad commentary on life. First of all, schools do not have a monopoly on pressure, time limits, and frustration. Life learners live in the real world, which can supply its own share of ups and downs. Secondly, if adult life is really so bad, perhaps the best preparation for it is a positive childhood. If our children do, indeed, have a life of frustration and restrictions ahead of them, maybe a non-frustrating upbringing will prepare them to be patient adults. The superintendent is really suggesting that a bad experience is a good preparation for another bad experience. As John Holt once put it, that line of thinking means that since adults experience a lot of headaches, we should put our children's heads in vices each day so they can prepare for what it feels like to be an adult.

The school superintendent was right in that socialization is the process by which we humans acquire the skills necessary to be functioning members of society. And that's fine if you're happy with society's status quo. That would be the status quo which involves war, rape, fundamentalist hatred, cut-throat competition, corporate greed, misogyny, apathy, adultism, racism, classism, materialism, selfishness....

I'm not satisfied with that. In fact, when my daughters were born, I realized that I wanted them to live in a very different world...and that, along with every other individual on the planet, I had the power to create that different world, and to help them do the same. So one of the main reasons Rolf and I decided our daughters would grow up without the influence of school was the fear that they would be socialized into the ways of the mainstream culture, rather than allowed to develop the tools to change it.

Of course, many educational reformers believe that I'm wrong there, that public schooling is the best way to fix things. School is supposed to be the place where a decade or two studying and interacting with those of diverse races and classes prepares us for the duties and privileges of adult citizenship, and fosters social competence and maturity. But, as I've written many times before, that utopian belief is simply is not the reality. Democracy is mere theory unless one is living it. And a child attending school on a compulsory basis, with little or no say about what is to be studied and when, is not experiencing a democracy.

In fact, there is a growing body of research indicating that, rather than providing every child with equal opportunity, the system perpetuates the status quo: with a few notable exceptions, children who enter the system poor end up poor, with many dropping out along the way.

So, realizing that socialization, as the term is used by sociologists, anthropologists, politicians, and educationalists, refers to the process of inheriting societal norms, customs, and ideologies, I question whether or not socialization is even desirable. It might provide our children with the skills and habits necessary for participating within their own society – or maybe not, since society is evolving pretty quickly these days. What it doesn't do very well is provide them with the tools to improve society...or even themselves.

My life learning daughters both eventually tried high school. They did well academically, but didn't fit in, largely because they thought of adults as equals, and didn't know their "place." They were appalled at the lack of respect for young people, the manipulation, and the power plays. They were surprised at the injustices they observed, which others shrugged off or didn't even notice.

Speaking out and challenging things they thought were wrong elicited many sideways looks. While they were able to compete with their peers, they often wondered why competition played such an important role in education, which they viewed as a personal pursuit.

So when I'm asked about socialization and self-directed learning, I ask back: Are you comfortable with a future run by square pegs designed to fit into square holes, or would you rather have a future created by creative, robust thinkers who envision a more humane, just, democratic social reality?

Restless? Go Climb a Tree : Medicating Children For Being Children

Often fidgets with hands or feet or squirms in seat; often leaves seat in classroom or in other situations in which remaining seated is expected; often runs about or climbs excessively in situations in which it is inappropriate; often has difficulty playing or engaging in leisure activities quietly; is often "on the go;" often talks excessively.

Sound like many kids you know? Then those kids must be mentally ill, because that is the definition of hyperactivity found in the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)*.[21] If you read it closely, the definition is laden with words that are judgmental, or at least reflect an adult's – often a teacher's – preference for quiet and order. And, although hyperactivity and its ilk are referred to as "learning disabilities," these characteristics seem not really to get in the way of true, active learning. Rather, they might describe the normally active, curious child!

By some estimates, the number of children diagnosed with hyperactivity and other "problems" such as attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is upwards of five million. In addition, it has been estimated by the psychiatric profession that sixty percent of children with the "disorder" carry their symptoms into adulthood. Some say that four per-

cent of adults in the United States, more than eight million people, have ADHD.

Some doctors and parents have found that many of the behaviors falling under the Psychiatric Association's various definitions of childhood mental disorders can be caused by allergies to certain foods, food additives or environmental factors, or by poor nutrition. Recent studies and clinical trials conducted at Purdue University in the U.S. and Surrey and Oxford in the U.K. indicate that ADHD, dyslexia and dyspraxia (Clumsy Child Syndrome!) may have a nutritional basis. There is also research indicating that the youngest children in a classroom are the ones most often diagnosed with ADHD, purely on the basis that their behavior is less mature than their classroom peers.

However, the pharmaceutical industry, which manufactures products like Ritalin and Dexedrine to medicate these so called illnesses, has a vested interest in helping doctors diagnose and treat them.

A survey conducted by the Harris Interactive polling company for Eli Lilly and Company found that parents report their children have ADHD "symptoms" around the clock but physicians only treat many of their patients for symptoms during school hours. So the push is apparently on to educate doctors about parents' "need" for further drugging of their children. "Managing ADHD during school is important, but we cannot overlook that managing ADHD during family time plays a critical role as well," said Richard W. Geller, M.D. of Norwich Pediatric Group, Norwich, Conn., and an assistant clinical professor of pediat-

rics, University of Connecticut School of Medicine, commenting on the survey results.[22]

Instead of examining why some children dislike the confines of school life so much, or if they have food allergies or environmental exposures, parents are encouraged to label their children with a mental illness. Complains one parent in a survey aimed at medicating kids who are very active, "Everything revolves around getting my child to cooperate and getting done what needs to be done."

Fortunately, an increasing number of doctors and researchers have been speaking out against the psychopharmaceutical approach to the behavioral management of children, i.e. redefining normal but inconvenient childhood behavior as a mental disorder.

Priscilla Alderson, Professor of Childhood Studies at London University, recently told *The Times* newspaper quite plainly that syndromes such as attention deficit disorder and mild autism were being exploited by psychologists keen to make a quick buck.[23]

Fred A. Baughman Jr., MD has been an adult and child neurologist, in private practice, for thirty-five years. He views the "epidemic" of ADHD with increasing alarm. Dr. Baughman describes it this way, "[Psychiatry] made a list of the most common symptoms of emotional discomfiture of children; those which bother teachers and parents most, and in a stroke that could not be more devoid of science or Hippocratic motive, termed them a 'disease'. Twenty five years of research, not deserving of the term 're-

search' has failed to validate ADD/ADHD as a disease."[24]

In addition to scientific articles that have appeared in leading national and international medical journals, Dr. Baughman has testified for victimized parents and children in ADHD/Ritalin legal cases, writes for the print media and appears on talk radio shows, always making the point that ADHD is a creation of the "psychiatric-pharmaceutical cartel," without which they would have little reason to prescribe its drugs.

