

# What did you learn today, Mum?

by Jan Fortune-Wood

The mantra of life-long learning is a useful sound-bite for a government whose education policy never seems to deliver the hoped for promise, but for home educators it is much more than that. For many home educating parents life-long learning is as integral to every day existence as cooking or shopping.

The very best teachers have always known that learning is a mutual process. A friend of mine in his 80s, who was once my A level teacher, wrote on my last sixth form report card, “who is the teacher?” This was someone who was always seen as a nonconformist in institutional terms and was lucky enough to be teaching in an idiosyncratic institution that didn’t shy away from recruiting mavericks. Despite government spin few teachers now have the time or luxury to learn alongside their pupils; there is far too much bureaucratic paper-filling for that. Home educating parents, though, are more privileged; something that has been brought home to me most forcefully in the last few years of our own home educating adventure.

Home education takes us down all kinds of unexpected learning paths. Far from finding ourselves in the traditional teacher-pupil relationship with our children, what many people actually discover is that the whole of life really is for learning; that parents always have more to learn than to give.

As an autonomously educating family, this kind of learning has been going on for us for many years – the whole family makes new knowledge together and the seeds of this knowledge often come from places that I certainly wouldn’t have predicted when I first had small children. When we began to home educate I had a very school-defined picture of education, having been not only a product of the system, but also a teacher. My list of ‘educational’ and ‘not educational’ was well developed and robust. It was also mistaken.

It took a couple of years for my children to teach me that learning isn’t what it’s traditionally made out to be and our home changed accordingly. Long after the useless labelling of activities into ‘educational’ and ‘non educational’ boxes had been eradicated there were still days when I wondered whether we were mad to swim against the tide like this and doubted where it might all end up. The notion of education as a system of outcomes and products is, after all, culturally dominant and deeply rooted in our thinking; it doesn’t change without a struggle.

We often hear of LEAs demanding to see children’s work, but for many home educators this is akin to asking to see inside our children’s brains. If we throw off the idea that learning is about timetables and curricula and if we find that the lines of demarcation between learning and simply getting on with life gradually fade away to nothing, then the idea of visible work may make less and less sense. A month of “education” might amount to a thousand fascinating conversations, several country walks, friends, a lot of messy art, foray to the library, videos watched and summer we might have. If it’s cold outside we long days reading story from light pollution we sky at night and sleeping late in the morning...

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visits to home education groups or craft, cooking or experimenting, a museum, cinema or ice rink, a list of computer games played. If it’s been camping, canoeing or climbing, might have huddled on the bed for after story. If we live in an area free might have spent hours gazing at the

We can feel confident that a great deal of knowledge is being built up but it is extraordinarily hard

to quantify. There may be little or no written work, beyond a few jottings on the backs of envelopes. There may be no lesson plans, no multi-coloured tables of learning objectives neatly ticked off as 'achieved'. So what have we been doing for all those years and what have we learnt?

Oddly no-one asks this in the first three or four years of life when children, without the aid of plans and formal monitoring procedures, learn the most amazing range of skills and knowledge. Yet as children it grow it seems we just can't help ourselves. We are conditioned to fear the worst unless children are 'made to learn', which inevitably means being schooled, whether at school or home. We are further conditioned to keep checking up, to distrust any learning that can't be weighed and measured at regular intervals. Yet the fact is that a great deal of learning is not about readily articulated knowledge or checkable facts. Most learning takes place inside a person, and most of what we 'know' and what is valuable to us in life is not available on the surface. Furthermore, we know full well that things of value have gestation periods.

When we plant a bag of bulbs we wait for them to germinate, shoot and reveal the final flower. We don't keep digging them up to see how they are doing and if we did they would fare very badly. The realm of ideas is analogous. Ideas grow inside people; they are essentially private, multi-layered and only a small part of an idea will ever surface in an articulate form, and even then only in its own good time.

Eventually the penny dropped for us that we couldn't keep taking the temperature of our educational provision. We had to simply get on and live it. This revelation, which was arrived at because our children were way ahead of us in knowing it already, meant that we had several years of fruitfully learning together in patterns that, to the outside world, may have appeared random, chaotic or not like 'education' at all. We became gradually more confident, more trusting of the innate urge to learn all the time and more questioning of the paraphernalia of traditional educational development. In fact, we became so accustomed to this integrated lifestyle of learning and living, that its latest twist took us completely by surprise.

