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Conventional Schooling Conflicts With Trustful Parenting

Trustful parenting may be incompatible with conventional schooling.

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My last several posts were about trustful [parenting](#), the forces that work against it today, and ways of overcoming those forces. As I pointed out in the [July 29 post](#), I think that the most powerful social force interfering with trustful parenting in our time is the school system. The power of schools over children and families has increased steadily over the decades, to the point where it is almost impossible now to be a trustful parent of a child in a typical public or private school.

As I write this essay, children and adolescents all over America are frantically completing their assigned summer reading, so they can turn in their book reports, due on the first day of class. Either that, or they are blowing off the assignments while their parents are frantically trying to get them to complete them. If your child fails to turn in those reports, the school will quite likely see that as your failing as well as your child's. You may well, at some point, be called in for a teacher's conference and reminded--as you sit, humiliated, in one of those little chairs in front of the teacher's desk--of the importance of parental enforcement of school assignments.

The school system operates on the assumption that children, including [teenagers](#), are incompetent to make their own decisions. They are not competent to pick their own reading (even their own summer reading!); they are not competent to learn on their own initiative. The assumption is that children need constant supervision in order to learn what they need to know to become, eventually, effective adults. Children left to their own devices will just waste their time, or worse, get into serious trouble. And you, the parent, may be seen as negligent if you do trust your child.

If your child blows off a homework assignment because she sees it as a waste of time--which it usually is, and which it almost always is when done from a sense of coercion rather than choice--you may be as much to "blame" as your child. You are supposed to monitor, nudge, maybe even bribe or threaten your child--do whatever you must to get that slacker to do the assignment. Maybe you'll have to tell Mary, "No, you can't read *Breaking Dawn*, because that's not the book you need to write a report on."

assignments, sign and return regular reports sent to them about their children's successes and failures, and in other ways serve as enforcement assistants to the teachers. Email has promoted a quantum leap in the back-and-forth tattling between teachers and parents.

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The home has become an extension of school, and parents have become teachers' assistants. Many parents buy into this all too readily; they, after all, are in competitions with other parents to produce kids with the best résumés. The loss, of course, lies in the children's own sense of autonomy and personal responsibility. Sadly, in many cases, the assumption that children are incompetent becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. The children themselves become convinced of their incompetence.

To be a trustful parent, and to raise your children with the wonderful sense that they are trusted and trustworthy, you may have to remove them from the conventional school system. Here are two alternatives to consider.

Sudbury model democratic schools

In two previous posts ([here](#), and [here](#)), I have described the Sudbury Valley School, which is where I have conducted some of my own research. Today there are somewhere between two and three dozen Sudbury model schools throughout the world, and Sudbury Valley itself provides guidance for groups who want to form new schools.

For 41 years, Sudbury Valley has been proving that, when given a chance, children and adolescents behave responsibly, take charge of their own lives, and learn on their own initiative what they need to know to become highly effective adults. The graduates of the school have been followed and documented more fully than have those of any other school I know of.[1] If any school has been proven to work, in terms of producing happy, effective adult citizens, it is Sudbury Valley.

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The results of this 41-year-old "experiment," now being replicated throughout the world, defy today's common beliefs about education and children. At Sudbury Valley nobody tells children what they must learn or how they must spend their time. Instead, the school provides the ideal setting for self-education. There are other kids, of the whole range of ages (from age 4 through 18 or 19), to learn from. There are adult staff members with various special skills and knowledge, who will help any child who asks. There are computers and other forms of

and the continuous age mixing, promote a level of nurturance, care, and safety that is exceedingly rare in other schools.

You would send your child to such a school only if you are a trustful parent. Distrustful parents can't imagine that such a school could work, even if they have read the evidence and visited the school. If you are curious to learn more about Sudbury Valley and the schools modeled after it, look back at the posts I noted above, go to the [Sudbury Valley website](#) (which includes books about the school), and look at the list of Sudbury schools there or on [Wikipedia](#).