The ADHD diagnosis is often made using brain imaging technology. However, the use of brain scanning is, itself, highly controversial. In fact, there seems to be little or no confirming data to support either the practice or the diagnosis that ADHD is even a biological problem that could be diagnosed that way.

A study recently published in the *Journal of Mind and Behavior* looked at thirty-three studies on brain imaging and ADHD dating back to 1978.[25] Jonathan Leo, professor of anatomy at the Western University of Health Sciences in Pomona, California and David Cohen, a professor at the School of Social Work at Florida International University in Miami, found that the majority of the studies failed, unaccountably, to consider a major variable – the use of drugs by participants in the studies.

According to the researchers, ninety-three percent of the subjects in the ADHD diagnosed group were either on drugs, just off drugs, or had been medicated for years. There were no studies that com-

pared typical unmedicated kids with an ADHD diagnosis to kids without the diagnosis, a suspicious phenomenon that the researchers say discredits the diagnosis.

The diagnosis makes life simpler for adults – especially teachers – and lucrative for the pharmaceutical industry, but is tragic for our children. Children are designed to run, jump, chatter, question, yell, climb trees, and be energetic and joyful on their own timetable and pursuing their own curiosity...not to be drugged or otherwise manipulated to sit in desks and be quiet in order to accomplish someone else's agenda.

Beyond School

The Art of Inspiration:
The Role Parents Play

One of the criticisms leveled at "unschooling" by the misinformed is that it's "unparenting" – meaning that it's the easy way out for lazy parents who "allow" their kids to do nothing all day, presumably watching television or zombifying in front of a computer screen. It's a silly stereotype, of course, and one that highlights our society's disrespect for and lack of trust in children and young people.

Yes, life learning children are in control of their time and how they fill it, for the most part. But that doesn't mean that their parents are absent from their lives and their learning. In fact, we're much more a part of our children's lives than any school teacher; it's just that our role is quite different. We understand our role as one of responsibility – to help open our kids' eyes to what's out there in the world, to support their desire to explore that world, and to share our enthusiasm for and experience of it.

And that's where it gets tricky for many people – for those observing and judging from the outside and for new home educators alike. We are not teaching or directing; we are exposing. We are acting as guide, facilitator, co-learner, exploration partner, muse, and inspiration.

Unschooling writer and mom Sandra Dodd[26] has called what life learning parents do "strewing." Describing her role as an unschooling parent on a homeschooling board many years ago, she wrote, "I just

strew their paths with interesting things." Those things can be toys or other things specifically designed for kids, but they can also be the stuff of daily life. This sort of purposeful exposure to interesting things can also involve taking children places – the beach, museums, art galleries, interesting stores, concerts, walks, book launches, community meetings, construction sites, the library, city hall – and connecting them with their local community. Along the way, it's also about tweaking their senses – pointing out smells, sounds, sights.

Life learning parents can also "strew their paths" through conversation, although many adults overlook, ignore, or scorn those opportunities with children. By chatting with kids about the things we are interested in and what is happening around us, we are exposing them to new ideas and experiences that they may not have considered before (and vice versa, of course).

In retrospect, I realize that when our family was life learning, one of the most effective things I did to help our daughters learn was to share my love of life, of the world, and of living in the moment. That included a combination of things that I encountered, tasks I had to do, and places I had to go during my work day (they grew up in the midst of our busy home-based publishing business), and things and places I thought might interest them. I was, in fact, modeling curiosity, motivation, mistake-making and correcting, risk-taking, and all the other attributes of a learning lifestyle.

Fortunately, I had hated my earlier four-month career as a school teacher, so I wasn't tempted to arrange, force, artificially motivate, or require attention to what I was strewing. I was merely putting things out there for my daughters' observation and possible interest, on the theory that children who live in a stimulating and rich environment where people are reading, doing, being, and learning, will do the same.

Perhaps that's where those who mistake unschooling for unparenting go wrong: They are used to passive children who have been told to sit down, line up, be quiet, and wait for adults to tell them what they should be interested in and when, so they think children need all of that artificial motivation in order to grow and learn.

Life learning children, on the other hand, are active learners; they don't just sit and wait for the world to come to them. As they did when they were infants, they actively try to interpret the world, to make sense of it. They are constantly learning (as are we all, in fact, because learning can't be turned off!)...and also experiencing the pride that comes with having understood new things and mastered new skills.

As the adults living with these curious young people, we are most helpful when we can honor their right to set their own learning agenda, trust them to learn what they need to know, help them develop in their own ways, and provide opportunities that will help them to understand the world and their culture, and interact with it.

By exposing our life learning children to the world's riches in this way, we are also helping them learn to make good choices. With our guidance, children are able to learn to self-regulate – to form healthy eating, sleeping, and media usage habits, for instance – without our creating and enforcing arbitrary rules of conduct, or making choices for them that they can make for themselves. (See more about that in the next article.) By "good choices," I mean choices that work for them, based upon their knowledge of their own needs and interests, rather than on our interests, opinions, or wishes, or what is convenient for us.

And once we're confident that our children are able to make choices that are right for them and good in the broader context (emotionally and physically safe, healthy, etc.), we must respect those choices. Maybe then, we can be inspired by their interests and learn from what they have discovered and experienced. Maybe then, they will be strewing our paths!

How Do They Know That?
(and why do we need to know?)

Ever since my daughters began to learn without school in the 1970s,[27] I have wondered about something. Why do so many people need to know how they learn? Reporters, relatives, colleagues, other parents, and the merely nosey have all, over the years, expressed a burning curiosity to understand how my children learned to read, write, and multiply…if they weren't taught. (Interestingly enough, I've never once been asked how they learned to talk or walk.)

I suppose these queries are somewhat rhetorical, posed by those who have never before considered the idea that learning isn't often a direct result of teaching, or that there are other ways/places to get whatever they define as an education. I used to shrug and say that I didn't know, that maybe it happened by osmosis…then change the subject. If I embarked on a longer explanation, people's eyes either glazed over or began rolling.

The curiosity, however, goes much beyond that. There is a whole industry of educational research devoted to understanding how people learn. Of course, much of it is aimed at finding better ways to teach things (and, of course, better ways to artificially motivate children to be receptive to that teaching) — things that would be learned anyway without the teaching and better, in some cases, without what amounts to interference masquerading as helping.

The elephant in the room is that much of what is supposedly learned in school isn't really learned at all. It is mostly material that has been memorized, whether it be history dates, mathematical formulae, or the difference between a verb and a noun. Absent any interest in learning the material and any context for it, as well as sufficient time to experiment with, adapt, and apply the information, this process cannot be called learning. Rather, it is memorizing, regurgitating, and forgetting. (Why else would teachers and some parents bemoan the "ground lost" over the summer?!)

