

learning for life

Education — is it our **right** or responsibility?

By Anna Jahns

Many people feel that a parent's right to choose their child's education means selecting which kindergarten in the vicinity suits them the best, or which university they should ultimately be enrolling in; most people never question the premise that compulsory education means we are not really supposed to have much say in how our children are educated, and just how deeply the implications go, once that fundamental responsibility is handed over.

The vast majority of homeschooling families believe that the education of children is primarily the responsibility of parents, not impersonal governmental institutions which are simply incapable of nurturing each child's potential to fulfilment. They feel that no matter how much energy is invested, the educational system itself could never be improved enough to match the quality of one-on-one instruction, in the safety of the home environment, at their own pace, under the guidance of the people who love their children the most, and who are most intimately aware of their particular learning styles, strengths and abilities. Home education is a holistic environment to learn in a way that is specifically relevant to life, especially

for those who choose an approach that allows a child to follow their own interests. It's also a place where children are spared from the specific developmental limitations inherent in the powerful conditioning of the schooling system, which we will explore later.

Entitled to a basic standard

As taxpayers in a modern, developed country like Australia, we are granted the right to a basic standard of life — we are provided with water, electricity, medical care, roads, education — and as individuals, we are free to choose to improve upon those basic standards according to our values. For example, we may choose to further purify the city council water before drinking it; we may have a health condition and choose

to undertake a variety of alternative approaches rather than settle for the standardised Medicare treatment suggested. We are not obliged to swallow the medicine prescribed. We are free to question, and once we are willing to make the effort to resource alternatives, we take the responsibility upon ourselves to seek the treatment that seems most appropriate to us.

At first it may require a certain amount of extra effort on our part, yet when we value our choice as being in service to the well being of ourselves or our families, it is no real hardship. And if the value seems to be truly worthwhile, we also take the responsibility to ensure the means are there to do so. Pretty soon, what seemed like extra effort in the beginning just becomes integrated into our regular way of life.

In the same way, we must ask ourselves, are we satisfied with the 'basic standard' of education that the State provides? Is this truly the kind of education we want our children to have?

It's quite astounding to consider that almost 30% of Australian children manage to make their way through all their schooling years — approximately 12,000 hours — without ever becoming functionally literate. 'It becomes particularly damning of the school system to consider that given individual tuition anyone can become functionally literate.



A Parents **Declaration** of Responsibility

As a parent, I am the **one** who is **accountable** for **choosing** the conditions in which my child's **intellectual, social** and **emotional** development occurs in.

It is up to me to determine what kind of **experiences** I want to protect them from, what qualities and lifestyle **choices** I would like to nurture.

My love and determination will always find a way once I realise it is **my responsibility** to be resilient and resourceful in embodying what **I believe** in for my child.

It is my responsibility to **refuse that which is inappropriate** for their development and it is my responsibility to **insist on finding a way** to work with the powers that be, to follow that through — or not — as the case may be.

I am willing to face the consequences of my choices.

No one can ever take my responsibilities away from me.

hours,' says respected homeschooling parent and prolific author on the subject, Beverly Paine. 'Education, although widely believed to be compulsory, isn't. Enrolment at school is. There's no doubt that most illiterate Australians attended school at some time in their lives. The law didn't require them to be educated — and they weren't.'

Who fails — the child or the school?

'Most children in school fail,' writes John Holt, a teacher, education reformer, and later, initiator of the homeschooling movement in the mid 60's in America. His book, *How Children Fail*, is a powerful collection of anecdotal observations from the classroom, where he witnessed first hand how many children fail. Along with failing to make grades, failing to learn, remember or use much of what is tested in exams, 'there is a more important sense in which almost all children fail; they fail to develop more than a tiny part of the tremendous capacity for learning with which they were born and of which they made full use during the first two or three years of life. Why?' His anecdotes illustrate so clearly how 'they fail, because they are afraid, bored and confused'.

