

## The Foundations of Unschooling- Patrick Farenga

*This is a revised version of my keynote speech to the Irish Unschooling Conference, May 2016. Please provide proper credit for my work if you use or share the information presented here.— Patrick Farenga*

I've been involved in unschooling since 1981, when I joined John Holt, and I published the magazine he founded, *Growing Without Schooling*, from his death in 1985 until 2001, when it ceased publication. We unschooled our girls, who are now ages 23, 27, and 30. I was asked to talk about the foundation and research that supports unschooling, so I need to start with that unusual word, unschooling.

Many of you are at this event because you are already familiar with the term, but for those of you who aren't, unschooling is a term first coined by the John Holt to mean learning and teaching that does not resemble school learning and teaching. I broadly define unschooling as allowing your children as much freedom to explore the world around them in their own ways as you can comfortably bear; I see unschooling in the light of partnership, not in the light of the dominance of a child's wishes over a parents' or vice versa.

The freedom for anyone, young or old, to choose why, what, when, how, and from whom to learn things is a key element in John Holt's work. In short, if you don't have the freedom to choose what to think about then you are in mental slavery; of course, we can choose to subordinate ourselves to a teacher (the master-pupil relationship) in order to accomplish or learn something, but that relationship only works well if the student wants to learn that subject or work with that teacher.



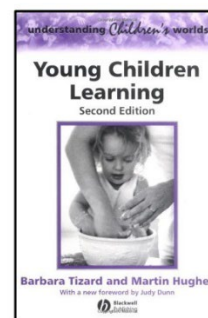
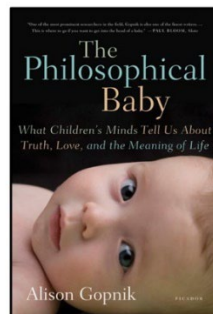
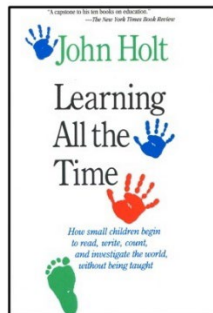
John Holt's 5th Grade Class, circa 1955

Further, Holt said louder and more often than most educators then and now that children are far better at learning than we give them credit for. After years of being a conventional schoolteacher, a hard grader, a professional who worked in exclusive private schools, John Holt developed a philosophy of education based on his personal observations, reading, experiences, and conversations with children, as well with adults who did not use grades, bribes, threats, punishment, or other forms of control to make children learn. He put these thoughts into action in his classrooms—he was fired more than once to due his “noisy” classrooms and minimalist attitude towards grading. He eventually got his ideas into print, and there John Holt hit a nerve and became, without a teaching credential or graduate degree, a public intellectual and bestselling author. His books have been translated into over 41 languages and his first two books, *How Children Fail* and *How Children Learn* have sold over 1 and half million copies. Eight of his ten books are still currently in print, 31 years after his death.

What John observed and thought about over his years of teaching was this: I teach, but the students don't learn. Why? I urge you to read *How Children Fail* and *How Children Learn* to get the full story, but here it is in short: John worked in high-powered private schools and he decided that it was fear of failure, fear of appearing stupid, fear of criticism from children and adults, the overall fear many feel in school that inhibits learning and leads children and adults to create what John called the charade of learning in school.

Namely, the students pass a test on Friday, but the material is forgotten by the students by Monday. Nonetheless, grades have been entered in the official records, seat time noted, and time clocks punched and therefore learning has happened as far as school is concerned. Holt wanted more than this for children and adults in the schools he worked in. At the same time he was thinking about the charade of learning in school, John was spending a lot of time with his sisters' young children, as well as other preschool-age children, and he kept noting how easily, joyfully, seriously, and unselfconsciously young children learn to do all sorts of things without formally being instructed. Walking, talking, socializing, counting, reading, writing—all are learned by young children, often just with help when they ask or show signs for it. John wondered, "Why can't adults let children continue to learn in this same successful manner as they get older?" Why, indeed?

## Learning All the Time



John Holt observed the differences between the free and easy learning of preschool-age children and the controlled and difficult learning of children in school in *How Children Learn* in 1967 (by the way, the book is still in print and celebrates its 50th anniversary in 2017). He also noted in the pages of *Growing Without Schooling* magazine and elsewhere that children are young scientists exploring the world: "The process by which children turn experience into knowledge is exactly the same, point for point, as the process by which those whom we call scientists make scientific knowledge." (*Learning All the Time*, 1989).

This statement is given more credence by research since Holt first noted this in the 1960s. In 2000 Prof. Alison Gopnik co-authored the book [The Scientist In The Crib](#), and in 2010 she wrote *The Philosophical Baby*, which continues to make a strong argument in this vein. In 2013 she published an article titled "[We All Start Out As Scientists, But Some of Us Forget: Why babies are so much better than adults at learning new things.](#)" Children are much better at learning than parenting and education experts have led us to believe. (Gopnik's latest book digs further into the parenting angle and [encourages parents to stop parenting so intensively.](#))

You might be wondering at this point, "This is fine for wealthy families, for professors who can raise their children comfortably, but what about working class people? I'm not smart enough to help my children learn and I don't have the time to devote to them to take them to classes or tutors."

The good news is, anyone can help their children learn and grow and humans have been doing this since they first appeared on earth. It is only since the mid-nineteenth century that universal compulsory school advocates succeeded in segregating children from the real world and made children learn in special classrooms from special people who control, predict, reward, and punish them for doing what the curriculum demands.

One excellent study in Great Britain, published as *Young Children Learning*, examined how young children learn by comparing the conversations of children in their preschool settings to the conversations they had with their parents at home.