One clue about how real learning happens comes from examining the sort of needs-based information that is acquired continuously throughout one's life through example, observation, reading, experience, trial and error, and practice. Some of that learning will involve "life skills" such as walking and talking, building a fence, growing a garden, and caring for a loved one. Some of it will involve those moments of insight that help us continue to fine tune ourselves as compassionate, emotionally well balanced human beings.

However, when most people talk about getting an education or becoming educated – in school or otherwise – they are referring to a certain, externally ordained set of facts called "academics" – reading, writing, chemistry, and history, as opposed to the set that involves feeding oneself, gardening, plumbing, bicycle repair, or playing the harp (although it is possible to take a course and get a certificate in many of

those fields). In fact, those skills are scorned in academic circles, considered frills at best and, at worst, a place to relegate kids who can't or won't do (the more important) academics.

Compartmentalizing and differentiating among various types of knowledge, and when and how they are learned is encouraged by those who commodify education. The types of information that are deemed important enough to be taught in schools (or obtained by other formal educative means) are measured and tested; others aren't. So it's not surprising that what is considered non-academic learning isn't often studied by the educational research industry.

At any rate, all the categories of learning will, according to the educationalists, move along more efficiently if adults (particularly ones who have supposedly been taught about how learning happens) help children, rather than leaving them to their own devices. Presumably, that's because we think learning is a difficult, complicated, and mysterious process that must be conducted on a certain schedule and in a specific order – a belief reinforced by school experiences.

However, children who have the opportunity to learn informally, at their own speed, instead of attending schoo,l demonstrate that all kinds of learning happen effortlessly without adult interference when the time is right – meaning the motivation is present – and usually without the learner even being aware it is happening. And when the motivation is present, even difficult information can be mastered with joy in

the absence of planned pedagogy or professional organization. There is plenty of anecdotal evidence about the truth of that statement among the homeschooling community, even if the exact mechanism may still remain a mystery.

British academics Alan Thomas and Harriet Pattison interviewed twenty-six unschooling families and then wrote *How Children Learn at Home*[28] in order to unravel how unstructured learning actually happens, and to challenge some of the assumptions underlying traditional pedagogy. Their book quotes parent after parent blissfully admitting to not having a clue how their children learned something!

Thomas and Pattison explain that life learning is a type of growth in which children add, flexibly and organically, to their understanding of the world around them. And in an article for *Life Learning Magazine* in 2009, they wrote:

First we sought to explain what children learnt in terms of the everyday world around them. Children at home are surrounded by the artifacts and skills of their culture and by ongoing demonstrations of how to use these things by more experienced members of the culture – everything from how to use a door handle to driving a car. Although it is not set up for learning, separated from the real world, broken down into tiny sequential steps and pre-digested as it is in school, this information is readily available and already in working context for children to explore.[29]

The simple fact is that young children are naturally motivated to explore, to play, to imitate, to experiment, and to deduce. Learning is something that happens as a result of those trial-and-error activities, rather than being set apart as a separate, linear entity as it is in school. As a result, much learning is hidden from view and the process can only be guessed at. And that's maybe why people are obsessed with dissecting the learning process: Having faith in such a mysterious process may be difficult for many, especially for those who are used to the one-size-fits-all, highly structured, test-oriented process of schooling. But the fact is that, as Thomas and Pattison found when they studied how home-educated children learn to read: "It does not seem to matter how or when children learn to read, they almost invariably emerge as fully fledged literate people."

Beyond School

Go Look It Up

"Ask questions to find out something about the world itself, not to find out whether or not someone knows it."
~ John Holt

A few years ago, I was in a home where a curious eight-year-old, delighted with the warm spring weather, kept bouncing into the house and asking questions about various flora and fauna. Mom, a trained botanist, refused to answer any of the questions. Instead, she told the child to "go look it up" and continued on chatting with me. Now, that mother was well-intentioned, thinking that she was encouraging self-reliance as well as research skills. Instead, she frustrated and bewildered a child who had an immediate need to know something that she knew her mom already knew.

Later, the woman compounded the problem by quizzing the child to check if she had, indeed, looked it up. The child sullenly refused to respond, walked into the other room, and turned on the television. I wanted so badly to ask the mother if that is that how she would answer another adult who asked her a question about a plant in her garden…or if she had rudely made that suggestion, if she would quiz the other adult about the information gained by looking it up.

We have it all backwards in terms of who should be asking the questions. Questioning is one way children learn (along with experimenting, making mistakes, jumping around, playing, singing, thinking

aloud….). While telling a curious child to "go look it up" might help her learn to look things up (a skill she'd no doubt learn anyway when needed), it also interrupts her thought processes, erodes trust, diminishes enthusiasm, creates confusion, and loses the opportunity for conversation that could lead to a sharing of passions and therefore to real learning.

Long gone (although you'd never know it by the standardized testing that goes on in schools) are the days when rote memorization and quizzing were useful or, in fact, when there was one "right" answer. Today's society requires not just knowledge of facts, but complex thinking about how to use them creatively. So we need not to question children, but to converse with them, to discuss life with them, to share information, and to model how we learn to problem-solve and to apply our knowledge. We also, of course, should be allowing them the freedom not to converse or discuss things with us when they don't want to; privacy is an important right not always granted to children.

As John Holt wrote,[30] and as my friend's interaction with her daughter demonstrated, quizzing is not only an unnatural way to learn, it is an artificial and disrespectful way of relating to people. Adults who ask strangers-who-are-children questions about where they live, how old they are, what grade they're in, and so on, are behaving in an intrusive and ageist way. But even worse are the instances when adults try to trick life learning children by asking questions to which they might not know the answer – in order

to prove the kids should be in school, or to stroke their own sense of superiority.

As much as we might occasionally wish there was a window into a child's brain through which we could view the mysterious process of development, that's an unnecessary voyeuristic desire. Learning happens. We cannot stop it and we can barely even manage it. So we should have trust in the process and respect for our children.

I remember, as a child of about ten, asking my crossword puzzle expert mother how to spell a word. She told me to go look it up in the dictionary. That may have been the last time I ever asked her a question, something that damaged our relationship until the day she died. I lost respect for her: Either she didn't know how to spell a word I figured would be easy for her, or she was too dumb to realize that I would need to know how to spell the word in order to look it up in the dictionary. Please don't do that to your children.

Beyond School

Will Computers Warp Their Brains?

As life learners, we strive to give our children the freedom to pursue their interests and passions. We see that they learn quickly – almost effortlessly – when they are caught up in and enjoying what they are doing. These days, pursuing our interests and passions can be assisted by the use of computers, smart phones, and various other electronics, such as gaming devices, e-readers, and tablets. However, many life learning parents are still concerned about their children's use of electronic media.

