

OAKTAG AND EYEBALLS:
THOUGHTS ON CHILDREN, EDUCATION, AND SOCIETY

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NOTE: THIS FILE CONTAINS ONLY THE INTRODUCTION AND FIRST TWO CHAPTERS OF THE BOOK; ANOTHER FILE CONTAINS THE LAST THREE CHAPTERS.

NOTE: This book was written about eight years ago; at the time I was teaching math fulltime at Drexel University; Devin, my youngest child, was 12 years old, and my then-husband was in the later stages of multiple sclerosis, and living in a nursing-home. The circumstances of my family's life are, of course, somewhat different now.

NOTE: Some of the material in this book has appeared in Growing without Schooling, Home Education Magazine, Pennsylvania Home Education News, and Mothering.

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A LONG GET-ACQUAINTED INTRODUCTION

When I was ten or eleven, my mother told me about a newspaper article which had caught her attention and which, so it seemed to me, she'd felt was pertinent to our family and its way of thinking. The article was about a sixth grader, around my own age, who was working on some project (a giant collage, perhaps, or a construction paper fairy village with quarter-inch houses and stores taped to sidewalks drawn on a cutting board swiped from the kitchen, much like the one my sister and I were making at the time). Whatever it was, the girl was so absorbed in it that she insisted on working on it through all her waking hours. In the throes of inspiration and energy, she neither could nor wanted to get away from it, much as an adult artist or inventor might be. So important was it to her that she refused to go to school.

She would resume her normal activities, she politely explained to everyone, when the project was finished. In the meantime, this project took priority. The adults in her life listened to her. Her parents and teachers held a conference, or two, and decided to allow her to stay out of school for the duration of the project. I had the feeling that her parents and teachers must have been something like my own parents teachers who, as my mother later told me, had already agreed with one another to "leave Marion alone. She's a different sort of child". In my case, it was a matter of looking the other way when they noticed me daydreaming. Perhaps, if I had been in the same sort of situation as the girl in the newspaper article and had pulled the same ultimatum, the adults in my life would have acted similarly.

In fact, I remember growing up with the vague feeling that, if anything vital in my life or work were ever to conflict with school, it would be school that would have to go. Over the years, this feeling has carried over into my adult life, and especially into my life as a parent, with children in school. I have always kept school in a kind of perspective. Even before our family began home-schooling, we have always kept to the mindset of that article which my mother so long ago shared with me: school is not the ONLY way to live and learn; in fact, it might not be the BEST way, and at least at times, it runs the risk of PREVENTING living and learning in the best ways. That article, and things like it, have certainly been food for thought.

The history of the world's accomplishments and breakthroughs includes numerous examples of artists, writers, scientists, inventors, and so on dropping out of both school and employment, or out of any set pattern of life, temporarily or permanently. I believe that it would be a good thing if creative, and perhaps also non-creative, people were free to evaluate and decide WHEN to drop out, as well as when to not drop out, or when to drop back in -- and if society could be able and willing to support these informed and serious decisions, as it did for the girl in the newspaper article of my childhood.

At this point I would like to address any readers who might feel that all this sounds "spoiled" or "privileged", or who might be thinking "But what about responsibility?" -- Yes, responsibility is important. In fact, responsibility is a word that will be appearing quite frequently throughout this book. ULTIMATE responsibility is, in more ways than one, what the ideas in this book are all about. What is responsibility? Responsibility for what? It is my belief that, to a large extent, responsibility is meaningful only when it is responsibility for things which we have chosen ourselves, in an informed and, yes, responsible manner. For example, to talk about a slave's "responsibility" to his master would, many would agree, make no sense. And so, perhaps, would it make no sense to talk about the "responsibility" of the girl in that article towards her school and schoolwork. Indeed, she felt that her responsibility was to her PROJECT. And perhaps EVERYONE's first, and ultimate, responsibility is to determine what her responsibilities are -- what our projects are.

Is it spoiled, privileged, or irresponsible to choose what has not been chosen for us? Is it

spoiled to question the compulsariness, or even the very existence, of schools and of other educational institutions. I think not.

A more subtle, but related, question is: With all the atrocities in the world today, does it make sense to put energy into worrying about the kinds of things I have just been talking about -- in particular, whether or not a sixth grader should be allowed to forgo schoolwork to work on her project? The last chapter of this book specifically tries to show how educational issues CONNECT with the political issues of recent decades. Throughout the book, also, are many allusions to this.

For now: Consider that, if and when humankind achieves a Utopia (without, for example, war, bigotry, poverty or other forms of financial deprivation and worry, and without atrocity), we are going to have to determine how to RUN that Utopia. In particular, it will then make sense to try to determine how to treat, indeed how to perceive, our children. And it may well be that, for optimal attitudes towards and treatment of children (and adults), schools and other institutions will have to play a very different, and possibly diminished, societal role.

Getting back to the girl's project, suppose that she had needed, not weeks, but YEARS to work on it? (And suppose that project had been something like a cure for cancer?) Suppose, on the other hand, that the project were a SMALL thing, not a specific project at all but a thought, a vague idea? Or perhaps the GERM of an idea, which school had PREVENTED from reaching even idea-status? Or suppose that girl had been a woman, and school had been her job? The question then arises: would it be too much to expect society (at least the way it is right now) to completely accommodate everyone who thought she might be onto something that might save the world?

Well, society could PARTIALLY accommodate. It could FEEL accommodating. It could have an accommodating ATTITUDE. It could TRY. And, if it was unable to succeed, it could be respectful and non-punitive. I believe that, even considering reality, the right MINDSET could make a difference.

To me, the memory of this sixth grader invokes my belief in a citizen's right to give to society what she has to give, to cultivate what she needs to cultivate in order to be able to give it -- and to be respected, listened to, and permitted to give -- maybe even paid. It is about a citizen's right to do her part. In fact, it might be said that this is SOCIETY'S right, also. At the very least, it's a nice dream, a nice mindset, a nice thing to keep in mind, to put to use if and when we achieve our Utopia.

SCHOOL DAZE: MOSTLY A MEMOIRE

This book is NOT only about home-schooling. More specifically, it is about how people might relate to children, and therefore to one another. However, you're bound to notice that in these pages home-schooling is mentioned, to put it mildly, quite frequently. Here are some reasons why:

- 1) for the same reasons that "school" is mentioned so frequently (namely, it's a kind of lifestyle)
- 2) My own two youngest children home-schooled for eight years and, now that they have also been in school and college, I still believe basically the same things that I believed while home-schooling. These "same things" are what this book is about.
- 3) The experience of home-schooling enhanced, sharpened, and added to these beliefs. That is, it was deeply incorporated into the process of writing this book.
- 4) In fact, I believe that "home-schooling ideas" are necessary (though not sufficient) to the care and maintenance of a nice society. (Yes, I mean to use the word "nice".)
- 5) Thinking about home-schooling leads to thinking about many other ideas. (As I say later on, questioning school can lead to questioning everything -- including, as elaborated on later, practices common to many HOME-schooling families -- but NOT INHERENT to home-schooling -- In fact, these are often practices carried over from conventional schooling.

Note/Disclaimer: Most of the questioning and warnings that go on in this book, have, as its object, both conventional schools and home-schools. However, some of it is about only conventional schools. So, although I'd like to maintain "parallel structure", I can't always.

This introduction is here, as it claims, for the purpose of "getting acquainted" -- with home-schooling, with conventional schooling, and with me and my family. If you already know about and feel comfortable with the idea of home-schooling (especially if you've read some of my own home-schooling writings), you might want to skip over some of it. But, before deciding to do, I suggest you read the next-to-the-last section ("Personal Statement") of this Introduction, in which appear ideas not often said in the home-schooling literature. Also, you might want to check out the very-last section ("Summary of the Rest of This Book") -- in order, perhaps, to skip the whole book! And now, for those who would like to "get acquainted":

Many home-schooling parents, and parents who are considering home-schooling for their families, recall their own school "daze" with loathing -- or rather, more loathing than fondness. "I HATED school," many say. Lorraine Clark, one of the first home-schooling mothers that I met, says of her impressions upon starting kindergarden: "All of a sudden there was this all-encompassing thing called school. There was never time for anything after that."

My own impressions of school are more subtle. I did not hate school; in fact, I remember liking it. Nor do I remember being conscious of it preventing me from doing anything else; indeed, my friends and I did many of the wonderful and autonomous things that my home-schooling kids do now, and my teachers often praised and encouraged me for my "projects". But I also remember liking Friday. And the end of June. Indeed, feeling thoroughly ecstatic, as though relieved, though temporarily, of a heavy burden. Also, my memories of school are different, somehow, from my other childhood memories. They're cloudier, hazier -- indeed, more like a "daze", as in "School Daze" (a term coined by non-home-schoolers, I'm sure). And they're shorter. That is, each remembered incident is shorter. It's as though it rises briefly and then

sinks, perhaps like a repressed memory of abuse.

For example, the one of being in fifth grade. Just being there. The teacher, Mr. Reuter. The classroom wider than it was long. And me in the left-most column, not row, three or four seats from the front. That's it; no incident, no anecdote, no direct quotes from anybody. And no impressions other than that I was there. Also, though, the room seemed like a VEHICLE of some sort, perhaps a DOCKED vehicle. And how do I know that it was fifth grade? I just know. Fifth-grade-ness was an ever-present GIVEN. (In all fairness, I have that same feeling about ages, so perhaps none of this is a function of school.)

I sometimes think that school was so long, so many hours away from home, away from other things -- just AWAY. Perhaps, to the child me, it was as long as a lifetime, or as long as the time the Narnia Chronicles children stayed away from their homes and lives. Or perhaps school was, in some quiet way, traumatic, so much so that I now block it out. Perhaps, even, that's why some parents and other adults are so resistant to home-schooling ideas and to questioning school; perhaps they need, emotionally, to keep blocking out their own childhood memories of school.

Remembering also brings the feeling of being in a roomful of kids, as opposed to only my sister and me or a small group of neighborhood kids. The feeling of all of us sitting in a matrix of desks instead of on the front porch or around the kitchen table. The feeling of being under the care of a teacher instead of somebody's mother. The feeling, as I once wrote in a poem, of the teacher being a kind of "Klimt's mother", all of us clutching, perhaps even balancing on, her robe.

I remember the spring before I started kindergarden, the visit my mother and I made to the school. My mother and I sitting with the principal in her office. The principal (whose name, Mrs. Welsh, stands out, as all names associated with school seem to stand out) probably spoke kindly to me. She probably said something like "This is where you'll be going next year. Would you like to come here next year?" My mother probably nodded and smiled; she probably touched my shoulder or put her arm around me. and I probably, vaguely, thought something like "How far off is next year?" -- or did NOT think to think that. I remember the way the chairs were arranged, along with the feeling that my future, or SOMETHING, was being plotted. I might have realized that it was no more my mother's choice that it was mine. I might have recognized a complete lack of control on everybody's part.

I remember my first day of kindergarten, mostly walking to school with the other kids. Some of the kids were different kids from the ones I usually played with. I also remember the brick outside wall of that school, and the steps, two of them, and a door, THE door. And the memory of my first day of school does not go in that door.

More clearly I remember the SECOND day of school. Lunchtime. Or was it recess? I don't remember WANTING to go home; what I remember is SETTING OUT to go home. Setting out in some arbitrary direction. Right or wrong -- It didn't matter because I didn't get far. A teacher, or somebody, asked me, "Where are you going?" "Home," I answered. "Oh," she told me, probably kindly, "You're not allowed to go home." And I wonder: What am I NOT remembering? What are these "screen memories" FOR?

We were allowed to bring our toys to school. But we had to leave them on the table by the door. I remember hoisting my Janey doll by her legs and flinging her onto what to me was a very high surface, up to my shoulders. Only vaguely do I remember the feeling of relinquishment, the slight worry that the dolls would get mixed up, that someone would take Janey by mistake. The bottom-line feeling was again loss of control, at a level a couple of rungs higher than that associated with childhood in general.

It was kindergarden; most of the time we played. Or so my mother later told me. So why do I remember the blackboard? Why do I remember "make three red balls"? Why do I remember so much sitting? Me left row back seat, Jackie right row front seat, and the bully, Steve, somewhere in the middle. Why don't I remember playing?

With a photographic memory I can re-create the mats on which we napped (though not the napping itself) and the story-hour corner (though none of the stories -- although, admittedly, at least nice songs that I still hum pretty often). Again, it's different from other childhood memories. It feels like a guided tour of PLACES -- no time, no action, just place.

An exception was one incident from kindergarten. I call it "the Venetian blind incident". The teacher had asked me to do something and I had said "no".

"Sit in the corner," I was told.

"No."

Very possibly I had decided that, no matter what she said, I could, as the saying now goes, "just say no".

But when she suggested sitting by the window, that somehow appealed to me. I remember playing with the Venetian blind cords, pulling and twisting them and eventually tying them into knots. Soon it became like biting my nails. I didn't mean to, but before I knew it, the knots had become quite knotted.

I couldn't untie them. I kept trying. I began to get worried. I didn't tell the teacher. When I got home I didn't tell my mother. All that evening and the next morning, I was afraid I'd done some horrible impossible-to-undo thing; the blinds would never work again and the whole school would somehow be broken. I'd never tell or maybe I would; either way I'd always have been a very bad little girl.

But when I got to school I looked over at the cord and it was completely free of knots. All I remember thinking was "oh".

I skipped first grade. "Because of your age," said my jealous friend Frances. "Because you already knew everything they were teaching," said my mother, years later.

Everyone had been very cautious and considerate about skipping me. My parents, teachers, and principal had held at least one meeting. Would I adjust? Would it go smoothly for me? We had recently moved; this was probably the best time to skip, since I hadn't yet formed my friendships; in fact, a girl I liked was in the second grade and would be in my new class. How did I feel about the whole thing? I'm sure I was asked.

But what I REMEMBER is standing outside the auditorium doors, a week or so after the skipping. The fifth grade was putting on a play; the kids were dressed as flowers; beautiful pastel colors took up the entire stage. I remember wanting very badly to go through those doors and watch the play. But it was the first grade's assembly day, and when it had been the second grade's turn, I had been in first grade. I would never, I knew, be with those pretty pastel flowers.

For years to come, throughout my childhood and beyond, I vaguely felt the loss of that year. "If I hadn't skipped first grade," I later wrote in a poem, "I'd've had one more year without changing classes and men teachers. . . I'd've had one more year at the old school, one more year without

wearing lipstick and stocking, without all my friends smoking and talking about boys . . . If I hadn't skipped first grade, " I concluded. "I'd be one year younger. If I hadn't skipped first grade, I'd still be a child."

Grade, indeed, was equivalent to age. School, indeed, was equivalent to life.

I used to try to please the teacher. Not by "brown nosing", which I was brought up to abhor, and not by "blowing my own horn", which was equally looked down upon in the household in which I was brought up. Instead I tried to gain attention and admiration in more subtle ways. I called it "creeping into the teacher's heart". Every year when I started a new grade with a new teacher, my mother would jokingly ask, "Well, did you creep into the teacher's heart yet?" And I usually had. I knew what my strengths were; namely, I was sensitive, quiet, creative, and different. And I was also "school-smart". I played those strengths. I wrote stories and drew pictures for "extra credit" (not, I now realize, even knowing what the term "extra credit" meant; to me it meant doing work that wasn't assigned or done in class). And I played the piano. Perhaps I even SPECIFICALLY acted quiet, sensitive, different, even not always popular with the other kids.

I was already getting all A's. Further, neither my parents nor I particularly CARED about A's. Apparently, however, I wanted to or needed MORE than A's. Perhaps what I wanted, and needed, was the attention -- the HEART -- of the teacher. Perhaps what I wanted and needed was the same kind of attention from my teachers that I was getting -- or wanted to get -- from my mother. If, six hours a day, I couldn't have my mother, I'd settle for the teacher.

Or perhaps I already knew what I know now, that in order to give society whatever it is that I have to give, I had to first determine what that thing is. And it isn't getting A's. Rather, it's MAKING UP THE SUBJECT MATTER, which in my mind might have entailed becoming colleagues of some sort with those adults who also made up the subject matter -- namely, as my child mind might have perceived things, the teachers.

In my childhood school life I was lucky for the most part. Both my parents and my teachers ALLOWED me to creep into their hearts. In fourth grade, for example, they let me, during Reading, work on math; I remember writing out the four times tables and trying to determine a pattern, a way in which "Mr. Magic 9" ideas could apply to "Mr. Magic 4". Also, my school didn't give homework so my afternoons, evenings, and weekends, were completely free. But the fact that I liked school does not mean that school was the best thing for me. Indeed, I might have liked life WITHOUT school more. I might even have accomplished more. (or less) Who can say?

Kitty Anderson, who coordinates Center City Home-Schoolers with me, has an interesting memory of her sixth grade year. Like me, she liked school. She was a model student, both grade-wise and behavior-wise. But one day she misbehaved, for the very first time, and was reprimanded. No mention was made of her prior (and future) good behavior. "Oh, I see," she thought -- with the force of conscious revelation. "They want ALL of me. They want IT ALL."

In fifth grade we began "changing classes", meaning a different teacher for each subject. Also, they began to give us more responsibility, things to keep track of. We had to remember to bring notes home, bring lunch and money for school trips. Reports were due every few months. I would worry about it all, the way adults worry about dentist appointments or job interviews. If something was due on a particular day, I'd divide all of time up into before and after that day. I'd be relieved when that day was over.

I actually CALLED them "my worries". And usually, as soon as one worry was over, another worry had already begun.

THE MAKING OF A HOME-SCHOOLING FAMILY

When my son Arin was in first grade, he came home from school one day and handed me a spelling test. "SIG," it read in bold letters. "RIG, THIG, SIGIG." A proud, perhaps naive, mother, I smiled to myself and thought, "My little Arin! He actually knows these words, or almost knows them. Ring, thing, singing... he's actually writing, and I can read and understand what he's writing!" But my joy quickly turned to heart-thumping when I saw what had been written in red at the top of the paper. "VERY VERY POOR."

What school does, I sadly reflected, is take "perfectly adequate," which is what most kids and most people are, and divide it into petty little categories. First, from VERY GOOD to VERY VERY POOR,, then I to 5, then A to F. It all seemed so unnecessary, and harmful, and, again, petty. "RIG", "SIG", AND "SIGIG" was a step towards "Ring", "thing", and "singing" ; it was a step which would obviously eventually, if not soon, get there. I couldn't, and can't, see what all the fuss and worry and VERY VERY POOR was about. Arin did learn to read, and soon enough, and now he reads a lot; he reads because he wants or needs to read; and having once written SIG, THIG, and SIGIG posed no problem that I (nor any of his later teachers in school) could discern.

In short, school -- and school-type things -- make too much of a big deal about little nonsenses. Everyone seems so nervous -- almost, sometimes, as though they WANT to be nervous. When, I often find myself facetiously asking, are they going to grow up?!

Over the years similar incidents, and similar reflections concerning these incidents, caused my husband and me to be very strong believers in what is now called home-schooling. We saw that consciously trying to teach children things which they would probably eventually learn anyway, or which they did not necessarily need to learn, did not seem to be the optimal way to go about things. It seemed complicated, negative, and unnecessary. We read books by authors such as John Holt and Nancy Wallace, and subscribed to various home-schooling newsletters such as Growing without Schooling (nicknamed GWS). As we continued our lives as the parents of school-aged children, we asked ourselves questions; If a student fails a test, and then passes a later test, why can't the later and better grade count? Sure, in adult life, there are situations where you don't "get a second chance," but school isn't adult life. Do kids need to go overboard in "getting ready for" adult life? What difference, we asked, does it make if a child learns third-grade material at fourth-grade age? If school is "preparation for life," why is one year considered so important? And how is a beginner supposed to distinguish between the math motivation and the math itself? And why is reading considered a separate subject, when kids are constantly reading in their OTHER subjects? Isn't a history book a book? Aren't ALL books "reading books"?

Marielle's kindergarten teacher would tell me about her reading. "She CAN do it; she just doesn't." Later we'd overhear her say similar things to the other parents and, four years later, about Arin. I realized that, when I was a kid, that's what some of my teachers said to my parents. I also recalled the psychological test I was given because I wasn't "functioning up to capacity." Just because a child has "capacity", or "potential", we'd ask ourselves, does that mean she MUST produce? And immediately, and continuously? Can't it go in spurts, the way things really happen? Or can't it wait; must the ABILITY to perform instantaneously become performance itself? Can't there be some "practice time" or "rest time"?

When Marielle was just starting kindergarten, I had several meetings with the very accessible and accommodating principal, Mr. Brown, concerning her teacher, whom I and many

of the other parents perceived as being too strict. During one such conference Mr. Brown looked wistful. "You know," he began, "I see them come in as kindergarteners and they're so cute, so happy, so open. And then I see them go out as eighth-graders and they're so different, so angry-looking, so hostile, so unhappy. And I wonder, what do we do to them?"

"Do you want me to answer that?" I asked.

"Sure," he shrugged seriously.

"Well," I began. "Well, of course, they grow up; they become adolescents -- confused, scared, etc. , just because of their AGE. But also --" I looked up and he nodded. "-- what we do to them is send them to school. School is... well, school is school. It's something they have to do. It's compulsory, it's often degrading, it's every day, it's ... it's school."

I was not explaining it very well but Mr. Brown nodded and said, "You're probably right."

Why was I not yet home-schooling? Partly because I knew I would have to ask permission and I was afraid to. Also, I thought home-schooling would be time-consuming; I thought it wouldn't leave me time and space for writing or other endeavors. Also, perhaps, for the same reason that Mr. Brown was continuing to be school principal. Schooling was the norm, the status quo. We would have to break the inertia in order to stop schooling. The burden of proof was not on schooling but on home-schooling.

Indeed, there were and are many people -- most people, in fact, whom I have encountered -- who believe in home-schooling, who agree with me on a lot of the issues -- but who are not home-schooling, many of them for those same reasons.

During that first year of my life as the mother of a school-aged child, the parents used to congregate in the school yard. I was not the only one who felt a general discomfort around the idea of sending a child off to school for the first time, and with the idea of school in general. I was not the only one to remark, "The teacher seems so military" and "Can't she just say 'good morning' to the kids, instead of right away ordering them around, telling them what to do?" But I was the only one to say, "WHY do we send them to school? Couldn't they learn just as much at home and do just as well?"

At this the other parents were at first silent. Then one of them said, "Well, school is GOOD for kids?..." She left her sentence trailing and sort of shrugged. Then another began, "They get a chance to meet other kids..." She also gestured helplessly as I answered, "Have they been lonely up to now?" and as I concluded, "I think we all know darn well that we send them because it's the law, or we THINK it's the law; actually, I know several people who DON'T send their kids to school." I paused. "Maybe we send them to school only because we somehow feel we HAVE to, because that's status quo; it would be hard NOT to send them." The parents in the group looked downcast. One of them said, "I'd like to talk with you some more about it." Nothing came of that particular encounter, but I do remember all of us looking down, in silent thought.

Even as I got used to sending my kids to school, even as we sent two other children to school, I always wondered whether it might be better if we didn't. It seemed there were always little incidents happening in our kids' classrooms; mostly I noticed that if, at any given moment, we walked in to the room, we almost always found the teacher scolding or reprimanding someone, if not the entire class, usually for something that would not be considered forbidden outside the classroom (often for something that would, on the contrary, be considered desirable, perhaps "creative.") I would feel GUILTY; I should, I'd think, march right into that classroom and yank my kid out of there; I should stand up for my beliefs.

But the school was a good one. The teachers were dedicated and, at least when we held parent-teacher conferences, seemed to know what the kids were about. For example, if my kids had any peer group problems, they understood the issues, as well as the dynamics, and were usually quick to solve the problem. The principal was even better at this. So because it was a good school that my kids attended, it was very tempting to “let well enough alone.” The incentive to make any change wasn’t as great as if the school had not been a good one. Besides, I was busy with my writing and with my small part-time career of adjuncting in various math departments at various colleges.

But ten years ago, as I was sitting at “the goat” in Philadelphia’s Rittenhouse Square with my youngest, then a two-week-old baby, one of the other mothers whom I knew only casually came up to me. “Are you the same Marion Cohen who’s listed in *Growing without Schooling*?”

“Oh, you read *Growing without Schooling*?” I answered.