The researchers got permission to hide microphones and record the conversations in the schools and homes for these children and after studying hours of these talks they determined that regardless of the parents' education level, the conversations at home were deeper and richer than the conversations at school. In fact, they noted that in school it was often the teacher who needed to initiate the conversations but at home it was the children. And at home the children would ask very large questions—"Who is God?", "Why is the sky blue?"—but at school they tended to be cautious about asking about things that weren't prompted by the teacher.

So it's not a matter of being smart and well-trained in pedagogical techniques that helps children learn, but a matter of being open, welcoming, and truly conversational with them—not a quiz or psychological probe disguised as a conversation. John Holt summed it up well: "It can't be said too often: we get better at using words, whether hearing, speaking, reading, or writing, under one condition and only one—when we use those words to say something we want to say, to people we want to say it to, for purposes that are our own." (*How Children Learn*, p. 124)

Anyone can help their children learn; you don't need a teaching certificate in any state in America in order to homeschool, nor must you use books and materials created just for schools to use—yet homeschoolers get into school or college or find work worth doing when they need to. This is because the school model for learning is just one way, and a very recent way in terms of how long humans have learned without such intensive, factory-like learning. It is more a matter of being kind and attentive to children's questions, helping them find the people, classes, books, experiences, or materials that might further their interest in those questions instead of pushing them through the school factory.

One last comment about helping children learn: Dr. Raymond Moore, an early and influential proponent for homeschooling, liked to say that he could always tell when there was a good learning environment in a home by who is asking the questions—if it's the children, then it is good!

John was familiar with schools that had various programs, vocational, work-study, travel abroad, gap year, these sorts of escape valves for kids who didn't fit into the standard school mold. But that was thin gruel for children in Holt's mind. He knew that children weren't born blank slates to be programmed by adults (which was the dominant belief, in the 1950s and 1960s, about children's cognition) because he saw how children were learning all the time but in their own ways and time frames, and that children, like adults, don't like to be constantly prodded, controlled, and guilt-tripped into doing something they would rather not do. So after about ten years as a popular school reformer John Holt started to question if reforming school was really a worthwhile activity if the goal was to create agency for students, to create enough time and space for self-directed education to occur.

School is not designed to support self-directed education—it is not in its origins, its DNA. School was originally founded as a way to control the unruly poor in ancient Greece and continues to serve this function in our present-day institutions. Plato makes clear in *The Republic* and elsewhere that schools are for the elite of society to discuss and plan how to best utilize the resources of the empire. The commoners, free slaves, women, and foreigners were not allowed to participate in the ancient Greek skole (school); they were just resources to be best utilized by their betters. Ivan Illich noted how this stain of slavery continues to be unacknowledged in schools throughout the world today.

Holt, thousands of years after Plato, wrote in 1978 about Prof. David Nasaw's book *Schooled To Order* (Oxford Univ. Press.):

I learned also from this book that when the Irish first came to this country they made very strenuous efforts, despite their own poverty, to provide education for their children in accordance with their own beliefs. These efforts were in time destroyed by the movement for tax-supported government schools. This had generally been true of American poor and working-class people.

They understood all too well that a chief purpose of government schools was to kill the independence and ambition of their children. They wanted their children to believe that they were as good as, and had the same rights as, anyone else, a very subversive and dangerous idea. But they could not long support their own schools and the government schools as well, and these independent ventures died out.

Mr. Nasaw gives us one quote that is almost too good (or bad) to be true. In 1908 James Russell, Dean of Teacher's College of Columbia University, said to a symposium of the National Education Association:

“How can a nation endure that deliberately seeks to rouse ambitions and aspirations in the oncoming generations which in the nature of events cannot possibly be fulfilled? If the chief object of government be to promote civil order and social stability (Ed. note—not quite what the Declaration of Independence says), how can we justify our practice in schooling the masses in precisely the same manner as we do those who are to be our leaders? Is human nature so constituted that those who fail will readily acquiesce in the success of their rivals? . . . Is it any wonder that we are beset with labor troubles?”

In this same vein James Callaghan, then Prime Minister of Great Britain, said not long ago in a major speech on education that what Britain needed was “round pegs for round holes.”

Holt felt that modern-day education was at heart a faulty enterprise and that better solutions than giving children more and more schooling were before our eyes. “It's a nutty notion that we can have a place where nothing but learning happens, cut off from the rest of life,” wrote John, ““It's not that I feel that school is a good idea gone wrong, but a wrong idea from the word go.”

Once we grasp that we learn all the time—even while sleeping our dreams can reveal or internalize new learning for us—we can develop new models and places for children and adults to learn and share their knowledge. Let me provide some examples first from John's personal efforts, and then into a larger scheme of things.

Once he decided school reform was not going to improve the lives of children John initially thought the solution was to give children the same rights of citizenship that adults have. The book he wrote about that idea, *Escape From Childhood*, caused many of his former colleagues in the school reform movement to question his thinking since it contains a lot about how children should control their own learning and have as much access to the world as they could handle, including the right to refuse to attend school and the right to travel.

I reprinted *Escape From Childhood* a couple of years ago and it still causes people's heads to explode when they consider letting children have the same rights as citizens. But the push back Holt endured on this topic made him realize he was touching a sensitive nerve for most adults. In his next book, *Freedom and Beyond*, John considered free and alternative schools and he concluded that no matter the good intentions a school has, conventional schooling (what Holt termed “hard jails”) and alternative schooling (what he termed “soft jails”) were not going to raise significant numbers of people out of poverty or improve children's attitudes about learning.

