

Homeschoolers: The Enemy of Forced Schooling

I was born in 1977, the year John Holt launched the first-ever newsletter for homeschooling families, *Growing Without Schooling*. At that time, Holt became the unofficial leader of the nascent homeschooling movement, supporting parents in the process of removing their children from school even before the practice was fully legalized in all states by 1993. Today, his writing remains an inspiration for many of us who homeschool our children.

Mass schooling is, by its nature, compulsory and coercive.

Holt believed strongly in the self-educative capacity of all people, including young people. As a classroom teacher in private schools in both Colorado and Massachusetts, he witnessed first-hand the ways in which institutional schooling inhibits the natural process of learning.

Holt was especially concerned about the myriad of ways that schooling suppresses a child's natural learning instincts by forcing the child to learn what the teacher wants him to know. Holt believed that parents and educators should support a child's natural learning, not control it. He wrote in his 1976 book, *Instead of Education*:

"My concern is not to improve 'education' but to do away with it, to end the ugly and anti-human business of people-shaping and to allow and help people to shape themselves."

Self-Determined Learning

Holt observed through his years of teaching, and recorded in his many books, that the deepest, most meaningful, most enduring learning is the kind of learning that is self-determined.

As "the enemy," we homeschoolers reject the increasing grip of mass schooling.

One of his most influential books, originally published in 1967, is *How Children Learn*. This month, it was re-published in honor of its 50th anniversary, with a new Foreword by progressive educator and author, Deborah Meier. In her early days as an educator, Meier says, she was influenced by Holt's work and was particularly drawn to his revelation that even supposedly "good schools" failed children through their coercive tactics. Meier writes in the Foreword:

"While following Holt's deep exploration of how children learn I

therefore wasn't surprised to discover Holt had joined 'the enemy'—homeschoolers. His little magazine, Growing Without Schooling, was the most useful guide a teacher could ever read. As time passed I began to change my views of homeschooling. I'm still first and foremost working to preserve public education but homeschoolers can be our allies in devising what truly powerful schooling could be like. If we saw the child as an insatiable nonstop learner, we would create schools that made it as easy and natural to do so as it was for most of us before we first entered the schoolroom."

Compulsory Education is Always Coercive

The trouble with Meier's line of reasoning is that it presumes this is something schools *can* do. Mass schooling is, by its nature, compulsory and coercive. Supporting "an insatiable nonstop learner" within such a vast system of social control is nearly impossible.

Holt said so himself. In his later books, as he moved away from observations of conventional classrooms and toward "the enemy" of homeschoolers, Holt acknowledged that the compulsory nature of schooling prevented the type of natural learning he advocated. He writes in his popular 1981 book, *Teach Your Own*:

"At first I did not question the compulsory nature of schooling. But by 1968 or so I had come to feel strongly that the kinds of changes I wanted to see in schools, above all in the ways teachers related to students, could not happen as long as schools were compulsory

Holt continues:

"From many such experiences I began to see, in the early '70s, slowly and reluctantly, but ever more surely, that the movement for school reform was mostly a fad and an illusion. Very few people, inside the schools or out, were willing to support or even tolerate giving more freedom, choice, and self-direction to children....In short, it was becoming clear to me that the great majority of boring, regimented schools were doing exactly what they had always done and what most

people wanted them to do. Teach children about Reality. Teach them that Life Is No Picnic. Teach them to Shut Up and Do What You're Told."

While progressive educators like Meier may have the best intentions and believe strongly that compulsory schools can be less coercive, the reality is quite different. Over the past half-century, mass schooling has become more restrictive and more consuming of a child's day and year, beginning at ever-earlier ages. High-stakes testing and zero tolerance discipline policies heighten coercion, and taxpayer-funded after-school programming and universal pre-k classes often mean that children spend much of their childhood at school.

Compulsory schooling cannot nurture non-coercive, self-directed learning.

As "the enemy," we homeschoolers reject the increasing grip of mass schooling and acknowledge what Holt came to realize: compulsory schooling cannot nurture non-coercive, self-directed learning. Holt writes in *Teach Your Own*: "Why do people take or keep their children out of school? Mostly for three reasons: they think that raising their children is their business not the government's; they enjoy being with their children and watching and helping them learn, and don't want to give that up to others; they want to keep them from being hurt, mentally, physically, and spiritually." Today, those same reasons ring true for many homeschoolers.

It's worth grabbing the anniversary copy of John Holt's *How Children Learn*. His observations on the ways children naturally learn, and the ways most schools impede this learning, are timeless and insightful. But it is also worth remembering that Holt's legacy is tied to the homeschooling movement and to supporting parents in moving away from a coercive model of schooling toward a self-directed model of learning. After all, Holt reminds us in *Teach Your Own*:

"What is most important and valuable about the home as a base for children's growth in the world is not that it is a better school than the schools but that it isn't a school at all."