We began talking. She had a two-year-old son whom she was seriously planning to keep out of school. This was before the 1988 passage of what’s known as “the Pennsylvania home-schooling law”; at that time people in Pennsylvania who wanted to home-school either went “underground”, simply not registering their children for school and hoping that neighbors wouldn’t report them, or else they asked permission of the local school district (and, to my knowledge, they almost always got it.) or else they used a correspondence school, usually Calvert, which was perfectly legal, although more structured and school-like than many home-schooling families would like.

Merilee and I became friends; we often talked about home-schooling and we decided to form a support group for parents who were considering home-schooling or who already were. The first meetings of Center City Home-Schoolers contained three members -- Merilee, I and another parent in the neighborhood who needed support in her decision not to send her preschooler to daycare. Her concern was that, in her experience, kids changed completely once they began regularly attending such a place. “It’s the peer group thing,” we agreed. “Once they’re separated from their homes and have to fend for themselves, to some extent at least, they need to develop defenses. And kids that little haven’t the resources to be in control of the situation.” This was a generality and an over-simplification, and we knew it, but it was a good start.

Center City Home-Schoolers soon began to pick up new members; Merilee had a friend, Janis had a neighbor, we advertised in local home-schooling newsletters, and so on. We met every two weeks, usually in my kitchen (since my then-husband, Jeff, who had multiple sclerosis, was living home at the time and I was often his care giver). Besides, Jeff wanted to be at the meetings and most of the other houses were not wheelchair accessible.) When we didn’t have meetings, we would get together with the other families in the group, and the conversation in our household was very definitely often about home-schooling. In general, the ambiance was pretty “home-school-y.” We naturally began to get used to the idea of actually home-schooling. Home-schooling began to feel like the norm, almost like the status quo, rather than out-on-a-limb. Moreover, our ten-year-old son Bret, along with the little one Devin, were often at the meetings, usually playing with the other kids but also sometimes joining or over-hearing the conversation around the table.

And so, when Bret’s peer group problems at school became aggravated, and when the education itself began to grate on him (He was particularly angry about homework. “They have no right to tell us what to do at home, TOO.” he said, and we agreed.) we gave serious thought to simply taking him out of school.

We gave it some time. We did a lot of parental guiding but we wanted the ultimate decision to be Bret's. We decided that Bret would finish out his fourth-grade year, another two or three months, take the summer to think it over, then have made a decision by September. Certainly Bret wasn't the first child to be stressed by school (which is part of the point!), or by peer group, nor is he the first person to be stressed, period. But every psychologist knows that that are at least two kinds of 'stressed'; one means stressed because of inner conflicts and psychological baggage., and the other means stressed because of the situation itself. So, there comes a point, or there SHOULD come a point, when we cease to say "That's life," when it's our responsibility as human beings and citizens to say no. There are times when "sticking with it" is not the answer and when "quitting" is. Think, for example, of the extreme example of Hitler Youth. And think of a kid not believing it, or simply not liking it, perhaps without quite knowing why. And think of his parents considering taking him out, and of the family decision whether to allow him to drop out. And think of neighbors saying, "But that's life" or "that's part of being a citizen" or "That's called responsibility."

What happened in September was exactly what Jeff and I guessed would happen. Bret, like most kids, caught the "back to school" bug and chose to go "back to school," complete with "back to school" clothes and school supplies. And two weeks later, when "back to school" had become "back IN school," Bret decided that he wanted to begin home-schooling. We said "okay", and it WAS okay.

It was more than okay. It was fantastic. Life became simplified. Not OVER-simplified, but simplified in a good way. No tests, no homework, no criticism or judgement, no non-enjoyable or meaningless or unnecessary work, no negative self-image, no all-too-temporary positive self-image that comes from a SINGLE A. No battle over homework, no waking up at 7:30, no going to bed early on "school nights". And no revolving our lives around "dinner hour" because that was the only time the family had to all be together. There was, instead, the time and the freedom to get involved in long-term all-day projects, and for Bret to baby-sit during "school hours" and earn a little money for himself, something that for him was an issue; earning money gave him a sense of control which went a little way toward counteracting the loss of control we all experienced from Jeff's illness and disabilities.

Bret could also help out and be a part of our family life; in particular, he could baby-sit Devin and help with his disabled Dad. In particular, since he was home, not necessarily more hours, but more VARIED hours, and since he was not away from 8:00 'til 3:00, he could notice more of what our home was like; he could notice what needed to be done, and act accordingly. Our whole family was, and felt, more together. Life was free of many annoying complications.

This kind of thing does not happen with ALL home-schooling families, nor do all home-schooling families feel as comfortable with it. Moreover, there are difficulties in "going out on a limb" which affect some families more than others. I don't mean to sound one-sided nor "Rah-rah-home-schooling" but it is true that, for us, home-schooling felt great. It was really empowering to finally be doing what we'd believed in for so many years -- in particular, not, every evening, having to say things like "We don't believe in homework but have you done your homework yet?"

THE LIVES OF HOME-SCHOOLERS

As with everything else in life, there were adjustments, mostly due to the fact that we were doing something different from what most people were doing. (Of course, if everyone were home-schooling, none of that would have been a problem) But all of us, Bret too, thought and felt that through. We did not expect to avoid that period of adjustment. We certainly did not expect Bret, a child of ten, not to feel strange, perhaps scared. After all, this was something quite new, to him as well as to most other people. We all talked about these feelings and we let Bret know that, if he should change his mind and want to return to school... well, we wouldn't let him make the switch overnight, we wouldn't make any rash decisions, but if, after taking the time to think it over, he decided that he wanted to go back to school, he would have had our permission and our blessings and support. (Many home-schoolers would disagree with that; they would not, under any circumstances, allow their families to become involved with the schools. I can understand that point of view, especially if I carry it over into the Hitler Youth analogy mentioned earlier.)

As it turned out, that period of adjustment did not last very long. In fact, it probably would be more accurate to say that, in our case, it was diffused throughout that first year; it never reached any worrisome peak. With our help Bret very quickly made a non-schooling life for himself and began, to paraphrase the name of the well-known home-schooling periodical, to "grow without schooling." He already had made some friends from school and he kept up with most of these friendships (at least as much as kids in general, in or out of school, keep up with friendships). He had also made friends in Center City Home-Schoolers. True, as with kids who do go to school, there were times when he had fewer friends than he would have liked, or when he had problems with the friends he did have. Naturally. But very possibly this peer-group side of Bret's life would have been worse if he had remained in school during those years.

Bret also had adult friends, for example a friend of a friend of mine who played the guitar during the first wave of Bret's "guitar stage." He also had jobs, whatever jobs a ten-year-old in this society is permitted to have. Babysitting, helping with his Dad, watering plants for neighbors away on vacation. He wished he could have a regular job, the kind he knew could not be his until he would turn sixteen. As far back as I can remember, Bret always had a strong desire to be independent and in control of his life. Some of that might be psychological; for instance, his father's disability probably made his control issues particularly strong. For now, however, Bret was content, most of the time, to be making some money on his own, and he seemed to enjoy the interaction; to me it seemed part of his social life, as for adults the workplace is a part of social life.

Freed from school, Bret also had more time to pursue his special interests, in particular, drawing and tinkering. The latter led to a special relationship with his Dad, who I was, to put it mildly, a tinkerer. The two of them would fool around with broken TV's and VCR's; Bret wound up making himself a color TV out of the parts. And when he decided to buy himself cable with money he earned himself, he helped the cable guy put it in, ironing out bugs which the guy couldn't deal with.

Bret also, at first, went part-time to his old school. He had been in what's known as "M.G." (the mentally gifted program), which met one day a week. That was a part of school which Bret had enjoyed and didn't want to give up, and his M.G. teacher was very anxious for him to stay. She was, in fact, extremely enamored with home-schooling and I remember her saying to me, when Bret began home-schooling, "It's the school's loss, and Bret's gain." There was minimal peer-group stuff at M.G.; most likely it was Bret's sensitivity more than anything else. He felt funny when kids questioned him about home-schooling, even though, from what he told me, it

seemed that they were nice about it; mostly what they said was “You’re lucky.”

The point is: Bret made a life for himself; he was not at loose ends. Sure, there were times when, like any other kid, he was bored, or couldn’t decide what he wanted to do. Or a friend he’d hoped to get together with wasn’t available that day. But, as many home-schoolers believe and will attest to, boredom is not in itself such a terrible thing; it’s a fact of life, perhaps the necessary link between one activity and another, or perhaps just a chance to sit and do nothing.

In fact, perhaps people are so accustomed to thinking of doing nothing as boring, that automatically, as soon as we find ourselves doing nothing (for example, finished with what we’ve just been doing), we say, “I’m bored.” And children probably automatically equate “There’s nothin’ to do” with “I’m bored. even though the two are two different things.

In school, teachers seem to be AFRAID of boredom (and of doing nothing), as though it reflects on their teaching ability. It just doesn’t LOOK good to them; it looks as though we ALWAYS do nothing, our whole lives (although, of course, doing nothing for a minute or a couple of hours isn’t the same thing as doing nothing one’s whole life). Also, what if the principal or a parent walks into the room just at the one between-activities moment when the class is doing nothing, and/ or bored? In fact, OUTSIDE of school also, adults seem to be afraid of boredom. In particular, parents seem to be afraid of their kids being bored, probably for the same reason that teachers are afraid of their classes being bored. Sometimes it seems to me that kids have this to HOLD OVER their parents; think what happens, or how a parent feels, when a kid says, often in a kind of goading way, “I’m bored.”

At any rate, Bret didn’t escape boredom; if anything, he was GRANTED PERMISSION to be bored (or do nothing). And I was granted permission to LET him be bored. Indeed, a lot of Bret’s time was spent in just “hanging out.” Not only (as he grew into his middle teens) on the streets with other kids, or alone in his room, but up in the attic or on the big bed with Dev and me. “Mom, could we all just hang out in the attic?” We’d play Tetris, or cards, or watch TV. Often Bret would ask, “Mom, could we all... you know, all just hang out and do our separate things?”

Bret would draw, Dev would play with his action figures, I would write. This “hanging out” development seemed to me very significant. There are, I think, many lessons to be learned from it, many having to do with the EMOTIONAL lives of children and of families. First: Many families might SAY, “yes, we also try to take some time just to BE together, to hang out.” But by “some time” they seem to mean LESS time than I do, less often and for shorter durations, sometimes totalling a scant hour a week. In many cases what they also mean is TRY to take the time. Which implies, to begin with, TRY. Which translates into WORK at it, perhaps feel anxious that they won’t be able to, won’t “succeed” because “some time to hang out” simply might not exist in their busy schedules. Everyone these days seems to be talking about “time to smell the flowers” but that phrase seems to mean different things to different people; in particular, it seems to mean different amounts of time (and maybe different kinds of flowers). And often “time to smell the flowers” becomes just another activity they have to try to squeeze in, just another doomed-to-failure no-win endeavor. (Perhaps, in fact, it means a nature walk!)

Second: This “hanging out” seems to me to be a very important demonstration of, or perhaps cause and/ or result of, what is often termed “unconditional love.” Hanging out together says, “We don’t love one another only for what we DO; we love one another for what we are, or THAT we are.” it also says, “We don’t love one another for what we will BECOME, but for what we are.” Our family just-plain enjoyed hanging out together. Contrast this with families who, because of school (or over-emphasis on school -- or on home-schooling work), spend almost all of their family-together-time over homework, or home-schooling work, often

arguing or disciplining and conveying the message of dissatisfaction; to me what this says to kids is “The most important thing is that you do well in school; maybe even that’s what determines how much I love you, or approve of you.” Parents don’t usually mean that, and will often tell their children the contrary (“It’s not your grades that are important; it’s who you are.”), but with the amount of time spent over homework, the IMPRESSION kids can’t help get (and, as most people will admit, kids are pretty impressionable) is that schoolwork is what their parents want from them.

Third: This large-scale hanging out brings a very secure comfortable feeling. Now that Bret is sixteen, he still takes some time to specifically hang out with me (though not always with siblings). And perhaps this hanging-out business is at the root of what I often tell people about our family’s style of home-schooling: “It’s more home than schooling.”

Again, I would like to address any readers who might be thinking, “But people have to live up to their responsibilities. We can’t spend our whole lives hanging out.” In the first place, who said anything about our whole lives? I was, true, talking about a lot of time, but I was not talking about “whole lives”. If a genius spends 23 hours a day hanging out and one hour in the throes of creation, isn’t this living up to responsibility? If a non-genius spends 16 hours a day sleeping and hanging out, and eight hours working, isn’t that, too, living up to responsibility? Second, we often learned and accomplished things as we hung out; we wrote, we drew, we talked, the games we played helped develop math concepts. And, as we shall see further in later chapters, it’s okay to just hang out and NOT learn or accomplish. It’s okay to TRUST the hanging out per se. In fact, it’s often when we’re “hanging out,” doing nothing or even bored that human beings get new ideas. I’ve often had the following experience: I’m sitting at my typewriter, working on a poem or math problem, and I’m having trouble with a certain line, paragraph, or calculation. After a while I realize that I’m hungry -- SO HUNGRY that, much as I might want to stay and continue struggling with my work, I have no choice but to momentarily wrest myself away. Five minutes later, at the fridge, an idea comes to me. Sometimes I think that maybe that’s “why” nature gave us bodily functions and needs. Third, in a sense HANGING OUT is a responsibility (since what we accomplish -- namely, getting ideas -- when we hang out is different from when we accomplish at other times). Indeed, perhaps human beings have the responsibility to decide how much “hanging out” is optimal and then act accordingly.

Why are people so afraid of hanging out, anyway? Why does it freak us out so much? Why does it make us feel uncomfortable or nervous? I think of writers and other creative people, so taken up with the spectre of “dry spells.” And I think of teachers worrying about “using classroom time effectively.” In general, I think of the human need to feel in control (and to keep up appearances), and of how this can go overboard, even backfire. In later chapters I will talk about the importance of doing nothing, of letting what we have already done gestate, of “sleeping on it.” And so, perhaps, might we also “hang out on it.”

HOW IS HOME-SCHOOLING POSSIBLE?

THAT it is possible has been born out by hundreds and thousands of families who are doing it, and documented by the pages of dozens of home-schooling periodicals such as *Growing without Schooling* and *Home Education Magazine*, as well as by an increasing number of scholarly studies. That it is (in general) SUCCESSFUL -- in subtle as well as obvious ways -- has also been amply shown.

How? ask many people. How can parents untrained in the field of education teach? How, in particular, can they teach specific subjects in which they themselves are not experts? There are many answers to those questions.

First, a few short considerations: IS there truly a "field of education?" Does it really take four years of training to learn how to teach? (In fact, college teachers have, almost without exception, not taken a single teaching course.) Indeed, do we have to "teach"; can't we just TELL? Or, as will be elaborated on later, NOT tell, but let children and other students discover for themselves (or perhaps simply read about), and make their own choices about what they discover and probe? Also, if we want to be concerned about parents' expertise in subject matters, we might also well ask ourselves about TEACHERS' expertise in subject matters. Indeed, teachers are not taught a whole lot of subject matter. (How could they be in the space of four years' teachers' college?) Teachers are taught mostly teaching -- not, for example, math or writing.

I give math and writing as the examples because those are the subjects in which (I hope) I am especially knowledgeable; those are the subjects in which I would recognize the lack of knowledge in a teacher and in which, as I teach them myself, I recognize the instances in which it was helpful for me to have this knowledge. This is not the same thing as saying that a teacher NEEDS to have this knowledge or be an expert. In fact, it's sometimes actually advantageous when the teacher doesn't know the answer, and is curious along with her students. As will be gone into very shortly, teachers and students can explore and learn together. Sometimes, even, it can reduce "learning anxiety" when the teacher doesn't know the answer. (There are instances when the opposite is true, but these do not include the home-schooling situation; there the students don't have the emotional need for the teacher to know everything.) In general, the whole notion of "expertise" can, and will, be questioned.

The simplest and most elementary questions asked by students often require deep and complicated answers, or answers which are themselves simple but which require profound background knowledge, or a "knack", on the part of the teacher. In *HOW CHILDREN FAIL* John Holt writes about how "simple math" is not really simple. He gives the example of $2 + 2$; children might well wonder what $2 + 2$ means. What $2 + 2$ means involves advanced math, math which a teachers' college doesn't teach. Holt gives the answer that $2 + 2$ means 2 of anything + 2 of that same thing, and he's right; that is a colloquial way of talking about concepts from axiomatic set theory. The point is: Teachers are often no more likely than parents to be able to deal with that kind of thing.

The second reason that home-schooling is possible is that parents don't HAVE to know the subject; they can learn it right alongside of their kids, the way I have been learning my "worst" subject, U. S. and world history. My method is to be on the lookout in thrift stores for interesting and appealing history books and then read them to Devin. The books don't have to be specifically history texts, although some of them have been. They can be historical novels, or books with only a small section bordering on history. A couple of weeks ago I found *TWENTY MODERN AMERICANS* in the Salvation Army. So far we've read about the childhoods, motivations, passions, personalities, and credos of Walt Disney, Jane Addams,

George Washington Carver, Yehudi Menuhim (who was home-schooled!), Charles Steinmetz, Amelia Earhart, and the Mayo Brothers. Thus we've learned not only history, but also sociology, science, music, geography, and art.

The book was written in the year 1942 (the year before I was born), but that just makes it even more interesting, and provides more opportunity for me to interject, as I read, thoughts about how things have changed since then, or to ponder, "Gee, I wonder if So-and-So is still alive." That's history, too. I'm just as interested in the book as Devin is and, in fact, when, as do teachers in schools, I ask him to be quiet and stop asking so many questions, it's because, right or wrong, I have a genuine desire to hurry up and find out what's next. In other words, learning along with your children has the advantage that your own interest and enthusiasm can spread to them; moreover, the situation is more honest and less artificial. (Indeed, if, when Pippi Longstocking's teacher asked "What's 9×7 ?", he truly didn't know the answer and was curious, Pippi probably would have been happy to give it to him.)

A third reason why it's possible for parents to teach their children: Parents might not, and probably don't, know every subject, but they do know life; they have the advantage of having been alive for a longer time than their children. They know what I call "the field," a metaphor gleaned from my experience teaching college math. College professors are often assigned courses which they themselves have never taken. Although this might involve extra preparation and a certain amount of nervousness, it usually works out fine, as I am discovering first-hand this semester, teaching Elements of Math Thought instead of my usual Calculus. While new to the course, I am not new to "the field" of math. This is one reason why parents can and do teach things to their children: They know "the field" of life.

Here is a fourth reason: A very large part of learning, larger than many schools seem to realize, consists of learning how to LOOK THINGS UP. Thus children probably don't have to be taught, nor made to memorize, as much as seems to be commonly believed; if they ever need or want to know something, they will be able to look it up. It seems silly and pointless to me and to many home-schoolers -- and to most children -- to have to memorize the birthdays of all the presidents or the dates of various battles; true, 1492, 1776, 1954, and so on are important dates in history, and people possibly should and usually do know them, off-hand, not only to look up, with or without school; indeed, they probably know them BECAUSE they're important -- that is, because they come up in conversation. Does a graduate math student have to memorize the log tables? Does a writer have to memorize punctuation rules? No. These experts learn as the need arises, by looking things up or asking a friend or colleague. Indeed, this expertise in finding things out is part of "knowing the field." And children, as they grow, come to know "the field" of life.

A fifth reason: Parents don't have to necessarily be the ONLY ones doing the home-schooling. Friends, relatives, siblings, grandparents, baby-sitters, neighbors, tutors, even casual acquaintances or passers-by -- all of whom might be experts in various subjects -- can also take part. Such arrangements can develop naturally, or they can be specifically set up (even paid for). In our household Aurelio, a young man who lives with us and is a friend of the family, often does his construction work in the kids' presence, or with their help. He also loves to do puzzles and play games, which he often simply lays out on the table, not to teach them but because he loves doing these things himself; the kids get drawn in and often, in the process, learn reading, math, science, or trivia. And Arin, Devin's and Bret's big brother, often helps him with fractions, perhaps minimally but still reinforcing what I've already taught him. Moreover, other home-schooling (or non-home-schooling) families often include Dev on their trips to movies, museums, and so on. Moreover, TV, videos, books, and the Internet can be teachers.

A sixth reason: Why SHOULDN'T parents be able to teach their kids? Indeed, NON-

home-schooling parents often teach their kids -- letters and numbers before kindergarten or even nursery school, and habits and values throughout their childhood. As for the other "school" subjects, why must someone be a specially trained teacher, teaching in a place called school, in order for teaching and learning to take place? In our society people are so accustomed to the institutions of teachers and schools that they can't imagine learning, or perhaps anything at all, happening without them. But in fact, viewing matters from the perspective of the history of schools, it is not hard to see that there have been plenty of school-less societies. Schools, and indeed teaching itself, are not the only way to go; they're not written in stone. Not all teaching comes from schools, and not all learning comes from being taught. It's partly because we're so conditioned, because we cannot imagine life without schools, and without all this fuss about teaching, and indeed learning, that we ask questions like "Can parents teach their kids?" or "Can kids learn without schools?" or "How ELSE are they gonna learn?"

Seventh and last: When I said a few pages back that parents don't have to be the only ones who do the home-schooling, I gave friends, relatives, and so on as examples of people who could join the home-schooling party. I left out one important party guest, namely the student herself. "Independent study" is perhaps the more respected way of describing this idea. Another way might be to say that the teacher is the subject matter itself. Thus Dev might have browsed through a library or thrift store himself and found TWENTY MODERN AMERICANS, then browsed through that book and decided which of the twenty he wanted to read about.

I do have one reservation, perhaps related to this question of how home-schooling can and does work: I do not subscribe to the statement, often quoted by home-schoolers and in home-schooling articles both in the media and in home-schooling publications, that "any parent knows her child." There are many subtle but important things about "her child" that a parent might not know (such as the things talked about in Chapters 2, 3, and 4). However, the schools, the state, and society, might not know these things either. As elements of society, both parents and schools have their agendas, which prevent them from knowing children -- individual children and children in general. So I don't join the many home-schoolers, indeed the many parents, in romanticizing the parent/ child relationship to the extent of lending my total enthusiasm to all home-schooling situations.

Kitty Anderson, home-schooling mother and co-coordinator with me of Center City Home-Schoolers, talks about "unexamined trust in institutions," and a friend says, "The home is an institution, too, and often an oppressive one." She goes on to point out that "handing children over to the parents" might not, as an institution, and per se, work out any better than "handing children over" to the state (in the form of compulsory schooling or anything else). The way society is at present, there would have to be many changes, both in parents and in the state, in order for me to be able to recommend that.

However, all other things being equal, parents are just as likely as schools to know and be able to "teach" children, and home-schooling is certainly extremely possible. There is nothing illogical about it. Parents need not feel anxious about taking it on.

HOME-SCHOOLING AND THE LAW

or

HOW TO KEEP RECORDS

What happens exactly when a family makes the decision to begin home-schooling? How is that decision implemented? My own case is probably pretty typical, and the home-schooling law in my state Pennsylvania is perhaps typical, although more involved than home-schooling laws in other states.

At the time that my family had decided to home-school, Pennsylvania's home-schooling law had recently been passed. Act 169 of 1988 made it easier for families like ours who were concerned about getting "permission" to home-school; the law now permitted it, so no school district could say no (although each district has the option of making things difficult for home-schoolers; fortunately, most so far have not chosen that option.) We had learned about "the new law" from members of Center City Home-Schoolers and other home-schooling support groups, so when we decided to home-school, we knew what to do. We knew what extension of the Board of Education to call and we knew what to say. "You can talk to anybody who answers," we'd been assured. "You don't have to talk to anyone at the top. It's nothing to be nervous about; just say 'We're interested in home-schooling; could you please send us the appropriate materials?' They'll ask your address and the name, grade, and present school of your child, and that's all."

Nevertheless, I had butterflies when I made that call. This is only one instance of that fear of authority which home-schoolers know so well; it's an important phenomenon and will be described in more detail in later chapters of this book. The person who handled my call was perfectly nice, but I was conscious of the fact that she had the power to NOT be nice. Also, I had heard that some school districts can be difficult, asking more than the law requires -- home visits, for example, or testing in the middle of the year.