These concerns are largely fueled by the studies appearing in the media about children's electronic media usage. Those studies usually concentrate on the number of hours spent in front of a screen in relation to the amount of time spent playing outside, reading, or studying. Since most kids attend school or daycare, the studies reflect the institutionalized lives of those children. It's true that when children are in front of a computer, they are distracted from interaction with caring adults, from active play, from hands-on lessons, and from direct experience of the natural world. But since life learning children have an infinite amount of unstructured time at their disposal, as well as the ability to self-regulate and actively follow their curiosity, the research studies don't seem to apply.

The Alliance for Childhood released a report almost a decade ago entitled *Fool's Gold: A Critical Look at Computers in Childhood*.[31] It claimed that a

heavy diet of ready-made computer images, programmed toys, and drill-and-practice computer programs actually appears to stunt imaginative thinking and creative idea generation.

Indeed, I think that much of the available educational software would bore anyone, let alone active, engaged life learning kids! What isn't recognized by most people is that this is a failure of the institutional mindset, which has taken a potentially useful tool and dumbed it down, or used it to administer curriculum, rather than of the technology itself. This is not the computer as used in the real world.

So let's challenge the assumptions about kids – especially self-educating ones – and computer usage. Let's examine whether or not the conventional wisdom is really wise or if it's merely become ossified into accepted truth.

In fact, the tools and applications of technology can support integrated, inquiry-based learning and engage people in exploring, thinking, reading, writing, researching, drawing and designing, creating films and making music, inventing, problem-solving, experiencing the world, communicating, and collaborating. So I have to wonder why we wouldn't make them available to our curious learners!

Seymour Papert,[32] a critic of conventional schooling and considered the world's foremost expert on how technology can provide new ways to learn, contends that problems arise with educational computer usage only when the machines are isolated from the learning process and from life,

rather than integrated into the whole, as they are for life learning children.

Another supporter of computer usage by children, and video gaming in particular, is former game designer and professor of educational psychology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, David Williamson Shaffer. In his book *How Computer Games Help Children Learn*,[33] he points out that when children play games like Sim City or The Oregon Trail, they learn about urban planning or the American West as a byproduct of the play.

But this is just the tip of the iceberg; Shaffer describes how games give children the chance to creatively manipulate a virtual world, and how they can teach creativity and innovation, abilities that are more important than ever in today's competitive global economy.

Renowned game designer and futurist Jane McGonigal agrees about the potential of video games. In her book *Reality Is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World*,[34] she notes that video games provide the rewards, challenges, and victories that are so often lacking in the real world (especially the so-called "real world" of school). She believes that the power of games shouldn't be used for entertainment alone but that their collaborative power can be harnessed to solve real-world problems and to boost global happiness.

To that end, McGonigal has helped pioneer a fast-growing genre of games that aims to turn

gameplay to socially positive ends, such as fighting depression and obesity, and addressing important twenty-first century challenges like peak oil, poverty, and climate change.

The kind of game is definitely important. In an article in the December 2011 issue of *Nature Reviews/Neuroscience*,[35] Douglas Gentile, a researcher who runs the Media Research Lab at Iowa State University, describes studies in the U.S., Japan, and Singapore, that found that playing pro-social games led to more subsequent "helping" behavior in users. In one longitudinal study, the researchers found that children who played more pro-social games early in the school year demonstrated increased helpful behaviors later on. (Again, I wonder if these results are applicable to the life learning population.)

Entrepreneur, author, public speaker, and gamification thought leader Gabe Zichermann believes that games are making kids better problem solvers, even smarter. In a TED talk he gave in Belgium, Zichermann asked, "Do kids these days have short attention spans, or does the world just move too slowly?"[36] He thinks that we should get over our fear of change and embrace the gamification of education, business, and everyday life.

The Potential Downside

But what about the nagging question about possible negative effects of violent video games? We don't know the answer to that for sure. Much of the research on both sides has been conducted by or for

those with preconceived notions of the outcome, or using incorrect assumptions or flawed methodology. And, like a non-peer reviewed study entitled *Violent Video Games Alter Brain Function in Young Men*[37] that was recently presented at a Radiological Society of North America conference, they are reported unquestioningly by the media, possibly because academics are revered.

In the research, twenty-two males were studied playing violent computer games for ten hours spread across one week. The researchers found that "a sample of randomly assigned young adults showed less activation in certain frontal brain regions," adding that "these brain regions are important for controlling emotion and aggressive behavior." However, there is no indication that the individuals involved actually demonstrated any violent or aggressive behavior. The study was paid for by something called the Center for Successful Parenting,[38] whose web presence is vehemently anti-gaming but lacking any information to identify the people or organizations behind it.

In his *Nature Reviews/Neuroscience* article, Gentile cited the most comprehensive meta-analysis conducted to date – led by his colleague and ISU Distinguished Professor of Psychology, Craig Anderson – which included one hundred and thirty-six papers detailing three hundred and eighty-one independent tests of association conducted on over a hundred and thirty thousand research participants. It found that violent game play led to increases in de-

sensitization, physiological arousal, aggressive cogni-
tion, and aggressive behavior. It also decreased
pro-social behavior. However, Gentile says that the
evidence that playing video games induces criminal
or serious physical violence is much weaker than the
evidence that games increase the types of verbal, re-
lational, and physical aggression "that happen every
day in school hallways." Of course, that everyday
aggression and its institutional triggers are why many
parents choose home- schooling!

The use of computers is also controversial in
terms of literacy. Many people – including famous
Canadian author Margaret Atwood – believe that the
Internet (and in Atwood's case Twitter)[39] is a literacy
driver, with even the most minimal amount of
screen-based reading contributing to cognitive and
literacy development. However, some researchers
worry about "Twitter brain" because brain cells have
been demonstrated to wither in the absence of cer-
tain kinds of in-depth stimulus.

For instance, University of Oxford neuro-scientist
Susan Greenfield has warned that Internet-driven
"mind change" rivals climate change as one of hu-
manity's greatest threats, "skewing the brain" to op-
erate in an infantile mode and creating "a world in
which we are all required to become autistic."[40] She
and other scientists agree that more research is
needed.

Cognitive neuroscientist Maryanne Wolf, direc-
tor of the Center for Reading and Language Research
at Tufts University in Massachusetts, warned of the

Internet's threat to literacy in her book *Proust and the Squid: The Story and Science of the Reading Brain.*[41] She is concerned because the hyperlinked, text-messaging screen shapes the mind quite differently than reading a book. "It pulls attention with such rapidity it doesn't allow the kind of deep, focused attention that reading a book ten years ago invited," she says, while admitting that today's world requires a new kind of thinking.

