

HOMESCHOOLING TEENS

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Everything in home education depends upon the style with which a family chooses to educate young people and the level of control the student is allowed to have over his or her own education.

In my view, young people in their teen years need to take control of everything they can and to be in charge of their own choices and progress. It is an axiom at Upattinas Resource Center that:

"The fatal pedagogical error is to throw answers, like stones, at the heads of those who have not yet asked the questions." Paul Tillich

This saying has served me well in raising my own children, as well as working with teens both in a day school and in the home school setting.

The fundamental question, then, seems to be how to believe in young people enough to allow them to come to the questions in their own time and their own way. We also wonder about whether they will ever ask the questions we want them to, or those questions that will serve to bring them to learning the important things "everyone" knows they need.

Let me suggest that we need to ask, "Who is everyone?" And, "How do they know what anyone needs at any given time?" If everyone includes all adults, parents, teachers, or other people who have lived longer, then we must take a hard look around us and ask still another question. "Why?" These are the questions teens ask of us and themselves as they decide whether and when to come to any kind of learning they have not initiated for themselves. It behooves all of us to know the answers to these questions and to allow these questions to be honest. "Because it will be good for you later. . .," is seldom an acceptable answer

If the family belief system requires that students study certain things at certain times and in a certain sequence, the student must understand and agree with this concept. In this case, the work to be done includes collecting materials and developing the venue for study that will give maximum space, time, and availability of resources, both in the home and within the community. Developing a schedule that includes enough play as well as work, and meaningful volunteer or work projects, seems to be self-evident. Most people have lots of good ideas about courses to take and resources for more structured home education once they decide to do it. Listing these things is not the purpose of this paper and workshop although we do have such lists available at our center.

In working with teens, most people are more concerned with how to bring them to learn, or how to accomplish the requirements that we believe are there -- either imposed by the government or by our own ideas.

It is my belief, after some 25 years of searching and experimenting, that young people really do know what they need and will do it if they are given the time and opportunity to follow their interests and dreams. This of course necessitates a great deal of faith and trust as well as support from a wider community than just the family, and here is where everyone gets "homework" to do. It is important for all those who are a part of the home education of the student to try to help the extended family and community to understand an approach that allows this kind of freedom of choice.

Grandparents, other relatives, neighbors and friends often need to be informed about home education, especially when a student has the freedom to go outside or be involved in self-motivated activities that do not look like school. Sharing the books that inform us, and articles from various media sources, can be of great help. Inviting the student to talk with others about what they are doing, including the recreational things, with honesty and enthusiasm, helps others to see positive growth and development. Sharing actual academic progress is also helpful. Tell others about the books and movies and art work they're exploring -- sing the praises of the freedom to take lots of time to become totally involved in a project and then analyze for others how that experience can be fit into the various subjects we think people should learn. For example; re-building a car of a certain vintage requires understanding of a time in history, reading and comprehending instructions, resourcing through the use of books and catalogs, as well as through asking others. It includes electronics, measurement and calculation in math, and being responsible for the laws regarding safety both in the construction and future use of the car. What a rich curriculum!

Now, when it comes to satisfying an evaluator that a student has done what is required, the student must be creative with the use of language. Again it depends upon what is being asked. When we evaluate in our center we look at such a project as a portfolio presentation. A folder or notebook containing notes from sources, diagrams of wiring, calculations of cost, interior decoration ideas, and perhaps before and after photos, can constitute a worthy presentation that encompasses several "required" subjects such as those listed above. The law does not require that a certain subject be approached in a certain way. It says Science, for example. True this is not classical physics, but it certainly is practical physics, and that is what is taught in many schools.

If a student wants to study classical physics, or any other subject for which there is a prescribed body of knowledge we must be sure that it is understood that there is something called Physics, which includes much more than what is entailed in building a car. It would be a great disservice to anyone to say that they learned the many aspects of Physics in this way. On the other hand, with a car behind them as introduction to the fact that much of his or her learning has been in physics, a student may look at the subject with less trepidation and have more courage to approach the classical subject. In this case, we now have a student with two science credits

available -- one in Practical Physics and one in Introduction to Physics, thus, fulfilling two of the science requirements.

We can find examples such as this for every prescribed subject, and we can find ways to describe much of what young people do so that it fits into the required areas; but what of those who do not want to do anything we can recognize as schooling? Here is where parents and teens are challenged. As John Holt once wrote in a letter to me

"The whole idea of 'not doing anything.' Is a little slippery. There are times in my life when, to the outside eye, I would seem to be not doing anything, but I may in fact be doing some very important thinking and reflecting. How can we be sure this isn't true of young people, who have many difficult things to think about -- which they are surely not encouraged to think about in school."

The problem for adults, and those teens who are concerned about the idea of "measuring up," is in the interpretation of the regulations and evaluation of what is done, including "hanging out." When we think about these regulations, it is easy to allow them to become an albatross around our necks, but in truth, although they do provide for the usual subject areas used by the public schools, and they do expect progress, they do not delineate the content of areas, nor do they presuppose a certain level of accomplishment. In some districts, the superintendent will ask for something equivalent to the district's expectations but even that is not really difficult when we take into account the reality of what is happening for the majority of students in our public schools. Although many young people learn many things in wonderfully rich programs, the vast majority learn whatever they retain in very little time during an otherwise boring and unfulfilling day. It is probable that these students are already learning much more outside school than inside.

