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Homeschooling the Teens Who Dislike School

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FROM THE EDITOR:

This article could have been written this year, and every year for the past ten years. It will probably need to be written next year.

The more state schools try to change, the more they stay the same – an outdated edifice of the industrial revolution, an antediluvian shell of its former self. Government schools are still graduating “working class” citizens of the state, ready for work that no longer exists. High Tech employers today are complaining of unprepared workers just like the industrialists of the late nineteenth century complained of farm kids not ready to work in their factories. The problem today are the bureaucratic government schools. They just can't keep up with changes in the real world. Yet, even knowing this, our children are still forced to attend these static institutions. Is it any wonder we are seeing more and more rebellion from the inmates?

The only thing that helps this generation of publicly schooled students, is their determination to learn contemporary skills *outside* of their required school time. After the compulsory social engineering is done, kids go home and build web pages, write, create, edit and publish video projects, get jobs and apprentice their way into the real world. Many are skipping public school altogether. They see mandatory government schooling for what it is, and their parents, for the most part, aren't willing to help their own children escape

into the life they are destined to pursue. The strong willed, do it on their own. Thankfully, this is nothing new.

This article, we hope, will encourage parents to think more seriously about the difference between learning and schooling. We hope to show that homeschooling is not schooling, but self-learning. Homeschooling isn't the same as schooling at home. Homeschooling isn't a pedagogy, it's a lifestyle. It's a way of thinking, a new way of looking at life and your family.

Most of this country's Founding Fathers were not 'schooled' as we know it today. Most were self taught, tutored, or apprenticed. Benjamin Franklin was indentured to his own older brother and worked for years in his print shop. What money he could scrounge up, he used to buy books. Every accomplishment, invention and deed that came from Mr. Franklin can never be attributed to the grades he got in high school, because he never attended.

Read some biographies of influential (not famous) people and you'll see a trend; many of them didn't go to college. Some didn't even finish high school. As for the ones who did go to government schools, I would wager that not a one of them can point to one week of their entire school experience and say, "That one class got me to where I am today."

My point, and the point of republishing the Kaseman's essay, is to say that as parents, we need to think outside the box. We need to see Government Schools for what they really are, not for what we're told they are supposed to be. We need to realize that twelve years of institutionalization HAS to have some effect on children's lives, their character, and even their souls.

If you find you have a child that is acting out, labeled deficient in some way by other adults, angry, frustrated, making all the wrong choices and you want to do something about it... then talk to them. Read this Topic and talk about what these ideas mean to you, and to your child. You don't have to be a teacher to homeschool. You need to be a parent to homeschool. You need to be willing to let your child be free to learn on his or her own and on their own terms. Skipping school just might be the thing that saves you and your child from the life the state expects you to live.

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Taking Charge - by Larry and Susan Kaseman

Homeschooling and Teens Who Dislike School

Teens often dislike school for some of the same reasons homeschoolers avoid conventional schools. Unfortunately, our society thinks young people should like school or at least cooperate and get passing grades. Those who don't are blamed for being learning disabled or trouble-makers. These teens and their families, not the schools, are viewed as the problem.

This column discusses significant connections between homeschooling and teens who dislike school.

- Homeschoolers can often understand, agree with, and perhaps even support teens' reasons for disliking school.
- Homeschooling provides an alternative that often can work well for teens who dislike school, offering them a good way to learn, grow, and prepare for life as an adult.
- We need to prevent homeschooling from being viewed as a haven for teens who simply want to avoid compulsory school attendance laws. Critics of homeschooling sometimes are quick to use this perspective as a reason to increase state regulation of homeschooling.

Legitimate Reasons for Disliking School

- Schools are generally not good places for people to learn. It does not work well to try to get 20-30 young people of roughly the same age but widely differing interests, abilities, experiences, learning styles, etc. to learn the same thing at the same time in the same way at the same pace in an artificial environment where they are limited to listening to lectures, reading, and writing and are cut off from the real world. The situation is worsening as No Child Left Behind forces even the most creative teachers to "teach to the test." No wonder so many kids are bored and find it difficult to learn in school.
- The social atmosphere of conventional schools is unfavorable and sometimes destructive. Again the set-up and basic assumptions are flawed. Isn't it unrealistic to put hundreds of young people into a small space with only a few older people who might possibly be role models; add pressures that are often used to try to force learning, such as competition, humiliation, and rigid

schedules; and expect them to learn to be kind, cooperative, supportive of each other, and grow into healthy, confident, mature adults? Teens who do not like the peer pressure, competition, bullying, and cruelty often found in conventional high schools are reacting appropriately to what goes on in most schools.