Some publishing companies are experimenting with turning children's books into apps. The result is more like an animated movie or game than a book, and some reading experts worry that the immersiveness of the technology can replace the shared experience of a child learning to read with a parent, turning it into an isolated pursuit, in the same way that some parents use television as a babysitter. Technology shows promise in increasing the interactivity, although building that into an app may not be cost-effective for publishers.

There are other valid concerns, such as video gaming being addictive in some individuals. There are now studies claiming to show that the pattern of problems pathological gamers face is very similar to those of people with substance abuse or gambling addictions.

Joseph Chilton Pearce, the author of *Magical Child* and *Evolution's End*, proposes that children should not begin using computers until they have reached the stage that Piaget referred to as "Formal Operations," which occurs at eleven or twelve years

of age. It isn't until that age, Pearce contends, that children have a strong enough sense of self to avoid being unduly influenced by the experience of the computer itself and the effects of the information they will receive through the computer.[42]

Perhaps the bigger question involves the longer term effects of computers on people. Undoubtedly, electronic media is changing us in many ways. When author Nicholas Carr asked, in an *Atlantic Monthly* cover story "Is Google Making Us Stupid?"[43] he tapped into a well of anxiety around whether or not Internet usage is negatively affecting our ability to read and think deeply. His subsequent book *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains*[44] describes how human thought has been shaped through the centuries by "tools of the mind" – from the alphabet to maps, to the printing press, the clock, and the computer.

Carr explains the neuroscience behind how the technologies we use to find, store, and share information reroute our neural pathways, with, as Maryanne Wolf wrote before him, the interruption and distraction of following hypertext links impeding the sort of comprehension and retention "deep reading" creates. Although this reconfiguring of our brains can have both positive and negative results, it is a configuration that children will need to live in an electronically-based world.

Given the lack of consensus about benefits or harms, parents must make up their own minds about how much electronic media their families are ex-

posed to. If your family uses electronic media, here are some things to consider:

- Since life learning parents are, among other things, mentors for their children, don't be hypocritical about it. The same principle applies to other things that some parents might feel are harmful – from junk food to television: If you want it in your life, you should be comfortable with in your child's life. In fact, you might find that your life learning child is better able to self-regulate her computer usage than you are!
- Parents should participate in their children's screen time. Invite your kids to play video games with you – understand how the games work, how your kids interact with them, and the thought patterns they involve.
- Jane McGonigal says studies show that games benefit adults mentally and emotionally when we play up to three hours a day, or twenty-one hours a week. After that, the benefits of gaming start to decline sharply. We don't know the saturation point for children's usage.
- Playing computer games with others can strengthen social bonds. Playing with real-life friends and family is better than playing alone or with strangers. And playing face-to-face with friends and family beats playing with them online, says McGonigal.

- Quality is important. The best games are collaborative, with strong, complex story lines. A great game challenges and entices the player to move beyond their current competency.
- Cooperative gameplay has more benefits than competitive games. Many games have a co-op mode.
- Look for games that encourage or require players to design and create as part of the playing process. Or work together as a family to create your own games.
- If you want to avoid games with realistic violence, guns, and gore, look for ones about sports, racing, music, adventure, strategy, or puzzles.
- Help your child understand ergonomics and best practices for computer use to minimize eye strain and other physical problems associated with computer over-use.
- Stop reading research studies about the effects of electronics on kids. Instead, with your kids, observe how using electronics affects you and them, and adjust your usage accordingly.

Education Inspired by Nature

*"Look deep into Nature, and then
you will understand everything better."
~ Albert Einstein*

During a discussion about biomimicry, which I was researching for *Natural Life Magazine*,[45] a Twitter contact suggested that I write an article for *Life Learning Magazin*e[46] about how biomimicry relates to life learning…and how Nature's self-managing model can be applied to learning. Oh, yes, I thought, learning is one of Nature's most elegant devices, however, we humans are the only species that sends our offspring to school in order to learn and to socialize. (We may also be the only species that stubbornly refuses to learn from our mistakes – even the famous lemmings who are supposed to blindly follow each other jumping off cliffs are reportedly a Disney fabrication.)

The term "biomimicry" comes from the Greek words *bios*, meaning life, and *mimesis*, meaning to imitate. It is the examination of Nature, its models, systems, processes, and elements in order to find solutions to human problems. By emulating Nature's patterns, its goal is to create new ways of living and of designing policies and products that are well-adapted to life on earth.

An early example of biomimicry (although it wasn't called that at the time) is the study of birds to enable human flight. Although never successful in creating a "flying machine," Leonardo da Vinci was a

keen observer of the anatomy and flight of birds, and made numerous notes and sketches on his observations as well as sketches of various flying machines. Likewise, the Wright Brothers, who finally did succeed in creating the first airplane in 1903, apparently gained inspiration for their airplane from observations of pigeons in flight.

Modern biomimicry research has inspired adhesive glue from mussels, solar cells made like leaves, fabric that emulates shark skin, harvesting water from fog like a beetle, and more. The fastening marvel called Velcro® inspired by the tiny hooks found on the surface of burs, carbon-sequestering cement inspired by corals, and energy efficient wind turbines inspired by schooling fish are other examples of biomimicry being used to create better products in the modern world. In fact, the green building sector has enthusiastically embraced biomimicry as an interdisciplinary way to investigate the design of buildings that move beyond current definitions of sustainability towards regenerative and restorative.

Biomimicry can also be used to create new organizational structures and systems. In an article in *Fast Company* magazine, Alissa Walker describes how, as part of the magazine's What Would You Ask Nature? biomimicry challenge, the U.S. Green Building Council (USGBC) reinvented its operating structure using biological principles and with the help of design and innovation consulting firm IDEO.[47] They needed to replace their hierarchical, top-down approach with a more flexible one that created a stronger sense of

community and connectedness among members. They found their inspiration in mycorrhiza fungi, which grow in a symbiotic relationship with trees, sharing and circulating nutrients among them. Walker writes that, "the designers instantly realized it was a perfect model: What if, instead of a hierarchical relationship, the national body (like the fungi) was in a supportive relationship with chapters (the trees), moving information and resources around as necessary?"

This USGBC organizational redesign wasn't just an improvement of an existing structure; it was a complete stripping down and rebuilding from the basics. In their book *Cradle to Cradle: Remaking the Way We Make Things,*[48] authors William McDonough and Michael Braungart suggest that this is the most sustainable path, rather than merely adapting and trying to improve harmful ways of doing things. "Being less bad is not the same as being good," they write.

And that brings us back to our education system. Why settle for the least harmful alternative when we could have something that is better – something that mimics Nature's ever-adapting and evolving attempts to remediate damage and create optimum conditions for growth? And why settle for throwing increasing amounts of money at a system that doesn't work when we can tear it down and start over?