The solution is to try to use our resources to directly lessen poverty and see if that change improves educational attainment, rather than imagine that processing children through school even more intensively will reduce poverty. Based on all the studies at the time Holt was writing (1974), and what we know today about how educational attainment is directly correlated to income and social standing (zip code) far more than it is to any particular school, method, or educational plan, why do we insist on giving poor children more academics, less play time, and tell their parents they must enforce these school rules in their homes? Despite Holt's and [others' critiques](#) of education's ability to reduce poverty, schools continued to successfully push themselves as the main way for people to rise out of poverty.

Holt continued to think about how to improve the lives of children and learners of all ages in his next book called *Instead of Education: Ways to Help People Do Things Better*. In it John describes a wide variety of places where adults and children *choose* to learn—foreign language schools, cooking classes, martial art dojos, music lessons, sports teams, hobby associations.

He also describes how quiet, solitude, and self-reflection are vital components of living that children, actually all of us, need time to explore and develop on our own.

This book, written in 1976, ends with a call to create an underground railroad to help children leave schools and learn in and from the world and people around them. Soon after this book was published people wrote to Holt telling him an underground railroad wasn't necessary because you could remove your child from school and teach them yourself. Some parents were doing it openly, but most were not open about homeschooling at that time. But there were enough families from around the United States, and eventually from around the world, who contacted John with their stories that he decided they should know about one another and that he wanted to help them grow in number. Holt created the first issue of *Growing Without Schooling* magazine and published it in August 1977, giving the modern homeschooling movement its first, consistent, public voice.

“...the purpose of school is not to speed them into useful life in adult society, but to hold them out of it.”

— John Holt, *Instead of Education*

As John corresponded with these early homeschoolers, he started to put together a picture of how children learned before school became their primary place to live and learn. Holt collected and shared fiction and nonfiction stories about childhood in the days before school was compulsory, in order to remind us how children and adults once mixed more freely and how well children learned without constant management by adults. He wrote about Margaret Mead and others' work with native people and how they lived with their children; John was deeply impressed by the work of the self-taught anthropologist Jean Liedloff, the author of the *Continuum Concept*. John was impressed not only with her descriptions of how the Yeqana Indians cared for their children, but also with how children were allowed to play undisturbed while the adults did their things throughout the day, but also, if they wished, the children could observe the adult activities, often on the periphery, and participate if possible. Liedloff notes the absence of any formal teaching and how conversation, observation, and mimicking adult behavior leads to tribal children's intellectual development. Hunting and gathering expeditions, sharp knives and tools, tribal councils and rituals were all accessible to the young.

[Carol Black](#) is a filmmaker and writer whose latest essay, “On the Wildness of Children” eloquently states recent research that supports Liedloff's observations.

In many rural land-based societies, learning is not coerced; children are expected to voluntarily observe, absorb, practice, and master the knowledge and skills they will need as adults — and they do. In these societies — which exist on every inhabited continent — even very young children are free to choose their own actions, to play, to explore, to participate, to take on meaningful responsibility. “Learning” is not conceived as a special activity at all, but as a natural by-product of being alive in the world.

Researchers are finding that children in these settings spend most of their time in a completely different attentional state from children in modern schools, a state psychology researcher Suzanne Gaskins calls “open attention.” Open attention is widely focused, relaxed, alert; Gaskins suggests it may have much in common with the Buddhist concept of “mindfulness.” If something moves in the broad field of perception, the child will notice it. If something interesting happens, he can watch for hours. A child in this state seems to absorb her culture by osmosis, by imperceptible degrees picking up what the adults talk about, what they do, how they think, what they know.

We don't live in a primitive society, goes the counterargument, so our children must learn in modern-day society. This objection doesn't address the issue though, because the problem is that we don't allow our children to live and learn in modern-day society much at all, they must live and learn under the fluorescent lights and assumptions of school, in segmented areas with texts, songs, teachers, and information made just for children, and for longer periods of their lives. Children must learn to focus on what the school wants them to focus on, so open attention becomes a deficit in these school environments. Here's another quote from Carol Black's essay, “On the Wildness of Children.”

Inuit author Mini Aodla Freeman recounts how, when she first came South from the Arctic, the thing that surprised her most was the children:

“They were not allowed to be normal the way children in my culture are allowed: free to move, free to ask questions, free to think aloud, and most of all, free to make comments so that they will get wiser... To my people, such discipline can prevent a child from growing mentally, killing the child’s sense of interest.”

If you thwart a child’s will too much when he is young, says Aodla Freeman, he will become uncooperative and rebellious later (sound familiar?). You find this view all over the world, in many parts of the Americas, in parts of Africa, India, Asia, Papua New Guinea. It was, of course, a great source of frustration to early missionaries in the Americas, who were stymied in their efforts to educate Indigenous children by parents who would not allow them to be beaten: “The Savages,” Jesuit missionary Paul le Jeune complained in 1633, “cannot chastise a child, nor see one chastised. How much trouble this will give us in carrying out our plans of teaching the young!”

What would happen if we allowed children to learn and share the world with adults more than we do now? Can a person’s open attention develop into useful skills and employment? The pages of *Growing Without Schooling* magazine and the strong growth of the homeschooling movement around the world show an incredible array of living and learning situations created by families, including taking children to work, reclaiming the home as a center of productivity as well as leisure, and creating clubs and associations based on the interests and activities of the members regardless of their age. Further, school is also part of the equation, but it is not the lead player. It is a resource to be used as wanted or needed, rather than a compulsory chore. Our own daughters moved in and out of public schools as they tried different classes and wanted to make new friends, but they were always free to leave school, which they did.