- As John Holt wrote in *Escape From Childhood*: "Schools seem to me among the most anti-democratic, most authoritarian, most destructive, and most dangerous institutions in modern society. No other institution does more harm or more lasting harm to more people or destroys so much of their curiosity, trust, dignity, and sense of identity and worth."

Homeschooling Teens Who Dislike School

Homeschooling often works better for families with teens who dislike school if parents understand their teens' reasons for disliking school. Some find it helpful to reconsider their own school experiences and those of siblings and friends by asking questions such as:

- Did I find school work exciting, or at least interesting, or did I spend a lot of time passing notes and waiting for the bell to ring?
- How was school social life? Did I feel confident, accepted, appreciated, and well-liked? Or did I feel awkward, embarrassed, left-out, rejected, perhaps bullied?
- How did I acquire the knowledge and skills I use in everyday life? How did I learn to parent, run a household, manage money, drive, do tasks required at work, get along with the neighbors, etc? (Consider skills like reading and driving, which many people supposedly "learned in school." Think how much of that learning was made possible by earlier experiences outside school, and how much was gained through experience and practice outside school.)

However, it's not surprising to find that many parents view their school experiences positively. That's partly because schools have such a strong hold on our society that many people claim they liked school, perhaps because they think they should have or because someone convinced them that they did. Some people may be reluctant to remember how awkward and embarrassed they felt. Many simply assume that they learned what they need to know in school, the place in our society where people are supposed to learn, without thinking much about it.

It also helps if parents understand that it's often the schools, not the kids, that are the problem, as discussed above. Then they can begin to appreciate the strengths their teens have. Among the possibilities:

- Academic abilities. Many teens who dislike school have strong academic abilities. They object to school because they are bored, are not allowed to study things they are interested in, want to study subjects in greater depth, are troubled by the continual interruptions, see through the hypocrisy, or need to learn in their own way, at their own pace. Perhaps they are kinesthetic learners who need to move while they are learning. It's important not to assume that they dislike learning or can't handle academics.

- Non-academic abilities. Many teens who dislike school have important strengths that are not emphasized or valued at school. Their mechanical abilities may make them good at repairing cars, computers, or clavichord. Some have athletic ability that goes unnoticed or unrewarded in the competition and political maneuvering that often accompanies sports in conventional high schools. Some teens have musical ability but the pressures of school don't allow them enough time to play or sing, compose, or experiment and develop new techniques. Some teens have creative abilities in photography, painting, graphic arts, and pottery. In addition, there are the sometimes overlooked abilities that are demonstrated by compassionate teens who volunteer in hospitals and nursing homes, those with green thumbs who excel at gardening, those with a special sense about animals who do well at animal husbandry or wildlife rehabilitation, etc.

- Perspectives and courage. Teens who are willing to stand up to what schools have become and say, "This is not working for me" deserve special credit. Many people go through their lives not realizing or acknowledging what's wrong with schools and how they can damage people. Others are too compliant or scared to do anything but go along.

- Overcoming damaging labels. Some teens who dislike school have been labeled as learning disabled (LD), as having attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), or as having an emotional disorder or mental illness such as depression. Many parents find it helps enormously to question such labels, which demean and stigmatize people and can become self-fulfilling prophecies. Instead they help their teens focus on their strengths, do things they are good at, and develop confidence by living and learning in a more supportive environment.

Given support and encouragement, most parents realize they know a lot about their teens' strengths from having lived, worked, and played with them for years in a variety of settings, most of which are healthier and more supportive of teens than are conventional schools. If teens have become depressed or had other problems as a result of their school experiences, parents may need to think back to times before school became such a problem. It is sometimes more difficult for teens to see and acknowledge their strengths, especially if they have been criticized and humiliated in school and other places, but it's very helpful once they can.

Teens who dislike school do sometimes contribute to the problems surrounding this situation, especially if they exercise poor judgment and get into trouble with the law. Even in such cases, however, we can ask how much of this results from the fact that our society does not provide many good alternatives to attending school.

Once parents and teens have recognized the legitimacy of teens' dislike of school and the strengths that teens have, they are in a stronger position to begin the work of finding and developing good alternatives to attending a conventional school, sometimes through homeschooling. This work is not easy and has ups and downs. It takes time, which is to be expected. Problems that did not develop overnight take time to solve. However, the process of developing alternatives provides learning opportunities and the results are definitely worth the effort and often make a big difference in the lives of teens and parents.

