

On growing without schooling

By John Holt

John Holt was a leading spokesperson for what he would describe as "growing without schooling." How he came to this is a fascinating story. This is an adapted excerpt from the introduction to his book, Teach Your Own, (New York: Dell, 1981).

It began in the late 1950s. I was then teaching ten-year-olds in a prestigious school. I was also spending a lot of time with the babies and very young children of my sisters, and of other friends. I was struck by the difference between the 10's (whom I like very much) and the 1's and 2's. The children in the classroom, despite their rich backgrounds and high I.Q.'s, were with few exceptions frightened, timid, evasive, and self-protecting. The infants at home were bold adventurers.

It soon became clear to me that children are by nature and from birth very curious about the world around them, and very energetic, resourceful, and competent in exploring it, finding out about it, and mastering. In short, much more eager to learn, and much better at learning, than most adults. Babies are not blobs, but true scientists. Why not then make schools into places in which children would be allowed, encouraged, and (if and when they asked) helped to explore and make sense of the world around them (in time and space) in ways that most interested them?

I said this in my first two books, *How Children Fail* (1964) and *How Children Learn* (1966). Many people, among educators, parents, and the general public, seemed to be very interested in and even enthusiastic about the idea of making schools into places in which children would be independent and self-directed learners. I was even asked to give a course on Student-Directed Learning at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. For a while it seemed to me and my allies that within a few years such changes might take place in many schools, and in time, even a majority. As people do who are working for change, we saw every sign of change, however small, as further proof that the change was coming. We had not yet learned that in today's world of mass media ideas go in and out of fashion as quickly as clothes.

Yet from many experiences during this time I began to see, in the early '70s, slowly and reluctantly, but ever more surely, that the movement for school reform was mostly a fad and an illusion. Very few people, inside the schools or out, were willing to support or even tolerate giving more freedom, choice, and self-direction to children. Of the very few who were, most were doing so not because they believed that children really wanted and could be trusted to find out about the world, but because they thought that giving children some of the appearances of freedom (allowing them to wear old clothes, run around, shout, write on the wall, etc.) was a clever way of getting them to do what the school had wanted all along - to learn those school subjects, get into a good college, etc. Freedom was not a serious way of living and working, but only a trick, a "motivational device."

When it did not quickly bring the wanted results, the educators gave it up without a thought and without regret.

At the same time I was seeing more and more evidence that most adults actively distrust and dislike most children, even their own, and quite often especially their own. They also feel that the most important thing children have to learn is how to work, that is, when their time comes, to be able, and willing, to hold down full-time painful jobs of their own. The best way to get them ready to do this is to make school as much like a full-time painful job as possible. As long as such parents are in the majority, and in every social class they are, the schools, even if they wanted to, and however much they might want to, will not be able to move very far in the directions I and many others have for years been urging them to go.

While the question "Can the schools be reformed?" kept turning up "No" for an answer, I found myself asking a much deeper question. Were schools, however organized, however run, necessary at all? Were they the best place for learning? Were they even a good place? Except for people learning a few specialized skills, I began to doubt that they were. Most of what I knew, I had not learned in school, or in any other such school like "learning environments" or "learning experiences" as meetings, workshops, and seminars. I suspected this was true of most people.