

## On teachers and teaching

By John Holt

*The natural process of learning goes on very well if left to itself*

I guess my ideal educational system would be a society in which knowledge was widely free and widely and freely shared, and children were everywhere trusted, respected, safe, valued, and welcomed. The adult world is full of signs saying off limits to kids. If we could take down all the signs that say "children can't come in," or "no children allowed in except accompanied by adults" we'd probably do most of what needs to be done. I don't think the mostly unconscious processes by which children explore the world and make sense out of it need much help. I think practically anything we do to help is mostly going to be harmful except for very limited things - answering questions, showing people things if they ask you, being there as a kind of friendly, sympathetic companion if they have things to talk about, giving them comfort if they need that.

Children are better at thinking than we are for the most part. There are certain kinds of specialized thinking that we are better at than they are, but for the most part if we look at those components of the scientific method - observation, wondering, speculating, theorizing, testing theory - point for point they do this better than most of us. People who are as good as kids at doing this are usually distinguished scientists, geniuses, prize winners, and so forth. The old saying that children go to school to learn how to learn doesn't make sense. They're better at it than we are!

I've learned more from them than they have from me. I'm much, much closer to being able to learn the way they do than I was several years ago. I started the flute at 34; I was a very bad learner, very tense, very scared of mistakes. I started the cello at 40. I was better, only played a couple of years because I was lecturing and had to quit. Took it up again at 50; I was a still better learner. I've taken up the violin now at 60, and I've gone much further in the first year - with 10 to 15 minutes a day on the violin - than I did in my first year on the cello. Some of it is a transfer but some of it is that I'm much happier at the whole business of learning something new. Much of it is just by hanging out with these little guys and seeing what they do.

We do not need professional teachers

I have many times talked to teachers who wanted to teach in alternative schools, or I'd meet some young guy who'd say, "I want to work with kids," so I say, well, what do you know that is so interesting that kids of their own free will will come up to you to learn how to do it. Usually they don't have any answer at all. My reply is, you don't want to work with kids, you want to work on kids, do things to them or make them do things that you think would be good for them.

The place to start is with something that really interests you, and then make yourself available to help others get to really do it also. There's a guy named John Payne in Boston, a very good jazz musician, plays sax, flute and clarinet, a very gifted jazz

musician. Within the last few years he's started a little school, and most of his pupils are adults. He says if you want to play a musical instrument, forget everything you ever heard about talent. He has organized his students into what he calls the John Payne Sax Choir and they play gigs in nightclubs in places around Boston. The routine when the choir is playing is that these 30 or 40 people - all odd shapes, sizes, men, women, the youngest kids will be down around 9 years old - work up these arrangements (with John Payne's assistance) and they fix it so that somebody who's just starting has got very easy notes to play and the more experienced players have the hard parts. They adjust the arrangements to the skill of the players, and he and his professional jazz quartet play behind them to provide the rhythm section. He also divides the students up into small ensemble groups when they get a little better, so they're actually doing a solo. My office friend Pat Farenga has been a jazz pianist for a number of years, and this last year he decided he wanted to play the sax. He took it up, and he'd had only 5 weekly lessons before his first appearance with the choir performing in public in a place where people come in and buy a drink and pay money to hear him! It's just marvelous.

The philosopher wants to empower us while the expert wants to stand over us and make us dependent on him. A true teacher - and we're all teachers, the human animal is as much a teacher as it is a learner - basically likes showing people who want to know, here, do this and do this. The essence of teaching is working yourself out of a job, getting a person to the point where they don't need you. The home schooling movement is, of course, a marvelous paradigm of that, and that's why it generates self-reliant learners, teachers and leaders.