Having to continuously go along with a way of learning that makes no

apparent sense eventually erodes a child's sense of autonomy, their love of learning, their individuality, their sense of self. The very nature of courses and classroom set ups is theoretical and disassociated from real life interactive learning, which impedes learning basic skills and the ability to think for one's self. What they learn instead is how to conform and follow the rules, to live 'inside the box'. Classrooms move at the speed of the slowest students, frustrating those who can move faster, with too many students in each class for teachers to be really effective. For some, the frustration and unnecessary pressure comes from being taught on the institution's schedule, not the individual's level of readiness, especially with regards to reading and writing skills.

What are they really learning?

A large part of what is really learned in school is the shadow side of the apparently all important socialisation issue; learning through imitation being exposed to all kinds of not-ok behaviours that are an inevitable consequence of being 'raised' by same age peer dependent kids hooked into cycles of negative peer pressure. This shadow extends past the playground, deep into the hidden recesses of a child's inner image of themselves, as much as it is cast over the classroom dynamics, where kids struggle much more with needing to 'appear' to be learning — to their classmates and teachers alike — than with being genuinely interested in understanding what is being taught. The eerily familiar strategies of how children learn to 'escape' from true learning are thoughtfully observed in John Holt's book *How Children Fail*.

Many parents believe that schools exist to help their children reach their highest intellectual ability. However, according to people like John Taylor Gatto, that is not the political goal of the industrialists that fund compulsory education; in his book *Dumb us Down*, he claims education is rather for the purpose of inducting young people into the modern culture of industry, so that personal differences of style, desire, and aspiration are blurred by the need to conform to standards and pre-established roles, the design being to create a nation of complacent, socialised workers who don't question authority, who believe everything the experts say, and who are deep in debt because they are conditioned to over consume what those very industries are producing.

Some argue that children 'need'

school because it prepares them for the 'real world' — but what if they had the opportunity to encounter the 'real world' later on, already equipped with their own values, life skills and a secure, solid foundation of a self esteem that isn't trained on conformity? What if they were able to face the real world with courage rather than blind obedience, an intelligence that can think for itself rather than one dulled by rote learning, with the capacity to experience life motivated by joy and open curiosity, rather than feeling forced to do things that make no sense, under some vague threat, simply because 'they' insist that is the way it should be done?

Almost all homeschoolers feel that it is the school system itself that is failing children. Rather than offer their children as sacrificial lambs to the altar of a societal system built to perpetuate the law of averages, they choose to create their own tailor made learning programs through the wealth of resources and support available to them. Especially for the parents of children who have learning capacities and styles of learning that simply don't fit well into our current educational system — including those who end up being labelled 'learning disabled', all the way to 'gifted' at the other end of the spectrum. Being educated at home in a more holistic way allows these children to flourish and fully live up to their potentials in a way that conventional schools are simply not structured to provide.

Who owns our kids?

What is interesting to note is that one of the greatest challenges parents face is not the pedagogic aspect of homeschooling their own children, but having to receive approval from the Government to educate their own children if they are not satisfied with the education they would otherwise receive. While homeschooling is legal in all states of Australia, not all homeschoolers agree with the educational authority's interpretation of the laws and the regulations regarding education and homeschooling.*

The question most frequently asked is whether it is justifiable to apply the monitoring techniques appropriate to school education to the home-based alternative, which is an education often obtained through hands-on life experience rather than school-like instruction. Some parents — especially those in Victoria, where the homeschooling regulations are quite reasonable — find the process to be fair enough, and for most homeschoolers it is, in any case,

relevant to create a basic program and keep somewhat of a record of progress made.

The fundamental conflict is between a homeschooling parent's belief in their primary right to raise their children vs the State's duty to ensure all children receive education, which becomes an even greater source of conflict for those who object even to seeking registration, which is the choice of up to 85% of homeschoolers in most other states, especially Queensland and Western Australia where the regulations are most restrictive.*

Parents who are considering homeschooling; please don't feel overwhelmed! There is a lot of support available to find one's way through the system if one chooses to go that way, and in most cases it is simply a matter of procedure. (*Please see the side panel on opposite page for information on the registration procedure.*) For many homeschoolers, it is the principle that is often the greatest point of contention, although for some it's true that it can be a most challenging reality.