Here are some suggestions that may help in homeschooling teens who dislike school:

- Take a vacation. If you can't afford a trip, consider staying with nearby friends or relatives. Or vacation in your own home, ignoring phone, email, and uninspiring tasks and instead spending time doing whatever constructive activities you choose. Watch videos and DVDs, play games, go to the mall, cook special foods, do crafts, read aloud, go on nature walks, watch the clouds. Think of things you've been wanting to do but didn't have time for. Sleep. It's amazing how much better people feel and how much more they can do if they just have enough sleep.
- Understand the homeschooling law. Find out what the law requires in your state by contacting experienced homeschoolers. Ask how to comply with only the minimum requirements of the law, which protects homeschooling freedoms and gives you the most flexibility choose what to learn and how to learn it.
- Pursue what interests you. You're more motivated and learning is easier when you're working on something you want to know about. Don't limit yourself to academic-sounding subjects. Studying almost anything in depth is rewarding.
- Learn what YOU need to know. Ask, "What do I need to learn to live a successful adult life?" instead of "What would I be doing if I were attending a conventional school?" Learn to cook, run a household, maintain a car, garden, manage money, etc. Don't overlook relationships with family and friends, beauty, religious and moral values, the world of nature, personal health, and other important things.
- Learn in many different ways. There's no substitute for discovering things yourself, as long as you're sensible about safety. Learn about another culture

by meeting people from there, learning the language, watching videos, reading fiction and non-fiction, cooking typical foods, and, if possible, visiting the country. Learn about cars and motorcycles by taking broken ones apart.

- Explore alternatives for work. Unless you're independently wealthy, there's a very good chance you'll need to earn money at some point. If you know what you want to do, figure out a way to start doing it, or something related to it, now. Find or create an internship or volunteer. Get a part-time job in an area that interests you. You'll learn a lot about being a beautician by answering the phone and scheduling appointments in a beauty shop. If you don't know what you want to do, explore a variety of alternatives. Consider working using a resource like the Career Development Manual from the University of Waterloo at www.cdm.uwaterloo.ca. "It's who you know, not what you know," so expand your circle of contacts and look for unexpected opportunities to try jobs you weren't planning to do.

- Recognize that you're learning basic subjects. Daily life provides opportunities to learn the basics. In fact, it often requires that we learn more about reading, math, science, social studies, and other subjects. If you are challenged by people who claim you're not getting an education and don't understand the importance of what you are doing, translate some of it into conventional school terms.

- Consider alternatives to college. If you don't have a compelling reason to attend, think about what you can learn from life experience that you can't learn in a classroom. If you really need a degree, consider the advantages to getting part or all of it through CLEP tests (see our column at <http://www.homeedmag.com/HEM/233/takingcharge.html>) and/or distance learning.

Minimize Risks to Homeschooling

Critics eager to find reasons to increase state regulation of homeschooling sometimes claim such regulation is needed to prevent truants and other teens who dislike school from escaping to homeschooling. Here are some ways we can minimize this.

- We can continue to work to have positive stories about homeschooling appear in the media. August is a good time to contact local newspapers and television stations with offers to be interviewed for reports on homeschooling.

- We can offer information, encouragement, and support to families who are homeschooling teens who dislike school. Our help increases the likelihood that they will succeed.

- If we are questioned about truants flocking to homeschooling, we can point out that there is no substantial evidence that this is happening. If it were, there would be many, many more homeschoolers than there are.

Conclusion

Homeschooling has the potential to contribute significantly to the lives of teens who dislike school and even change their lives, especially when their parents and others recognize their strengths and the legitimacy of the their reasons for disliking school. Developing an alternative for teens is a lot of work but pays rich rewards to teens and parents. Homeschoolers who support families in this situation also help prevent homeschooling from being seen as an escape for teens who dislike school.

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"Why Legislation to Prevent 'Unqualified' Families From Homeschooling Won't Work" published in HEM July-August 2004.

<http://www.homeedmag.com/HEM/214/jatch.html>

"Alternatives for 18-Year- Old Homeschoolers" published in HEM September-October 2004.

<http://www.homeedmag.com/HEM/215/sotch.html>

An archive of the Kaseman's writings is on the American Homeschool Association web site:

<http://www.americanhomeschoolassociation.org/info.html>
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