Our warehouse/prison style of schooling processes students in preparation for the past rather than the future, and largely ignores the potential of

new technologies and emerging worldviews. So educational reformers should be building entirely new paradigms, rather than merely tinkering and ending up with something that's arguably "less bad," like they've been doing for decades.

So how would Nature solve our so-called educational crisis? Biomimicry would suggest that education should be decentralized, self-regulating, co-operative, resourceful, always adapting and shifting in response to new information and changing conditions, active and always in motion, with built-in feedback mechanisms. Doesn't that look a lot like life learning?!

Clearly, Nature wouldn't create dedicated school buildings full of desks. It wouldn't coop kids up indoors all day sitting at those desks. It wouldn't create a top-down hierarchy where there is a high ratio of young students to adult "experts," standardized curriculum, tests, or grades. There wouldn't be passing and failing or report cards.

A biomimicry-inspired education system might borrow from the way the fringe-lipped bat learns to use frog calls from different species as acoustic cues to assess the palatability of its prey. In a study published in 2006, researchers Rachel Page and Michael Ryan at the University of Texas at Austin investigated the role of social learning and cultural transmission in bat foraging. Comparing three different learning groups, they measured the rate at which bats learned new foraging information – in this case, the experimental association of the calls of a poisonous toad

species with the presence of edible prey. The researchers tested the effectiveness of learning this experimental association and concluded that the best results came from a social learning group, in which a bat that was inexperienced with the new call-food association was allowed to observe an experienced bat.[49]

Or a new education paradigm might resemble the way honey bees collaborate as they make decisions about selecting a new hive. They choose the best site through a democratic learning process that humans would do well to emulate, according to Cornell University biologist Thomas Seeley.

In his book *Honeybee Democracy*,[50] Seeley describes the elaborate decision-making that bees use. It is similar to how neurons work to make decisions in primate brains, he says. In both swarms and brains, no individual bee or neuron has an overview but, with many independent individuals providing different pieces of information, the group achieves optimal decision-making. "Consistencies like these suggest that there are general principles of organization for building groups far smarter than the smartest individuals in them," Seeley writes. The bees' collaboration process is being used as a biomimicry model by researchers at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign who are looking at ways to improve disaster relief efforts.

Collaboration is, indeed, an important part of the new kind of networked learning environment that is developing to replace the factory model we've been

using for the past while. The *Fast Company* article that I referenced earlier in this essay quotes a USGBC staffer who said that the organization would be successful when the national body was learning as much from the chapters as the other way round. With the help of the biomimicry designers, Nature's fungi/tree symbiosis model was taking the organization in that direction.

School systems, however, have not really awakened to the possibilities of collaboration. In fact, their centralized, top-down organization means they can't even be focused on the needs of children, let alone including them as collaborators in their own lives and those of their school communities. Instead, schools serve the educational industry of text book manufacturers, test creators, and teacher training; their mandate includes feeding the economy with workers and consumers; children are expected to swallow the medicine the experts prescribe. And that medicine is the same for all and really not much different than it was decades ago.

Nature, as we have seen, operates more sensitively. It creates habitats where each organism is adapted to its place and its conditions. As habitat conditions change, organisms are continuously developing and changing in synch in order to survive.

The maverick American ecological economist Herman Daly[51] has pointed out that as a species, our habitat conditions have changed as our population has grown, but our strategies have not. So, too, with education.

I think Nature's design for education would look a lot like the life learning community: participatory and self-managing, rather than being run by a hierarchy of outsiders. As in Nature, individuals of all ages would manage their own behaviors by setting personal standards and evaluating their performance in relation to these standards. That is, of course, how children develop until school teaches away that power and turns active learners into passive receivers of information.

Life learning is one of the forces – along with technology, which is allowing learners to connect directly with the global knowledge commons and to bypass schools altogether – behind the paradigm shift that is underway in education. Schools and their related industry may or may not reconfigure themselves around this change, or we may see an entirely new type of system emerge to organize and ensure equitable opportunity. (Even that seems like it could be redundant and unnecessary...and, in any case, it's irrelevant to whether or not learning happens. But then again, Nature does like to build in redundancy!)

A few educational reformers understand how profoundly the life learning philosophy differs from the current norm. However, most will merely co-opt those aspects and language that fit their minor rejigging of schools. But that's okay, because life learners are on solid ground, having followed our instincts and designed a new way of living based on billions of years of natural development. Our lifestyle is an elegant amalgam of the natural and high-tech

worlds, a combination of art and cutting-edge science.

If the biomimicry model is good enough for designing efficient high-speed trains, replacements for buttons and laces, and passive air conditioning, then it's a great model for reinventing and revitalizing how our families live and learn. After all, learning how to live and adapt within our habitat is just, well, natural.

Ready For A Changing World

*"None of the world's problems will have
a solution until the world's individuals
become thoroughly self-educated."
~ Buckminster Fuller*

Recently, "unschooling" has had its more than fifteen minutes of fame as a few brave families have allowed the mainstream media a peek at their life learning experiences. Cue the naysayers and doom-mongers! The main concern is – understandably – that kids from a life learning background be ready and able to function in the "real world." Even people who accept many of the criticisms of our school systems question that. They worry that young people who have learned without school won't be competitive enough; won't understand boundaries; won't know enough calculus, botany, history, grammar, or Shakespeare, or other subjects they're "supposed to know;" won't be well enough socialized; will grow up slovenly and unmotivated from playing video games all day….

And then there's the worry articulated by someone writing in the comments section of the MSNBC website after some coverage of unschooling a few years back: that children who direct their own educations generally grow up to be leaders, not followers, and find it more difficult to take direction from others. Too bad, that.

Of course, anyone who has a passing acquaintance with a life learner will know that the concerns are unfounded, so I won't bother to argue with them

here. They are all based on the faulty assumptions that kids are naturally lazy and uninterested in the world and therefore have to be forced to learn, and that what is taught in school is actually learned. And they assume that success (in life or in any endeavor) is defined by society rather than by self...and generally involves money and/or status. We know otherwise. But that's not my point.

I think the problem is with the critics' understanding of the "real world." John Taylor Gatto[52] has described at length how schools were designed to churn out obedient workers and consumers who would fit nicely into the cogs of a capitalist market economy. And I find myself agreeing with the critics that life learners aren't all that well suited to the sausage factory. However, that particular "real world" is changing if not disappearing, and young people who have grown up in charge of their own learning and their own lives are, I think, very well prepared to thrive in (and help create) its replacement.

The fast-paced, high stress, competitive, and highly paid lifestyle that the critics fear unschooled young people won't be prepared for is, according to many, soon to be history. It is not sustainable on a large scale. It was part of a quickly departing era of expanding profitability, corporate greed and fraud, stable markets, cheap goods, and abundant natural resources. In a new era when currency systems and markets are volatile, climatic conditions are uncertain, and environmental costs will be accounted for in the costing of goods and services, smaller scale, suffi-

ciency-based economics flourishes. As we begin to reinvent production and consumption systems to be more ecologically sustainable and convivial, a whole new set of skills and attitudes is called upon.

