

Self-Directed Education and the Freedom to Choose

My 10 year old daughter attends Parts & Crafts, a local self-directed learning center for homeschoolers/unschoolers here in the city. She goes once a week and loves it. At the beginning of each session, the facilitators work with the young people to generate ideas for classes and then the kids pick which classes they want to take. They also always have the choice not to participate in any classes and spend their time as they choose, tinkering with the abundant makerspace materials, reading, knitting, playing board games, etc.

Freedom to choose is a fundamental principle of Self-Directed Education. Young people can choose to take a class or not, or to leave the class at any time for any reason, or to leave the learning center altogether. This affords children the same respect and autonomy that we grown-ups enjoy. For example, I choose classes based on my interests. If that class is not meeting my needs then I have the freedom to leave. My children have the same freedom.

I make sure when I register for classes for myself, or for my children, that I am prepared to eat the full cost of that class whether or not I/they decide it's not working, and if I am not prepared to pay that amount then I/they don't register for that class. The freedom to stop doing something that isn't working for us, as long as we don't cause harm to others, is something we grown-ups take for granted but often expect otherwise from our children.

Boston College psychology professor, and Alliance for Self-Directed Education founder, Dr. Peter Gray, writes that the freedom to quit is the most basic human freedom. He asserts: "In general, children are the most brutalized of people, not because they are small and weak, but because they don't have the same freedoms to quit that adults have."

At Parts & Crafts, my daughter chose woodshop for one of her classes this term. Yesterday she was telling me about the class and how she is working on creating wooden swords to give to her younger brothers for holiday presents. I asked her to share more details of the class. She said the facilitator is working on a specific, prepared project with some of the kids but that she and two other kids are working independently on their own projects during that time. I love this. Kids can take a class to learn how to do a project with adult guidance, or they can work autonomously on their own projects if they choose.

The true promise of Self-Directed Education is in how it enables human flourishing. Young people are given the freedom, respect, and agency to drive their own learning, with adults available to provide resources, guidance, and support when needed. As John Holt wrote in *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."

Helping people to shape themselves is what Self-Directed Education is all about. It fosters choice, freedom, autonomy, and the ability to learn in non-coercive environments, always with the ability to opt-in or out. In essence, it grants children the same freedom from coercion that adults enjoy.

We need to let go of the notion of *schooling*—something someone does to someone else—and instead reclaim *learning*—something humans naturally do. Self-Directed Education provides the pathway to do this.

Originally published at Whole Family Learning.