Rights we were born with

Another angle at looking at this, if one steps back and sees purely from a rights perspective — even then, we as parents should have the right to raise and educate our children. (*Please see the UN Declaration of Human Rights in this article.*) 'Individuals are free to choose not to assert their rights, but such a decision would not affect the fact that they (and others) still have those rights,' says homeschooling advocate Ben Mettes. 'They are inalienable. The sad truth is that the longer we wait with asserting our rights, the more legitimacy and justification our opponents will claim. Our silence in claiming our rights is all too often explained as our acceptance that we had no rights.' This is ringing especially true now for Queensland homeschoolers, as the Qld Education Board is currently reviewing registration requirements and the future remains uncertain. (*For further information and the possibility to register your voice, see Queensland Review at www.eleanor.sparks.to/homeschool/eqreview)*

Educating a society-dependent future

What it basically comes down to is that 'democracy' is another word for 'majority rules' and in order to ensure the population is educated in a way that prepares them for a society-dependent future, a formal school education is

Getting started

Home education is legal in Australia. However, laws and regulations differ from state to state. You will need to obtain a copy of the relevant act for your state, and find out about local conditions and policies that may apply. Homeschooling networks can help you with legal information, but check for yourself — information may not be up-to-date. Always **seek legal advice** if in any doubt as to your legal position. Parents are usually required to prepare a learning program for the children, which includes provision for social interaction with peers, and how progress will be monitored. This is assessed by an officer of the educational authority, a process that usually takes less than a month and includes at least one interview. Review varies from annually, every two years, or as negotiated.

At the review interview you would also be required to demonstrate educational progress of the children. This necessitates some degree of record keeping, an essential element of a sound educational program. In most cases a simple annual

report prepared by you should suffice. The type of information sought by educational authorities in the process of ‘approving’ homeschoolers varies considerably, but the focus should be on the quality of the proposed learning program and learning environment. A comprehensive guide to establishing learning programs and reporting methods can be found in the Australian homeschooling manual by Beverley Paine; *Getting Started with Homeschooling: Practical Considerations*.

Homeschooling families work together or form **supportive networks**, catering to the educational and social needs of their members. Informal and formal networks exist in both metropolitan and country areas. It is advisable to contact a local network and find out about the current requirements in your area before you complete your application. See the homeschooling resources pages on these main Australian websites

www.hea.asn.au Home Education Association

www.beverleypaine.com Homeschool Australia!

www.eleanor.sparks.to/homeschool Australian Home Education

Excerpted from Homeschool Australia! www.beverleypaine.com

deemed mandatory. Responsibility is gradually moving away from the individual and is handed back as a list of overt or covert ‘regulations’, justified in terms of ‘protection’ of the individual — in this case the child (the future taxpayer). Why else should parents who are willing to make the commitment to educate their own children — when it is so much more convenient to shuttle them off to school every day — be candidates for truancy charges and monitored for child abuse?

‘As a society we collectively agree that parents are not capable of raising and educating their children,’ says respected homeschooling author Beverley Paine. ‘Until we personally stop looking at other families and judging them capable or incapable of rearing and educating their children, our families will be subjected to that behaviour.’

Personal responsibility

‘It becomes an issue of personal responsibility. I make decisions for myself that I can live with,’ says Beverley Paine.

Opportunities for recognising and exercising personal responsibility is one of the more important aspects of her children’s home learning,⁺ and she entrusts her children with a large amount of responsibility to determine their own learning directions. Regarding her children’s education, it is clear that ‘I am accountable to them, and only them, for the rest of my life’. Ultimately, the faceless institution referred to as the ‘Education Department’ will not be the one standing accountable for the outcome of our choice to send our kids to school — there is no one there to take responsibility by the time the outcome is clear, although it is the first to claim superior authority when evaluating a family and their intended educational approach, which surely is a questionable position.