In her book *Plenitude,*[53] author (and sociologist/economist) Juliet Schor describes both this new model and the skills required to flourish in it. She writes about the need for people to become "self-provisioning" as a way to thrive in the twenty-first century. Self-provisioning is, simply, producing for oneself, making items that may be used to live, or sold or bartered for other things, in a way that contributes to one's standard of living. She writes that it "represents a return to more widespread capacity among the population to feed, clothe, shelter, and provide for itself." This capacity, of course, has been eroded among the middle and upper classes that have been working ever harder and longer in that "real world" and have, therefore, been spending money on clothing, convenience food, leisure activities, and so on, rather than making their own.

But even before the economic downturn began in 2008, some of these "homemaking" skills – such as gardening, sewing, knitting, and canning had been enjoying a return to popularity. You may be familiar with the blog Boing Boing.[54] Its founder and co-editor Mark Frauenfelder (who is also the editor of *Make* magazine) believes that this do-it-yourself ethic is only partly about the things we produce. He says it's also – at least for those of us who went to school – about learning how to learn (another important skill

in the new economy), and about connecting with others who share our interests.[55]

There is already an informal education network in place to help people learn skills like organic farming, permaculture, alternative methods of home construction like cob and strawbale, and renewable energy technologies like solar and biofuels. Much of the learning happens during short-term workshops, online courses, and internships or apprenticeships. A lot of it is hands-on, actually using the skills being learned to create real-life projects. And – not insignificantly – learners come from all backgrounds and are of all ages.

If the plenitude model holds true, we'll be seeing a lot more of that sort of learning. More than conventional job market skills, people will need a diversification of skills and attitudes that will help them meet their needs outside of our current market economy as that economy transitions – either intentionally or by default – to a more sustainable way.

And, as Schor isn't the only one to point out, declining labor markets (with fewer jobs or more jobs with shortened hours, and underemployment of various other sorts) will give us all more time to develop those new attitudes and skills. What are those skills? Aside from life skills, they'll include flexibility, adaptability, creative thinking, networking, research ability, motivation, time management, adaptability to numerous types of learning modes, strong family and community ties, entrepreneurship, self-reliance, and

willingness to do it yourself. Sound like a life learner you know?!

These are the very skills that business thinkers agree will be indispensable as we transition to a new economy. Business writer Seth Godin's book *Linchpin*[56] is all about how the industrial model for work design is no longer of much use. Godin says that the work that people will be paid for in the future is the difficult, innovative, one-of-a-kind, creative stuff.

Richard Florida,[57] the urban theorist and best-selling author who also runs the Martin Prosperity Institute at the University of Toronto's management school agrees. He believes that the latest recession is a "great reset" that will fundamentally change the work we do and the way we do it. For him, the change marks the end of the consumer-driven postwar economy and the rise of one built on knowledge work and the service sector.

What About College?

Although some students pick up some needed skills and attitudes in college and university, they, like all learning, are best gained – as life learners know – as part of daily life and work. And that realization has led a growing number of academics and economists to question the current idea that everyone needs a formal post-secondary education.

Robert I. Lerman,[58] an economist at American University advocates an investment in on-the-job apprenticeship training. That would, he believes, help young people develop problem-solving, deci-

sion-making, conflict resolution, and negotiation abilities – all of which a 2008 survey of more than two thousand businesses in Washington State found entry-level workers to be lacking.

Even government statistics confirm the idea that the "real world" is changing. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, for instance, has found that most job growth in the next decade will be in labor markets where a bachelor's degree is not even necessary. Add to that the spiraling cost of attending post-secondary institutions and a number of studies (including Annette Lareau's *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life*)[59] showing that parental affluence is the main guarantor of a "good" job, and one has to question the urgency to write a check or go into debt just to get a job.

But beyond that, memorizing certain bodies of knowledge or mastering specific skill sets in order to do well on exams is not what will be most important for success in a sustainable economy. Entrepreneurial-style attitudes – risk taking, curiosity, persistence, intrinsic motivation, innovation, non-conformity, leadership, strategic thinking – will be what's important (even if one doesn't own a business, although increasing numbers of people will be self-employed). And that's not what leads to success in school!

In fact, those traits often get in the way of school success. Perhaps that is why many well-known (and rich, although that's not necessarily an indication of success) entrepreneurs didn't attend or complete college. Think Apple's Steve Jobs, Bill Gates of

Microsoft, Twitter's Biz Stone, Mark Zuckerberg of Facebook, Richard Branson of Virgin; Michael Dell of Dell Computers, Oracle's Larry Ellison….

Needing Someplace To Go

Whether they're an entrepreneur or employee, in this new, volatile, sustainability based economy, more people will be working decentrally. Here's Seth Godin again, this time from a recent blog post entitled "Goodbye to the Office:"

"If we were starting this whole office thing today, it's inconceivable we'd pay the rent/time/commuting cost to get what we get…When you need to have a meeting, have a meeting. When you need to collaborate, collaborate. The rest of the time, do the work, wherever you like. The gain in speed, productivity and happiness is massive. What's missing is…someplace to go. Once someone figures that part out, the office is dead."[60]

Well, life learners have figured that part out. They are used to learning on a wherever/whenever basis, so they know that there is no need to go anywhere to get things done – or to learn.

Also among the recent crop of businessmen writing favorably about the life learning approach is a consultant named Clark Aldrich. On his blog *Unschooling Rules*, he has written that change starts from the bottom up with people focused on what's best for them and their families: "A multi-national corporation would never 'discover' the need for organic, minimally processed, locally grown food on

their own, no matter how many scientists and academics they had on their payroll. It is only through independently minded and passionate people, taking control of the input into their own bodies, could this 'new' idea of healthy food be developed, propagated, and ultimately mainstreamed."[61]

In the same way, life learners – rather than school authorities – are making fundamental changes to education. And, at the same time, we're preparing our kids to function well in the new, more sustainable, real world.

The old economy is dying...and with it will die our traditional education system and business-as-usual. RIP.

Finding Success

School is said to have many purposes, including socialization and enculturation. (In reality, it's mostly about being a place for kids to go during the adult working day.) For many people, school's main purpose involves preparing kids to become a "successful" adult. And, of course, the flipside of that is many people's concern that lack of school equates to lack of success in adulthood.

That concern is ill-founded for two reasons. One: some of the world's most financially successful people have little formal schooling. Two: the definition of success is a very personal one.

