

Educational Philosophies

Example 5

Autonomous Education for an SEN Child

We are fully aware of our duties derived under Section 7 of the Education Act 1996 to ensure that we provide an efficient, full-time education, suitable to B's age, ability, aptitude and any special educational needs he may have.

With a clear understanding of our legal responsibility our educational philosophy has continued to evolve during the period we have been electively home educating. Although the fundamental principles have remained the same, our understanding of an education, which is of intrinsic benefit to the individual has developed and we are now able to ensure B's educational needs are met without being constrained by any artificial boundaries between education, learning and life.

The fundamental principles of our educational approach have remained the same because they are the values and beliefs that have always underpinned our parenting, our influences drawn from Carl Rogers, Abraham Maslow and Dr Haim Ginott amongst others. In addition our educational approach continues to be influenced by studying the many and varied books and articles currently in the public domain, written by a variety of authors including John Holt, Roland Meighan, Jan Fortune-Wood, Ivan Illich, John Taylor Gatto, Linda Dobson and also the huge body of information currently available about home-based education on the internet.

Our elective home-based education is centred on a whole life, self-directed learning approach. Learning takes place all the time naturally and continually in the home and community environment. We believe B is always the person best placed to know what he wants and needs to learn, that following B's desire to know, understand or acquire a particular skill or piece of information we will provide him with opportunity and access to appropriate resources, whether they be externally placed e.g. museum, leisure centre, library, suitable course of study etc or internally placed e.g. television, books, internet, programme of work etc. We ensure that he is provided with a rich and stimulating environment in which to learn and that he is allowed to find out what he is interested in by being exposed to a variety of interests, experiences, people, beliefs and relationships

That he is allowed the freedom to experiment without fear of failure and negative criticism, we have always fostered the belief in our family that there is no such thing as a mistake, only a learning experience. This ensures that the emphasis is placed on what can be learnt from any given situation and on any action that needs taking in order to move things in a helpful and productive direction.

We encourage lots of verbal interaction, this being one of the most valuable aspects of our educational provision. Warm, responsive communication enables B to share his interests, news, information, and ideas and gives him opportunity to express his needs and desires. Practicing empathic listening and active attention allows us to be alert to B's affective and cognitive needs, in order that they may be supported and nourished.

It is often through explanation of a concept, discussion of an area of interest or simple communication of information that B is able to unconsciously assimilate and internalise newfound knowledge. Additionally simple conversations often sparked by seemingly innocuous events can lead to the deepest philosophical discussions, debates and areas of research or can simply in an instant cause one or both parties to find instant clarity of thought.

Whilst encouraging verbal interaction in an atmosphere of mutual respect we also facilitate space for quiet contemplation where B can develop ideas and concepts at his own speed.

We aim to enable B to foster the confidence to ask questions of whomever, wherever and if questions are asked of others, or us which cannot be immediately answered to develop skills and strategies to find out more information. B's questioning, his making sense of his world and the information in it as it directly relates to him forms the very foundation of his learning. B leads his education in the direction he needs to take it in order to find out what he needs to know.

Our home-based education allows for a high degree of flexibility and spontaneity. This ensures that we can meet B's needs in an extremely efficient way, which we would be unable to do if constrained by an artificial timetable or subject boundaries. B is able to follow his interests and aptitudes quite naturally until his interest moves on. As he is intellectually motivated by his natural curiosity, he is able to pursue work that is meaningful to him. This very creative process allows B to satisfy his need for knowledge within any given area; he is able to fuse one piece of knowledge to another without the artificial limitations of a predestined journey into a specific area in isolation.

Similarly B's 'work' is produced not for the fulfilment of others, but for the fulfilment of self. This ensures there is no pressure on B to 'perform' as we believe this would interfere with the natural learning process. One outcome of producing work for the fulfilment of others, especially where a value judgement will be forthcoming is a natural tendency to stick to known areas of competency, stifling learning and creativity.

We believe value judgements are one of the easiest ways to block the natural learning process. The learner becomes unwilling to disclose feelings of insecurity or lack of intellectual understanding, feeling they will be negatively judged. Thus, learning becomes associated with fear of failure instead of excitement of discovery. No value judgements are imposed on anything B offers for appraisal; instead specific descriptive feedback is given. Specific descriptive feedback is honest and congruent and enables the learner to be honest and congruent about his own endeavours in return.

As B's work is produced for the fulfilment of self it is imperative that he controls who sees it and for what purpose, e.g. his 'work' being used to judge educational provision would have a corrosive effect on the learning process, leading to pressure to perform. By contrast any self-imposed challenges, such as B's commitment to the Dyslexia Institute's Multi-Sensory Literacy Programme and the inherent evaluation of the learner involved in that process has a positive reinforcing effect precisely because it is a self-imposed challenge.

Aims:

We believe that the approach we are providing will allow B to continue with the natural process of life-long learning.

That he will naturally acquire through our approach to education the emotional and cognitive intelligence required to function in a modern and civilised society.

That he will bring that emotional and cognitive intelligence to all his learning and life decisions.

That he will follow his intrinsic motivations and interests in order to decide in which directions he wants to take his learning.

That he will continue to meet his 'special educational needs' in the manner of his choosing with our continued support and understanding.

In the short term we aim to ensure that B is allowed to continue to heal, both psychologically and intellectually from his school experience and the recent arbitrary actions of the local education authority.

In conclusion:

Our home-based education is efficient by definition in that it achieves that which it sets out to achieve moment by moment; as any learning undertaken is in direct response to the learner's intrinsic motivation. B's interests, drives and aptitudes are the driving force behind his learning, thus his learning is naturally at his precise ability level and therefore inherently suitable to his age. As our educational approach is a whole life approach with no artificial boundaries dividing the two it is by definition full-time.

B's diagnosis of dyslexia is of less consequence now that he is receiving a home and community based education. B's learning style is very simply B's learning style. As A.S Neil, creator of Summerhill, succinctly puts it:-

"When my wife and I began, we had one main idea ... to make the school fit the child instead of making the child fit the school."

(A.S. Neil, 1937)

This concept is at the core of our learning approach, we support B in his endeavours as he moulds his learning to meet his needs. He is able with our facilitation to seek appropriate help and resources, ensuring that he is able to learn in the way most efficient for him.

Home-based education and parenting are synonymous with the learning process. It seems to us that learning is as natural at birth and in small pre-school children as breathing, yet somehow this natural desire is often extinguished during the maturation process. Much of what we have seen B wrestling with during the past 4 years has been the unburdening of the mantle of passive learner to be instructed and the reclaiming of self and the natural desire to understand himself, his family, his community, his environment, his world.

"The easily observable fact is that children are passionately eager to make as much sense as they can of the world around them, are extremely good at it, and do it as scientists do, by creating knowledge out of experience"

John Holt, *Learning All The Time* 1989