The fact is that when children are failing grades or charged with behavioural difficulties, the blame is put on the families, backgrounds, neighbourhoods, attitudes, nervous systems, whatever possible to turn the attention from the

flaws of the system itself. So with this in mind, indeed it does seem that it is our responsibility as parents in the end, and in the beginning, too — only a parent can be the true authority when it comes to their children’s best interests. In the words of philosopher Vijaya Venkat: ‘Responsibility need not be seen as a burden; rather, I am simply responding, with my ability to protect, uplift, nurture, care and share.’

Alternative to mainstream education

Some families who choose to turn away from mainstream education are fortunate to have access to Steiner or Montessori or other such alternative learning schools which generally create a more nurturing atmosphere in which to learn, and value creative expression of each individual’s unique nature and contribution. Many alternative learning centres have a later start on academics and a more flexible approach to abilities and levels of readiness. It is a growing

Our Inalienable rights

The United Nation's Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted and proclaimed by General Assembly resolution 217 A (III) of 10 December 1948, declares in Article 27 (3) that parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children and also mentions the inalienable character of such rights. (www.un.org/Overview/rights.html)

These points are further worked out in the **International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights** (ICCPR), which is a legally binding agreement, adopted in 1966 and entered into force 10 years later. Australia has ratified this covenant, therefore the covenant has the force of law in Australia. (www.un.org/rights/dpil774e.htm)

Australia has also acceded to the First Optional Protocol, therefore recognising the Human Rights Committee to consider complaints of violations of such rights. In accordance with Article 10, the provisions of the Protocol extends to all parts of federal States without any exceptions. (www1.umn.edu/humanrts/instreet/b4ccprp1.htm)

Article 18 of the ICCPR says that:

1. Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice, and freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching.

2. No one shall be subject to coercion which would impair his freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice.

3. Freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs may be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health, or morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others.

4. The States Parties to the present Covenant undertake to have respect for the liberty of parents and, when applicable, legal guardians to ensure the religious and moral education of their children in conformity with their own convictions.

(www.unhchr.ch/html/menu3/b/a_ccpr.htm)

movement, but it is not an option that is available to many. And yet, there is still the possibility to explore learning that is not even restricted to the classroom setting. Homeschooling is an option that is available to all families, regardless; and it is a way of learning that is completely integrated into real life.

John Holt is often quoted as saying: 'Intelligence is the measure of how we behave when we don't know what to do. It has to do with our ability to think up important questions, then find ways to get useful answers.' Now, wouldn't we want to nurture that kind of intelligence in our children? Even as we have to struggle to shake the chains off our own minds, dulled by conditioning as they can be!

There are many wonderful books and resources available to expand this inquiry into the possibilities of home learning as a viable, effective and rewarding alternative to schooling — some are mentioned below, many others can be found on the websites mentioned in the info side panel. It's worth taking these first steps with a sense of adventure — this is exactly how many home educating parents describe the journey they are sharing with their children, as they learn and grow together; a journey of choices, freedom, fun and learning.

REFERENCES

- John Holt. *How Children Learn, How Children Fail and Teach Your Own*
- John Taylor Gatto. *Dumbing Us Down: The Hidden Curriculum of Compulsory Education*
- Wendy Prienitz. *Challenging Assumptions in Education*
- Beverley Paine. *Learning in the Absence of Education*
- + Beverley Paine article. *Important Aspects of Our Home Learning*. <http://homeschoolaustralia.beverleypaine.com/articles/aspects.html>
- * Alan Hardy. *Home Education and the State* http://www.hea.asn.au/hea/resources/disp_res.asp?type=4&id=26
- Thanks to everyone on australianhomeschool@yahoo.com support list for so many valuable discussions!