In my case, everything went smoothly. Two days later I received "the appropriate materials" in the mail. (I had been warned that, with the law still so new, the home-schooling offices were often inefficient; I might have to call again.) What I received, and what I realize can be intimidating to some, but left me with only a vague feeling of that fear of authority, were pages and pages of information, most of it about the tutorial program (for those home-schoolers who hire a tutor, which we were not planning to do). The information was worded in that same school-type language that "rules booklets" for the various schools use. No less, and no more, intimidating. The only thing that's actually needed, of these materials, is surprisingly short; it's known as "the affidavit" and is only two and a quarter pages. What it says is that you plan to educate your child (no particular method stated) in each of twelve general areas (The division of education into these subjects often changes from year to year. In general, there are the three R's, U.S. History, Pennsylvania History, math, science, and so on.) There are also legal sounding statements towards the end of the affidavit stating that no one in your household, in the past five years, has been convicted of any child-abuse-related crime.

Basically there are four things that need to be done, to initiate the home-schooling year, or partial year (if the decision to home-school has been made in the middle of the academic year). First the affidavit needs to be signed by a parent, or by a "home-schooling supervisor" designated by a parent, and then notarized. Then, just as though your child went to school, inoculation records (or religious or other waivers) needs to be sent, as well as a copy of the home-schooling supervisor's high school diploma, or, as they say, "the equivalent", which could be a G.E.D. certification, a college diploma, or some other evidence of competence (or what

they consider competence).

I don't agree with this "high school diploma" requirement. I believe that, in general, families who have made the decision to home-school are committed enough to, for example, learn right along with their children, as described earlier. I also believe that that requirement is racist and classist, in that it is intimidating, plays on parents' insecurities, and disadvantages people who are less likely to present an "equivalent" or to request a waiver. They also have less access to people who do have a high school diploma, and whom they can ask to be the home-schooling supervisor.

The fourth "enclosure" that needs to be mailed or brought to the school district is what is called "Educational Objectives." This is a list of ideas for home-schooling activities for the year; two or three ideas of things to do, under each of the twelve subjects listed in the affidavit. The ideas can be specific, like "read 'Anna Karenina'", or more general like "trips to the library." It is comforting to realize that these "objectives" are merely IDEAS, and that it is not required that the ideas be carried out; they can be altered, partly or entirely. Often working on listing the "Objectives" can be done as a family project, and can itself be considered educational (and listed as one of the objectives!)

These are the four items that get mailed, by August 1 of every year (or at the onset of a family's decision to home-school). In our district, things proceed pretty informally and with much leeway. The district is often late in getting back to us, and is also "good" about letting home-schoolers be late in filing. Late or not, what happens behind the scenes is that someone at the district office looks over the Educational Goals, checks that the affidavit has been signed, that the medical records are in order, and so on, then sends a letter to the home-schooling supervisor to the effect that the affidavit has been approved and the home-schooling year may begin. The home-schoolers that I know don't hold their breaths waiting for that letter (it often arrives in October.), but just go ahead with their home-schooling lives.

After that there is no "home-schooling law paperwork" until the end of the year, technically the last day in June (but in actuality often later, on everybody's part). No one visits your home, nor comes to check on anything. As for this end-of-year paperwork, there are four items due at the school district's office by, again technically, the last day in June. The first is a portfolio of each child's work (more about this later; for now, the "work" doesn't have to be like the work he would be doing in school.). The second is the log -- that is, records which have been kept (by either the home-schooling supervisor or the child himself); basically, what has to be documented is that either 180 days or 900 hours of home-schooling have taken place; the records don't have to be detailed; they can range from a mere listing of subjects covered on particular days, to the home-schooling diary that I keep. The third is what is called an "evaluation letter", from a certified teacher or child psychologist; this is what many home-schoolers find the hardest to come up with; it's the most of a pain in the neck. But the good news is that "evaluation letter" is a misnomer. It isn't an evaluation; it's merely a statement that appropriate education is taking place. The law doesn't require grades or comments of any kind about how "well" a child is doing, in any sense of the word "well". In fact, in the interest of solidarity among home-schoolers, many home-schoolers specifically ask the evaluators not to write any comments, no matter how positive, and no matter how tempting! The fourth item is required only in grades 3, 5, and 8. Home-schooling kids have to take standardized tests in those grades. It's important for home-schoolers to know that they have a choice of which test; the choices range from the regular test given at the local school to mail-order tests like the ITBS (Iowa Test of Basic Skills) to testing services specially designed for home-schooling kids (and state-approved). It's also important that there's nothing in the home-schooling law that says what grades kids have to get on those tests; they merely have to TAKE the tests.

As we shall see, for many home-schoolers one of the main points of home-schooling is that

our kids can learn according to their own schedules, perhaps even learn different material, perhaps even question the concept of “material”. It is no surprise that approved tests are geared toward the material taught and emphasized in the schools, so home-schoolers won’t necessarily do well on these tests. (They would, of course, do well on tests designed with their own home-schooling curriculum, or lack of curriculum, in mind.) There are many home-schoolers who would prefer that their children not be tested, because they don’t want to put them through the testing experience at such young ages. To me, for example, testing is the opposite of trusting and very possibly the opposite of unconditional love, or “hanging out.” (More about all that in the next chapter of this book).

In my own home-schooling “diary”, I write down cute little details like, when we first began home-schooling our family would joke about how, if Bret acted up in “school”, I (teacher) would have to write a note to myself (parent). I also jot down interesting, and educational, questions the kids asked, such as Bret: “Does light ever go SLOWER?” and “What happens to houses if their owners die?” And Devin: “If people aren’t artists or writers, what would they need paper for?” and “If you have perfect X-ray vision, it means you’re blind, right? I also jotted down observations he made, not as part of any science lesson or specially set up experiments, but at odd and unpredictable moments. “When you dip a daffodil in water and then take it out, it’s still dry.” And, in learning geometry, his answer to “What’s the area of a circle of radius 1?” was “One circle-inch!” And, a couple of days ago, Devin trying to move, with his straw, the one drop of soda remaining; he couldn’t do it until he tried BLOWING through the straw.

Most home-schoolers, however, keep much less detailed records, perhaps simply checking off which subjects were covered that day or which books were read that month. One home-schooling mother I know keeps WEEKLY records, summarizing what was done the past week, with the understanding that school is held every weekday, so 180 days are automatically accounted for. Again, viewing themselves as part of a community and in the interest of solidarity, many home-schoolers have agreed not to specifically try to “impress” the school district. We are not trying to outdo each other, nor are we trying to outdo the schools (certainly with respect to school-type standards, like test scores). We want only to be allowed to not send our kids to school.

Styles of home-schooling, like styles of record-keeping, vary. Many home-schoolers actually conduct “school at home”, often five or six hours a day. Sometimes they use methods similar to those used in school, textbooks, assignments, and the like. Others, like me, are of the “do nothing” ilk. Though I do, at this present time, give Dev two worksheets a day -- one in reading, the other in math -- for the most part Dev and I just do what we’d be doing if there were no such words as “school” or “education”. The way I think of it is: Most of the home-schooling effort is in the record-keeping.

One idea that has been extremely helpful to me, and which I share with new members of Center City Home-schoolers, is that of entering “conversations” into the log. If our family has an interesting conversation and if Dev is present (whether or not he “participated”), I record it under whichever the topic is, usually “Civics”. (Sometimes it’s more than one topic, and gets so recorded.) Most families, home-schooling or not, have conversations, about what’s going on in the world or in the family; often a good family conversation is better than any “health” class in school. It doesn’t have to be a long conversation; perhaps it doesn’t have to be a conversation at all; it could be simply something that was said, perhaps a single sentence. It can be merely planted. (In fact, there are times when more than mere planting can be too much; it can be detrimental, and invasive, what a kid might call “rubbing in.”)

Other non-school-like things that can be entered into the records, however they’re kept, are TV programs and videos. Even “junk” movies or TV programs often contain or plant life

lessons, lessons about how people relate to one another. Even if the program comes to the “wrong” conclusion, or is done poorly, it can be turned into a small conversation, or “mere” joking around, about how “bad” the program was. Indeed, the most tasteless meaningless program can often be used as a springboard for very important musings. I believe, though, that we need to be careful not to feel self-conscious as we use that kind of opportunity and not ruin the fun of the program (or get invasive in the face of PRIVATE musings, especially if the movie was sad). In our household, for instance, everyone always kids around about how “Mom” (meaning me) always drives everybody crazy while we’re watching a funny movie by saying things like “Why doesn’t she just TELL him?” That all by itself is possibly educational in some way.

Indeed, junky movies are part of our culture and history (our PRESENT history, the history being made right now), just like “junky” events, such as slavery and the holocaust. Thus, as citizens, we all need to learn them -- as history, if nothing else. (Whether we need to learn them every hour of every day is another matter!)

Other things that can be entered into the home-schooling records are books read (even comics which, like junky movies and TV programs, can contain many life lessons, and which are still reading material), newspaper articles (even if not read by the child herself, but only read aloud or commented on by the adults in the household), and trips taken (even if not to so-called “educational” places). It’s also helpful to keep in mind that PART of a book, or part of an article, or part of a TV program, can “count”. As Kitty Anderson says, we don’t always have to be “thorough”; we can do things “halfway” or “piecemeal” sometimes; we can be jacks of SOME trades.

Games, including video games, might also count, if not as history or geography or civics (depending on the type of game), then perhaps as math. And since math seems to be the biggest hurdle for many home-schooling parents, this is a good point at which to describe a card game which, all by itself, without any other resource, has gotten Devin through elementary arithmetic -- addition, subtraction, multiplication, division, and some exponentiation (also the process of averaging). Part of the beauty of “Extended Casino” is that it is not specifically a “learning game;” it’s “Mom’s” extension of the game “Casino”, which people play just in “regular” life; my family played it when I was a kid. It’s also inexpensive; all that’s needed is a deck of ordinary playing cards, and the game works perfectly well if one or two cards are missing from the deck.

Here’s how the game goes: It’s best played with two or three players; four works, too, for anyone who doesn’t mind waiting her turn. For the first round, the dealer gives each person four cards, then places four cards in the middle. The other cards are put aside for later in the game.

The person left of the dealer goes first (or any other way you want to work it). The first person tries to find, out of the four cards in the middle, cards which will, in some arithmetic combination, make one of the cards in her hand. She can add, subtract, multiply, divide, and take powers and roots. For example, suppose the cards in the middle are 3, 7, 8, and Queen, meaning 12. And suppose she has an Ace in her hand. Then she can say, “Ace (1) equals 8 minus 7 to the three-plus-twelfth power,” and thereby take in all five cards for her “pile”. The more and better cards she takes in, the higher will be her score at the end of the game. (More about scoring later. in particular which cards are “better”.)

Devin might not have understood the concept of exponentiation, but, since Aces are among the “better” cards, it sure didn’t take him long to learn that 1 to any power is 1. Actually, several weeks later, he developed an interest in powers of 2 and he figured out, on his own, that 2 to the 7th power is 128. (He was about 8 years old at the time.)

The second player then does the same thing, looking for middle-cards which combine to make one of the cards in her hand, then taking the entire "equation" into her pile. (Of course, if the first player has taken all the middle-cards, the second player can't do anything except place, into the middle, one of her cards. In my family, whenever that happens, the first player quips, "have some SPACE," and also, if I'm the second player, I always gasp, dramatically, "Where'd it all go?" and Devin, who as the youngest has the privilege of always going first, laughs.)

Since everyone has been dealt four cards for this first round, the game goes around four times (for this first round). At the end of the round, the dealer again deals out four cards to each player (but none in the middle) and another round begins. This continues until all 52 cards have been used up.

There's also something called "building", which can be omitted if it seems to confusing. If you need TWO cards from your hand to make an "equation", you can "build". If, for example, there's a 10 in the middle and you have in your hand both a 7 and a 3, you can place the 3 on top of the 10 and say "10 minus 3 is 7 -- building 7." You then, however, have to wait for your next turn before using your 7 to "get" all the cards in the "equation". Moreover, someone else might have a 7, and take in the 10 and 3 before your next turn. Or, if there's a 4 in the middle and someone else has a jack (11), that person can then say "7 plus 4 is jack" and take them all in. Or someone else might use the 7 you just built to build something else, for HER. Moreover, everyone now knows you have a 7. It can get very interesting, and can teach a lot of math.

When all the cards are used up, it's time to score. The conventional way of scoring is: There are 11 points in all -- 3 points to whoever has collected the most cards, 1 point to whoever has collected the most spades, 1 point for each of the four Aces, 1 for "the good two" (meaning two of spades), and 2 for "the good ten" (ten of diamonds). That's the conventional way, but a family can make up its own way; for example, Devin once decided he wanted the THREE of spades to be "the good THREE."

As with junky movies, the game can become a springboard for further math. For example, Devin became (temporarily) fascinated with ways of "making Aces" and he invented his own game; basically, he initially lays out the cards like the game "Solitaire", then takes in all the cards that combine to "make an ace." And, though Devin's too young to learn logarithms, and may never need to learn them, I've used them in "Extended Casino" to add to my score, by taking in middle cards 9 and 3 with a 2 in my hand. (Log 9 to the base 3 is 2.) "You can't use logs!" Devin shrieks. "You can use whatever math you know!" I shriek back. At any rate, Devin SEES logs, and thus knows about them, whether or not he decides to explore them. (And, if the two involved is the GOOD two, he just might!) I have also wondered: What about "double-building?" Suppose, for example, I have in my hand, not 3 and 7, but 3, 6, and Ace. I'd need to "build twice" to get that "good ten" in the middle. Could I put out the 3 and say "double-building 10", then wait for my next turn and put out the 6, saying "10 minus 3 minus 6 is Ace -- building Ace"? Would that work? Hm.

The point is: Extended Casino definitely sounded impressive in our home-schooling log, and in there it went, under "Math", every time we played it. Even if a game isn't as blatantly educational as "Extended Casino", it can still go into the log; often, as we'll see in more detail in future chapters, the educational value of an activity often doesn't show up until some time later.

There's another very important source of material to enter into the home-schooling log, namely things the PARENTS do when the kids are simply AROUND. The kids don't have to be actively participating, or even watching or listening. For example, I enter "Mom practicing the piano" under "Music", even though Dev himself doesn't practice the piano, nor always

listen particularly closely to me when I practice. After all, he HEARS me, and he hears Bach or Mozart. He also hears the mistakes I make, how I correct them, and how practicing improves my playing, though not always right away, and not always monotonically. He might act as though he couldn't care less, and maybe he doesn't but, again, he does hear. I also sing, and sometimes my friend Phyllis comes over to sing with me. He hears that, too; in particular, he hears the joy it gives us, and the joy that Phyllis and I have singing together.

In this same way Dev hears me talk about the math courses I teach at Temple; "conversations about Calculus" goes into the log. I also write, send out, publish, give readings, "Conversation about the lives of writers," I jot down in the home-schooling log. I remember, in particular, how I held him and cried when, amidst the strain of waiting to hear the final word about a book manuscript being seriously considered by a mainstream publisher, a much smaller rejection came my way. "This is just SO important to me," I sobbed to nine-year-old Dev. "I've worked so long and so hard to be a real writer. I don't know if I could take it if it still didn't work out." And then, several weeks later, when I did get the final important acceptance (for "Dirty Details", by Temple University Press), Dev joined me and my friends on our celebration/ thrifting expedition. Indeed, he does know what the life of a writer is like, and it probably affects or will affect his own writing and his own life. At any rate, the information has been given him, for him to use or not use, as needed; it's certainly education.

More mundane adult work like cooking or washing floors can also be thought of as education, and thus as material for the log. Whatever adults do, it shows, or 'teaches', kids what the lives of adults are like, and thus what the kids' future options will be. To me, and to many home-schoolers, this is education, and therefore log-material. Indeed, log-material is not at all difficult to come by.

HOW HOME-SCHOOLERS FEEL ABOUT HOME-SCHOOLING LAWS

The fact that home-schoolers have to keep records doesn't mean we have to specifically teach in any particular way. Record-keeping does, however, often affect the way home-schoolers FEEL, and therefore it can't help but affect, at least subtly, the way they home-school. "I feel as though I'd do things differently if I didn't have to worry about the law," says Pam Bronson, mother of three home-schooling children.

Indeed, the law can be intimidating; HOW intimidating depends, of course, on the people and the circumstances involved. For example, all other things being equal, it is more intimidating to parents who are not "educated" or "middle-class", especially those whose experiences in life have led them to be afraid, to have low self-image, and/ or fear authority. And the end of the year legal stuff feels more formidable or impossible to those who might not have access to what the home-schooling network calls "friendly evaluators." Moreover, evaluator's fees are more of a concern to low-income families. In that respect, the home-schooling law of Pennsylvania is racist and classist.

Also, a home-schooling parent might tend to feel self-conscious being on the prowl for something to put in the log. I for one tend to worry that I'll forget to write it in; I don't want to walk around all day carrying the home-schooling notebook, but sometimes I think I need to, in order to "catch" everything -- especially since, as I believe true education necessitates, there's no telling when something "educational" will happen. Always being conscious and on the alert for what can count as educational can make home-schooling parents nervous, and can affect the way they relate to their kids -- often ALL THE TIME, not only during "school hours" (since many home-schooling families don't HAVE school hours, or else they consider ALL hours school hours). It might not be as pervasive as the way SCHOOL affects relations between parents and kids, but it's still there. And I tend to think, bitterly: Even if home-schooling laws do succeed in protecting kids from child-labor and/ or child-abuse, perhaps this is offset by the very opposite of protection that is happening to so many OTHER kids (kids who are NOT threatened by abuse), kids like mine and like dozen of other home-schoolers I know.

Are home-schooling regulations necessary? Isn't there some other way to prevent or minimize child-abuse? (And DOES school prevent child abuse? There's a whole book titled "Child Abuse in the Schools.") Why should ALL children have to go to school, or comply with home-schooling laws, in order to prevent abuse of SOME children? We don't put all children into foster care, do we?

I mentioned the end-of-year hurdles, in particular finding an evaluator. The school district will provide one, if we wish, but many home-schoolers understandably feel that just any certified teacher might not understand her family's particular style of home-schooling. Home-schooling is not like school; it is not necessarily "school at home." It is not necessarily a home-schooler's goal to imitate (or outdo) school. Many home-schoolers educate in ways completely different, and based on different premises, with different goals, from the schools. In fact, recent issues of the publication GROWING WITHOUT SCHOOLING have been running articles questioning society's concept of EDUCATION, and have been considering the idea of "growing without EDUCATION." (Later chapters in this book will, I hope, explain this idea in detail. Basically, society --- and therefore parents, schools, and home-schooling households -- are hung up on the word "education".) Not every certified teacher would understand this, but would instead apply school-type standards and mindsets while evaluating. She might, for example, look for "lesson plans" or "curriculum", testing, grading, book reports, and the like. Also, she might look for accomplishments rather than processes (especially emotional processes).

Also, the law doesn't say that the evaluator has to TEST the kids, nor judge in any way. It

says merely that she spend some time with the kid, or with the entire family, and determine that education is in fact taking place, in some way (and that child-abuse is not taking place). Many potential evaluators don't understand this; they think they're supposed to write comments and/or make suggestions, perhaps even to the kid. The home-schooling network can usually help anybody find a "friendly evaluator", and Devin, for example, views the evaluation as a chance "to see Loretta." But the fact is that, every June, "Loretta", like it or not, has the power to switcheroo on us (having, perhaps, somehow changed during the previous year), and I don't like being in this kind of position. It has been suggested by home-schooling writers that there be some kind of "tenure" for home-schoolers; for instance, families that have been "approved" for two years straight be exempt from record-keeping and testing thereafter.

Another source of worry and hassle for home-schooling families has been the testing in grades 3, 5, and 8. Although the parent or home-schooling supervisor can choose which test to use, many parents object to the idea of testing per se and don't want it imposed on their kids. Many home-schooling kids have never had the experience of being tested and they, not so much fear it, as don't understand it. Why is their competence being questioned? What is this business of competence anyway, for 8 and 10 years olds? Indeed, as the next chapter will bring out, testing might be thought of as the opposite of trusting. In general, it is totally alien to the lives of many home-schoolers.

Whatever the home-schooling style, and whatever the level of income, of a home-schooling family, legal requirements run the risk of taking from the time and energy put into the home-schooling itself, and the parenting itself. In fact, legal requirements could cause home-schooling to become too much like conventional schooling.

In Pennsylvania, the "new law" has been the object of much discussion and controversy among many home-schoolers. To begin with, for those who were ALREADY home-schooling at the time when the law was passed, it's often nothing but trouble; these families were often formerly home-schooling WITHOUT paperwork; they simply had the permission of their school districts to do what they wanted. The home-schooling laws of many other states involve less paperwork than Pennsylvania, and ideas are often being suggested as to how to lessen Pennsylvania's home-schooling paperwork.

Moreover, for many home-schoolers the bottom-line issue is not paperwork; it's the question of whether the state has the right to dictate how parents bring up their children. Indeed, many home-schoolers question the very existence of ANY home-schooling law. I, for one, feel kind of silly, if nothing else, being checked up on every year by the state. I feel silly, and a bit insulted, having to bring in my log and portfolio every June 30, and call up in August to ask whether it's been gone over yet and whether I may proceed with the home-schooling for the next year. I'm an old pro at it by now, and I take it in stride, but that makes me feel as though I were a kid myself.

HOME-SCHOOLING BLISS

I'd like to talk more about how much for the better my own and my family's life became once we began home-schooling. But before I launch in, I also want to reiterate that this is not EVERY home-schooling family's experience. Many, probably most, families have felt more keenly than we have the problems associated with home-schooling -- in particular, something that home-schoolers call "home-school burnout" (often, as I'll talk about later, caused by the particular home-schooling STYLE and CREDO). Also, as the next chapter will show in detail, many homes suffer from some of the same problems that schools do; many homes are oppressive in some of the same ways that schools are, as well as in other ways. Recall my friend's statement quoted earlier: "The home is an institution, too." "Rah-rah-home-schooling" is not the impression I mean to give; often the problems of families are not solved by home-schooling per se, as they were to a great extent for us. Home-schooling, however, does open up a whole new range of possibilities, and for us these possibilities were very liberating and of utmost importance.

That said, I would like to describe how wonderful home-schooling can be. "What about free time for parents?" is a common question asked by people unfamiliar with home-schooling, or familiar only with certain styles of home-schooling. Home-schooling gave me MORE free time. For starters, my kids now sleep 'til 10:00 and 11:00, so I can use whole mornings for writing. This is better than whole evenings, because I'm fresher in the mornings. And evenings, for me, are times for relaxing with the kids, rather than feeling I have to pay special attention to them because they've been in school all day.

I do much of my writing while my kids are around. If and when I need to feel free to ask the kids to please NOT be around, or to leave the room, I can tell them, "I just got an idea for a poem so I'm going up to my attic for awhile." I know that they, having seen me at my work, understand and are not fearful of or alienated by it; it is not, to them, "Mommy's secret life," which she leads apart from them while they're at school. My writing, along with singing and piano playing, along with my husband's physics and solar energy work, are all part of the life which has been their parent and teacher. Thus I don't put a lot of time into home-schooling or even into "childcare". Indeed, in the matters of home-schooling parenthood, or any human interaction, less is often more.

Even in schools, less can be more. That is, teachers can spend LESS time on their teaching -- both the teaching and the preparation. My father, who taught high school history, spent NO time in the evening in preparation for the next day. (He used the New York Times as a starting point for each class, and refused to make up "lesson plans," was ultimately asked to resign because of this.) In my Calculus classes I save time (for myself) in many ways, which are beneficial rather than detrimental to students. For example, after teaching each topic I give "seatwork" for the students to do right in class; this saves THEM homework and ME the correcting of homework. (I've also seen that students understand what I lecture about, so they don't come around a whole lot for office hours! In our society many people (in and out of schools) seem to be of the mindset that anything worthy (such as parenting and teaching) has to take up a whole lot of time, and that the quality of one's parenting, or teaching, is directly proportional to the amount of time (and energy, money, etc) put into it. It is my opinion that this is not true.

I mentioned freedom from "the dinner hour." In fact, sometimes this means freedom from dinner itself. Or from MAKING dinner, in particular a fancy dinner. In my family, it just isn't that important. It isn't the focus of our family life. We (sometimes each of us separately, especially now that the kids are getting older) can just "raid the fridge." I call it "Treasure Island." "We're marooned on an island," I say, "and suddenly we discover a whole fridge stocked with food."

