

1. Natural Learning

Parents soon find out that young children are natural learners. They are like explorers or research scientists busily gathering information and making meaning out of the world. Most of this learning is not the result of teaching, but rather a constant and universal learning activity as natural as breathing. Our brains are programmed to learn unless discouraged. A healthy brain stimulates itself by interacting with what it finds interesting or challenging in the world around it. It learns from any mistakes and operates a self-correcting process.

We parents achieve the amazing feats of helping our children to talk, walk and make sense of the home and the environment in which it is set, by responding to this natural learning process. All this is achieved, with varying degrees of success, by us so-called amateurs - the parent or parents, and other care-givers such as grandparents.

The highly sophisticated activity of parents is described as 'dovetailing' in to the child's behaviour. Parents, frequently the mothers for the largest share of the time, have no pre-determined plan of language teaching, we simply respond to the cues provided and give support to the next stage of learning as the child decides to encounter it. What we discover as parents is that, if supported and encouraged, children will not only begin to make sense of their world, but can also acquire the attitudes and skills necessary for successful learning throughout their lives.

But, this process of natural learning can be hindered or halted by insensitive adult interference. Sadly, the schools available to us, whether state or private, are often based on an impositional model which, sooner or later, causes children to lose confidence in their natural learning and its self-correcting features, and instead, learn to be dependent on others to 'school' their minds. In the process, E. T. Hall wrote in 1977, *"Schools have transformed learning from one of the most rewarding of all human activities into a painful, boring, dull, fragmenting, mind-shrinking, soul-shrivelling experience."*

A prize-winning New York teacher, John Taylor Gatto, describes this kind of schooling as training children "... to be obedient to a script written by remote strangers ... Education demands you write the script of your own life with the help of people who love or care about you."

The consequence is that parents wanting an effective and morally healthy education for their children based on natural learning principles, are in the same position as people wanting more healthy, vegetarian or vegan diets, or non-smokers wanting clean air in public places, or investors wanting to invest their money in ethical rather than exploitative ways, or people wanting to save the environment from further and possibly terminal destruction.

The system is not in the habit of providing any of these things and often has a vested interest in providing the opposite. So, like the vegetarian pioneers, the non-smoking rights movement and the environmental protection groups, parents wanting education that respects natural learning principles, will have to argue and organise to try to get it.

There are at least three options. One is to find one of the rare examples of humane schools free from domination, (often, but not necessarily, small in size). Ivan Illich describes these as 'convivial' institutions rather than 'coercive' ones. A second is to fight a rearguard action of damage limitation by deliberately providing alternative learning at home in out of school

hours, and maintaining a continuous critical dialogue with children about the schooling experience. Since my son chose to go to school rather than have home-based education, this was my own path. He grew to argue that 'school is a wreck, but I can find bits of treasure in it.' A third option is to join the fast-growing minority, (grown from about ten families in England and Wales in 1977 to about 10,000 families at present), who undertake home-based education and increasingly establish co-operative family learning centres to support their endeavours.

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