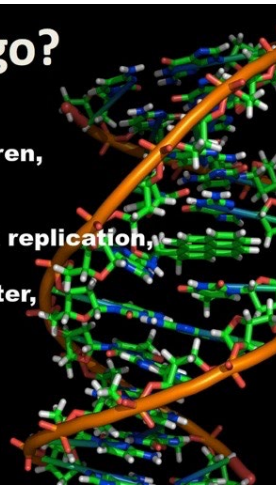
Holt never felt the word “homeschooling” was adequate to describe the learning he was talking about—learning that didn’t need to take place at home nor look like school learning. John knew that many children want to be out in the world, to be in the community and learn the lay of the neighborhood because, like most healthy humans, they are social beings—it is in our nature to be social, curious, and to learn. So John used the word “unschooling” to describe this type of learning—after already trying out the word “deschooling,” coined by John’s friend Ivan Illich, and found to be too harsh by the public. Unschooling didn’t fare any better and John himself, by 1981, was using the word homeschooling interchangeably with unschooling.

But John Holt never gave up on the concepts embedded in the term unschooling. Unschooling has a long and distinguished pedigree though you’d never guess that today, where everyone is worried that if they don’t have money to pay tuition, either their own money or the government’s, they won’t learn anything worth knowing and will be condemned to menial jobs for a living. Fortunately that’s just an old wife’s tale: people can have meaningful, successful adult lives without years of schooling as children and have done so since the dawn of humanity. Indeed, as I’ll show, children can learn to program computers and use technology in clever ways just by working together and without any adult instruction, as the work and research of Sugata Mitra demonstrate.

Mitra is also working with western students in classrooms that expand upon the hole-in-the-wall concept in the US, the UK, South America, and other places to see, as Mitra puts it, how children can learn anything in a group with a computer and an Internet connection. He proved this in one of his hole-in-the-wall experiments where he asked “How far can children go on their own if you give them a difficult subject to learn?” This slide of Mitra’s sums the task up:

## How far can it go?

**Can Tamil speaking children,  
from a village in India,  
teach themselves  
the biotechnology of DNA replication,  
in English,  
from a street side computer,  
on their own?**



When Mitra returned to the village a couple of months later he described the situation this way:

So I tested them. I got an educational impossibility, zero to 30 percent in two months in the tropical heat with a computer under the tree in a language they didn't know doing something that's a decade ahead of their time. Absurd. But I had to follow the Victorian norm. Thirty percent is a fail. How do I get them to pass? I have to get them 20 more marks. I couldn't find a teacher. What I did find was a friend that they had, a 22-year-old girl who was an accountant and she played with them all the time.

So I asked this girl, "Can you help them?"

So she says, "Absolutely not. I didn't have science in school. I have no idea what they're doing under that tree all day long. I can't help you."

I said, "I'll tell you what. Use the method of the grandmother."

So she says, "What's that?"

I said, "Stand behind them. Whenever they do anything, you just say, 'Well, wow, I mean, how did you do that? What's the next page? Gosh, when I was your age, I could have never done that.' You know what grannies do."

So she did that for two more months. The scores jumped to 50 percent. Kallikuppam had caught up with my control school in New Delhi, a rich private school with a trained biotechnology teacher. When I saw that graph I knew there is a way to level the playing field.

The social aspect of learning is clearly present in Mitra's work, as is the element of independent thought. Why do we doubt that our children can learn on their own and together and ask us for help when needed? If other children aren't available to brainstorm with the child, that's when a parent or other adult can help (which, as Mitra shows, is primarily to provide encouragement for learning).

Finding a mentor, teacher, class, book, Internet site, or person who can explain or help our children do what they want to know is not that hard nor does it require a degree in education. Any parent can do this if they want to, and you will get better at it the more you ask. Eventually, your children will be doing it on their own, getting their own books out of the library, asking to take lessons or do travel, because you have modeled this behavior for them. You help your children learn about how to navigate the world by doing your learning in front of them.

When Holt was writing and advocating for children to have more time to play and discover the world in their own ways and time frames in the 1980s, our schools and social policies were moving in the opposite direction. Their solution was to put more emphasis on tests, use technology to further control the learning time and focus of children, and to expand both the entrance and exit ages for school in order to keep them in school and out of their neighborhoods for longer periods.

Schooling became more intensive, as we saw in the 1990s up until today: academics have trumped play time to the point that most American public schools no longer have play recess during the day. Even our preschools have been infected with the fever of to instill academics in very young children.

An article titled "[The New Preschool Is Crushing Kids: Today's young children are working more, but they're learning less](#)" presents research that shows that preschool teachers are saying the children in their care are less inquisitive and engaged than those in previous classes they had: what changed?

### The Double-Edged Sword of Pedagogy: Instruction Limits Spontaneous Exploration and Discovery

Published in *Cognition*, 2010

Journal homepage:

[www.elsevier.com/locate/COGNIT](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/COGNIT)

The high-stakes testing, rigorous curriculum, and no child left behind academic regime has caused arts, playtime, exercise, and other so-called frills of education to be disregarded in education, and provides authoritarian parents with plenty of support for keeping children's noses to the grindstone at ever earlier ages and for longer periods of schooling. As the researchers note, children learn from both spontaneous exploration and explicit instruction, but educators and policymakers have succeeded in making explicit instruction the norm. The change is not without serious side effects on children—the loss of curiosity that spurs intrinsic motivation, personal discovery, and the sense of mastery one gets from that knowledge.

Ivan Illich, in *Deschooling Society*, wrote about what he called the “paradoxical counterproductivity” of modern institutions and education in particular; Holt agreed but used more common language to describe it: Holt wrote, “Schools are places where children learn to be stupid.”