We also sometimes do have a “dinner hour,” but it’s not an institution or an obligation, and it’s more the exception (at least this year) than the rule.

Almost the day we began home-schooling, Bret (then ten) and Dev (then four) became fast friends. They wanted to spend almost all of their time together, to the extent that “taking care of Dev” wasn’t something that I had to do. If I wanted or needed to go out, teaching or thrift-shopping, I usually felt that I could. And Bret, of course, was AVAILABLE for such “baby-sitting,” since he didn’t have to be in school. (It’s probably important to mention that, at the time, my husband spent most of his time at home with a home-health aide, so there were at least two adults around.)

Another fringe benefit of home-schooling: Bret has seen that I do my work with loved ones around, so he knows that HE can do HIS work, or play, with Dev in the room. He doesn’t perceive a little brother as a threat, any more than I perceive sons and daughter as threats. This cuts down considerably on “sibling rivalry.” (It has not eliminated it, especially once Bret became a teen-ager and needed to break away from childhood and children, in the person of Dev.)

Sibling rivalry is not the only family phenomenon that relaxes under the cloak of home-schooling. Discipline takes on a whole new color. It’s just not that much of a big deal. Our kids SEE us, know us, live with us, in the true sense of those words. This seems to mean that they trust us, in particular, they trust that what we ask of them is right and reasonable. In some sense we’re like colleagues.

Moreover, freedom from school helps us feel free in general, and in particular about relaxing certain household rules. For example, we don’t bother our kids about “putting everything back in its proper place.” Instead we keep everything in ONE place -- one for each of our four floors. Legos, constructs. Little Ponies, arms and legs of action figures -- all go into whichever box, at the end of the day, is on the same floor. This makes everything easier for everybody; the house is still neat (at least during the night!) and the clean-up is simplified. This practice also allows the kids’ play to be more flexible, and more creative, less predictable. In general, home-schooling has allowed us to feel free to be continually assessing the true needs of our children and ourselves, how much time, money, and energy we all truly need to expend. Part of this process is the relinquishment of the burdensome assumption that adults have to be constantly teaching children to be grown-ups. Instead, again, the kids continually SEE “grown-up-ness in action” -- they see us as ROLE MODELS -- and we trust, both them and ourselves, that they WILL become grown-ups when... well, when they’re grown up!

When Bret first began home-schooling seven years ago, our family was in a very difficult situation, a situation beyond stress; I called it “dire straits.” My husband Jeff, diagnosed twelve years earlier with multiple sclerosis, was becoming more and more ill and disabled. He could no longer transfer from wheelchair to stairglide, bed, or toilet. We had home-health aides six hours a day, funded by a local agency, and the rest of the time, or when the aides didn’t show, which was often, I lifted my husband, dressed him, fed him, toileted him, and so on. In the middle of every night I tended to him five, ten, fifteen times, and more. “Impossible” would be a better description than “difficult”; It was definitely not an ideal situation for a family to be in. But this, too, was alleviated rather than hindered when we began home-schooling. Being out of school gave Bret time to work with his dad on “fixing”, as they called it. Jeff gave the instructions and Bret worked on broken TV’s and other equipment. Eventually Bret, all on his own, made a color TV out of broken VCR parts. More importantly Bret and his Dad had the chance to be close. Moreover, because Bret was home, not necessarily MUCH of the time but during a greater SAMPLING of hours, he saw what was going on at home, what we were going through. And he offered to help. One of the things he helped with, for which I will be eternally grateful, was nights. For the first time in years I got a full night’s sleep. The flexibility of

home-schooling permitted this. Perhaps most important of all, choosing to home-school and implementing this choice successfully made us feel EMPOWERED, and this partially made up for the powerlessness surrounding the disease.

Since we've been home-schooling, our home has become a center for many exciting activities. Center City Home-Schoolers, Sierra Club meetings, Well Spouse meetings, poetry readings, Phyllis the soprano over to try out a new duet from *la Traviata*, and so on. Indeed, home is a place where things happen, when things CAN happen. Home is "out in the world." Home-schooling makes it possible for home to be a world, or for the world to be home-based. Because we're not locked into school-imposed schedules, nor school-imposed values -- because our lives in general don't revolve around school -- they can instead revolve around the subject matter itself.

Back to the question asked at the beginning of this section: What about free time for parents? As we have seen, the answer to that question can depend on the home-schooling style. For example, if the style is time-consuming or premised on a school-type environment with emphasis on textbooks, tests, sitting still, and so forth, a parent's needs might become subordinated in the shuffle. On the other hand, parents who don't over-burden themselves (and their children) in this way are often spared "home-school burnout." Home-schooling to them often feels less overwhelming.

Still, parents who devote many hours a day to "school at home" also benefit in certain respects. For example, they don't have to spend evenings "helping" with, or nagging about, homework. They don't have to worry about comments from teachers, nor whether or not their kids are getting along with the teachers. Nor do they have to wake up, both themselves and the kids, at 7:30 A.M., nor pick up or be home for their kids by 2:30, nor arrange "after school care" if they're working, nor feel pressure about enforcing bedtimes on "school nights" (sometimes even on weekend nights, because they feel the kids have to maintain the school routine). They needn't feel obligated to spend weekends with "family" because that's the only chance there is for the family to spend time together. (Likewise, as mentioned, dinner hour.) Years ago Kris Osbakken, a friend of mine who had just begun home-schooling, remarked, "School puts worry in my life. I worry about their teachers, I worry about their reading I just worry." Home-schooling parents don't have to worry to that extent. Things are much more under control.

Life seems so much simpler, more true to its essence, now that we're home-schooling. Diana Baseman, author of "The Pennsylvania Home Education Handbook" and co-editor of Pennsylvania Home Education News, calls it "freedom and simplicity."

Back to "free time for parents": Being with one's kids twenty-four hours a day is something which, in this society, often fills a mother with horror. But a home-schooling mother DOESN'T have to be with her kids twenty-four hours a day. Though she doesn't get the free baby-sitting six hours a day from the schools, she does have many other options available. Playgroups, exchange baby-sitting (which, without school, can go on for days instead of hours at a stretch, if parents so choose), neighbors, relatives, and friends are examples. Moreover, home-schooling kids often have the opportunities (and the time) to be friends with adults, and these adult/child get-togethers can be as good as (and less expensive than) baby-sitters. Also, home-schoolers can and do get together and form communes or collectives or friendships. And some parents can afford just plain old regular baby-sitters (as many do whose kids do attend school). It is a myth that home-schooling kids have to be with their parents twenty-four hours a day.

Moreover, home-schooling kids and their parents often WANT and CHOOSE to be together twenty-four hours a day. Indeed, for many home-schoolers, this is the main reason for

deciding to home-school; many parents feel that age five is too young for kids to be separated from them; or they might simply not want the separation. In this society, being with kids is usually equated with “baby-sitting” and “baby-sitting” in turn is equated with work (or drudgery), with negative connotations. But parenthood, motherhood, and childhood often take on new meaning when school is out of the picture. Jean Liedloff’s book, “The Continuum Concept,” describes the Yequana Indian mothers who “wear” their babies and toddlers; that is, they keep them with them continuously, at the same time going about whatever work or play they need or want to do. The children grow up seeing these activities, gradually and lovingly taking part in them more and more, in step with their ability, curiosity, and natural desire to join their community. In fact, in our own less “primitive” society, it is becoming more and more common for mothers and fathers (home-schooling or not) to have home-based businesses or other work, or to take their babies and children to work with them.

Moreover, this often entails not viewing children as burdens. Children who are not viewed or treated as burdens, conjecture many home-schoolers I know, are often sweeter and less hostile than the average child. Indeed, having been care giver to my husband, I know what “burden” means, and I know that children are usually NOT burdens. Along with some parents, society also will have to learn to not automatically view children as burdens, so that parents won’t have to worry about their kids “acting up” in public. Indeed, the whole concept of “acting up” isn’t written in stone. Sometimes the things kids do ARE a real interruption, but more often they aren’t; sometimes society is so accustomed to thinking of children as interruption that it knows no other way. For example, in a large thrift store the other day, the voice on the loudspeaker boomed, “Parents please keep your children with you at all times. Don’t let them wander off or you will be put out of the store.” I caught sight of a mother whose children were “wandering off”; “Get BACK here,” she told them quickly, and sternly. I felt that she spoke to them in this way because she wanted to assure the store personnel, one of whom was nearby, that she was “controlling” her children. To me she seemed subtly embarrassed and worried about being judged, or “put out of the store.” I felt sad and angry, especially when her kids, bored with having to stay by her “at all times” and perhaps insulted by the announcement, began to act up.

I do realize that the store was right; the kids could get hurt or lost or kidnapped. Still, I think that there was more to the spirit (or ANTI-spirit) of the announcement than only concern about these real dangers. Indeed, home-schooling and home-schooling ideas question the very notion of kids’ “acting up,” as well as other negative perceptions of kids. For our family, home-schooling has allowed us to reject many of these negative perceptions, and has left us with a very positive outlook on life with kids.

WHAT ABOUT COLLEGE?

Home-schooling kids have essentially no trouble with college. Those who decide they want to go usually have no problem getting in, and most colleges make allowances for home-schoolers. Whatever they accomplished in their home-schooling lives, plus their SAT scores, is used to decide whether or not they get accepted. I read and hear this again and again from home-schooling families. Though many home-schooling kids decide they don't want college, many do; it's a decision, as is the decision whether or not to home-school.

I have not yet had personal experience with my own home-schooling kids applying for college, but I have had experience with Bret applying to the "magnet" public high schools in Philadelphia. These are specialized schools -- for example, Carver High School of Engineering and Science, and the High School for Creative and Performing Arts. In partial answer to the title question of this section, here is the letter which I wrote to the schools to which Bret applied (in answer to their request for grades):

To whom it may concern:

For the past four years (grades five through eight) Bret has been home-schooling, according to the provisions of Act 169. I inquired how to handle this section of the application and I was advised, in lieu of grades, to send copies of the promotion letters which we have been receiving each June from the appropriate office at the Board of Education. Those copies are enclosed.

However, they contain minimal information. Since Bret's home-schooling program has been completely ungraded, I am enclosing this short statement about how I, as his home-schooling supervisor, assess his academic and overall performance and what, in this program, "performance" means.

Probably the best phrase to describe our home-schooling style is "independent study." Under my supervision, guidance, and support, and that of my husband and of Bret's two adult siblings as well as many other adults with whom Bret is in contact, Bret has made daily decisions concerning what he wants or needs to learn (and, sometimes, what he DOESN'T want or need to learn). He has not been forced or pressured to do anything academic, and he has appreciated being given these choices and has responded accordingly.

Since I am a mathematician and my husband is a physicist, Bret has learned, quickly and efficiently (A-work beyond a doubt) algebra, geometry, physics, how to build a color TV out of a monitor and a broken VCR, and how to build solar collectors. Since my husband is the inventor of a new type of solar collector (which won the 1990 Best Invention Award at the Franklin Institute), and is also very involved with social issues involving solar energy, and ecology in general, Bret has also become aware of and interested in these issues. This in turn has led him to be interested in other social issues and of his own volition, he has read articles in diverse publications and thereby advanced his knowledge of history, geography, and civics, in particular current events.

Bret's reading has also developed according to his interests and sometimes those of his family and friends. For instance, the field of magic. Bret is, in fact, a professional magician, with several paid public performances to his credit. On his own, he has found and read on the order of thirty books on the subject. Currently he is also learning the mechanics of juggling and ventriloquism, and is reading accordingly. Like many thirteen-year-olds he gravitates toward comics. Interestingly, the vocabulary in comics is extensive, and Bret's conversation reflects this. Another activity that has increased his vocabulary markedly, and improved his reading, is

Scrabble, a family passion. Bret and I are both members of an (adult) Scrabble Club, and Bret is as adept at the game, if not more adept, than any of the adults involved. He has also expanded his horizons in other ways through this Scrabble Club. At present he does not seem to be attracted to literature but, since I am a writer, he is definitely exposed, and he does show an interest in my writings. For example, he bought my books with his own money, has attended my poetry readings, and responded enthusiastically. He has also written poetry; one poem was published in "Fennel Stalk," an adult literary journal.

As his home-schooling supervisor, I would certainly give Bret an A in every subject, including physical education and socialization, because he has pursued each interest in an adult manner, making decisions when necessary and abiding by them, also altering decisions when called for. For example, when he became interested in playing the guitar, he found out through a friend where to buy the guitar, then found an instructor and arranged the lessons himself. He has also been responsible for half of the cost of the lessons. When he feels he needs an extra lesson, or to skip a lesson, he calls up the instructor and discusses it. When he felt he needed a longer break from lessons, he decided on that, too, and continued to practice on his own, without prodding from anyone; he also took informal guitar lessons from one of the members of the Scrabble Club.

Bret is certainly not a "TV kid" and this, again, is through his own development and decision making. It was two years ago that he spent a few weeks weighing the various disadvantages of TV and video games, and voluntarily sold his Nintendo and TV. I could give dozens of other examples of how Bret, under my husband's and my guidance, has been responsible for his own education. It is often said of home-schooling children that they learn how to learn, and this is certainly true of Bret.

In this same manner Bret has decided that it is now time for his interest in art to become more directed. All his life he has been pursuing it very much on his own -- with, of course, input and compliments from family and friends who are artists. I believe that, in the learning of any discipline, there needs to be a first "isolation stage," without classes or competitions or other adult interference, and that it is the responsibility of the artist to know when that isolation stage needs to be over. Bret, in his usual manner, has owned up to that responsibility.

I have no doubt that Bret will do well in high school. Home-schooling children, in general, do well if and when they decide to attend school; they pursue this new endeavor with the same enthusiasm, capability, responsibility, and maturity with which they have pursued everything else in their lives. As a parent I might be biased, but as Bret's home-schooling supervisor, I would give him an unqualified A+, as well as my recommendation for admission to any school of his choice.

The five schools to which Bret applied, and to which I sent the above letter, responded appropriately. They did not demand any additional testing, nor did they disqualify him for lack of grades or any other rigamarole. He got into three of the five schools. One was particularly supportive. Someone from their office called me and said, in an apologetic voice, "I read his application, and your letter, and I can tell that obviously Bret's a really smart kid. But -- I'm really sorry about this; I know it's silly but the office has to have it for their records -- I need to have actual grades to put down. Can you tell me some?" I hesitated for a few seconds (I was honestly trying to think of what grades I felt Bret deserved in each of the subjects, and I didn't want to seem inauthentic and give him all A's.) The person cut in and said, "Listen, Bret sounds to me like an A student. How about I just put down all A's?"

PERSONAL STATEMENT

As perhaps readers can tell by now, some approaches to home-schooling excite me more than others. And I don't believe that home-schooling in and of itself is going to solve problems, either of individual families or of the world. In fact, serious questions can arise from what I've come to call uninformed credos and practices associated with home-schooling (and sometimes with school-schooling as well). As I will try to show in Chapter 1, "what's wrong" happens not only in the school. And as I will try to show in Chapter 2, "what's wrong" is associated with bowing to authorities of various kinds, not only school (and some of these authorities are in the home). To me what I call "questioning everything" is at the crux of childhood, education, and societal issues; it is not only a matter of whether or not children go to school.

Being uninformed about the many possibilities of home-schooling can lead to serious problems and disturbing questions. There are many examples of this, which will be described in detail throughout this book. For now, I will try to touch on a mere few of these examples: Being unaware of the true power of home-schooling -- in particular that home-schooling does not merely entail parents doing the same things that the schools do, to the same ends as those of the schools -- leads to problems within the family such as "home-school burnout" and "power struggles" between parents and kids (often of the same ilk as that which occur when parents try to "get" kids to do "their" homework). This in turn causes society to understandably ponder whether parents "can" home-school their kids, and causes parents to feel that they have to buy expensive curriculum which, in turn leads to the risk of home-schooling as an institution being classist, among other things. Because of this, minority parents contemplating home-schooling, but not informed about the full range of home-schooling possibilities, often feel that home-schooling isn't their cup of tea. All in all, home-schooling done in an uninformed, and a-political, way can lead to big problems, both political and personal. It is not only for reasons having to do with educational theory, nor even "for the sake of the kids," that I am advocating a "freedom and simplicity" style of home-schooling (which involves minimal structure -- meaning, perhaps, structure as an exception rather than as a rule -- as well as minimal money, time, and energy expenditure.) It seems vital that home-schooling be done in a socially conscious manner.

Consider the slogan of INFACT: "Breast feeding is empowering to mothers." In a similar manner, home-schooling is empowering to mothers. (In fact, home-schooling has been called "the mother's milk of education.") Both empowerments come from being freed from dependence upon big business and other powers that be -- for example, infant formula feeding in the case of breast feeding, and "the schools" in the case of home-schooling. However, to both slogans, I would add, before the word "is", "in a socially conscious manner." The more consciously both breast feeding and home-schooling are applied, the more extensive becomes the empowerment. In the case of breast feeding: If mothers allow themselves to be persuaded, by government and by society (in the form of doctors, family, acquaintances, and the media) that, for example, their milk is no good, or not enough, or that they shouldn't nurse in public, that they should "get out once in a while" (let someone else give a bottle), that babies should be "encouraged" to go without feeding for a particular length of time, and so on, then the "power of mother's milk" becomes undermined. Analogously, the various societal qualifications concerning home-schooling reduce its empowerment. (This is not to say that breast feeders and home-schoolers have to be completely rigid the other way; breast-feeding mothers CAN take time away from their babies, and home-schoolers CAN set up a "school at home." However, decisions such as whether the mother wants to "get out every once in a while," wean early, or set up her home-school like a "regular" school can and should be made in an informed and conscious manner, and not swayed by authority (again,

often in the form of family and friends). It's not always easy to separate everything out, but being aware and informed is a good start, and helps things get easier.

There are other examples of ways in which the future of home-schooling (as a movement) depends upon home-schooling families being informed about the possibilities within the home-schooling option. For example, if parents believe, as many do, that home-schooling has to mean sitting for five or six hours each weekday in one's own livingroom doing "school at home," then there arises the "socialization issue" so well-known among home-schoolers (mostly because that's what society and the media talk about when they talk about home-schooling). People tend to think that home-schooling kids don't socialize with other kids, and this misconception occurs partly because people perceive the choice as being between spending the better part of the day sitting in a classroom with many other kids and spending the better part of the day sitting in a classroom with only ONE kid, namely the kid herself. Given that choice, socialization, or exposure to the world, becomes an issue. But that is NOT the choice. Home-schoolers also have the option to not spend time in a "classroom" AT ALL. Or, somewhere in the middle, only one hour a day, two hours, and so on. Thus "the socialization issue" and thereby society's views of home-schooling, takes on whole new dimensions once people realize the scope that home-schooling can take.

Another example of how the dissemination of complete information is vital for the future of home-schooling: Kids who home-school are usually freed from five or six hours a day in school, often from another two hours of transportation to and from school. They are thereby freed to become citizens of the world. If society as a whole is unaware of this fact, it will draw conclusions, as mentioned earlier, concerning whether or not home-schooling kids are separated from "the real world". This is not to say that home-schooling kids can, do, or should hold down full-time or even part-time jobs, or be "used" for housework, baby-sitting, or the family business, especially in a forceful manner. Moreover, I'm not even saying that kids should necessarily be "encouraged", while they're still kids, to "become useful members of society." What I'm saying is that kids who don't have their mornings and afternoons dictated to them are free to at least OBSERVE the real world, and to begin making the germ of decisions. Indeed, home-schooling kids often have a head start in the determination of their adult careers, as has been demonstrated again and again by individual home-schooling kids. In my own family Bret had a head start in his present career (He supports himself, lives apart from me now.) doing creative crocheting, and Dev had a head start making up his portfolio for his CAPA (The High School of Creative and Performing Arts) audition, as well as in making his decision to apply to this high school.

If provided with this new picture of home-schooling, perhaps people wouldn't ask, ad infinitum, whether home-schooling takes kids from, or fails to prepare kids for, "the real world." Indeed, it becomes clear that home-schooling can BE "the real world," often more so than the "world" of the "school-schooled" child. And again, people might not accuse home-schooling families of 'avoiding responsibility.' Instead, it becomes clear that home-schooling concerns itself with the ULTIMATE responsibility of human beings, which is to EVENTUALLY (not necessarily immediately, or by any specific age determined by experts) decide in what way to connect with the world, and to then actually connect. Moreover, home-schooling brings this responsibility into view early on in a child's life; and it brings it into view gradually, naturally, and gently. Compare this with the usual SUDDEN worry, tumult, and minor trauma over getting into college, graduate school, and/ or employment.

In my view, home-schooling doesn't have to be home (Education can take place anywhere.) and it doesn't have to be schooling (Learning takes place in all different ways.) To me, HOME-SCHOOLING MEANS SIMPLY NOT SENDING KIDS TO SCHOOL. It can then become a way of living life, a way that is not degenerate but which is also not difficult or self-conscious, a way in which learning is no big deal.

Indeed, what excites me about home-schooling is not so much the range of activities that kids can do, but the range of activities that kids are free NOT to do. It is (often disconcertingly) true that kids in school ALSO do “all the wonderful things” done by home-schooled kids -- and sometimes they exhibit the same joy, enthusiasm, and initiative seen in home-schoolers. But again, to me the point of home-schooling lies not in what kids and families do, but in what they are free to not do.

Many home-schoolers feel that the term “home-schooling” is a misnomer. They feel, as I do, that “schooling” does not describe what they do, and that what they DO do is not confined to the home. In general, if we limit ourselves to thinking in terms of “school versus home.” or in terms only of the words “school” and “home”, what results is confusion, questions, and in general an incomplete picture of the whole scenario.

SUMMARY OF THE REST OF THIS BOOK

Center City Home-Schoolers, the group formed by my neighbor Merilee Williams and me, and later coordinated by Kitty Anderson and me, functions both as a support group and a resource center. Besides providing a time and place for home-schoolers to get together and talk (about home-schooling concerns, and often about other things as well) and for home-schooling kids to meet and make friends with each other, the group is also meant to be a vehicle to inform. People who contact Kitty or me are not always seeking to join or even to attend a meeting; often I get calls between meetings from "new" home-schoolers, or from "old" home-schoolers with new concerns, or from interested people not home-schooling at all. Talking with them about some of the ideas already mentioned in this introduction (and also in the rest of this book), I see how un-informed many are. "I thought the law said we have to sit our kids down six hours a day." "I thought we had to decide on some curriculum." "I thought we had to give the kids tests and grades." Or many people don't voice these misconceptions so literally; they just come out indirectly in the course of our conversations. People are usually -- almost without exception, actually -- pleasantly surprised and relieved when they see what the possibilities are, and how home-schooling can be an opportunity, not to do what schools don't do, but to sometimes NOT do what schools often do.

Very often, even over the phone, I sense the lights go on in their heads. "Oh," many exclaim. "BEFORE I didn't believe I COULD home-school; now I do." I hope that readers of this will benefit in this same way (whether or not they actually decide to home-school; I believe that, if they don't, they can still incorporate many of the IDEAS into their lives.) It is in this spirit of informing that I am writing this book.

Not everybody subscribes to the same home-schooling credo that I do, but there seem to be many who do but don't know it (that is, haven't articulated it in so many words). Again, it seems to be a matter of becoming informed and then of using this information to decide what one's own credo is. I hope that this chapter has served as a description of home-schooling, and as a first-order approximation to the kind of lives that children and adults could be living. The remainder of this book will furnish more details.

The first chapter, titled "What's Wrong", is about just that, "what's wrong" -- not only in the schools (as I had originally intended it to be), but other adult-organized "children's" activities as well, including some home-schooling ones, and, in general, in society's treatment of and attitudes concerning children (and of humans). Examples of "what's wrong" have already been mentioned or alluded to in this introduction; others will be developed in the first chapter: the compulsory nature of learning, homework and other ways of controlling families' lives (even while the kids are not actually IN school, or IN any "educational" situation), exaggerated peer-group contact, over-emphasis on -- resulting in self-consciousness about -- the "difference" between learning and not-learning, "the potential trap", and so on. In Chapter 1 I will try to go into all of this in a systematic manner, as well as give other examples.