Financial success and status are the main concern of those who worry that kids who haven't attended school won't be prepared for adulthood. If you were to persuade those people to dig a bit deeper, they might expand the definition to include happiness, career satisfaction, becoming active citizens, and other more esoteric things. But being a financially functioning adult – i.e. supporting self, family, and the economy – is the biggest component of most people's definition of success. I've written in earlier articles about my belief that life learners are well prepared for this sort of success...if they want it.

Of course, not everyone frames success in terms of money. A quote by one Bessie Anderson Stanley (often misattributed to Ralph Waldo Emerson) says that to have succeeded is "to have laughed often, to have won the respect of intelligent people and the af-

fection of children, to have earned the appreciation of honest critics, to have endured the betrayal of false friends, to have appreciated beauty, and to have left the world a better place, whether by a healthy child, a garden patch, or a redeemed social condition."[62]

School doesn't teach most of those things. Nor does it teach what Stephen Downes[63] – a senior researcher for Canada's National Research Council and a leading proponent of the use of online media in learning – thinks leads to whatever definition of success one might have. He says the route to success means knowing how to:

- predict consequences
- read
- distinguish truth from fiction
- empathize
- be creative
- communicate clearly
- learn
- stay healthy
- value yourself
- live meaningfully

School doesn't do much about those things either. However, young children are good at being successful on their own in the way of Stanley and Downes. They laugh a lot, are self-regulating and self-confident. They appreciate beauty, are creative, and learn easily. They ask incisive questions and constantly experiment. But all of that can be turned off by well-meaning adults trying to prepare them for

"success." They can be made to feel self-conscious when they don't appear to achieve the gold star prize of outwardly-defined success. And then the destination becomes all-important and the process irrelevant.

My adult- and school-induced neurotic perfectionism has taken me many years to overcome. In school and at home, I learned that being successful is good, and that non-success – aka failure – is bad. Failure comes with shame and ridicule. This leads us to fear failure, which is paralyzing. We become focused on trying not to fail. We become passive and avoid taking risk. We hold ourselves back from living fully and, ironically, from opportunities for "success."

And that brings us back yet again to the respect and dignity that are such an important part of autonomous parenting. If our children are living life on their own terms, rather than trying to meet someone else's expectations, they are successful. Over and over again.

There is No Such Thing
As Unschooling Failure

Most people who live in ways that are a bit out of the ordinary have occasional moments of doubt. And life learners are no exception. When families self-select to live as if school doesn't exist, there really isn't a downside. Nevertheless, I often hear from people who have decided that "we're unschooling failures" or "unschooling doesn't work for our kids." And I've discovered that what they really mean is that it isn't working for them – the parents.

Deschooling ourselves is not easy. And if we've not done that work, we tend to compare our children to their schooled contemporaries, assuming that school standards have any real meaning (or that schooled kids actually meet those standards much or all of the time). For instance, we might decide that our life learning child has a "math problem."

One mom said to me that her seven-year-old daughter can make change, multiply, divide, and deal with fractions while cooking, but can't for the life of her say what six times eight is. She blames it on lack of formal math instruction and says they're "moving back to using curriculum this year." Not being able to memorize the multiplication table is not a problem that is specific to how or where one learns. I went to school and never did memorize the darn thing. Once I recovered from the frustration of trying, and the damage the process did to my self-esteem and my interest in math, I didn't miss the ability any more than

I miss the ability to perform any other skill I haven't cared to master.

Another issue has to do with structure. I have no idea why people equate life learning with lack of structure. Self-directed, interest-based, active learning from living in a rich and creative environment can include various degrees of structure. (See the earlier essay about biomimicry if you have any doubt about that.) If they live in an environment of trust and respect, kids will create their own way of organizing their lives and their time. A problem can arise when the parent's need for structure or flexibility differs from that of the child. That's when the parent has to separate her need from that of her child. But the conflict is not the fault of unschooling.

Another temptation is to think that life learning is an easier or slacking-off form of homeschooling because mom or dad doesn't have to arrange for curriculum, or teach, or cajole, or motivate. To those on the critic bench – and even some beginning life learners – it can look too simple! It is simple, but it is not necessarily easy. For instance, those who like to play school (or who are professional teachers), who haven't moved beyond control, or who don't share their children's interests will have to work hard to let go. Other parents find it demanding to always model learning and be on the outlook for things that might be of interest to their kids. And, lacking tests (or a window into your child's brain), being sure that learning is happening can be a challenge for those who like to observe cause and effect. Learning happens best

when it's not the goal but the byproduct of living. Believing that requires trust in ourselves as much as our children, and that's not easy.

Perhaps the biggest thing that makes some parents feel "unschooling doesn't work" is that they've defined the concept too rigidly, and by someone else's way of doing things. Of course you'll feel that you are an unschooling failure if you can't follow the unschooling rules! But what if there are no rules? If we are able to forget about the formulas, the "experts," the opinions on discussion boards, the principles and rules relating to this or any other way of being with kids – and just tune in to their needs and interests – we should be able to create a rewarding style of family life and learning. And we should feel free to change what we do in response to our or our children's needs without feeling that anybody has failed.

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Wendy Priesnitz is an author, poet, journalist, editor, and former broadcaster. She edits *Natural Life Magazine, Life Learning Magazine*, and *Natural Child Magazine*. She has written ten books, including *Challenging Assumptions in Education* and *School Free*.

Wendy has been a homeschooling and unschooling advocate, speaker and writer since the mid 1970s, when she and her husband Rolf began to homeschool their two daughters Heidi and Melanie, and Rolf coined the term "life learning" for the way they lived. She is an agent of change who, when she was barely out of her teens, recognized the need for rethinking how we work, play, and educate ourselves in order to restore the planet's social and ecological balance.

Read Wendy's blog at
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Beyond School is a collection of seventeen essays about how families and individuals can live and learn without coercion or struggle, and with trust, respect, dignity...as if school doesn't exist.

Together, they create an impassioned but well reasoned case for a different way of helping children and young people learn about today's world while becoming equipped to live in tomorrow's world.

This book holds high the beacon of respect for and trust in children – not only to learn what they need when they need it, but to fully participate in the lives of their communities and to take their places in a democratic society. At the same time, it reassures homeschooling parents (as well as those other adults in their lives who haven't yet realized there are possibilities for education beyond school) that their chosen path is the inevitable way for-ward in today's rapidly changing economy.
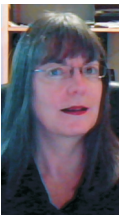
About the Author: Wendy Priesnitz is a calm, clear voice of advocacy and support for life learning. She writes with a wisdom and certainty born of forty years of experience and observation of the damage done by schooling, and of families living without coercion. Making the radical seem obvious, she shows that school is not only unnecessary, but can get in the way, as it turns children from active to passive learners, shuts down their curiosity, removes their autonomy, and damages their creativity and ability to think clearly.