When I say this, most people wonder about whether that learning done outside of school in the "hanging out" time is valid or valuable. Again, let me quote from John Holt's letters, sent to me as I struggled with this in the early 1980s, especially in relation to some teens who were with our program and whose parents had virtually given up on them:

"... I also wonder what's the difference between being at home and 'hanging out' at home?... if they are not supposed to be at home or on the streets, where are they supposed to be. Of course it would be nice if they could be doing something interesting and useful -- but said that society doesn't provide many of those opportunities... I suspect that what you mean is that they are not doing any of the things you think they ought to be doing, such as what? Chances are, they weren't doing them when they were going regularly to school either. But anyway, what are these things you think they ought to be doing and how do you know, how can you tell that they aren't doing any of them.

One of the things that we worry about is whether we are being honest in describing these aspects of growing up for authorities; if we can, in fact, accept them ourselves. I find it easy to label much of this time, and even to have students evaluated for credit if they are in our system, as electives in Human Development, Relationship Skills, Personal Growth, etc. these are legitimate

electives which may also be used as Social Studies. In many schools there is a venue for such classes -- those in which students hang out together in a classroom with a teacher, thus legitimizing such time.

So what are the things we fear about our teens and their "education"? We fear that they will not learn enough about the important skills for living a prosperous and fulfilled life. Let's ask ourselves when we learned those things? And how did we learn them? It would seem that all the skills to function well in the world of math came to many of us in elementary school. We cement them with practical experience in jobs and in the use of real money in real situations of responsibility. Algebra and geometry are truly wonderful and interesting subjects and are certainly important for college-bound people. That in itself will be the reason for studying them and really learning them in much less time at home or with a tutor than in a classroom where many students are bored or otherwise engaged.

We fear that they will not know about our history or the great literature of the ages. I've asked so many adults when they really did get interested in these things. Almost to a person they said, "When I was older and history had meaning in my life," and "Oh I could never stand Dickens." What a pity -- to leave Dickens behind because you were forced to read his works before you were ready. Our center and my family's experience with taking students on trips leads me to believe that there is no greater teacher of Geography, History, or Government than travel. What is now available in visitor centers in our national parks and monuments is far more interesting and accurate than many history books. The biographies of important people, novels of various historical eras, Black, Native American and Labor Union history centers and theaters; all these kinds of places and books provide a richness of experience that far surpasses the textbooks we have available. And during the time of travel (barring car sickness) we have found that young people read and often share lots of different kinds of books. It is also a good time for writing -- logs, diaries, poetry, letters, collaborative stories -- and telling family stories.

We fear that they will not be able to do well on standardized tests or other college applications. Those of us who work with alternative kinds of education, including home education, are finding that more and more of our students are not only admitted to colleges, they are invited to apply. We've even had students who have climbed the ladder to National Marriott Scholarships without grades or grade levels. It takes work to fit the anecdotal descriptions of portfolio work into the little boxes in the applications but it can be done and they will address it. There are lots of books and computer programs that also help young people do well, so they have a vested interest in your child's success.

Most families engaged in home education do know that social growth is not at risk because of the many activities they are involved in with their children. But what of teens who are often stretching away from the family unit and the more organized socialization of the early years. Again the "hanging out"! In our experience, young people do socialize with each other wherever they are and in whatever kind of institutions or home situations they find themselves. Through conferences, churches, YM/YWCAs, sports, and neighborhoods young people find each other

and develop friend groups. Even those who go to the mall and drive around in cars listening to music are developing social skills and learning about the nuances of society and their place in it.

It is important that young people understand the value of making their own decisions when it comes to learning. They need to be part of the decision-making about what constitutes appropriate record-keeping. They need to be honest in describing what they have done and in keeping their own records. They need to know that they are trusted to do what will serve them in their growth and development, and they need to know that they may have the freedom to decide many of these things for themselves. But, they then may also have the responsibility to keep track and take charge of compliance with legal issues.

There is nothing quite so useful in growing up as taking charge of our evaluations in school as well as in the work world. If teenagers can learn to do this without fear of authority but with respect for the positive things it may represent, they will have learned something many adults are not able to acknowledge, out of their old fears. They will have the courage to interface with others about their performance and to stand up for their rights with understanding of how various systems work. They will also be able to evaluate those systems and decide in which ones they choose to become involved.

We must remember that one of the jobs of teenagers is to become separate individuals. This is one of the most difficult tasks anyone faces, and it is not often acknowledged as an incredibly important learning experience that must happen during these years if it is not to become a problem later. It takes time and leisure space to think and to dream. It takes the opportunity to make mistakes as well as to succeed and to find ways to interface positively with family friends, public agencies and the rest of the adult world as a single person who is separate from family and friends -- a unique individual.

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