The second chapter, "Questioning Everything: The Many Subtle Faces of Authority", is perhaps the crux of this book (and was most fun to write). Home-schooling parents and advocates often talk about "authority" in the form of schools, and about how we must struggle against internalizing the authority in our homes and in our minds. But few home-schoolers seem to take into the account the forms of authority which the HOME can take, and how this can extend into what many home-schoolers call "out in the world". Consider, for example, the various activities of which home-schooling kids and families can and often feel obligated to partake, and to which home-schooling parents, sometimes desperately and needily, turn: Girl Scouts, art classes, the Y, Little league... All of these, while often positive experiences, also

share many school-like features with the schools. Libraries, performances, and books “for” children can also be suspect. It is not so much these phenomena themselves that bother me, as the authority status which they are so often given. (In the second chapter, I will explain more thoroughly what I mean by “authority” and by “authority status”.) There are also authorities within the home-schooling movement itself, especially in the form of curriculum companies or home-schooling “experts”, but also certain practices and mindsets. It is in this second chapter that I caution parents, home-schooling or not, to be wary or and to question --- well, EVERYTHING. This is a schooling society we live in and, even if everyone were to begin home-schooling tomorrow, it would very possibly remain a schooling society for a long time to come.

The third chapter, “Re-Thinking Creativity”, is a chapter all its own because of its huge scope and because of the space which I needed to give it. In our society, the word “creativity” has become so loaded that it often acts as an authority. For home-schoolers there is an additional consideration, an additional sense in which the word is loaded: because home-schoolers are pioneers, because they are doing something which is different and apart from the bulk of society, they are understandably scared. So they often need to be able to say things like “Johnny can’t read but he’s creative”. And for this purpose Johnny needs, in order to assuage his parents’ fears and uncertainties (and those of the other adults in his life), to be creative IMMEDIATELY (not eventually) -- whereas true creativity often takes decades to manifest, in the form of paintings or poems or... well, creations. Non-home-schoolers are also scared in this way, simply because being a parent can be scary.

Businesses, including home-schooling businesses and “home businesses”, play (sometimes subconsciously) on all this; other special interest groups cash in and the result is what I call “the childhood creativity mania”. What is real creativity and what is part of that mania? How can we separate it all out? How can adults be more sensitive, and less nervous, about the phenomena of creativity, or lack of? What if a child isn’t (or doesn’t yet seem) creative? Can we be patient with respect to creativity -- that is, can we WAIT for it? What are the true “ages and stages” of creativity? What is the difference between a creative child and a creative adult? A creative adult often reverts back to the creative child she once was; what does that mean in terms of her needs, and her creativity’s needs? Is there an “adult creativity mania”? How do society’s attitudes towards creativity expose and reflect its attitudes towards children, and adults, in general?

Chapter IV, “New Heights in Non-Structure”, is a kind of corollary to Chapters II and III, almost an excuse to do some even more subtle questioning. It describes the possibilities, the emotional “heights”, that can be ours if and when we do this subtle questioning. In effect, it shifts the concentration from the “what’s wrong” of Chapter I to “what’s right”, or what CAN be right. The chapter has a lot to do with emotion, and with giving ourselves and our children permission to feel, respect, and act on emotion. It’s also about SPECIFIC permissions -- for example, permission to not-write in cursive, or not-read to your children -- and it’s about the GENERAL permission to let individual differences, emotions, and common sense be our guides.

The fifth and last chapter is “The Politics of Home-Schooling”. As we have begun to see, home-schooling is not a-political. It’s not only a matter of education of child-rearing or even lifestyle. Modern issues such as minority, economic, abuse, women’s, and day-to-day life issues connect with home-schooling and home-schooling ideas. Although, for example, minority and women’s groups often shy away from and/ or are wary of home-schooling and home-schooling ideas (and Chapter V will try to convey what makes this happen), in actuality these groups, and individuals within these groups, have much to gain by dipping, or plunging, into them. Myths, misconceptions, beliefs, fears, and feelings have to be sorted out. For example, school and other authorities are often oppressive to minorities, as well as to parents,

children, and families in general. Feminists in particular need to be more aware of the oppression that schools and other authorities lay on mothers and children. (True feminism, to me, means being woman-identified, as well as mother-identified in some way, even if one is not a woman or a mother.)

Going the other way, home-schooling needs feminism, to help prevent "home-school burnout" and to ensure that home-schooling laws, the home-schooling movement, and home-schoolers themselves stay non-racist, non-sexist, and non-classist. Moreover, school and other authorities foster and feed into both financial and emotional insecurity in individuals, and cause people to push themselves and their children towards more and more money, more and more "success", more and more ego-builders, and more and more tangible "evidence" of all of this, while at the same time pulling us away from REAL feelings of security. In general, schools and authorities often foster fear, competition, and the very opposite of solidarity among people. And this begins in kindergarten, or in nursery schools and day-care centers, even in infant swim classes.

There's no denying that home-schooling and home-schooling ideas represent a whole new range of possibilities, a whole new way of thinking and of living, for individuals, for families, and for society. If tomorrow the world were to abolish the authority status of schools and other institutions (to the extent that they became the exception rather than the rule), there might be, as there is in some home-schooling families, some "period of adjustment". For a while it might seem as though home-schooling ideas and "the real world" were in conflict. Things would have to sift into place. And I believe that they would -- or there's a good chance that they would; who can say until we try? Things sift into place when a large number of children play together, for example in the playground; often it looks dangerous but in fact the kids are watching out for each other and rarely does anyone get hurt, certainly no more than adults do when they "play" - especially at business, boxing, and war.

After the abolition of authority, society would possibly restructure itself gradually in many ways. Certain words, such as "success", "work", "play", "teach", and "learn", might take on new meanings, or even cease to exist at all. Priorities might change. What we think of as "human nature" might change. It is my belief that people -- children, too -- would still "work" just as "hard", or just as committed-ly, if not more so, and would accomplish just as much, or more. (We wouldn't lose our doctors, nor our trash collectors.) But, I believe, people would work FOR DIFFERENT REASONS. For example, they might work because they felt the need for their work, and they would feel that their work was meaningful, appreciated, sufficiently compensated, and secure.

Perhaps we would all feel like that sixth-grade student from the first paragraph of this Introduction, filled with the passion of working on her project. And we wouldn't have to get PERMISSION to work on that project. Indeed, very possibly ALL of life, and all of society, would BECOME a project, a true project, for each of us separately and for all of us together.

CHAPTER I: WHAT'S WRONG

I was at first planning to call this chapter "What's Wrong with Schools." Then, as I began writing it, I realized more and more that many or most of "what's wrong" occurs in home-schooling situations as well and in homes, period.

"What's Wrong with Both the Schools and Home-schooling?" "What's Wrong with Structured Schooling?" "What's Wrong with Structured Home-schooling?" I decided upon the present title, which I hope says what I mean., and which I hope will become clear to readers.

Much of this chapter applies to all schools without exception, because many "things wrong" are inherent to the whole idea of school. But some of it applies only to MOST schools, or to many schools. What I hope the reader will do is read open-mindedly and honestly, to see what she recognizes from the schools or home-schools in her own life.

In the introduction to this book I talked about how home-schooling to me is an opportunity, not so much to do things which schools don't do, as to not do things which schools do do. So home-schooling is an opportunity to DELETE, to get rid of, to house-clean. Twenty or so years ago, when I first began to think about home-schooling (and I tried, for a long time unsuccessfully, to find other parents who'd want to home-school with me), I just assumed that that's how other people who were interested in home-schooling thought of it. I assumed, in the language of the next chapter of this book, that they, like me, were "questioning everything." I naively did not realize that many people were interested in home-schooling as an opportunity, not to omit, but to add on -- to teach children MORE things, faster, with more structure and discipline, more "homework", towards greater accomplishment, and -- again in the language of the next chapter -- greater bowing to certain authorities. I did not realize that many people are interested in home-schooling because they believe that the schools are not schooling ENOUGH.

There are, I suppose, some situations, perhaps in "bad" or poor neighborhoods, where this might actually be a legitimate concern (although, as I'll elaborate on later, more school-like school is very possibly the WORST way to solve the problem of disadvantaged children and families). At any rate, that is not what this chapter is concerned with. This chapter is concerned with the things which schools (and some home-schools) DO do, things which, I believe, are wrong and harmful, and MORE harmful the more of it they do.

I feel that schools, including many home-schools, make too much of a big deal about education. They often make too much of a big deal about ANYTHING involving children. That to me is the gist of "what's wrong." Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that the big deal is made about the wrong things, and in the wrong ways. The more money, time, and energy put into the wrong ways, the less money, time, and energy is left for the right ways. In fact, the wrong ways often preclude the right ways.

In THE HURRIED CHILD David Elkind talks about "conspicuous concern." This is probably a good concept to keep in mind when reading this book. "Conspicuous concern" is analogous to "conspicuous consumption," which Thorsten Veblen describes at great length in his book THE THEORY OF THE LEISURE CLASS. Basically, "conspicuous consumption" is consumption of material and intellectual products (including books and, as Veblen's last chapter is titled, "Higher Learning"), not out of any real desire, need, benefit, or enjoyment (for themselves), but out of a drive to SHOW OTHERS --or perhaps, on an emotional and/or psychological level, show themselves -- what they have -- that is, what they can financially AFFORD. Analogously, Elkind's "conspicuous concern" refers to the drive to SHOW our

concern (genuine or not) for our children. That is, adults try to show, or prove, how concerned they are, via tangible evidence and symbols such as fancy toys, expensive schools, time-consuming inconvenient extracurricular activities, certain kinds of parental involvement, and so on. This is often far too independent of how much ACTUAL concern, or love, that they have for their children.

So “conspicuous concern” is different from actual concern; it is the APPEARANCE of concern. It is important to keep in mind that it is not only parents who are guilty of conspicuous concern, but also the expensive schools, clothes, etc. themselves, plus the authorities from which all these arise. Indeed, conspicuous concern seems to be synonymous with “big deal,” or perhaps with the “authorities” analyzed in the next chapter, or with the about-to-be-analyzed “what’s wrong” of the present chapter.

TOO MUCH TIME

School, as I have already said, takes up too much time. Kids go five out of seven days, starting early in the morning and ending so late that there is barely time to do much else before being called for supper. In fact, many kids are expected or required to do homework in the period between school and supper. Then, after supper, the kids either do more homework or get ready for bed because, after all, they have school the next morning. and this goes on for thirteen or more years (after which, of course, the kids are now adults, with college or jobs).

Most people are so used to this state of affairs that they give it little thought. (Thus the above paragraph has no shock value-- although, to me, it does.) Many vaguely lament that they hardly see their kids, and some admit that when they do see their kids, things are pretty hassled. They might sigh resignedly. But school seems a fact of life, almost biologically determined; few people question it.

The situation could, of course, be worse. Kids could have to go to WORK every day at 7:30, (or earlier), or to war. Yes, compared to some situations (which also, unfortunately have existed or still exist in various places and times), school is not half-bad, and far from horrible. But this is speaking RELATIVELY. The fact that something could get worse is no argument in its favor. Besides, people who advocate school do so because they believe that it's the BEST thing for kids.

Does it really take six hours a day to learn to read? And if so, is it worth it? Adults often compare school to adult employment. One of the things they say is that school prepares kids for the world of work. Well, is THAT worth it? And, in fact, DOES it prepare kids for the world of work? In actuality, when they grow up and go to work, home-schooled kids have no more trouble than conventionally schooled kids. and maybe less. (We've already seen some reasons why -- they have a head start in deciding WHAT KIND of work they want or are good at, and also they learn responsibility and commitment in a meaningful way).

Many adults feel that, because the adults in the household work, the kids should have something analogous to work to do. But is that so? Are kids miniature adults? Do kids have the same need, or the same motivation, to work? Do kids have the same control over the "work" they do? Do kids truly understand the need to "work"? IS there a need for them to "work"? (Do they earn money? Have they chosen their "job", in any sense of the word "chosen"?) Many adults say, as they urge their kids off to school in the morning, "mommy and daddy are going to THEIR work, and YOU're going to YOUR work." Do the kids relate to that? Note the expressions on their faces next time it happens.

School is not merely too much time; it's essentially ALL the time. Our lives revolve around school. Not only kids' lives but those of the entire family. And not only hours and days but years and decades. A mother I know, who with her husband owns and manages a small stand of ethnic clothes and accessories, talks about her concern for her four-year-old son. "What're we going to do next year?" she asks. "We go traveling four times a year, two months at a time. What about his schooling?" Unless they decide to home-school, this family's life and work will soon have to change drastically.

Because school takes up so much time, it takes away from people's time to do other things. The above example is obvious; conventional schooling would mean no more trips to Guatemala, no more family business. But EVERY kid in school gives up huge chunks of his life -- visits during the week, sleepovers, out-of-town friendships. Indeed, every family with a kid in school has its lifestyle pretty much determined by that fact.

Many parents might talk in terms of “commitment to education.” Sometimes this makes sense: graduate school for example, where the student has truly committed to a particular field of study -- or a specialized high school (art and music, for example)-- or the first year of a formerly home-schooling child who has, indeed, decided to commit her energy to trying out school. But by and large, is “education” a commitment which either parents or children have actually CHOSEN? Is it a commitment they even understand? What does commitment mean, anyway? I’m reminded of that scene from “Roots”, when the master sells the couple’s daughter, justifying it by “As long as everyone follows the rules, I treat them well.” Who has made the rules, and who has chosen to commit to them?

IS education a commitment? Or is it something parents “commit” to because everyone else does, or because they believe they’ll get in legal trouble if they don’t. Are they afraid they’ll get punished by “Master”?

Even if education is a commitment, is school the only place to get it? What’s meant by education? Must it take up our children’s entire (or one minus some unit-fraction of) childhood?

I could cop out and say “Everyone has to answer these questions for herself,” but in answering them “everyone” would need to be completely informed, and not be swayed by status quo. Yes, everyone does “need to answer these questions for herself,” but first she needs to answer OTHER questions, such as: What do we want our children’s lives to be ABOUT? What do we want OUR lives to be about? What do we and our children want to learn, and do? How much time is really needed for what we have decided? Perhaps, like the family with the ethnic products business, we’re ALREADY doing it....? Perhaps we (both adults and kids) could do it BETTER without school? More, and more involved, questions will appear later on in this book

“Too much time” can apply to home-schooling families as well. Certainly one factor would be the style of home-schooling. Another factor would be how much, for a particular family and a particular kid, is too much. Either way, the issues would probably be more subtle than for schooling families. In the Introduction, it was described how complying with home-schooling laws, in particular record keeping, can take up time. Also, Devin has lost a “sleepover” or two with a home-schooling friend because that friend “had to do his math.” Gloria Molek, a home-schooling mother who, with her two kids, was hostess to Dev and me at a home-schooling conference near Pittsburgh, emphatically describes this state of affairs. “I joined a home-schooling group so my kids could have kids to play with during school hours and you know what?! The other parents always say ‘Mary can’t come over today because she has to do her (school) work’ or ‘Mary can’t sleep over because we have to get up early tomorrow morning and work.’” Moreover, as described more fully in the next chapter, many home-schooling families choose to lose their time, and their “freedom and simplicity” to various adult-organized, non-school activities and to other non-school “authorities”.

For home-schoolers we’re probably talking about LESS time lost. And, sometimes less lost, period. Still, I believe that home-schoolers, too, need to be wary of devoting too much time to “education”. Even without school, there are many pressures, temptations, distractions, and instances of conspicuous concern out there, all time and life taker-uppers in the name of “education”, or of “concern”.

TOO MUCH INPUT

A friend of mine was once contemplating the several day-care centers which she was investigating for her four-year-old. Telling me about one of them, she frowned and looked skeptical. "I don't know..." she pondered. "In the OTHER one they sang a new song every day. . ."

I was bewildered. I hadn't realized that it was important to "sing a new song ever day" (or even every week). I hadn't realized that it was important to learn a new ANY- thing every day. A day is 1/ 365 of a year, and a lifetime is so many years! What is this preoccupation with "every day"? What is this preoccupation, period? I think about the songs I sang when I was a kid; if I'd been introduced to a new one every day, I doubt if I'd remember any of them. Not the way I remember them now.

And so it seems to go, from day-care through kindergarten all the way through high school and college. A new song every day. A new story every day. "Read to your child at least 15 minutes every day." I know a home-schooling parent who every day asks her five-year-old, "What did you do today that was creative?" Another home-schooling parent says, "Do SOMETHING every day." What is it that's fearsome about the sun rising and setting without something being "done"? (Isn't the sun rising and setting enough, at least sometimes?)

Kids who already love music are taught "Music Appreciation." Kids who already draw, or make collages, are made to do it again, and again, and not on their own terms. Kids have to memorize presidents' birthdays, something they'll never remember nor use when they've grown up. Textbooks are large, and expensive. Quantity, quantity, quantity. Clutter, clutter, clutter.

Sometimes it's subtle; no memorization, no sitting still for long periods of time; but preschoolers who already move are enrolled in "movement" classes. Infants who are already stimulated go to "infant stimulation" classes. Somehow it seems to "count" more if the "movement" or "stimulation" is facilitated by a professional "mover" or "stimulator", rather than a parent, friend, or very self. How necessary is any of it? Why do so many parents, home-schooling and conventional schooling alike, seem to feel as though somehow they're not proper parents if they don't keep up this over-input? Why must there be so much learning going on? Why is genuine love for children always channeled in these directions?

Certainly there's ENOUGH teaching going on; yet somehow teachers, in and out of school, seem to think that maybe, if they teach fast enough, they'll finally teach it ALL. There seems to be some kind of anxiety which they're trying to assuage. As though putting out time, energy, and money (or CHARGING money) will succeed in assuaging that anxiety. Teaching and learning seem to me to serve as a kind of *raison d'être*. Perhaps it's part of "conspicuous concern."

Devin at nine said to me, "I want to know cursive but I don't want to LEARN it." One could laugh and continue teaching Devin cursive. But do people have to specifically learn things in order to know them? All things? What about the obvious counter-examples of walking and talking? And what about less obvious examples like Mozart, at the age of four, suddenly picking up the violin and playing? What about all the very subtle things people do, things we take for granted, like looking up when another person walks into the room? What about societies where babies are "bound", or just not put on the floor or ground 'til they're older, and the babies still crawl and walk, at the same ages and stages as in our society? What about Devin learning how to read by being a writer -- that is, dictating his stories to me; for two or more years we did this, without my specifically teaching him either reading or writing (Well, to

satisfy the requirements of the law and have something to put into the log, I'd give him a worksheet, with a "sentence of the day," which I'd ask him to try to read; if he couldn't or didn't want to, I'd read it to him, pointing out each word or anything else that I thought of which related the spoken and the written word. Anyway,); one day, as I was taking his dictation, he suddenly told me, "No, not THAT word; THAT's not what I told you." Days later he was writing down the stories by himself, and also reading. True, he had learned, but not by specifically being taught - - not, that is, in the way most people think of learning.

Perhaps some, or all, things aren't a matter of learning but a matter of when the time is right. Certainly trying to learn something when the time ISN'T right is very inefficient, let alone difficult; it could also lead to learning incorrectly -- that is, to not learning at all, and worse.

I remember advice from my mother when I was an adolescent about to break up with my first boyfriend, because he loved me and I didn't love him. "Teaching someone how to kiss!" she exclaimed. "How preposterous! You don't LEARN how to kiss. When a person is in love with another, kissing just happens." Society would agree. So why does it persist in believing that teaching someone to read, or add, before she's ready isn't preposterous.

Okay, some might answer, but not everything is like kissing. But maybe it is. When "the time is right," as I said in a previous paragraph, maybe everything is as passionate and as natural as kissing. (I myself use the word "passion" to describe my feeling about math.)

Being in therapy is a kind of learning and, as every good therapist knows, it's usually a losing battle to force anyone to go into therapy, or to proceed in therapy too much too fast. Similarly, going through a grieving process is a kind of learning (We learn to reclaim life.) and society has recently come to see that it can't be rushed, or denied, or interfered with too much. Moreover, for someone who has just experienced a loss and is grieving/ learning, we don't recommend a death and dying CLASS, but a support group. In Chapter IV, I will talk about how a learning environment should and could be a kind of support group (that is, displaying the same sensitivity as a support group and proceeding just as slowly and gently).

"The minute you teach somebody something, you've deprived him of the experience of learning it for himself." I forget who said that, but I believe it's true, almost without exception. And only rarely is it worth it, only rarely is it inherently necessary to teach somebody something before he has the inclination and the time to learn it for himself.

Marjorie Rice was never taught math beyond high school. She certainly was not taught tessellation theory. Yet after reading an article about it, she got all excited and came up with a few of her own classifications, moreover with original notation, useful to and appreciated by professional mathematicians. Yes, it's an exception. But maybe there'd be more exceptions if people weren't taught so much, if we weren't given such an overload of input.

Maybe, in fact, there ARE more exceptions, but these exceptions aren't usually what we hear about, nor what the schools teach us. Maybe, in fact, accomplishment has somehow, in our society, come to be, largely, DEFINED in terms of input; it's almost as though if it didn't result from conventional school input, it doesn't count. If we didn't learn it in school, it can't go on our resume. "The Lord works in mysterious ways," goes the familiar poem, and society needs to realize, on a more encompassing level, that PEOPLE also work, and learn, in mysterious ways.

TOO MUCH TESTING, TOO LITTLE TRUSTING

I've made mention of this in the Introduction. But I don't mean testing only in the sense of actual tests. I also mean subtle testing, oral testing, done continuously, every moment, throughout the day.

It isn't only school. Parents, and other adults, do it with preschool children, with babies; home-schooling parents do it, too. People, with or without kids, seem to have the need to PROVE things. To prove, in the case of kids, and of teachers, that the students have learned what we've taught, in and out of school. And to prove it often, even constantly. Pointing to a sign on the street, parents ask their toddlers, "See that letter over there? What letter is that?" Or, reading to kids, "Do you know what that word means?" We're constantly asking them things. And expecting answers.

Some parents are OBVIOUSLY obnoxious; with others it's more subtle. Why do people always need proof? Why do we need to always hear the proof, or see it? Why do we need to document; why do we need so much tangible evidence, results, accomplishments? And so early in our children's lives? Can't learning, and loving, happen without being documented? Can't we just trust? Trust our kids, trust the subject we're teaching, and trust ourselves? Can't we wait? Can't we relax?

There are, of course, many answers to that question, and what they are depends upon the people involved and the situation; probably there are psychological factors as well. Still, if we realize what we're doing, maybe we'll save our testing for our own arenas and leave the kids alone.

As for actual tests, in and out of school, I believe that the reason behind them might be the same as for the more subtle daily testing described above. Namely, teachers and schools, and some home-schooling parents, feel the need to prove. To reassure ourselves. (In the case of home-schoolers, this need is understandable, given the lack of confidence society conveys to them.)

Sometimes the need to prove is unfortunately based in reality -- that is, justified. For example: For schools, state funding might depend upon what is proven. Also, teachers worry about losing their jobs, or not being promoted, or appreciated. They also worry that the students (and their parents) won't realize how well she's taught them. Because, despite students' moaning and groaning about being given tests, THEY, too, have developed the tendency to assume that, until and unless they've passed a test, they haven't learned. Indeed, testing comes to be the most assuring, if not the only, way for everybody to know that the subject has been taught and learned. Testing, then, tests EVERYBODY -- the teachers as well as the students. EVERYBODY gets nervous before a test. And the end result is that testing replaces trusting.

One of the many harms that come from this phenomenon is that the prospect of testing affects, not only the manner in which the subject is taught, but the way the subject ITSELF is developed in the course. Namely, it has to develop so that testing can occur, and so that grading the tests can be reasonably simple for the teacher or grader. To me this seems especially evident when the subject is math. In the latest issue of *Growing without Schooling* Aaron Falbel (who has a PhD in math) writes, "School math is very different from real math. School math is mostly about computation and symbol manipulation. Real mathematicians do not sit around all day doing school math. School has concentrated on this one tiny part of mathematics because... it can be graded easily." And I, preparing for a job interview in which one of the questions would be "What suggestions do you have as topics for a course in

Discrete Mathematics?', was considering answering "Russell's Paradox in Set Theory," but then I realized, "How could students be TESTED on it? There are no problems to give, no specific examples; it's just ONE fantastic idea."