Homeschooling and "unschooling."

For many parents, who do not have the choice of a Sudbury school, homeschooling may be the only alternative to conventional schooling. In recent decades, as schools have become increasingly intrusive in families' lives, the number of families choosing homeschooling has risen sharply--to over a million in the United States today.

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Not every parent who chooses homeschooling, however, is trustful or particularly values children's freedom. Many parents choose homeschooling primarily for religious reasons; they want to raise their children in a certain religious tradition and protect them from other ideas and practices. Some parents choose homeschooling because they are extraordinarily *untrusting*; they want to have their children under their thumbs all the time. Some parents choose homeschooling because they believe (generally correctly) that they are more able to get their children into Harvard than is the local school system. Still others--who certainly have my sympathy--choose homeschooling primarily to protect their children from the harassment and bullying that they have experienced at the local public school.

The brand of homeschooling most compatible with trustful parenting is that often referred to by its adherents as *unschooling*--a term coined in the 1970s by John Holt, in his magazine *Growing Without Schooling*. With a little Googling, you can find a number of fascinating and helpful websites devoted to unschooling and/or to homeschooling coupled with a good deal of children's freedom. One of my favorites is the [Natural Child Project](#), where, among other things, you can find books by Jan Hunt, including *The Natural Child* and *Unschooling*.

The most successful homeschooling and unschooling families, in my experience, are those that recognize that the family, though a great base for living and learning, is not sufficient. Here are three considerations, which in some cases can be challenges:

1. *A big part of growing up is learning how to solve problems and get along independently of one's parents.*

Beginning at about age four, and increasingly after that, children are drawn to other children. In hunter-gatherer and other traditional cultures, and until recently in our culture, children beyond age 4 spent many hours every day playing and exploring in age-mixed groups out of sight of adults. In play of that sort, children learn how to solve problems independently. In my view, that is the fundamental task of education, and it can only occur when children are away from parents or other adults who are paying attention.

compassion and nurturance through interacting with younger ones.

3. *Children need more adult models than just their parents.* Children love their parents, and they need their parents' love, but they naturally look to other adults at least as much as to their parents to learn what it is like to be an adult. By seeing what other adults do and by overhearing other adults' ideas (including ones that their own parents would consider to be blasphemous), children are exposed to a menu of behaviors and ideas from which they can pick and choose. Children do not passively mimic either other children or adults. When exposed to a sufficient range of behaviors, ideas, and attitudes, they make their own value judgments and incorporate what they observe into their own growing repertoires, in ways that make them unique, not replicas of their parents or of anyone else.

Many unschoolers have figured out ways of meeting these challenges. They have found ways for their children to play and explore away from themselves, to meet and make friends with other children over a broad age range, and to become naturally exposed to a variety of adults. But often this is not easy, in our society where family sizes are small and where neighborhood friendships among families are generally lacking.

If you are one of the many homeschoolers and unschoolers who have been regular readers this blog, or even if you are a new reader, I hope you will contribute your thoughts, in the comments section below. What do you see to be the biggest challenges to your manner of helping your children educate themselves, and how do you meet those challenges? What books or websites would you recommend to others who are considering homeschooling or unschooling? What traps should be avoided?

See new book, [Free to Learn](#)

Notes

[1] For followup studies of Sudbury Valley graduates and other former students, see: Peter Gray & David Chanoff, "Democratic Schooling: What Happens to Young People Who Have Charge of their Own Education?" *American Journal of Education* 94 (1986), 182-213; Daniel Greenberg & Mimsy Sadofsky, *Legacy of Trust: Life after the Sudbury Valley School Experience* (1992); Daniel Greenberg, Mimsy Sadofsky, & Jason Lempka, *The Pursuit of Happiness: The Lives of Sudbury Valley Alumni* (2005).

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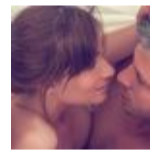
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