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BBC Radio 2, Jeremy Vine Show. 1PM.

Presented by Fi Glover, standing in for Jeremy Vine.

FG: So school's out for Easter, which means the majority of British children are taking a break from their formal studies, but there's another group of kids to whom normal term time might not apply. They're the ones educated at home. In Britain it's estimated that up to 170 000 children are taught outside school and some say that the figure will rise as more and more parents become disillusioned with the quality of State education. But is it such a good thing? Could homeschooling damage the social and academic development of your children? Mike Fortune-Wood joins us. Mike home educates his four children and has also found time to write a book about it all. Hello Mike.

FG: And Carol Sarler is with us too. Carol is of course a columnist for the Daily Express. Hello Carol. Mike, tell us a little bit about how you home educated your four children.

M FW: We've pretty much followed their own interests over most of the time we've been home educating. As many home educators do when they first start they try to copy school at home but that tends not to work – the children become quite bored with the idea of following some kind of a curriculum and start to develop their own interests, so we generally followed that. Over the years they've changed and developed, but now our children are doing some quite advanced studies.

FG: What's an average day like, though? I mean, your kids, we should say they're 13, 14, 16 and 18 at the moment, but I mean, let's take you back five years when you were educating them, I mean, would you say: 'Right, it's 9 o'clock, we've got to be doing something'?

M FW: [laughs] It rarely happens like that. There is no average day. It can vary enormously from one day to the next. Mostly we'd follow whatever they were interested in at the time. Some of them might have been interested in some particular project work, we may have done visits, we may have gone to the library, we may have visited with other home educating families, or other groups. We may have gone to concerts or whatever. It really is very, very difficult to say.

FG: Did they all take exams and are they all taking exams?

M FW: The oldest three are involved in formal course work now. We didn't do GCSEs or A-levels. The eldest one is doing an Open University degree from home, as is the 16 year-old and our 14 year-old is now taking an Open College of Art course in Art which will lead to a degree as well.

FG: Why did you decide not to make them sit any exams?

M FW: The GCSEs are getting quite difficult to take from home. There's coursework requirements which requires that you have to have somebody formally to mark the work that they're doing. In any event, GCSEs seemed a lot of effort for very little payback. Our eldest boy has got an A-level in philosophy, but in the end –

FG: Did he actually sit that at home?

M FW: Yes he took it from home and took the exam at a local Further Education College as an external candidate.

FG: Right, so you don't actually become the invigilator with the annoying squeaky shoes.

M FW: No, there's a formal way of doing that.

FG: Right. Why did you decide to do this, Mike?

M FW: Initially it was for bullying. My research shows that 44% of people who begin to home educate, when they first start, do so for that reason, although there are, clearly, many, many reasons why people will home educate their children but bullying is the largest single reason for people initially beginning to do so.

FG: Carol, you're allowed to come in now.

CS: [laughs] Well, I think it's... Hello, Mike... I think, you know, it's cheap and despicable to come into a debate with an anecdotal straw poll....

FG: Oh, go on!

CS: But the fact is, the fact is that I've met home educated children, rural ones and city ones, in this country and very recently, in fact, in America where it's becoming quite a movement and the awful truth is, Fi, I've never liked any of them.

FG: Why not? What's different about them?

CS: Well, it's horrible if you don't like a child, isn't it? Because at the same time as you're disliking or being annoyed by the child you're going: 'But it's not their fault. It cannot ever be a child's fault.' And it isn't their fault, but they walk this planet with a sort of sense of entitlement, a little adult precocity that is unattractive. It isn't charming. But you can see how this happens. Nobody can say well all children must be equal, as in, the same. There is always going to be the difference between, I don't know, the Nike trainer or the cheap copy from Woolies or something that is going to make a child feel set apart. But we are talking about education. We are talking about the thing that takes up the largest number of hours in the day and the most days of the week in any child's life which is the collective rough and tumble of education. Now, if you say to a very young child, and essentially this is what you're saying, 'What is good enough for all the other children, is not good enough for you my boy!' you are not doing that child a favour – from day one, you're not. From day one you're saying 'You are different,' and I've never yet met the child who actually enjoys feeling different. Have you?