Because the prospect of testing so often affects what is taught, it follows logically that what a test tests is this ALTERED subject, and not the true subject at all. A special case of this is that many chapters in textbooks place the emphasis, not on the most interesting material of the chapter, but on the most easily tested. And this testing, in all its subtle forms, takes over the learning process and what is learned. Testing virtually REPLACES learning.

There are times when a student, especially an independent study student (home-schooling or not) might CHOOSE to be tested. This might be because of the influence of this testing and school society, or because of the genuine desire and need to test oneself. Whatever. Testing could possibly be used to facilitate learning; it could be treated as part of the learning itself (not only as a way to measure the learning, or to "trip one up.") For example, a test could encompass all the important points ("Important" might even be defined, among other things, to mean the points which the student relates to best, or simply LIKES best.) and none of the unimportant points. Or it could be made up such that the answers will read like a synopsis of the course; that is, going over the test would be a course summary. Problems could be put in chronological order, by which I mean not necessarily the order in which they were presented throughout the course, but the logical order (In math, we might say "according to the axiomatic method"). Thus testing could be used as PART of teaching and learning. (In my math courses at Drexel I often don't actually teach peripheral, but nice, topics but instead put them in the "Extra Credit" section of the tests.)

In my own Calculus classes, I give "practice tests," "seatwork", and "crash reviews", involving oral "tests" which don't "count". Home-schooling with Devin, we sometimes do "Spelling Tests." But to me "test" means that, if Devin doesn't know the answer, he asks me, I tell him, and he writes it down. Devin ALWAYS get 100% on tests; he doesn't KNOW there's any other mark (except, of course, what he hears from other kids and on TV. Despite these encounters, I believe that the way we've done tests will have, throughout his life, some positive emotional impact -- or will LESSEN any negative emotional impact regarding tests, which he is bound to feel as a willing member of society)

In my Calculus tests I don't mix the problems up (in order to "challenge" or trip students up). I also don't get carried away with my own math research (and other personal agenda); this is not the time to think up interesting or inventive problems, which freak students out and which seem to have little to do with what the course was about. I DO give such problems as "extra credit," at the end of the tests -- and I write them up on a separate sheet, so that students who want no part of it won't have to even see it.

I'd like to talk about the range of feelings people might have while they've being tested? Well, how does it feel not to be trusted? I remember tests in my own life. School tests were not difficult for me; I was an A+ student and I possibly felt that it was not me being tested but some of the other students. Also, my parents were aware and made me aware of "testing issues;" they basically did not believe in testing. So I was a good sport and played along with the testing game. On the other hand, I do remember feeling slightly Kafkaesque; suppose this particular test would be an exception? Could I bare to see that D, even knowing that it meant nothing? A poem of mine entitled "Test" described this Kafkaesque feeling. It begins, "Suppose they give a test / on the theory that the two hours are typical? / and then suppose something happens to make the two hours not typical?" Somewhere in the middle of the poem I ask, "Suppose NONE of the above answers are correct?" The poem ends, "Maybe / before today / it was all / only / a coincidence."

I do remember more subtle tests in my life. When I was eight years old, my mother began taking me to the dentist. “She has great teeth,” the dentist told her. “Then why,” I thought, “do I have to keep going?” I had passed the test, and I didn’t understand why I was still being tested.

I now skip to age 34. My third baby, two days old, had just died. I was suffering horribly. My mother tried to be supportive; “if this is a test,” she said, “you’ve passed with flying colors.” “Then why,” I thought bitterly, “am I still being tested?” Being tested can feel like HAVING ALREADY FAILED.

Indeed, testing IMPLIES the possibility of failure. Why should learning involve that mindset? Learning is ALWAYS a success. Any course should be more than passable; it should be WONDERFUL.

In home-schooling Devin I admit to sometimes feeling the need to know for sure (only, however, because of the home-schooling law), and thus to need to test/ prove. So I give him ONE multiplication problem. Or two. That’s all it takes to satisfy me. Indeed, if we must test, HOW MUCH testing must we do?

I’d like to end with some thoughts about giving ourselves permission to make mistakes, and to KEEP making mistakes. First, research mathematicians USUALLY make mistakes. They try out one wrong idea after another; often for months and months, or years. Then they end up with, basically, ONE right idea. And pilots: When they fly their planes, they’re USUALLY going in the wrong direction (although in short little spurts); they spend most of their time trying to get into the right direction. Testing, true, can sometimes take this phenomenon into account but it’s pretty iffy. In fact, I believe that often students truly absorb the material AFTER the course has long been completed. Months, years, decades. Pat Henry, Assistant Chairperson of the Math / Computer Science Department at Drexel (where I teach), once said to me, “Students don’t really learn the material until later, perhaps when they take the NEXT level course.” For example, they don’t truly learn Calc. I even if they got A in it, until they take Calc. II. Testing often does NOT cement knowledge, because not enough time has passed. If (and ONLY if) we want to talk about testing, perhaps the most accurate way to look at things is: True testing takes TIME.

TOO MUCH PEER GROUP

Most of this section (though not all) applies only to schools and not to home-schooling situations. In answer to that by-now famous question, "What about socialization?" (upon which societal doubts concerning home-schooling seem to focus), I often answer, "I believe that school offers TOO much socialization." Moreover, school IMPOSES, even FORCES, too much socialization.

In my experience, the kind of socialization imposed by schools is very different from the kind which kids would grow into if they didn't go to school, and in fact very different from the kind which they do get when they're not in school. When I was a kid, I felt very comfortable among the neighborhood kids, and was probably quite popular and well-liked. It was also this way when I played with my sister or visited my cousins. But at school things were different. I felt more alienated from my peers. Moreover, the neighborhood friends with whom I played almost every day acted, somehow, different when we were all in school.

In what ways is school socialization different? It's difficult to pinpoint all of them but, for starters, school is everyday, a long day, mostly in the same room, with the same kids. And while the kids can choose with whom to play during recess, any real control of the social situation is not theirs. It seems that in school, kids are PUT together.

It has been said that kids at school are like kids at war. In many ways it's like the army. Away from the home front, they are fending for themselves. And fend they do. That might be how we get the bully. Also the goody-goody. And the school-smart straight-A+ teacher's pet that none of the other kids can stomach. What are they all competing for? Attention, perhaps, or admiration, or simply approval? Or survival? Perhaps as a substitute for love, or for that feeling of security? There are many moments when, for a child, a compassionate, understanding, and affectionate teacher is just not the same thing as a parent or doting aunt or someone they know well, someone who is committed to them throughout the years.

It has been said that school helps the process of socialization, or at least that it's a place where kids can make friends. Certainly, like in every other place, there is the possibility of meeting people whom you might like. And in fact, when Bret at ten first started home-schooling, he said, "Well, I've already made my friends at school; now I don't need school any more!"

School seems to "teach" socialization in a way similar to how it teaches other subjects -- namely, in a school-type way, often over-simplified, full of assumptions about children and human beings in general and about the ways in which we relate to one another. Kim Bresloe, a home-schooling mother, tells the story of her son Jade's only year in school. He was shy, and his teachers kept saying to Kim, "I'd like to see him make a friend." As the months wore on Jade did make a friend, a little girl sitting next to him. However, several days later he reported to his mother, "First the teacher tells me to make a friend, now she says I talk to her too much. I'm not going to make friends any more." Indeed, do the schools give kids mixed messages about socialization? Is the very structure and set-up of schools such that mixed messages can't help but be conveyed?

I remember gym, from my own school days. It certainly wasn't like kickball on my parents' front lawn. Or tetherball over at the park. Both experiences exercised me (although the non-school experiences exercised me more, since I got more turns "up at bat.") Both experiences involved teamwork, and both taught me whatever body coordination physical education is supposed to teach. But at "gym" I felt alienated. I didn't have fun. And I worried. What if Barbara, for example, that tough girl who used to mock me and call me "baby", landed on

second base while I was guarding it? Around the neighborhood I was good at baseball; I hit the ball all the way across the street, and I often hit home runs. In school, though, I usually couldn't even connect.

Maybe the reason I almost never made home runs in school was that "home", both literally and figuratively, was too far around. In general, everything was too big. I remember the first time the gym teacher explained the game, which I must have already played many times around the neighborhood. I somehow misunderstood; I thought you were supposed to just hit the ball and run the bases, without worrying about being tagged. I thought hitting the ball was the only real hurdle.

I remember school trips. They weren't like family trips. In fact, when I was on a school trip and a family wandered by a few yards away from us, I looked at that family in envy. To me school trips meant worry. What if I lost my money? What if I got lost myself? What if no one wanted to sit with me on the bus? School trips seemed to have a lot in common with gym.

I believe that children, and adults, need periods of not being social. (In fact, that's part of socialization, knowing when it's time NOT to be social.) Teachers often do realize this, as do school principals. I remember my daughter Marielle (who has always been extremely socially adept) in fourth grade, going through a stage when she didn't want to go to recess; her teacher very nicely let her stay inside with her. Indeed, teachers often have to "work around" the rules, because school itself, its very existence, does not seem to take the "no-socialization" moments and other stages of childhood very seriously.

Peer-group, along with socialization, has had a variety of meanings throughout the history of the world. Not every culture concerns itself with whether or not its kids "socialize". In some cultures kids, and adults, are continually and automatically socializing, working and playing together, or in the company of one another, all ages, all activities. And in other cultures, just the opposite occurs; families live far apart from one another; kids associate with siblings only; if there are no siblings, they see no other kids. It is not a given that kids have to socialize, or socialize in any particular way.

To illustrate the vast range of socialization possibilities, as well as questions about these possibilities, I'd like to describe a game which Devin and his friends Jonathan and Jade made up one afternoon in Rittenhouse Square. I call it "the threesome game." One person would sit down on the bench (next to me, the adult -- which might or might not have been significant); the other two would go off together, and walk around, hang out, or find something to do. The idea of the game was to see which "group" would get bored first -- whether, that is, the one sitting next to me got up to find and join the others, or the two who had gone off came back to join us sitting on the bench. At the end of the game (which usually lasted ten minutes or so) they did NOT talk about who had "won". They merely very quietly NOTED what had occurred, then very quickly and without difficulty chose the one who would sit on the bench, and then would start the next "round". I wonder whether this game was one of their ways of dealing with the threesome syndrome. By the way, the winner was always the bench-sitter; the bench-sitter always held out the longest, and the two together always wound up coming back to the bench. So I guess it's easier to sit on a bench by yourself and wait than it is to hang out with one other person.

With my other three kids, and with most kids and adults, threesomes are often bad news. But Devin and his friends have NEVER had problems with threesomes. For example, even when I catch two huddled together, the third on the side, it is not a situation of being, or of feeling, "left out." (I know this because I ask or investigate, right then and also later on.) Indeed, "left out" seems to be a concept which Devin and his friends don't know about.

If everyone were home-schooling, maybe socialization wouldn't be such an issue. People might worry that kids who DID go to school weren't being socialized! In the latest (as of this writing) issue of *Growing without Schooling* Jeanne Ferrari-Ams writes, "My son is eleven and my daughter is ten, and they... are the best of friends. .. My husband and I are the same way -- we are each other's best friends -- and sometimes I think I should have more friends. Actually, I do have a wide range of friends. It's just that I prefer my husband's company, and the kids prefer each other's company. People learn to be diplomatic to each other, to share. If this is accomplished in the home, it naturally extends into the community and into other relationships..."

The scenario can vary from person to person within a particular society. Some kids are loners; some are very social. Most kids go through their ages and stages. My own kids have gone through what I jokingly call "the no-friends stage;" That's an exaggeration but it's a first-order approximation to a description of those less social periods, which can last for years. Probably most kids go through ages and stages when they're not particularly interested in other kids, or when they just can't find other kids that they like enough to make friends with them. And this would be all well and good except: What about school?

Indeed, school makes things such that kids HAVE to socialize. School makes socialization an issue. School enforces and re-enforces peer group pressure because it enforces peer group, period. Larry Shyers, a doctoral student at the University of Florida, did his dissertation on comparing home-schooling kids with conventionally schooling kids. Some of his findings suggest that home-schooling kids behave better because they tend to imitate their parents, while conventionally schooling kids imitate their peers. "The results," said Shyers, "seem to show that a child's social development depends more on adult contact and less on contact with other children." All these are speculations rather than definite conclusions, but they do help to place the whole "socialization business" in perspective.

Although this section was about schools, home-schooling parents also sometimes tend to enforce, or "encounter", too much socialization -- at home (as in "Now, play nicely with your cousins."), around the neighborhood (as in "Go outside and play") and about town (Girl Scouts, karate classes Little League). And one of the fashions in home-schooling groups and circles is to organize what has come to be known as "field trips." These trips have some of the pitfalls of schools trips -- some over-crowding, confusion, lack of spontaneity due to that over-crowding, and confusing, and a kind of mania, or fixation, on making the trip educational or social.

In short, we don't ALWAYS need peer group, we don't ALWAYS need to worry about how to deal with peer group, nor do we need to create peer group situations and problems. Peer group is a fact of life, for us to partake of and enjoy and be grateful for, when we do need or want it.

THE 'POTENTIAL' TRAP

In the Introduction I mentioned how, when my daughter Marielle was in kindergarten and first grade, her teachers told me, "She's a very sweet little girl, a very bright little girl, but she's not living up to her potential." And four years later, when my second-born Arin was in those same grades, I was told, "Arin's a very sweet little boy, a very bright little boy, but he's not living up to his potential." And how, both times, I flashed on myself decades ago as a "very sweet little girl, very bright little girl, but..."

I was getting all A's, drawing many pictures per day, writing several stories per week, playing the piano for assembly; how much potential did my teachers think I had?!

It seems to me that teachers in school get the parents all riled up with this potential business. They get themselves all riled up, too. And everyone working together gets the kids all riled up. Home-schooling parents sometimes get into this potential mindset, too; it seems to be the way society is, school or no school.

Also, it seems to me that they keep raising the potential. "Their potential" seems to be DEFINED as whatever level is just beyond their performance! My husband often talks about how, when he was a kid, he used to HIDE his potential. He didn't want to let anybody know what he was capable of. Once, however, he slipped and said something brilliant in one of his classes, and then, so he recalls, they gave him a psychological test -- similar to the ones I had when they were worried about me not living up to my potential.

It seems to me that living up to one's potential is something one has done by the END of one's life or, if one is lucky, towards the middle. Not in kindergarten or first grade. Whether or not someone reaches her potential in her early years does not necessarily determine whether or not she will in her later years. People's lives aren't homogenous in that way. Moreover, it seems to me that "living up to one's potential" means finding out what to use that potential FOR. And though Mozart played that violin at age four, Gauguin did not paint at age four, nor age thirty-four. Indeed, for the first fifty years of his, Gauguin did not live up to his potential. Nor did he need to. And Handel wrote the Messiah in three weeks, but he probably never lived up to THAT potential again --not in three weeks.

If we're going to believe in potential, I think we should also believe that there is a time for it. A time, that is, for it to be just that -- potential. A period for it to lie dormant. Moreover, just because someone has the potential to do something, that doesn't mean he has to actually do that thing. It certainly doesn't mean he's EMOTIONALLY ready to do that thing. It also doesn't mean he's ready to do that thing TO ITS FULLEST. Certainly not right then and there. What, I wonder, is the rush? Again, what is this need to see, this need to prove?

Having been brought up by the schools on potential, I sometimes wish I'd never heard the word. I wish I didn't know that I have the potential to, say, finish this book in three weeks. A chapter every couple of days; that's not unreasonable. Once, in fact, I DID write a book in three weeks. I wish I didn't know all that; I wish I could stop thinking in those terms. I wish I had never heard the saying, "do the best you can." Sometimes doing the best you can is very difficult, and very inefficient, especially if you rush it.

THINGS LIKE BOOK REPORTS AND NATURE JOURNALS

Things like book reports and nature journals are examples of testing, even if they're not called tests. And they often emerge, as do most tests, from the emotional need to prove. A book report proves that the kid has read the book. A nature journal proves that the kid has been exploring nature (whether actually, or vicariously through some book the teacher has assigned or through some rigged up "nature experiment").

True, both the spoken and the written word are important tools in our society. Recording things -- along with proving things -- DOES have its place, but not, I believe, in the case of a person reading a book or taking a walk through a forest. Here's what Dori Griffin, a home-schooling kid, has to say, in an issue of *Growing without Schooling*, about nature journals: "I love to watch birds and observe plants and animals and draw what I see. I browse through books like 'The Country Diary of an Edwardian Lady' and sometimes I draw, using the drawings in the book as a reference. A couple of years ago, we tried keeping nature journals in a more formal sense. We would have to have a drawing or an entry, as an assignment. This just wasn't the same as doing it because you wanted to. We put our nature journals away after about six or eight months of sporadic use."

CAN education be such that kids do things only because they want to? I believe yes. Certainly, where that possibility exists, we should allow it. Especially since "want to" often means "need to" or "it's time to." And a kid who has an interest in nature will automatically choose how she wants to express it, as Dori Griffin describes above. There is no need to prove this interest. If a kid doesn't have an interest in nature, will keeping a nature journal help? Why, anyway, are adults so anxious for kids to be interested in nature? Nature is wonderful, calming, and "good clean fun," but that doesn't explain the pervasiveness and the anxiety. Is it for the children or for adults? Are adults anxious for ADULTS to be interested in nature? Is there anybody who's NOT interested in nature? And anyway, are we talking about genuine veneration for nature or conspicuous concern?

Right now I'm flashing back on that art class at the Y which I took when I was a kid. I used to wonder, vaguely, "What's the point of me making papier mache puppets when EVERYONE ELSE is making papier mache puppets?" Perhaps, analogously, a kid might wonder, "What's the use of me keeping a nature journal if everyone else is also keeping a nature journal?" Indeed, possibly all the nature journals turn out to be pretty much the same (especially if they're all observing the same woods). There seems to be something false, something contrived, in "having" the entire class keep nature journals, or do oral book reports, or even write compositions on "any topic you like" (even though all the compositions would not be the same). Perhaps in the back of the kids' minds lurks the question "What's the point?"

It was not their idea to keep a nature journal. It was not their idea to write or present a book report. And for many people a large part, perhaps the main part, of the creativity is in thinking up the idea in the first place. Being given a framework, even a framework as broad as "any topic you like," takes it away from the kids. For example, if a teacher had said to me, "write an essay on why 'things like book reports and nature journals' might be detrimental and unnecessary, my enthusiasm would dim considerably. "Oh," I might think, however vaguely, "she knows that already. It's known already. I'm just supposed to fill in the boring details, do hack-work. My IDEAS aren't needed."

Just because a kid has seen or explored nature, that doesn't mean she should keep a nature journal. And just because a kid has read a book, that doesn't mean she should report on it. Even if she loves the book, or has a definite opinion about it, it still doesn't mean she has to document or prove it. Do adults report on books they've read? Do they even TALK about

every book they've read? When they do talk about a book, do they always give a complete report? And do they begin their "report" by saying "Have you ever been to a baseball game?" No; more likely they would "report" on a book about baseball only to someone who has happened to mention that she's just been to a baseball game, or herself read an article or a book about baseball. It would seem contrived and insulting to an adult, and to a kid, to begin an encounter with "Have you ever been to a baseball game?", especially in order to work your way into giving a "report" on a book about baseball.

Do book reviewers review every book they've read? (And when they do, do they begin, "Have you ever been to a baseball game?!") Does a writer write about everything that happens to her, or even every thought or idea that has occurred to her? Being a writer, I know that the answer is no. There are some things I write about and some things I don't. or not just yet. Sometimes I write about something immediately after it's happened and sometimes it takes years or decades. And sometimes I understand why I waited, and what finally triggered the writing down, and sometimes I don't. Things are just not that simple, even if schools and other adult institutions try to make it that way.

When a kid is reading and enjoying a book, her enjoyment is often dampened by knowing that she has to report on it. Moreover, this knowledge can change the way she reads the book. it can even affect his choice of book. For example, if he is assigned a book report on "any book you like," he knows that he has to like the first book he reads; otherwise he'll wind up having to read two, or more, books. So he might wind up staying with a book that he hates, only because he's already thirty pages into it. I'll never forget "Proud Destiny" from my childhood. Why I chose it, I'll never fathom (possibly because it was only book left that day in the classroom library). "Proud Destiny" was three inches thick, small print, and boring from beginning to end. But I chose to stick with it, rather than cut my losses and begin another.

If I were a reading teacher, what I'd probably do is simply initiate a class conversation about the books we'd read (or about why we haven't read any books, perhaps about how we all FEEL about reading). if nobody said anything, I'd start the ball rolling by talking about a book I'd read, whether or not I'd liked it; I'd relate it to things in my own, and perhaps the students', lives. I would not do anything as self-conscious and contrived as a book report. I believe that they would in this way learn something about books in general from this one class alone, without any assigned homework, without even the reading of any book. (In general, I always try to teach so that the classroom sessions alone, without homework or even reading the text, will be enough; indeed, as I teach, I ASSUME that no one does homework and no one owns a copy of the text. I don't necessarily ENCOURAGE this; I just ALLOW for it, and in a non-punitive and non-judgemental manner.)

But schools and some home-schooling parents get so caught up in things like book reports and nature journals, and in proving, that they can't relax, trust, and think in terms of what's supposed to be happening, which is enjoyment and/ or learning. In general, school, including some home-schools, does things in contrived, time-consuming, anxiety-producing (and anxiety-reflecting) ways. They give busywork, and the kids know it. Despite the lip-service given the word "potential", they seem to believe that kids CAN'T, or won't. It seems to be the given that kids won't do anything, even something enjoyable like read a book or go on a walk (nature- or otherwise) unless someone makes them do it. Carrying that over to adults, society seems to believe that adults won't work at any job unless society forces them to. Thus EVERYTHING becomes forced; nothing is chosen.

TOO MUCH OF A BIG DEAL

When my first child Marielle was several weeks old, I was a generally nervous new mother. One of the forms which this nervousness sometimes took was that I was extremely concerned ("Obsessed" might be a better word.) with things like getting her, not only to sleep through the night, but to fit into some semblance of a schedule, something that would jive with my own schedule and that would put me more at ease. I remember saying to my mother, "I'm going to start waking her up at 7:00 every morning; that way she'll get into the habit so when she starts school..."

My mother wisely interrupted me, as gently and as non-insultingly as she could. "Hey!" she said. "Hold it right there! She won't be starting school for another FIVE years. She'll go through a million changes before then."

I immediately got her point, came to my senses, stopped tormenting myself with at least that idea, and decided to let Marielle, and myself, sleep as late into the morning as she would. So at least I spared us THAT "big deal."

Bogged down by my new-mother status (not to mention societal ideas of what a "respectable schedule" is), I now realize that I was making "too much of a big deal." And of course, as my mother predicted, Marielle did "go through a million changes" and wound up presenting no problem whatever when the time came for her to wake up for kindergarten.

Both schools and home-schools often make too much of a big deal. "If they're allowed to chew gum in class, they won't learn respect." "If they don't learn responsibility and commitment now, how will they hold down a job?" "If they don't learn karate, how will they defend themselves?" "Say 'please'." Or "Say 'thank you.'" Then, aside to any onlooker, "You have to start them early." And, from a home-schooling journal (in fact, an UN-schooling journal), "It is very important that kids be encouraged to accomplish something -- anything -- every day." Everyone seems as nervous as I was with my first baby.

Society seems to think that the future will be an exact repetition of the present. We forget that, as my mother put it, they'll "go through a million changes." (And so, by the way, will their environment. So, that is, will what they're supposed to do and how they're supposed to act.)

The future, of course, IS some function of the present. The present does determine the future in SOME way. But not, surely, in the over-simplified ways mentioned above.

And yes, a child's experience does to some extent determine how she'll be in the future. But a child does not have to DO NOW whatever it is that we want her to learn. For example, a kid can see, as my own kids did, that her parents always say please and thank you; she doesn't have to be required just yet to say these niceties herself. The parent doesn't have to prod, nag, and annoy. -- "Whaddaya SA-AY?" every time someone hands the poor kid a cookie. The parent can teach by example. Instead of asking my kids "Whaddaya say?", I tell the cookie-giver, "Thanks very much. That's really nice of you." My kids hear that, whether or not they acknowledge it, and soon imitate and say "thank you" themselves. Put another way: Whether or not they are PROVING it to you right then and there, they are learning manners, and it will probably show up by the time they've grown, more probably before then.