This position is less starkly stated by researchers, but the point remains the same. For instance, Dr. Richard Medlin, in his study of *Predictors of Academic Achievement in Home Educated Children*, found:

The lower the level of direct instruction, the shorter the “teaching” year and the less frequently rewards and grades were used, resulted in higher levels of achievement. Ironically, parents expressed higher levels of satisfaction with their homeschooling experience when their programs were more intensive.

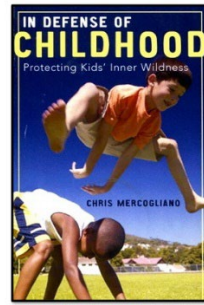
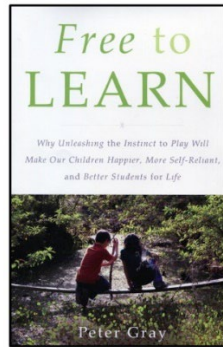
The paper I show on the slide above is by researchers at the Univ. of California, Berkeley, and they sum up their findings quite clearly in the title of their paper: “The double-edged sword of pedagogy: Instruction limits spontaneous exploration and discovery.” What they found in their experiments was that after direct instruction from teachers, “children are less likely to perform potentially irrelevant actions but also less likely to discover novel information.” In other words, the kids are compliant but less adventurous in their thinking.

Of course, if you fail in school it is your own fault, never the school's. It is sour grapes if you say it is the school, because others graduated and they are doing fine, right? That's one of the reasons school is so impervious to change: we valorize educators and education—in the U.S. we have bumper stickers that say “If you can read this thank a teacher”—but why isn't the flip side also on bumper stickers; “If you hate math, thank a teacher;” “If you don't like to read, thank a teacher”? No, the flip side is always that you didn't try hard enough, or you aren't smart enough, to do well in school. And so we blame ourselves for our school failures, or school will blame our genetics and urge drugs to make students focus properly, or blame factors beyond their control such as poverty or parenting without considering how the structure of conventional schooling can cause aberrant behavior in children.



Can we stop viewing the problem as something that is wrong with our children and instead start asking what's wrong with our schools? Apparently not: school just gets more intensified, more children are labeled as learning disabled and are being kept in school settings for longer and longer periods of time, and even adults, in this age of Big Data and surveillance, are being subjected to ongoing mandatory continuing education and certifications. The ancient dream of John Amos Comenius, the so-called father of education, is that everyone will learn everything perfectly from their instructors—and it is now engulfing us into womb-to-tomb compulsory education.

## Play



Dr. Peter Gray spoke at your conference last year, and I'm honored to say we have been colleagues for several years now. Peter's work with how children learn through play is vitally important and he is inspired by John Holt's work—John wrote a lot about the value of children's fantasy play and play in general, and he advised unschoolers to always let their children play as much as they wanted to. Peter Gray's book is titled, *Free To Learn: Why Unleashing the Instinct to Play Will Make Our Children Happier, More Self-Reliant, and Better Students for Life*. Peter joins many educators who have written on this topic, but he brings his expertise as a research professor in psychology to the table. In his book Peter notes, too, how so-called primitive people allow children to live and learn informally while the adults do their own things and how effective this method is. Further, Peter details how children learn through play, observation, and conversation with other children.

Here's an interesting quote from Peter's book:

Indeed, there is some experimental evidence that children in the United States pay less attention to what is going on around them, and thereby learn less through observation, than do children in traditional non-Western cultures. In one such experiment, Maricela Correa-Chávez and Barbara Rogoff compared the observational learning of children in a traditional Mayan culture in Guatemala with that of middle-class European-American children in California. The procedure was to bring pairs of siblings into the laboratory and to teach one child how to build a certain interesting toy (a moving mouse or a jumping frog) while the other one sat nearby and was given a different toy to play with. Then, in the crucial test, the child who had not been taught to build the toy, but who could have learned by observation, was asked to build it. The result was that the untaught Guatemalans demonstrated significantly more understanding of how to build the toy than did the untaught Americans. Moreover, within the Guatemalan group, those from the most traditional Mayan families learned more, through observation, than did those from the more Westernized families.

[The Lego Foundation](#) recently endowed a Lego Professorship at Cambridge University that will study the role of play in children's development and their research shows that children should learn mainly through play until age 8. But who is really paying attention to this information other than a few educators and us? School proceeds as it always has, aided by the latest fads and money-making concepts that promise to turn students who are made of lead into students made of gold. I must mention that the father of modern education, John Amos Comenius, was an alchemist, so this analogy is particularly apt.

It's not that teachers are bad people or that schools are intrinsically evil places, it is that we've removed children from the world and placed them into a special world created just for them and we act as if there is no other possible way for children to learn, despite evidence to the contrary.

Compulsory schooling is not a controlled experiment—there was no control group of children who learned outside of school compared to those who attended school and then through careful research schools determined what practices can best help children learn. No, we just forced children into school and that became their self-contained world.

As noted several times by me already, many people have seen and written about the coming demise of childhood and now it is before our eyes as children are rarely seen even after school hours in the U.S. because they are all in enrichment or other after-school programs. There are record numbers of children struggling in school—and sometimes violently acting out against the school as we see in Columbine and Sandy Hook in the U.S.—many other students never complete college, require drugs and counseling to get through school, or, sadly, commit suicide because all they can imagine is their small world of school and its limited choices, which becomes unbearable for them.