FG: Mike, do your children know that they're different?

M FW: I'm just wondering if Carol therefore thinks it's reasonable for children to be bullied in school?

CS: No, I don't. But –

M FW: Well then I think that it's reasonable for people to object to that.

CS: Yes I do too and do you know, Mike, you're so artic –

M FW: Bullying in schools is endemic these days –

CS: Are we here to talk about home education or bullying in schools?

M FW: We're talking about the reasons why people home educate and that's what you brought up, just then. You've also seemed to object to precocity in children.

CS: Yuck.

M FW: What I think you're objecting to is children's maturity, children who have an opinion of their own and home-educated children do.

FG: Let me just –

CS: OK. hang on, a point first. No I am not objecting to maturity. This is ridiculous –

M FW: Well, that's what you said. You said you objected to –

FG: Mike, are your children more advanced in terms of their education than other children of their own age and if they are, what's the actual advantage in that? I mean, life tends to be a marathon not a sprint. Is there true value in them getting there first?

M FW: No, not at all. But we just educate to our child's age, ability and aptitude – that's the law and in doing so we've found that our children have simply moved ahead faster than the school systems would normally require them to.

CS: Well you don't know they have. They've not been allowed to sit A-levels. They've not been allowed to do their tests against other children.

M FW: Yes they have. Our eldest boy took an A-level.

CS: One. Philosophy.

M FW: Our eldest took an A-level.

CS: I'm there with Maureen Lipman and her ologies on that one, frankly, but look, the point you're missing here is that it isn't just about how many exams you can or you cannot get. There is a lifelong value in the sentence: 'Sit down, shut up and wait your turn.' Now, if there are 30 people in the class, you learn something from that. If there are 2, you don't. It's not good for them.

FG: Mike, where are your children getting the rough and tumble of social interaction from?

M FW: They're socialising with all the children in the town that we belong to. They get out of an evening and they're invited to events and social gatherings that those kids do, in exactly the same way that everybody else does.

CS: Concerts, you suggested?

M FW: - are members of local organisations like the Scouts and Woodcraft Folk and so on in the same way that children who go to school are. They also socialise among other home-educated children. I think this is a nonsense actually, the idea that home-educated children are in some way peculiar or objectionable. Home educating parents are always being complemented on the behaviour of their children.

CS: Oh, behaviour, yes! Behaviour –

M FW: And attitude and maturity of our children.

CS: No. No. And the other thing is, whatever reason –

M FW: I've never heard of anybody objecting to children in the way Carol has.

CS: I didn't object, I said I didn't like them, which isn't the same thing. But, you know, you're clearly articulate and incredibly motivated. You want the best for your children and one of the things that saddens me about it is, it is precisely the parent who opts, as you have done, to take them out of the system, who could fight the bullying, who could improve our schools, who could make schools better.

M FW: So, you're suggesting I should sacrifice the needs of my children for other people's children. My duty is towards my children, not other people's.

CS: Well, I wonder if you are fulfilling it. I don't like the sound of children who go to **concerts** and **Scouts** and **Woodcraft Folk**. It sounds to me like as soon as they get away from you, they're –

M FW: So now you're objecting to all the organisations –

CS: As soon as they get away from you, they're going to be bullied all over again.

FG: So, Carol. Hang on a sec. What would you rather... What are the children that you like? What do they tend to do? Where are they hanging out?

CS: I like children who know something of the street. I like children who know something wider than the agenda set by their parents. The only children that home-educated children play with are children who meet with the parents' approval. The whole thing is –

M FW: I'm sorry, but that's absolute nonsense. Our children play in the street like everybody else's children.

CS: Well, they shouldn't. It's not safe.

M FW: What?

FG: [laughs] Goodness me! Mike, have any of your children ever said to you, 'Actually, I wouldn't mind giving school a bit of a try?'

M FW: No.

CS: No, I'm sure it's very nice for them. You've already said that you follow **their** interests. You'd hate for them to be bored. My goodness me! If I were never ever to have been taught anything that bored me I couldn't do my ten times table!

M FW: My eldest daughter at the age of 15 to 16 achieved a distinction at Open University-level Science.