Similarly, I don't believe that we have to insist that kids actually read NOW. or PROVE they can read. We don't have to get all worked up about it. We don't have to make a big deal. Kids live in a world where people read, if not books, then street signs. Reading is part of their world, and in general emotionally healthy kids want to imitate and join that world.

(Emotionally UN-healthy kids wouldn't want to read even if we DID insist.) Moreover, as one home-schooler put it, "If you can read one word, you can read." -- or at any rate, reading or learning to read is IN PLACE.

Schools, including some home-schools, often make too much of a big deal about just about anything concerning children. In a previous section of this chapter I described the big deal made about potential. In another section I talked about the big deal made about "things like book reports and nature journals." Why are we all so self-conscious and nervous? What are we fixating on? What do we have to prove? And why? Indeed, adults often seem to forget that, just as kids normally, easily, and harmlessly go through their "ages and stages" in emotional and developmental areas, they can go through their ages and stages with respect to learning.

At the library a couple of weeks ago, Devin and I picked up a flyer about a juggling act. April 17, 4:00 - 5:00. "That sounds like fun," we agreed. But then we realized that April 17 was the day of our Treasure Hunt party. (Devin had asked me, "Can we have a treasure hunt at my next birthday party?" He'd kept asking until I'd finally said, "let's not wait for your birthday; let's just have a treasure hunt party.") So of course, on April 17, we couldn't do both. Besides, what was the point of jugglers for an hour when we could have treasure hunting all afternoon? We don't need official big-deal entertainment for an hour when we can have ACTUAL entertainment all afternoon.

DEMANDING PROOF OF THE FUTURE -- NOW

Expecting the proof of learning to occur immediately upon being taught sometimes can be extremely unrealistic. An important part of learning usually occurs when one is NOT specifically being taught. Learning gestates, between lessons, overnight, weekends, summers, and once the course is over, sometimes years or decades later. (This to me represents a good case against homework; although there might also be advantages to homework, too much homework PREVENTS this “between teachings” type of learning; it deprives students of that “gestating” unconscious part of the learning process, because it USES UP overnights, weekends, and so on.)

A lot of this carries over into college and into adult life. I’ve taught college math for decades, but it continues to appall me that kids are expected, via “the Final,” to demonstrate (again, prove) that they know the material AT THE END OF THE SEMESTER. The end of the semester is not always, perhaps not usually, the time when they necessarily would know it. The real test, if test there must be, as to whether or not a student has absorbed the material in a course is whether, when the time comes to USE it, the (former) student recognizes this and either remembers it well enough to use it or knows where and how to look it up, or who to ask. To me this seems to be what any course should really teach; it follows that that cannot be tested at the end of the semester, however convenient that might be. Indeed, Marielle could not possibly “learn” to wake up in time for kindergarten until it was actually TIME (five years later) to wake up. In just this way students cannot “learn” course material, not quite completely, until it’s time to actually use that material.

True, there is possibly some correlation between the ability to truly learn course material, in the sense that I’ve just described, and the course grade as conventionally and presently computed. However, I still think that what I’ve been saying should be taken into account (admittedly a very difficult think for society to do, and especially to implment).

Here’s an example of a doctor who, I believe, learned his medical school course material work well, even though his memorization skills were not perfect (as with most of us). At age almost four, Devin fell and broke his wrist; at Children’s Hospital the intern on duty began applying the cast. I watch the cloth wind, first, around Devin’s hand (minus fingers), then wrist, next elbow, and... I saw the doctor hesitate. A full minute, it seemed,; he was grappling with something.

Finally he said, “I’m going in to the other room to look something up. I’ll be back in a minute.”

“In a minute” he returned and told us, “It doesn’t have to go past the elbow.. No point making him wear it past the elbow.” I felt very grateful to and impressed with this doctor and I told him so. “Thank you,” i said, “for admitting that you weren’t sure and looking it up, instead of acting all-knowing and putting the cast on his entire arm.”

In any exam given at that time, he might have gotten that question wrong; yet he knew what he should have known, that it was a choice between two things, half-arm or full-arm cast, and he also knew where to look it up. Moreover, he WAS “back in a minute;” it didn’t take him too long to look it up.

There are, of course, exceptions. Certainly there are parts of knowledge, medical or otherwise, in which time is of the essence. (And students could be tested conventionally on these parts, and ONLY these parts.) But by and large, most knowledge is of the variety that we merely have to know ABOUT it; we don’t have to know it word for word, or number for number.

In my essay "Weekends, Summers, and the Rest of Our Lives," so titled because I believe that's when much of learning takes place, I talk about how colleges (high schools, too -- and some home-schools) make a big deal of "class participation." (For home-schoolers the fixation might be on "response".); sometimes participation counts as part of the grade. But students are individuals; they have individual learning styles and individual ways, and degrees, of "participating." Just because a student isn't saying anything, that doesn't mean she's not participating. (Remember the Gettysburg Address, after which the audience didn't clap.) I usually teach using the Socratic method and many students ask and answer the questions, but some don't. Still, on EVERY student's face (well, every AWAKE student...!) I see, if not hear, some REACTION. I see nods, smiles, expressions of relief when some light has dawned, and so on. Also, a student can "participate" during one part of the lecture and not any other. I don't feel I need "participation," in the form of recitation on the part of students, in order to prove anything. Even if I see a student sleeping or otherwise turning off, I don't worry about it. Sometimes a student doesn't participate in ANY way (even silently); for some students participation isn't where it's at.

Last week a home-schooling mother called up Center City Home-Schoolers, anxious and distraught because her six-year-old son didn't seem to be paying attention to "the lesson." This mother believes much of what I believe but she has been pressured by friends and family, and they have played upon her doubts, as friends and relatives play upon the doubts of most home-schoolers (indeed, most parents). I said to her, "You know how, sometimes, when you read kids a story, they appear not to be listening; they play around, even talk or yell or watch TV. And then, suddenly they'll catch ONE WORD, something that seems to them not quite right, or they have a question about it, and they'll stop you and ask that question. Not only have they been listening, but they've been listening to every word. Well, that's how it might be with the 'lessons'. Besides, even if they're not listening, they HEAR." This did reassure her.

We don't have to make a big deal out of "paying attention," "class participation" or any other PROOF. Most of the time we can live and let live, and learn and let learn. We can relax. We can let the present be the present, and leave its proof for the future.

TOO INVASIVE

When I was in therapy, my therapist often used that word “invasive”. I thought it was a good word. My mother, for example, was invasive when, after praising the sonatinas I had composed, she added, “Of course it isn’t Mozart.” My father was invasive when he insisted on sitting in the chair next to the piano where my sister was practicing, making constant comments despite her please. Both were invasive when, after I expressed some desire or inclination or protest, they remarked, “Freud would have a lot to say about that.” It even felt invasive when, during my adolescence, they’d catch me with a downcast or moody look, and remark, “So what’s wrong, Marion?” And perhaps I was was invasive when, after Bret at eleven had remarked, “Gee, I’d like to know more about slavery,” I jumped in with “Oh, I have a bunch of books about it. I used to be absolutely FASCINATED by slavery, too, when I was your age. My sister and I used to play Topsy and Eva, from Uncle Tom’s Cabin, and I’d write about my fascination with slavery in my diary. I could read you some of the stuff I wrote...” (And Bret interrupted my little reverie with “Mom, I’m not THAT interested.”) Kids, too, are invasive with their interruptions or down-putting remarks, or when Devin snaps, “What’s so great about [my beloved] fractions?”

“Invasive” seems to embody a range of adjectives, including interfering, interrupting, overkill, mocking, undermining, rubbing it in, and so on. “Invasive” means invasive to our thoughts and feelings. It’s a word with subtle meanings. Certainly everyone is invasive -- and invaded -- sometimes. That can’t be helped, since life is seldom black-and-white, and since it’s not always impossible for a person to know what might be invasive to another person. But some people are more invasive than others, and some situations are more conducive to invasive-ness. Adult interaction with children can provide many examples of this -- classrooms, adult-run children’s activities, and teaching learning situations within the home, such as helping with homework and home-schooling, and so on.

I often wonder why some psychologists, who understand the concept of invasiveness, seem not to understand the extent of the kind of invasiveness mentioned directly above. I hope that what has already been said in this chapter has helped to illustrate this extent, as well as how unnecessary it all is. In fact, perhaps “making a big deal” is synonymous with invasive. I made too much of a big deal about Bret’s passing comment about slavery. My parents made too much of a big deal about Mozart and Freud. And backtracking a little, certainly book reports and nature journals can be invasive, to a kid’s true interest in a book or in nature. The school-like focus on a kid’s “potential”, which often is potential only in adult minds, is a very subtle and encompassing form of invasive-ness. It nips in the bud any gestation, that all-important phase in the history of any talent or genius, that period when talent is ONLY potential, a secret kept even from oneself and very precious and fragile. Continuing to backtrack, peer group is perhaps the cruelest of invasions, especially the snickers when a kid gives a silly, or an unusually serious, answer in class. And too much time is CONTINUOUS invasive-ness. Also, too much input might be another virtual SYNONYM for invasive-ness.

Indeed, situations where education is the agenda can be hotbeds of invasiveness. In his book, “Educating the Entire person”, Ron Dultz points out, “The most important idea to keep in mind when educating children is the fact that all children are immersed in sensitive, complex and critical patterns of self-development. Their formal education cannot occur properly if it is inharmonious with their various patterns of self-development.” Perhaps, more important, neither can those “patterns of self-development” themselves “occur properly”.

In some sense, any education-oriented situation has TWO agendas -- the teacher’s and the learner’s. And those two agendas are often opposed, unless the learner has specifically and consciously AGREED to be taught. Ron Dultz calls ANY compulsory education an “unnatural situation” and goes on in his book to say, “... demanding learning of children is inappropriate in a

majority of cases. It humiliates children, frightens them, intimidates them, disorients them, and often establishes in them resentment and hostility toward learning. Demanding learning of children is also an unfair assignment for TEACHERS. (underlining mine) Teachers placed in the position of having to demand learning from children are themselves given an ignoble task. It can be humiliating, unrewarding, and demoralizing.”

Perhaps teachers in schools who simply recognize all this, and who own up to it in the presence of the students, can at least partially break through the “resentment and hostility”. Teachers in the home can do more than this. They can avoid invasive situations, and they can teach only when it’s called for.

THE DIS-EMPOWERMENT OF CHILDREN, PARENTS, TEACHERS, AND EVERYBODY ELSE

I've already gone into some detail about how pervasive school can be, especially time-wise. How it can get into our lives, undermine relations within families, regulate (sometimes completely) a family's waking hours, and what gets done in those hours. I've already talked about how the home-schooling laws and society's general attitude toward education can do the same sort of things. If that isn't dis-empowerment, what is?

Consider what all this does to a parent's self-image. "Society is chipping away bit by bit at our children's childhoods," said Kim Bresloe at the latest meeting of Center City Home-Schoolers.

"Yes," I added, "and it's also chipping away at parents' parenthood." Indeed, it often literally tells the parents what to do, treating us like children.

True, in recent years some schools (including the ones my kids and I have had contact with) have been increasingly sensitive to the feelings of parents, and respectful of parents in general. Over my own children's school years I've especially appreciated, for example, the booklet about homework telling us specifically that parents were not expected to help their kids with homework, but only to remind them to do it. I also appreciated the teacher's attitudes towards parents, how they did not automatically blame or look down on them, nor hold them responsible if things went wrong. For example, when one of our kids exhibited a behavior problem, his teachers told us, "I feel guilty. I worry that I'm not doing my part."

Still, parents are probably aware that this kind of sensitivity and respect can be withdrawn at any moment (as indeed it has been, at times -- if only via a look or tone of voice), and the main thread continues to be that our role in our kids' education and upbringing is at the bottom of the totem pole. We are instructed, maneuvered, talking down to -- and not paid. We are, after, providing our country with citizens, and workers, no less than teachers and the school board. In general, parents do not feel appreciated or empowered, and I believe that that is largely because of society's attitude towards education, or perhaps society's attitude as FIXATED upon education.

Now, do TEACHERS feel empowered? Not the ones I've spoken with, both in my home-schooling activism and plain old general conversation with teachers I've known as friends or in my kids' schools. They're locked in by lesson plans, syllabi, city and state regulations, the need to discipline, the pressure to cover a certain amount of material by a certain time, and by the negative mindset of the kids (which is probably caused in large part by the compulsory nature of the situation, as well as by society's attitudes towards kids, as well as plain old experience.)

Teachers don't decide who to teach. Nor when. Nor where. Nor, to a very large extent, what or how.

Let us for a moment allow ourselves the luxury of imagining teaching without school, and without any legal intervention in education. (Most of us have probably already experienced this, though in small doses -- for example, how do people learn how to play chess, or cards, or how to fix things around the house?) It could be a whole different scenario. Everyone, not only those designated as "teachers", could teach if she wanted to, what she wanted, who, and so on. She could teach when and only when someone needed or wanted to know about something, something which she and not that someone knew. She could teach when the "students" were ready and willing to learn (ready, that is, to define themselves as students). It could happen in isolated incidents or in spurts, or a whole course, with more than one student,

could develop. Think of Socrates, how truly empowered he and his students were.

But schools and schooling laws prevent that kind of empowerment. They perpetuate a myth that only “the teachers” can teach, that you have to have a degree or certificate in order to teach. (And thus, for example, people unversed in the nature and scope of home-schooling ask, “Can parents teach their children? Would I be able to teach my children?”) They also perpetrate the myth that, unless someone teaches you, you can’t learn. They even perpetrate myths to the effect that you have to be qualified in some way in order to learn. (For example, college scholarships and fellowships, and SAT scores.)

Schools, schooling laws, and schooling ATTITUDES make us afraid. They grossly diminish the power of teaching, and of learning.

SCHOOLS ARE OPPRESSIVE TO POOR AND MINORITY FAMILIES

I have already talked about the dangers of home-schooling's becoming racist and classist. For example, as already pointed out, the Pennsylvania home-schooling law is classist in that complying with its requirements is more accessible to middle and upper class families. I might also mention that a bigoted or racist home environment will have more chance to pass on these attitudes to its children if those children don't go to school. In fact, unfortunately, there are many parents who choose to home-school BECAUSE they want to pass on these attitudes.

The remainder of this section is about the ways in which school (not home-schooling) is oppressive to poor and minority families. It is certainly true that there has been discrimination in the schools. Just yesterday a Puerto Rican friend of mine told me that teachers in one of the "best and most socially conscious" schools were favoring the white middle-class students (and UN-favoring the other students). Considering the broader perspective, schools throughout history have carried out the will and attitudes of their country's governments; for example, schools in Nazi countries discriminated against Jewish children. (And colleges denied or backed up the holocaust). The emphasis in this section, however, will not be on the INDIVIDUAL schools, teachers, and principals but on schooling per se.

Although many schools and teachers have gone out of their way to combat prejudice, racism, and classism, it remains a fact that all public school teachers have attended teachers' colleges; even black teachers had to have had four years of time, if not money, to devote to this. Thus teachers, whatever walk of life they come from, are not really coming from the same place as poor and minority students. As a result their values and personalities are usually different from those of the students, and of the people in the students' lives; the students thus can feel alienated, even if subtly (and even if they "shouldn't"). The very language used by teachers, and the language which they encourage or force the students to use, is not working-class. Actually it is barely even colloquial. When I was in sixth grade, our English teacher would not allow us to say "ain't", "well", and "okay". Even at home, we had to keep what I now smilingly call "ain't journals," and record any instances of using these "bad" words (some of which have since been added to the dictionary). Schools do provide, or try to provide, diversity, but on middle-class terms.

In her chapter in CHILD'S WORK on "Choosing Friendships," Nancy Wallace says, "School, we realized, would never have been able to bridge the gap between Ishmael [her fifteen-year-old son] and his working-class classmates. Instead, it would almost certainly have CREATED a gap where previously there had been none. School, after all, is where you learn to judge and be judged by narrowly defined academic standards. School is where you learn to stop seeing people 'from all vantage points,' as Ishmael would say, quoting the Sufi leader, Pir Vilaya Inayat Khan."

Indeed, Linda Goss, well-known Black story-teller and author, and a recent home-schooler, has told me, "Miquon [the alternative school which her son had previously attended] TRIED to bring various cultures together. But it was, after all, in the suburbs, and it did cost money [so it didn't attract very many minority families]. When I came to your [home-schooling support] group and saw everyone sitting around your kitchen table, and the kids and the cats, and all that food, I thought, 'THIS is great!' You really made everyone feel comfortable. That was REAL diversity."

Consider equipment. Is it affirmative action that poor kids get to use computers in the schools? I would imagine that at least some of the advantage to this "exposure" could be offset by feelings of alienation. When you don't have a computer at home, when your father or

your aunt or uncle doesn't use one in his job, when home- life dinner- table conversations (assuming they exist) are not about computers, then computers in school just don't feel the same.

This mere tendency is aggravated by the fact that there are never ENOUGH school computers. (In general, I've noticed that any help or affirmative action offered by society never seems to be enough.) So each kid waits in line. And feels cheated if he didn't get his turn today. And waits, as I did next to the school bully on second base in gym, next to his peer-group enemy. Or talks and laughs too loud, or pushes and gets into trouble. Or worries that, when he gets his turn, he'll somehow mess up, make a fool of himself, perhaps completely botch up his turn. Or not get a long enough turn. But not admitting any of this, putting on a show of not-caring, because sometimes it feels easier to succeed at failure than to fail at success. I know all this from my own memories of seventh grade sewing class; there weren't enough sewing machines; because of the waiting, it took forty-five minutes to sew one seam. Once I sewed the wrong seam and wasted a whole week. I wasn't poor or black but I still felt alienated. Ten years later I had my own sewing machine and that's when I really learned how to sew (without a teacher). Besides, before any of this, I had had no sewing machine, ever, and knew quite well how to sew without one.

In the section on "Too Much Time," I talked about school's pervasiveness, how school permeates, almost prevents, the home, or ANY life outside of school. How it can get into the relationships between parents and kids, in particular how it gets the parents to hound (or hit) their kids over matters like homework and grades. Poor and workingclass parents are particularly susceptible to that kind of thing, partly because of poor self-image; they bemoan their working lives and "want better" for their kids, and they believe that good grades, or making a good impression, will achieve better lives for their kids. What's meant by "better" is another matter. Thus they are inclined to respect (too much), and be fearful of, authority; they, like the kids, are trying to "please the teachers;" perhaps, like me when I was a kid, they're trying to "creep into the teacher's [or the system's] heart."

I think back to one day twenty years ago; I was picking Marielle up from kindergarten. I found the teacher and a mother hovering over little Dwayne. They were shaking him and yelling, "You WILL read. You MUST read. You CAN read and you WILL." To me it seemed no accident that the boy and his mother were black and shabbily dressed.

Middleclass children seem to feel more comfortable in schools than poor children. And, vice versa, schools seem to feel more comfortable with middle-class children. Even if a particular teacher is open-minded and allows, for example, slang in written assignments, she still possibly feels more at ease, or subtly different in some way, with the middle-class kids. It's a mindset that's hard to get rid of.

And middleclass kids in school are more likely to socialize with other middleclass kids. As a high school student, I somehow knew which kids I was "supposed" to be friendly with. I thought of them as "the well-dressed kids"; what I meant, but couldn't then articulate, was kids dressed a certain way, and looking and talking a certain way. Actually, looking back, I see that "the well-dressed kids" were NOT necessarily all well-dressed! I just thought of them that way. And I did NOT associate with very many of these "well-dressed kids," nor did my parents or teachers urge me to. Somehow, though, I felt that something was wrong, that I was doing something wrong. In a movie or TV special, the kids I did associate with would turn out to be unusually sensitive or display some great character, perhaps wind up saving my life, but this was reality. These kids were just people, and life was just life; no dramatic incident occurred to help me see and understand what was going on, which was that I was socializing outside of my socio-economic group and that it was unavoidable and understandable that I feel strange in some ways.

Is public school “equal opportunity”? Poor kids often have to work outside of school. They often not only have to “work their way through college;” they have to “work their way through high school.” Sometimes this work is not merely employment, but in their own homes, taking care of a younger sibling, or cousin, or sick relative, or contending with alcoholic parents. Yes, middleclass kids have these problems, too, but it’s different somehow. The point is: If you have more responsibilities and worries outside of school, you have less time and energy for school, and more distraction from school. And therefore, pure and simple, less chance of getting good grades. Sure, there have been examples of poor kids doing well in schools, but it’s a lot to ask of them and, all other things being equal, disadvantaged kids have... well, the disadvantage. Is school “equal opportunity?” I’d say obviously not. Quite the contrary: Schools and schooling actually REINFORCE class differences, rather than offset them.

When I was teaching at City College of New York, a student came up to me after class. For starters, he was black. He was also a dwarf. As a clincher, he said to me, “I have to withdraw from your course. I have to withdraw from school altogether. My father got sick and I have to take care of him.” Indeed, “equal opportunity,” along with “affirmative action,” will have to mean much more than anything our society has so far provided.

Then, too, many poor kids grow up knowing, or believing, that, no matter how well they do, no matter how good their grades are, they very likely won’t go to college. Put more accurately, they DON’T grow up knowing that they WILL go to college. Many don’t even think about college. Their families don’t talk about college. These kids know college as a word, perhaps heard on TV, as some remote thing that means, in one way or another, success. Something they don’t expect to achieve. Both “college” and “success” seem meaningless, perhaps alien, words for them. So they don’t think at all about college; in fact, they see no reason to get good grades, or otherwise do well, in school. School is irrelevant to their lives, and to their futures. Their futures are work and as poor kids get older, school becomes for them more and more of something that PREVENTS them from work. In other words, poor people are understandably less motivated to do well in school. And the advice “get an education” so often given poor and disadvantaged young people, is often easier said than done; indeed, advice is not the same thing as a solution.

The closest I myself ever came -- and this was pretty close, if not actually there -- to being “disadvantaged” was during those five years when my husband’s multiple sclerosis had progressed to the point where he couldn’t transfer from wheelchair to, say, toilet. He still lived at home during those years; I lifted him with my bare hands, put him on and took him off the toilet, did whatever had to be done in between, and was awakened by him ten, twenty times a night. “Regular” people (that is, people who were not disadvantaged in that way) had no idea what my life was like, even though I told them. That, I often imagine, is how it is with poor and disadvantaged people. (And perhaps that’s one definition of “disadvantaged” -- that society, or the authorities of society, in particular school, has no idea what your life is like.)

In “Dirty Details,” my book about the above-described period of my life, I write about how strongly I’ve identified with poor people. I drew many parallels, among them the feeling of downtrodden-ness, that feeling that society was no friend of mine, and probably never would be. Indeed I felt often as though I wasn’t part of society at all. “Am I even a third-class citizen?” I asked. “Am I a citizen, period.” And so whether or not to JOIN society seemed like a series of daily decisions. It often felt similar to grieving, in that it seemed a huge effort to do ordinary things. I was, true, writing and publishing like mad, but there were still certain commitments I was afraid to make. For instance, I was afraid to take even a part-time teaching job; what if the home-health aide didn’t show that day? Yes, I feel that I understand very well why, for example, poor and disadvantaged people are not, as a social worker I knew once put it, “goal-oriented.” Why they don’t want to entrust (literally) four or more years of their lives to college,

why they have trouble believing any promises that at the end of the four years they'll get a good job. Why they don't trust in general. At the same time I have realized that I had not ALWAYS been disadvantaged, and that that made my situation different from that of, say, poor people. What, I asked myself, if "nights, lifting, and toilet" had been ALL I'd known? What if I'd known no other way? Yes, I think I have at least an inkling of what discouragement can be, along with despondency, lethargy, alienation, even hostility.

Another consideration concerning minority groups in the schools has to do with peer group. I've already talked about how school enforces, and exaggerates, peer group, thereby making it into something negative, or perceived and acted upon by children as such. In this same way the racial-integration part of socialization (which in itself would be a good thing) becomes, by the school set-up, exaggerated and distorted.