Prof. Neil Postman, hardly a radical educator, wrote a very good book in 1988, *The Disappearance of Childhood*. Postman makes a point in this book that is worth remembering the next time someone tells you that school is scientifically based on the latest research about child development so how dare you think *you*, an uncertified parent, can educate your own child. Postman writes:

... by writing sequenced textbooks and by organizing school classes according to calendar age, schoolmasters invented, as it were, the stages of childhood. Our notions of what a child can learn or ought to learn, and at what ages, were largely derived from the concept of sequenced curriculum; that is to say, from the concept of the prerequisite.

... the point is that the mastery of the alphabet and the mastery of all the skills and knowledge that were arranged to follow constituted not merely a curriculum but a definition of child development. By creating a concept of a hierarchy of knowledge and skills, adults invented the structure of child development.

Holt wrote in *Escape From Childhood* about the history of childhood and how modern society infantilizes children compared to children of the past. Prof. Stephen Mintz, in his wonderful book *Huck's Raft: A History of American Childhood*, provides much more detail about this, including how Dr. Stanley Hall invented the developmental stage we call "adolescence" in the early 20th century. Mintz notes how this concept was leveraged during the Great Depression, which led "financially hard-pressed marketers and manufacturers to target children as independent consumers . . . by the end of the decade a new age category, the teenager, had emerged, personified in the movies by Mickey Rooney, Judy Garland and Lana Turner. One of the Depression's lasting legacies was nationalizing and commercializing childhood."

Many parents rely on the childcare that school provides while they work or care for others, so this system is pretty firmly in place going forward. But cracks are showing all over schooling today and rather than redesign or offer alternatives those in charge are doubling-down: longer school days, more homework, more rigorous curriculum, more seat time and lectures. As this trend was emerging in the 1980s a popular American educator, Ted Sizer, wrote:

Learning is a human activity, and depends absolutely (if often annoyingly) on human idiosyncrasy. We can arrange for schools, classes, and curricula, but the game is won or lost for reasons beyond these arrangements. The readiness of the students, the power of the incentives they feel for learning, and the potency of teachers' inspiration count more than does any structure of any school. Run a school like a factory, and you will get uneven goods.

John Holt made this same point in his many books, starting with his first, *How Children Fail*, in 1964. In one of his last books, *Teach Your Own: A Hopeful Path for Education*, John made the point that homeschoolers are providing educators and researchers with valuable information and opportunities to study how children learn in a variety of situations and about parental involvement in education.

Holt also urged classroom teachers to conduct research based on their teaching experiences, not controlled lab experiments, just as Holt did and many of the other teacher-writers did during the 1960s and 1970s.

This is why John was able to embrace homeschooling—he felt parents who wanted to pay attention to their children would learn how to best help them learn and grow, just as John himself did with his students. John did not have a college degree in education, nor did he spend his early years working in schools. When he did become a private school teacher he took his job seriously, and all the notes and memos from his teaching became the basis for his first two books.

Learning from one's experience can take time and lots of self-reflection; but this is often taken away from us in school, which demands quick answers and test results to prove things are working in order to move on to the next item on the curriculum. It took John nearly 10 years to formulate his thoughts and feelings about teaching and schooling before he wrote his first book; give yourself and your children some slack! Enjoy slow homeschooling—your time with your children will disappear before you know it. Don't turn your home into an overscheduled, overstuffed school: John liked to say that the chief educational mission of our time is not to make our homes more like school, but to make school *less* like school.

John wrote often and enthusiastically about self-directed learning for people of all ages. Indeed, [John took up the cello in his fifties](#), largely to experience what it is like to be a learner from scratch but also to see if it was true what so many music educators told parents: if you don't start your child on the cello (or violin, or whatever) when young they'll never be able to do it when they are older because of all the habits and poor coordination they will have due to their age. John got good enough to play in a chamber music quartet and loved to play his cello whenever he can; the book he wrote about it *Never Too Late*, is a joyous musical autobiography that has more information about Holt's personal life than his other books.

Self-directed education is the key element for unschooling to occur, and, as Ted Sizer's quote shows, even in conventional school having a student buy-in to the class or teacher overcomes most obstacles to learning. Choosing to learn something is vital to effectively learn; otherwise it is a scattershot effort.

But when Holt uses the phrases self-directed learning or personalized learning he means the learner chooses why, what, when, how, and from whom (if someone else is necessary) to learn. But most people claim children won't learn anything that they'll need to know when they become adults if they are allowed this freedom as children. That's why a child's day must be filled with tasks and drills, to prepare them for their future work doing tasks and drills for others. But nobody knows with certainty what will be needed by the next generation of employers; today's knowledge quickly becomes tomorrow's dispute in the media that quickly becomes yesterday's muddled old news.

Think of some of the more popular educational products that parents give to their children instead of giving their children a choice of what to do or study: Remember the Baby Einstein craze? Or the Better Baby Institute? Or using classical music to improve a child's IQ—the so called Mozart Effect? Each one of those methods has its advocates, [but none have been found to genuinely improve a child's IQ in any meaningful way](#). (Remember Dr. Medlin's research, and how parents felt better about instructing their children even if it was shown to be less effective than letting the child learn it in their own way . . . )

Instead of working on children to make them do what we want them to do, why can't we work with children to help them do what they want, and in that process develop the trust and relationship necessary so a child will eventually listen to you if you ask or tell them something that you think is important for them to know or do. Yes, this takes patience and lots of time on the adults' part, but that's what unschooling gives you: lots of time. You don't have to run through the lesson plans and check off boxes that show accomplishments; you can teach through conversation, through your displays of integrity and patience, through playing fair, by having fun together. Direct instruction is just a piece of the picture, but in school, it is the entire picture.

