

There is an alternative

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School organisation is generally geared towards managing groups of 30 pupils, with varying levels of knowledge and skill, using a timetable that dictates when exploration of a subject will start and finish. This is set within a curriculum that stipulates what will be learned and what will be avoided: whether pupils have an interest or not. Most children cope with academic life at school, and take part in the social whirl that involves being with large groups of children in small classes and small playgrounds. But for some children school can become literally a nightmare, and parents may choose to withdraw their children and educate them at home.

Is it legal to educate children at home? Is this a feasible option? Won't children just sit around at home doing as little as possible? Can parents with no experience of teaching provide an appropriate education? What about the children's friendships? These are justifiable concerns, expressed by parents considering home educating their children. They also represent the major prejudices against parents who are perceived as turning their backs on 'the system'.

Let's start with the legal position. Surely the law requires children to be educated at school? Not so. Education is compulsory, but school is not. Ross Mountney sums up the legal argument in his book, 'Learning without School: Home Education'.

'The Education Act of 1996, within Section 7, refers to the parents' right to educate their children out of school, if they so wish. This has developed from the Education Act of 1944. It states that 'the parent of every child of compulsory school age shall cause him to receive efficient full-time education suitable to

- a) his age, ability and aptitude and
- b) any special educational needs he might have, either by regular attendance at school or otherwise.'

(Quoted from Mountney 2009)

Mountney also explains that the law in Scotland is worded differently, but the option of home educating is still there. He further suggests that 'the interpretation of the words of the law allows home educators room to give their children an education that suits their individuality, personality, their special gifts and needs.'

If your child attends a special school in England you need permission from the Local Authority to withdraw them. If you live in Scotland you need consent from the LA whatever school your child attends.

Now let's go to Lampeter in Mid Wales, and the home of Elly Foster: a qualified teacher working as a private tutor. Elly supports children after school, as well as those being educated at home. The latter include children whose parents have removed them from school because of difficulties, as well as

children who have never been to school. Elly has met many parents who are home educators, and shared her experience with me.

“Parents often recall being told, ”Your child is slow. He is falling behind the others. He can’t keep up. He should be at Level 4 but he is at functioning at Level 2.” The pace at school is very rapid. A mismatch between the speed of what is being ‘delivered’, and how much children can absorb, can lead to accumulated stress and severe anxiety. If the child’s needs are not being dealt with properly then parents have to deal with this at home: children who are stressed, not sleeping, becoming anxious and in some cases needing to be literally dragged into school kicking and screaming. The pace is slower at home, but progress can be more rapid.”

“Most parents think they are not qualified to teach their children, but quickly find they have enormous amounts of skill. Perhaps ‘teach’ is the wrong word to use, as I find little evidence of parents behaving like teachers. If you sit down with your child and say, “Let’s pretend we can do school,” you are likely to fail. The relationships between teachers and pupils, and children and parents, are very different. Parents who try and copy what happens at school will find themselves frustrated. Children will rebel. The more relaxed parents are, the more successful they will be.”

“It is better to see your children as autonomous learners. You don’t have to follow the National Curriculum, but you can follow your children’s interests. So the approach is, “You tell me what to learn and we can find out about it together.” Elly specialises in teaching maths and science, so often supports young people preparing for GCSE in these subjects. It is an irony, felt by many parents, and expressed by Elly, “that as soon as you withdraw from the education system, you lose any entitlement to support; e.g. with paying for exams, even though you are, in effect, saving the Local Authority a lot of money.”

I asked Elly about children on the Autistic Spectrum. “You can use their ‘special interests’ as a vehicle for learning. You could expand a project on trains to include maths, science and writing. This will be more satisfying, absorbing, and ultimately more educational than learning about the Tudors. That is not to say we ignore the Tudors, but learn about them when English history becomes part of the child’s interests.”

Elly often works with children whose parents have made a conscious decision to home school because of their child’s negative experience in school. Elly finds that families take a while to adjust to what is, in effect, a new life: “Starting over can take a while to adapt. Self-esteem can be knocked to bits and will take years to repair. When I see a smile appear on a child’s face, then I know I am doing well.”

What about socialisation? Won’t children become isolated? Elly finds that most parents actively seek to develop and maintain their children’s social lives. They make contact with other home educators, sometimes meeting together to share educational experiences. Education Otherwise, a national organisation supporting home educators, can put families in touch with each

other, as well as providing a network of educational support. Children may also be involved in groups such as Cubs, Brownies or The Woodcraft Folk.

Is this experience replicated across the UK? I visited 'Heroes' an organisation based in the woods on the Berkshire-Buckinghamshire border, and set up by Dawn Dingwall. Dawn's daughter Jodie, now 19, could not cope with starting school. Other children were able to embrace the transition to school, but Jodie resented having to go there and was becoming traumatised by the experience. Dawn made the choice to teach her daughter at home, and the family have not looked back. Dawn wanted to work together with other families who were home educating, and looked for premises where they could meet and share educational experiences. Dawn eventually found 'Camp Mohawk' a set of buildings in the woods near Henley-on Thames, that was only used for a few months in the Summer by a parents' group supporting children with autism.

'Heroes' now meets at Camp Mohawk for four days a week, linking a network of families and tutors, who are organised to support children's and young people's learning in a variety of ways. Activities such as maths, physics, history, chemistry, piano, discussion, drama and singing, are built around the all-important task of cooking together and sharing a meal. Looking after animals is a popular activity, (including a parrot, a dog, rabbits and guinea pigs, with plans to accommodate sheep, a goat and a pig.)