Bulbs that are planted, tended and given the best soil and conditions eventually come up and put on an amazing spring-time display of colour, scent and beauty. Of course, we might not get what we expected – the mixed bag may have some surprises in it – and so with life. Most of what autonomously educated children learn will remain in their private minds, not amenable to testing, perhaps not even articulated, but some of it will suddenly flourish in the world and the blossoms can come in quite unexpected shapes and colours.

How does years of reading stories, doing the odd kitchen experiment, baking cakes, watching TV, talking, talking and more talking become (with what seems like extraordinary rapidity when we haven't been able to witness the internal gestation) a love of philosophy or an ability to critique and deconstruct literature or an understanding of complex scientific methodology and principles or an outpouring of artistic creativity?

Conventional educational theory tells us that we can only achieve such things by going through painstaking formal steps, by constructing knowledge as a series of carefully interlocking building blocks beginning from a young age. However, we have experienced something quite contrary to this. It's not magic. Children don't go from having no knowledge to university level science courses by some unidentifiable mystical process. On the other hand, despite what traditional schooling would have us believe, children can and do go from having no formal study to university level science courses (as an example) when they are accustomed to learning by living and when they are confident that problems are there to be solved, not to obstruct them. In short, when children are used to thinking they can do anything they are interested in and have enough passion for the subject then they find a way to learn anything.

It seems counter-intuitive and it certainly runs against the grain of the school-mill, but we really shouldn't be surprised when children who have spent the last eight or ten years apparently mooching around doing a bit of this, a bit of that, and a lot of playing, suddenly throw themselves into acquiring skills or knowledge that would make many adult survivors of the formal education system blanch. That's certainly what happened to us and although I'm sure we shouldn't have been surprised, it still took our breath away.

Our ultra-laid back, mooching around household suddenly became a hive of more formalised academic industry. What remains fundamentally different from any conventional education environment is that every activity taking place is the passion of the person doing it. There is no forced academic drudgery at the behest of the system, only self fulfilment. In this new phase learning is as it always was – done only because it interests and is wanted. The methods are different, but the motivation the same. Of course the nature of parental input has had to adjust to the new methods.

My days are currently filled helping with a whole range of learning styles – on the one hand assisting with formal courses of study in politics, literature, biology, art or French, on the other hand still joining in with informal passions for philosophy, poetry or history and, of course, maintaining the autonomous environment in which conversation and fun predominate.

All of this brings me back to my original question, "What did you learn today, Mum?" My own academic background is in the areas of theology, education and literature. I've studied philosophy, but not half as much as I needed to be able to go on helping one of my children in the last few years. I work as an editor and write fiction and poetry, so it has been a joy to share and broaden these interests with one of my children, but I never expected to find myself grappling with serious scientific study and maths

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in my forties. teacher. I am simply alongside the build the knowledge needed. What is that all the things I've always claimed really are just that: more than ever I with a real interest can plunge into have the intrinsic motivation to do so,

Autonomously educated children can learn anything they want, from carpentry to physics; from how to paint to history. Moreover, they can do so without having to endure years of mind deadening lessons that serve only to make them believe that studying is a hard and gradual slog that will probably tire them out before they ever reach their goals.

This is the secret that traditional educators don't want to admit to: you can spend your childhood playing, talking, baking, hiking, making dens and watching TV and still build all the knowledge you need to progress to any academic or practical discipline that interests you as a young adult. Imagine what would happen if children and parents en mass realised that!

The other secret is just as powerful – you can help your child to learn anything, even something you know nothing about, even something that might once have paralysed you with fear at the very thought of it. You can do this for the same reason that your children can learn anything without all those years of schooling; simply by being passionate about helping your children and open minded enough to keep learning, asking for help when you need it.

Flourishing educationally is not about pre-set outcomes. It is about achieving whatever an individual wants to achieve. Years of formal preparation, constant testing and monitoring,

together with tuition from those who set themselves up as the guardians of knowledge are not the secrets of education after all. In the last few years I've studied subject specific disciplines from languages to arts, social sciences to humanities, literature to science, maths to creative writing. It has been a fantastic learning journey, but not more fantastic than the years spent walking and talking and story telling. What has been more fantastic than any 'subject' learnt along the way is the more profound knowledge that there are as many ways to learn as there are people; that learning is so much more than fits on pieces of paper.

The secret for parents is not to believe we have to be experts – the world is full of resources and help – but to be as open minded as our passionate, creative, inquisitive children. The secret for parents and children alike is to learn whatever we want when we have the passion to do it. The secret is that life is the true arena for learning – something that the powers that be probably hope we won't take as seriously as we do.