The thing is, many classroom teachers know they need to allow more freedom, play, and self-agency in their classes—even at the college level—but they don't find any support for it and they are conditioned to move from one lesson plan to the next based on the dictates of the school schedule, so many quickly give up the fight to do such things in their classrooms and they just buckle down and get with the program.

Self-directed education in unschooling is thoroughly different: if a child finds an interest, such as learning to play the piano or computer programming and sticks with it, most people think that's okay. But if they move from one interest to another, or burn through all the material about identifying birds in the library or online and then never look at bird books again, parents, and educators in particular, get worried and think unschooling is failing and they must focus the child on more academic matters. But the child is focusing, just not on the schedule and subjects you wish they would focus on, and having a multitude of interests is not necessarily a sign of ADD or hyperactivity or school phobia.

Birds, planes, plants, computers, tools, cars—the world at large—all are in a child's reach to observe and perhaps even manipulate when they learn among adults who want the child to explore and ask questions about their experience of the world. This sometimes leads to an intense interest in a particular subject, such as how learning karate when she was five years old spurred our youngest daughter to learn about Japanese culture and study its language for a few years—all of which never could have happened in our local school, except, perhaps, as an after-school activity. However, we used her Japan studies in our homeschooling reports to school officials as her primary learning activity in those years. That Audrey no longer is interested in Japanese culture and language is not an issue; she got out of it what she needed and it fed her ongoing interest in health and food: she is 23 now, has a college degree in diet and nutrition, works for a chiropractor, and loves to work out. That's what self-directed education is—truly personalized learning that lets a child spread their wings as much as they can and that can move them into new places, new people, and new ideas. However, this is not what personalized learning means for educators today.

The founder of Facebook, Mark Zuckerberg, recently announced a new philanthropic organization aimed at supporting the newest reform in education: personalized learning. His group acknowledges the term is still vague, but I'm afraid there's no doubt where this is going to go. It will result in personalized learning meaning children must choose from a selection of prepackaged courses that will be customized to how they use a computer to learn. It isn't about finding a dojo and a Japanese tutor in your area, and creating local connections with real people. It's about completing coursework aligned to state curricula that is "personalized" as to how you complete the coursework using a computer.

John Holt noted that it isn't how or what you teach children that determines what sort of adult they become, but how they are treated. Allowing children the freedom to think and learn about the world in their own time frames and schedules is not what most entrepreneurs, corporations or governments are thinking when they use the phrase *personalized learning*. Make no doubt about it, when they use this phrase they mean the teacher is in charge and it will be done through the impersonal media of computers. For instance, Susan D. Patrick, the executive director of the International Association for K-12 Online Learning, or iNACOL, a nonprofit advocacy group based in Vienna, VA, told *Education Week* this year:

But she added that personalized learning must also promote "student agency"—basically, giving students more power through either digital tools or other means, accounting for how they learn best, what motivates them, and their academic goals. The most effective digital tools support that purpose, she said.

"Technology can help provide students with more choices on how they're going to learn a lesson," Ms. Patrick said. "[It] empowers teachers in personalizing learning" and "empowers students through their own exercise of choice." (From <http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2014/10/22/09pl-overview.h34.html>)

(I must note how Orwellian the phrase personalized learning can be, much like the illusion of choice fast-food chains offer: you can only purchase a hamburger, but you can have it your way!)

The more I think about it, the more I don't understand why educators, or at least education entrepreneurs, aren't all over homeschooling and unschooling as sources for learning about personalized learning and parental involvement in education. Is it because educators can't be equal partners with families, that families must always serve the school first? Is it because modern educators feel they can't manage learning that can't be controlled and measured? The school factory ignores these disruptive measures and philosophies and conventional schooling continues unabated into the 21st century, soon to be staffed by robots and computer programs disguised as personalized learning.

The only reform for this is to create a new system, a new path into adulthood that can't be worn down and made indebted to an education system that dominates people's lives, and that is where homeschooling and unschooling come in to play. Alternative schools have been around for some time in the U.S. and UK and other parts of the world, but they are hard to replicate, cost a fair amount of money to run, and require lots of parental support and involvement in the school's mission. Homeschooling is far more easily replicated, as its worldwide growth continues to indicate, and it isn't as costly as public and private schools.

Further, blacksmiths, musicians, artists, martial arts, computer programmers, gardeners, grocers, graduate students, and just about anyone you or your child can approach can be potential teachers or mentors in their subject areas. You don't need to worry about purchasing a world-class curriculum and getting a college degree in education in order to administer it (although if you look through advertisements for curricula you will sometimes see the phrase "teacher proof" used to describe them, which makes you wonder what going to a school of education is all about).

Studies show that unschooling is growing slowly and steadily, but homeschooling is growing faster. People are more comfortable teaching the way they were taught, so buying and administering a conventional curriculum feels right for them. What I find heartening are the number of conventional homeschoolers who, either because they and their children think the curriculum is boring or because their children get so involved in other activities (dance, raising and caring for animals, theater, sports, computers, etc.) that the parents stop pushing the curriculum and start embracing their children's pursuits. They help their children find books about dance, take courses about animals, take acting classes, work with a sports coach and realize how learning one subject well requires a variety of skills that children learn. They may be the same skills on the curriculum—reading, writing a cogent report, calculating numbers—but they are learned as part and parcel of their new activity. These parents may never call themselves unschoolers, but that is what they are doing once they start to support their child's development and ignore the curriculum's developmental milestones.

Much of what I described today is about elementary and secondary school age children, but I think the situation gets worse at the college level, because now the stakes are quite high, financially and personally. College has gotten to be so expensive in the U.S. that some graduates have six-figure debts to repay starting upon their graduation at age 21. What a millstone to tie on a young person, and all on the assumption that a college degree will give them a leg up economically on every one else!