Lynne Ingram is a parent volunteer at Heroes, and two of her three children attend as often as possible. Lynne described what led up to her taking the decision to remove her son Ryan, who has autistic spectrum difficulties, from his local school. "He was very distressed at school. Everyone learns in different ways, and most people can cope with being instructed in groups of 30, but Ryan couldn't. The school blamed our home situation because he was only aggressive at home. I understood that he was bottling up his frustration at school, and letting it go with us, where he felt safe to do so. He saw school as a nightmare. The minute I started teaching him at home, the depression left, along with his really severe anger.

"It was a huge relief for all of us when I understood that I did have a choice: that there was an alternative to school. More people should be aware that this is an option. Many parents say, "I'd love to do that, but I don't have a degree." I tell them that you don't need qualifications to teach your own child. What you do need is resourcefulness as well as a relaxed approach and a belief that learning should be a pleasure for everyone involved. (And being on the Internet helps as well!)"

But then people ask me, "What about his maths, English and science?" And I say, "He wasn't learning them at school anyway, but he is learning a lot now. He is also a happy, relaxed individual."

Ryan, who is now 15, negotiates what he would like to do at Heroes. There is a range of four-week courses to choose from, including biology, drumming, Spanish, and horse riding. Like other parents, Lynne gives a commitment with Ryan that he will attend the courses. Ryan, for example is signed up for piano

and steel pans, horse riding and maths, but cooks instead of attending history. Ryan particularly enjoys music, and has taken part in performances with a local organisation called Swipe. He also goes for two hours a week to a local college: taking part in a 'Skills for Work and Life' course. He attends with other teenagers, whose places are funded by their school. Lynne has to fund this herself.

Young people may be referred to Heroes who are on the verge of exclusion from school, or who have already been excluded. They usually respond well to the atmosphere of Heroes. I asked Dawn to try and sum up the difference between Heroes and school. "We treat the young people with respect. They choose their own timetable, and we ask for feedback. We are involving young people in their learning."

Jane Gutteridge and her two children attend regularly. Jane's daughter Georgia had difficulty accessing the curriculum at her primary school because of severe dyslexia. After a lot of thought the family decided to teach Georgia at home. Jane feels that this was the right decision for the family. Georgia is more relaxed as a learner at home. She enjoys practical activities, and is particularly motivated by caring for animals. This is fortunate as she attends Heroes for four days a week, and has taken on the responsibility of helping to look after the centre's animals.

But what about support for her dyslexia? Tutors at Heroes are able to adapt lessons to meet Georgia's needs, but the full extent of her disability has still to be assessed. As the family are not entitled to any support from the Local Authority, they will need to pay for assessment.

Ross Mountney's book echoes the sentiments and views expressed above, as well as being full of practical advice for parents. Of particular importance is advice for parents who are planning to home school. It is not a decision to be taken lightly, and represents a huge commitment, in terms of time, and there are likely to be significant financial implications. Parents need to be flexible, resourceful and adaptable. Positive rapport with the children is vital, as all involved will need to be dedicated to learning together. Parents need to be able to manage their work around the commitment of time that home educating requires, and children will need somewhere to learn, an interest in finding out and, ideally, a computer.

Parents should also carefully plan for their children's social integration, so it is helpful to have a car or access to public transport. Parents will need access to books and resources. A lot of information can be accessed on line, and through organisations such as Education Otherwise.

Ross Mountney also counsels parents about time and pace. He writes that it takes time for everyone to settle into learning at home, particularly if children's self-confidence needs to be repaired. It may take time for parents and children to adjust to their new roles and the new way of learning together. It can be helpful for parents to see their role not as a teacher, but as a mentor and facilitator.

It can also take a while to get the right balance between 'work time' and free time.

Realistically children only focus on the work in hand for small periods, and even less time when they have 29 other children to distract them. It may be better to approach a child's 'work time' from the perspective of achieving the activity rather than being involved for a set number of hours. As Ross puts it, 'Progress gently rather than intently.'

As children who are home educating can get through tasks much quicker, it often happens that they progress at a faster rate. They may have more time for play. This need not be a worry, as it is the alternation between focused learning and self-led activities that aids learning. Ross suggests that parents should try and avoid getting 'hung up about too much free time'. They are likely to learn as much in a short lesson with one adult than in an hour with a larger group. 'Free time' can also be advantageous for developing skills and attitudes, as with Ryan's cooking and Georgia's caring for animals.

And what of the future? What are the prospects for young people? Ross Mountney, Elly Foster and Dawn Dingwall all affirm that many home-educated young people go on to higher education and achieve well. This may in part be because they are encouraged to become self-motivated early, are used to open-ended learning, and have a lot of practical skills from everyday learning. Some children return to school at secondary level, or sooner, depending on what is right for them. The important message is that any decisions can be reversed, and there is always choice. At all points families need to assess what is in the child's best interests.

Finally Lynne Ingram has two important messages for parents considering home education: "You do have a choice, and there is an alternative to school. Once Ryan was out of school, a lot of his autism lifted. Ryan still has ASD, but people often don't realise this now because he is more relaxed and less likely to respond in a unusual way."

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Learning Without School: Home Education by Ross Mountney is published by Jessica Kingsley Publishers 2009

Useful websites on home education include:

Education Otherwise www.education-otherwise.org

Home Education UK www.home-education.org.uk

Home Education Advisory Service www.heas.org.uk

'Heroes' www.heroesberkshire.co.uk