CS: I'd rather she was climbing trees and smoking a joint behind the bike sheds.

M FW: Well, I would object to the smoking, but –

CS: Yeah, I bet you would.

M FW: But I have no problem with her climbing trees and she does. In fact, she goes walking, we live in the countryside here, there are mountains at the back of our house and she'd often seen climbing them. She rides her bike around the town and meets with local friends. And I just think that this is a total fallacy that you're setting out and it's a nonsense.

FG: Mike, have any of your children ever had the Mickey taken out of them, though, for not going to school?

M FW: No.

CS: Cos they never get to meet Mickey-takers, do they?

M FW: [laughs]

FG: Mike's children sound like they have a very well-balanced social life.

CS: Fi, can I raise a whole new set of objections here?

FG: You can raise **one**.

CS: Alright, just the one. Some years ago, I was doing a story on a woman in Wales and she was a spectacularly successful home educator. She educated her own children and she educated her foster children and the council were absolutely delighted with her fostering and it was in the process of working on this story that it became apparent that this woman, who was getting wonderful results from the kids, was *having sex with a 14 year-old foster child*. Now, please. I am not going to say,

FG: Well, Carol, that's an **extraordinary** anecdote to bring into any argument –

CS: The only reason I'm raising it is this: If that child had not been in such a closeted, very close, 24-hour a day situation with this woman, do we think the relationship would have developed? I'm not sure, and although this can happen in schools and we do know that there was a schoolmistress in fact jailed two days ago for exactly the same thing, but if it did happen in a school, I think that there is more likelihood that the child would have had somewhere to turn and it would have been noticed. Now what I'm coming down to is that you, Mike, I'm sure, are an absolutely wonderful home educator and would not dream of harming your children or anybody else's, but there are far too few checks on everybody who opts to do this and that has to be a problem.

M FW: I think that's a nonsense. There's around fifteen to twenty-five teachers every year prosecuted for abuse of children. There are 500 allegations of abuse by teachers and that doesn't account for the many thousands that probably –

FG: Leaving, hang on a sec. Hang on –

CS: But you don't even get the allegations because you're not in a system where allegations are likely to be made or easily made.

M FW: I think that's not true.

FG: Hang on, Carol. Mike, what kind of checks are made? Who comes around to make sure that the kids are actually being educated? Does anybody do that? Does the Local Education Authority have to do that?

M FW: The Education Authority don't have a right of access to the home, but if anybody becomes aware of anything then reports are usually made.

CS: And how would people become aware?

M FW: Home educators are very visible within the community. All of our neighbours know that we home educate. I am absolutely certain if one of our children started looking a little odd or was walking around with bruises or was clearly depressed or was in any way behaving strangely, I am absolutely certain that somebody would report it.

CS: The fourteen year-old in my story was neither bruised nor depressed. In fact, he rather enjoyed the nookie as I recall, but it was still **wrong**.

M FW: Well, that's right, and I'm glad it was dealt with.

CS: It wasn't.

M FW: Well then, you were remiss in not reporting it.

CS: We'll go into that another time. There were reasons.

M FW: Well, you should have reported it. You had a legal obligation to report it.

FG: Right. Good Lord. OK, we've gone slightly off at a tangent here, but I've enjoyed the conversation very much. Just before we go, Mike, can I ask you what your own experiences of school were if, in fact, you went to school. You weren't home educated yourself, were you?

MFW: No. I think, looking at my wife and I, our experiences were quite different. My wife was a grammar school child, she went to Cambridge University and did very well. She has a PhD and is also doing an MA in creative writing. My experience was rather different. I went to a rather poor school, I didn't enjoy it at all. I found the whole thing quite depressing and very boring and I came out with virtually nothing. Later on, once I left school and was able to do things that I was more interested in, I got an HNC in electronics and I eventually had a degree in economics.

FG: Mike, thank you very much indeed for talking to us this afternoon.

M FW: Thank you.

FG: That's Mike Fortune Wood and you heard Carol Sarler as well. Thank you very much indeed for coming on, Carol.

CS: My pleasure, but can I just say to Mike: **please** don't forget the value of the fag behind the bike shed.