Many are finding, especially in today's economy, that they must work in restaurants and other minimum-wage jobs despite their college degrees, and there's a despair among our American young that no amount of education is going to provide them with the same level of financial security their parents had. We are made to feel, explicitly and implicitly in the U.S., that if you don't go to college you will never make a good living, and since so many young adults drop out of college there is a sense that they are now trapped, destined to be burger flippers and street sweepers. These young adults, and many older adults, feel trapped by their circumstances because they either can't afford more schooling (the typical answer given to older workers seeking jobs) or they don't trust school as an option (as many millennials see they were sold a bill of goods about how they were being prepared for jobs that don't exist by their schools).

The suicide rate for teenagers in America is shocking, and I've mentioned the school attacks perpetrated by students against students in the U.S., and the poor U.S. economy is also driving up the suicide rates for white, middle-class men. But I was saddened to read in the *Irish Times* that Ireland has a similar problem.

Padraig O'Morain wrote about the suicide problem in Galway, where young students in despair drown themselves in the Corrib River. In his column on Monday, May 2, he writes:

"In the wild, the animal that loses out in a conflict very often goes off to join another herd. So there's an escape, and an alternative. In humans, because of how we've constructed society, it's all too easy to think that there is no escape. I mentioned students above.

Look at the extraordinary pressures we put young people under now, starting with the years leading up to the Leaving Cert and ending only after university but maybe, after all that, working in a crappy job.

It must be awfully easy to feel trapped and to imagine that there is no escape. Indeed, Prof. Mark Williams talk about "contemporary society with its fear-based school system that prioritizes examination grades as the central criterion of success, then wonder why many children and young people disengage."

The fear in the system is a fear of the loss of status, not being able to hold your head up with other people, of failing to meet expectations. And it's all too easy to get trapped in that fear."

I could continue with other studies, quotes, books, and biographies that amply support self-directed education, and if you're interested there is more research and support for you to read on my website, [www.johnholtgws.com](http://www.johnholtgws.com), in my update to Holt's *Teach Your Own*, and on [www.alternativestoschool.com](http://www.alternativestoschool.com) that I cofounded with Peter Gray and others. Plus I frequently cite research and news articles about unschooling and self-directed education on my Twitter account, @patfarenga, and on the John Holt/Growing Without Schooling Facebook page.

But research only goes so far. If your children are being hurt in school, you don't need a research study to tell you that something has to be done. If their classes and teachers bore your children, you don't need a research study to switch them into another situation.

But homeschooling is not just a reaction to school techniques, it is also as a reaction to schooling as the institutional gateway to the ethos of competitive consumer culture, to schoolings' service as a social sorting machine, and to schoolings' continual push to segregate young people from old people in ways that enable educational institutions to take over many of the duties and responsibilities of parents and local communities.

Teachers in school may need all the training and certifications they do in order to work in schools, but such training is not transferable to unschooling. Indeed, I'm aware of professors, private, and public school teachers who homeschool and unschool their children because they prefer that their children learn this way and not in the school way.

The fact is, teaching and learning has always been a human endeavor, it's only in recent human history that teaching and learning have become institutionalized. People have always learned and created things regardless of whether a school or university existed. Certainly being able to use a school or university for one's own purposes, much as one would use a public library, would be a welcome change, but most universities won't allow this cafeteria approach to their offerings. Fortunately, the Internet is providing unschoolers with access to a great library and [homeschoolers and unschoolers have good track records of getting into and graduating from college](#) regardless of their unconventional educations.

If I listened to the education research and homeschooling's critics back in 1981, when I started work with John Holt, I might have dropped homeschooling and gone into something else. But John made me rediscover an important truth about living and learning when he introduced me to unschooling: true learning isn't about passing tests, being top of the class, and getting academic accolades, and true teaching isn't about transmitting information to another person.

True learning is about learning what is meaningful to you, and a good teacher shows you how to teach yourself; they should not make you dependent on them.

But the most powerful insight I got was this: learning can be and usually is a social activity, not the lonely, school test-taker image of learning. Learning is based on relationships: when you feel connected to the people, places, and things in your life it is easier to learn new things than if you feel unconnected. Learning is state dependent: if you are in a bad state, say your pet dog died that morning and you didn't eat breakfast, you are not going to be in a mood to learn no matter how enthusiastic and well prepared that teacher is.

That's another reason so much of the research about school doesn't help us for learning at home and in our communities—education research considers student–teacher relationships and students' personal feelings as far less important than the professional enterprise of education. But education, especially for young children, *is* all about feelings and relationships and that is why unschooling is successful. You can always hire another tutor or teacher, try a new class or buy a better text, but you can't get another parent or child, so work on your relationships and it will pay you great dividends. Don't sacrifice your relationship with your children on the altar of education!

Having a good relationship with your children keeps communication flowing among you and enables you to follow your children's lead as much as possible so they can show you what they like or want to learn and how you can best help them to learn it. I want to close with some words by John Holt about this. After years of teaching fifth grade and writing *How Children Fail*, John Holt wrote about the natural way that children learn before it gets diminished by school in his book *How Children Learn* in 1967. In 1983, after years of observing and supporting homeschoolers and unschoolers, John revised *How Children Learn* and added these closing words.

See Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EsowqlhCLAM&t=36s>

Little children love the world. That is why they are so good at learning about it. For it is love, not tricks and techniques of thought, that lies at the heart of all true learning. Can we bring ourselves to let children learn and grow through that love?

John Holt, *How Children Learn*