Moreover, if and when classes in school teach diversity and tolerance, the kids barely listen or relate. "Black Studies," for example, only means books by black authors to read and report on, and classroom "discussions" to "participate" in (and in which the conclusions, often oversimplified, have already been drawn -- No white student dares, for example, to talk about any possible fears of or general discomfort around blacks.) The kids' attitudes, conscious and/or unconscious, are probably on the order of "Oh, that's just something we have to learn in school." (Indeed, "learning in school" seems to be something quite different from just-plain learning!) Thus tolerance becomes just another "school thing," and often "too much of a big deal."

Yes, integration in the schools is better than segregation in the schools but integration, WITHOUT schools would, I believe, be best of all. Have schools improved race relations? To be sure, schools can be a vehicle for diversity and that can sometimes be a positive thing, but many other factors are also at work. For example, the competitiveness of school life fosters and aggravates racial and class problems. As an over-simplified model: The middle-class kids compete (perhaps subtly) for grades; the poorer kids compete in sports, or in ability to be tough and outwit the teacher, and the other kids. There seems to be SOME type of competitiveness for everyone! The kids get into the HABIT of competing and "race wars" are just another opportunity. They'd happen anyway, but school fails to prevent them, and in fact provides another arena and rationale for them.

"Bad" schools are often in "bad" neighborhoods. The two go hand in hand. Is it the governments' fault? That is, do governments PUT bad schools in bad neighborhoods (as they put badly-run bus routes or badly paved streets)? Or is it the neighborhoods' fault? Do bad neighborhoods mess up their schools? Perhaps it's both. The point here is: They go together. They happen simultaneously. And schools are just one more way of DEFINING the "bad neighborhoods," of tracking them, of perpetuating them, and of making them worse.

Schooling through the ages has been, in general, a classist institution. Considered within the perspective of the HISTORY of schools, schools have been formed by governments for various political reasons, usually different reasons from those given to the parents and the taxpayers. "In school to learn" has always been the rationale but the actual reasons (for, actually, not only schools, but education itself) are basically two in number. One is to keep the upper classes upper, via teaching certain skills (It used to be embroidery, now it's reading and computers or, for younger children, dinosaurs and rain forests) and then making schools such that only the upper classes could afford the time or the money and then, moreover, DECLARING these skills vital, and synonymous with intelligence, worthiness, or respectability. The other reason for the formation of schools has been to keep the lower classes lower by, conversely, creating schools for the lower classes, making them compulsory, and using them to indoctrinate, to keep people in line -- as schools do in the United States today, from homework to dress codes to actual subject matter. Thus schooling helps society

chip away at children's childhood, parent's parenthood, and any minority's culture.

As John Gatto Taylor describes in "Dumbing Us Down," sometimes these "lower class schools" were specifically designed so that competition and division among the lower classes would result; this nipping in the bud any solidarity that might lead to union activity or other rebellion, grossly offsetting any advantage in learning to add or read. In the very last chapter of this book, more will be said, and an analysis given, concerning how minority issues connect with schooling and home-schooling issues. All told, I'd say that neither school nor home-schooling has appreciably advanced the cause of poor and minority people? Home-schooling IDEAS could be a step in the right direction.

DEGRADING AND OPPRESSIVE TO WOMEN

It's an old story that mothers, more than fathers, often feel talked down to by teachers and other school personnel, in much the same way as by doctors and other members of the medical establishments. In fact, I often wonder why feminists have worked towards change and autonomy in the health-care system and not so much in the educational system.

When Arin, sixteen years ago, brought home that paper on which the teacher had written VERY VERY POOR, I felt as though the teacher had graded my own work VERY VERY POOR. That was not only because I loved and empathized with my child, but also because I felt that I was being graded as a parent. And I felt, not only that I was being handed the responsibility to see to it that Arin did better work in the future, but that I was supposed to define "better" according to the teacher's standards, and get him to achieve these standards via her methods. It felt as though my role as a parent was to do the school's bidding -- that is, to do as I was told.

Schools sometimes refer to "the parent-teacher team," or even to "the parent-teacher-child team." They go on to say that "we all learn from one another," which is usually true. But in fact it's only the teacher (along with the other school personell) who gets paid. And because of my feminist consciousness, and perhaps also because of my personal experiences with unemployment, there were times when I minded this.

Once I said and did something about this which made me feel good. When Marielle was in the sixth grade her class was working on a writing project; the idea was that the kids would write poems which would be set to music by a professional composer. It would all be put together and performed on stage, under the title "It Isn't easy Being a Kid." Marielle's teacher knew I was a writer and he asked me if I'd like to be involved. What he wanted me to do was attend a few meetings and give a poetry reading to the kids -- as he put it, "light a creative fire under them." We decided that I would read poems and prose that I wrote when I was a kid, maybe a few current writings, or writings by my own kids. It all went as planned; the kids, inspired by my reading and by the brainstorming afterwards, eventually wound up filling the program with poems about dreams and peer group. (Imitative, true, of the poems I had read but, as Nancy Wallace points out in the entire fourth chapter of her book, "Child's Work," copying can be where creativity starts.) At one of the meetings, with

the teacher and three other parents, it came up that the composer was being paid at the rate of \$12 a song. The money would come from fund-raising, probably a sixth-grade dance. I hesitated a second and then I asked, "Are you paying for poems, too?"

All was silent. "Well," I continued, "I think that all of us here are working professionally and as long as you're talking about pay, I think we should, if possible, all be included. In particular I, as a professional writer, would like to be paid."

I was aware of the enormity and the "inappropriateness" of what I was asking, so I was pleasantly surprised when the teacher said, "Sure, I'll see what I can do." He did, however, add, "We might have problems with the principal because, after all, you're a parent..."

"Oh," I thought half-facetiously, "do I ALREADY get paid too much as a parent?!"

I did wind up getting \$10 of the sixth-grade dance money, and the teacher wrote me a long letter in which he apologized that it could not be more. Thinking about it now, I remember that I would have "lit the creative fire" without being paid, and that perhaps I was a little picky or uptight. Perhaps, that is, I was overly sensitive, and swayed by my own situation -- by, for example, the fact that writers usually don't get paid for their work, and that at the time writing was basically the only non-child-rearing and home-making work I was doing; moreover, this act of volunteerism would not drum up business (that is, sell my books), as such acts do for doctors or lawyers. I still, however, feel good about what I did. I feel that I raised, if not anybody else's, then at least my own consciousness about this business of being "only a parent" or "only a mother." (And, as they say, if I wasn't part of the solution, at least I wasn't part of the problem.).

I have also felt sensitive about the demeaning brand of volunteerism which schools encourage and to which so many parents seem willing to be subjected. The mindset in most schools seems to be that mothers (more so than fathers) are not busy and have the time to do work like baking cookies, work for which they get paid nothing, and which also earns very little for the school. Many parents enjoy this work, and the accompanying socializing with other parents, but many do not, and do it only because they feel pressured, subtly or obviously. A couple of weeks ago, at the grocery store, I ran into an old "park

bench friend" whose youngest son is now in kindergarten; because she is still delaying in going back to work, she has been sucked into what she described as a "40-hour volunteer" week. And she isn't happy about it.

Here is a shortened version of an open letter which I once wrote to the parents at the daycare center which, at the time, my son Bret was attending:

Dear Fellow Infant-Toddler Parent:

I'm writing this to let you know of my reaction to the latest communication about the Parents Meeting, which appeared in our boxes last week, the one about the bake sale and the raffle. I'm wondering whether any of you feel the same way I do.

In a word, my immediate reaction to that latest note was: Resentful. Another word would be: Angry.

I am a working parent. I work more than eight hours a day. I know that the rest of you are in the same situation. I placed my child in day care because I need the time for my work. I don't have the time to bake cookies or to sell tickets.

Yes, sure, I could, as they say, "make the time." On second thought, I COULDN'T "make the time." There are other things for which I have "made the time" -- things like reading stories to my kids, taking them to the pool, and just-plain talking and interacting with them. I have already "made the time," again and again, and there is simply no time left for cookies and raffles. If there were more time then, to be honest, cookies and raffles would not be first on the list.

Of course I do realize that many of us enjoy things like bake sales and raffles -- this kind of participation in our children's lives. However, I also know, from individual conversations with individual parents, that a lot of us don't enjoy baking cookies, and that a lot of us do it, when asked, because we feel uncomfortable saying no, or because we're afraid of being accused of not caring about our children' (enough to "make the time"). Deep down inside, I believe the ultimate fear (read or imagined) is that our children will be put out of the program.

If the baking of cookies or the selling of tickets were mandatory for the continuation of the program, then yes, I would try extra hard to "make the time" (I wonder how, though!). But it isn't. The thing for which the cookies and ticket-selling would raise money is, so I've been told, NOT the continuation of the program, but trips for the kids. Well, I simply am not terribly concerned about trips for the kids. I am, frankly, extremely satisfied with the program the way it is. The kids also appear to be extremely satisfied, not at all bored, or in need of trips. Sure, trips are often fun, but I don't believe they're necessary, and certainly not necessary ENOUGH to warrant that kind of time and energy.

The kids have a large playground to play in, are taken often to the public parks, and I believe this is what they enjoy most. This is the way Bret would spend his day if I WEREN'T working, if I were with him all day.

It certainly is possible for us to care about our children and still not bake cookies. A lot of you know me personally as Bret's mother; you've probably observed that I love my children, care about them, take time with them, and so on. Many of you heard me read my poetry at that meeting, and you know how deeply my feelings go and how important my children are in my life. You know that I went through two full-term pregnancies to have Bret, and that I am still breast-feeding him. Yet I am saying no to both baking cookies and selling tickets. The point is that YOU are a good parent, even if you say no to cookies and raffles.

Actually, I look upon the activity of baking cookies as a DETRIMENT to being a good parent to Bret. If I baked the cookies, it would probably be during and/or before making dinner (since I'd be in the kitchen anyway). So the usual rush to finish everything would be doubled. "Get Bret OUT OF HERE!" is possibly what I'd be screaming.

I resent this pressure. I resent being treated as though my time weren't valuable. I want to, and do, give time to my child, but not in this way. I want MY CHILDREN, MY HUSBAND, AND MYSELF to decide in which ways we spend time for and with one another.

Even expensive private schools, with plenty of money, hold bake sales and raffles because, they say, the kids need trips. Why is this? Why, emotionally, does everyone seem to need this sort of thing? I often wonder if it's guilt. Do, for example, day care mothers (and sometimes fathers) feel at least some

degree of guilt for working and, as some thoughtless people say, "letting someone else raise your kids." Perhaps many of us feel, subconsciously, that we might be able to ease the guilt feelings by things like baking cookies, and then being able to tell friends, relatives, and acquaintances, "Well, yes, I did go back to work. BUT Bret's going to a wonderful school, where they take the kids on all these great trips..." (In fact, there are many great trips which are cost-free.)

If you feel the same, or similar, or if you would like to discuss all this, please get in touch. Leave a note in my box with your name and phone number. And thanks for "making the time" to read this!

I showed that letter to a social worker at that day care center and she agreed with me, but suggested that I not distribute it. (It was "too radical.") That was about fourteen years ago and the letter still seems to apply. To me one of the things it shows is the little ways in which school gets into people's family and personal lives, and into their self-images -- especially women's.

The home-schooling movement runs the danger of falling into the same snags; in fact, many home-schoolers spend a lot of volunteer time, energy, and money on various home-schooling group activities, activities in which they might not be truly interested (neither the parents nor the kids), and often at the expense of their family and individual lives. Home-schooling mothers have talked to me about how they sometimes feel pressured to attend, and help out at, various home-schooling events -- meetings, activities, field trips, and so on. "I feel like I might as well be a PTA mother," I've heard more than once. Indeed "making too much of a big deal", in and out of schools, can be oppressive to women and families.

MORE WAYS IN WHICH SCHOOLING INTERFERES WITH FAMILY LIFE AND LOVE

The other day I watched a mother help her first-grade daughter with homework. This is a child who is daily showered with love, by her mother, aunts, and grandmother. The family is fun-loving and dotes on her and her younger brother, especially on this particular holiday occasion.

But suddenly the mother remembered that homework was due the next day. "Omigod," she gasped. They got out the worksheets and notebook. The mother was at first kind and patient. But the longer her daughter took to do the homework, the more worried she looked, and the less relaxed and loving she became. At one point she told her daughter, "Don't look at ME; look at the WORD."

But Samantha wanted to look at her mom. She was USED to looking at her mom, and she was used to her mom looking back at her. How sad, I thought, and how strange and confusing it must feel to Samantha. In fact, it felt strange and confusing to ME, and indeed Samantha looked sad and confused (if also, understandably, mischievous and hostile).

To think that some children see their parents ONLY at homework-doing time; this is the ONLY way they relate to one another. Not only, as described in the section "Too Much Time," does school make it so there's little or no time for parents and kids to be together; it also controls the time they do have. How sad.

Home-schools can do it, too. Several weeks ago, in a thrift store, I couldn't help but keep watching a mother with her two sons, who appeared to be ages around six and nine. She was constantly -- literally constantly -- criticizing and correcting them. "Let me teach you something. Be still and listen. I want to teach you something." What she wanted to teach them, it soon became quite clear, was adding up the prices of the items they had tentatively picked out. They weren't interested. They seemed aloof, withdrawn, alienated. It was as though they had turned themselves off. Not only was she constantly correcting them; her corrections were just-plain wrong. For example, "how can you learn anything when you keep looking around?" Indeed, "looking around" is a huge source of information. (It depends, of course, upon what the "anything" is that you want to learn.)

The following sentence kept going through my mind: "It seems as though she doesn't love them." And I had a strong urge to go over to her and quietly say to her, "It seems as though you don't love them. And I know that you do." Indeed, perhaps what it seemed was that she didn't LIKE them. At any rate, this family was not doing school homework; they were doing a home-schooling type of work, and in fact they could very well have been a home-schooling family. And worry about learning was interfering in a big, and to me unnecessary, way in its life and love. How sad.

MAYBE IF WE DIDN'T TRY TO TEACH SO MUCH

From the time my daughter Marielle was two to the time my son Arin was four -- a total of six years -- they had the ideal baby-sitter. Edie lived three blocks away and was "Grandma" to dozens of kids in the neighborhood. She charged on a weekly basis (to some not at all), was always available (breakfast, supper, overnight, weekends). She did this because, as she put it, "I just don't feel comfortable without kids around." WITH kids around, she DID feel comfortable, and relaxed and happy, as she went about her life, being available and affectionate to the kids, without displaying "conspicuous concern."

But now she was moving on us. There were no other neighborhood sitters of "Edie caliber" (and price), so I began making the rounds of the day care centers. Our family had "been with Edie" for a long time and, outside of Marielle's school, this was my first experience with formal day care, and I can't help remembering how appalled I felt at some of the things I encountered.

One center seemed particularly formidable, condescending, and illogical. For example, I couldn't help comparing its "intake procedures" to Edie's "intake procedure." The center's intake procedure was written up in five or six mimeographed sheets. It described "three steps," two interviews, and a waiting list. How different it seemed from Edie's intake procedure, which had consisted of a single visit in her livingroom where we also met the family with whom she was living and which included a mother, her two kids, a dog and two cats, and with whom Elle immediately and easily began to play. "Just bring her over any time you want," Edie had told us as we walked out the door.

"Well, we'll call first," my husband had said.

"Oh, you can call if you want," Edie had answered, "but it really doesn't matter."

But now this day care center wanted birthdate and registration, and it required what they called "a gradual visiting period" for each child. "Because your child needs you," ran page three of their write-up, "we ask that you be present for the first morning or longer, depending on his need." Further along, beginning in bold caps, it continued, "DO YOU SEE THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN A CHILD'S ATTENDANCE AND ADJUSTMENT? The center is open from 7:00 A.M. to 6:00 P.M. So that every child can feel a part of his group and get the most out of Child Care, it is important that he be present for a meaningful part of the day. It is for this reason that pre-school children are required to be at the Center no later than 9:00 A.M. and leave no earlier than 3:00 P.M. School-age children are required to stay at the Center at least one hour after public school."

Anna at Edie's used to go two days a week. Nini arrived every day around 7:00 A.M. Beverly arrived around noon. Every month or so our Elle, now in school and involved in various after-school activities, would get to missing the gang at Edie's so she'd come with me to pick up Arin and often wind up sleeping over, along with several of Edie's other "alumni". Edie's grandchildren would also visit every once in a while. And every one of those kids, whatever their "Edie schedules," most definitely, to paraphrase the day care center's words, "felt a part of the group and got the most out of Child Care."

Towards the end of the Center's write-up appeared what seemed to me to smack of propaganda. "While it is important for children to be involved in the many activities in their group, pre-school children can benefit from only so much. Too long a day is no better than too short. Thus, pre-school children should stay at the Center no longer than nine hours."

On the first day that Marielle, then aged two, stayed at Edie's we came to pick her up at 5:00.

Elle was very happy to see us and came running with hugs and kisses and requests for a glass of water, but no way did she want to go home. "Everyone else gets to eat here," she told us. And indeed there were all the kids, sitting around the table while Edie dished out the stew. We had to wait while Marielle finished her supper, and we were offered some too. After that, if for any reason we had to pick Marielle up at 5:00, Edie would pack her a doggie-bag. And no matter what time we picked her up, she always wanted to know if Debbie and/ or Chrissie could come over HER house now. Often we answered "yes".

Indeed, at Edie's, it wasn't a matter of "the many activities in their group"; there were activities all right, but not so "many" as to make "too long a day" a concern. This was Edie's HOME, and Edie went about her business (nothing "over-stimulating" or even just-plain stimulating, just housework and visiting with neighbors -- who also doted on the kids -- and TV watching). She never failed to tend to the kids when they needed her, and often when they didn't, but she was not around ONLY to take care of the kids, and this, to me, seemed more dignified and less burdensome for everybody.

Why, I asked myself then, can't day care centers be just regular ordinary PLACES, for kids (or adults) to eat, sleep, play, and stay ad intinitum like at home or at a friend's or at Edie's? There seemed to be a conspiracy of sorts perpetrated by all of society, not only the powers that ran day care centers like the one I was considering for Arin. The subtle and unconscious plot, so it seemed, ran something like this: First, make the centers over-stimulating. then write down in the "guidelines" that, because they're so over-stimulating, the kids can't stay there more than nine hours. And some parents' work REQUIRES more than nine hours.

If day care centers weren't such a big deal, I conjectured, there could be MORE of them. There could be twenty-four hour centers. If everyone weren't so hung up on intake procedures, gradual visiting periods, social skills, cognitive skills, vaccination verification, and pre-school education, it wouldn't all have to be such a big deal. At that time I had a semi-facetious "day-care motto:" Quantity, not quality. By "quality", of course, I meant the procedures and other hang-ups described above; by "quantity" I meant enough day care. (And right now, writing this, I'm quipping "Quantity time!")

Reading that day care center pamphlet and other such literature, I felt discouraged. I had been feeling discouraged anyway. In those days even the feminist movement was assuring society that it did not condone day care centers as "mere baby-sitting." "Huh?": I thought. "What's wrong with 'mere' baby-sitting?" That's what Edie had given us. That's what I gave my kids when they were home. "Mere baby-sitting" to me INCLUDES love and education, as does "mere living."

What's all the fuss about? Why does toddler day care seem, so often, to be equated with pre-school education? Why, just because a parent is working, must her kids be subjected to pre-school education? Why, for example, must the word "education" or something equivalent be included in the advertisement of most day care centers? Why, if it isn't, do the centers feel they won't attract customers?

Teachers often truly love kids. Many became teachers for that reason. In day care centers, nursery schools, elementary and high schools, teachers very often seem to genuinely enjoy and understand children. But maybe they'd like their jobs more if they didn't have to actually teach the kids? Or teach them SO MUCH? Or hover over them so much? And put everything else aside? If they could "merely" be with the kids, teaching and doing custodial care only as called for, in the natural course of events -- at or least not so scheduled, and REQUIRED, so much? If they could, at least some of the time, do what they'd be doing anyway -- read, play card games, watch TV -- if they could BE ADULTS? Maybe they'd really rather be an Edie, and get to know "real kids", and be, to those kids, "real adults." If they could

get the same salary, benefits, and appreciation for being an Edie, maybe that's what they'd choose.

Sometimes it seems to me that people think they're somehow not "supposed" to be with kids unless they teach or hover over them, toting academic or life skills. It seems as though everyone, meaning society, somehow needs to justify through "education" the very existence of day care centers (or perhaps of the phenomenon of childhood itself). Parents, for example, often say (perhaps to assuage guilt feelings), "Yes, I went back to work BUT Johnny's going to a WONDERFUL school." And the bigger a deal is made about this education (and of the day care), the more comfortable everyone seems to feel. It's related, I'm sure, to the conspicuous concern mentioned earlier; certainly education serves as a convenient FOCUS for conspicuous concern.

At any rate, teaching and education seem to be a kind of *raison d'être*. Lining kids up and/or sitting them down and having them recite or work in workbooks seems, to some, to be the only way for them to get to be with kids. Or perhaps the only way to get PAID, or paid decently, for being with kids. Maybe society would like to get out of this rut but just doesn't know any other way.

But there ARE other ways. They have been and will be described in this book (and in many other books about home-schooling and about living with children). Indeed, most people do know about these other ways from personal experience. For example "hanging out," playing games, parallel play, hugging, and so on. Maybe if schools (including home-schools) didn't try to be schools, or even day care centers, if instead what they tried to be was "mere baby-sitters," maybe things would be better all around.

It seems pertinent to note that much of this section, and of the previous section, also applies at the other end of the line -- that is, in some nursing homes, adult day care centers, and other programs for elderly and impaired citizens. Over the years, many parents of toddlers have told me things like "I'd like to send her to a place where they just let the kids play all the time, but there isn't any." In this same vein, many well-spouses and other family members of ill or impaired people have said, "I do need respite care but... well, Charlie's a former college professor; how would he feel about all that basket weaving and group singing...?"

Why, indeed, does society have to have such a basket weaving mindset? Can't we throw off the nervousness, the guilt, the potential, and so on and just "take care" of our citizens, old and young, in the true and literal sense of the term?

CHAPTER TWO; QUESTIONING EVERYTHING THE MANY SUBTLE FACES OF AUTHORITY

Home-schooling parents and activists often talk about how important it is to try to overcome the fear and influence of authority. However, by this what they usually seem to mean is only authority associated with SCHOOLS -- teachers, principals, officials, rules and regulations, perhaps the subtle effects of the schooling they went through when they were kids. But often the very things which home-schoolers turn to in order to replace or combat the above-mentioned "school" authorities are, or are at risk of becoming, authorities in themselves.

Many home-schooling parents are understandably scared -- It's scary to do the opposite of what most people are doing. -- and they seem to need things to grab hold of -- for example, Girl and Boy Scouts, the Y, art classes or music lessons. These are things which many parents (home-schooling and otherwise) tend to feel guilty if they don't partake of and which they might be able to list in home-schooling logs or about which they can say, "Johnny doesn't go to school but he does keep busy" or "he sure does interact with the (real) world." In fact, activities within the home-schooling community itself have served, or tried to serve, this purpose-- that is, the purpose of assuaging feelings of doubt and guilt.

These activities, however, often turn out to be like school in many ways, and they can play the same negative roles in children's and families' lives; in other words, they can become authorities. It is this authority status that is the problem, not necessarily the activities themselves (as, perhaps, in some cases it is not SCHOOL itself that is the problem, but the authority status given it.).

I'd like to define what I mean by authority, and to emphasize that authority in this sense is not good. For our purposes here authority will encompass anything that large numbers of people aspire to, imitate, or try to "get in good with" or find time for, for reasons other than its worth, desirability, or enjoyment.

These other reasons for embracing authority might include force, reality (such as the testing requirement of the home-schooling law), pressure, fear, habit, conformity ("safety in numbers"), bad self-image (not trusting ourselves), guilt feelings as well as the conspicuous concern described in the previous chapters. It often seems to me that parents, teachers, and society in general take the most difficult, rather than the best or wisest, course of action, especially when children are involved (in order, perhaps, to prove, to others and to themselves, how "concerned" they are.)

Then, too, psychological associations might come into play. For example, the Cub Scout den leader might remind you of your mother, or of some mother or father figure from your childhood. Thus the process of transference occurs, and parents can feel like children. Fantasies, too, can lead to or along the latching on to some authority. For example, sixteen-year-old Bret has fantasies of out-doing his twenty-two-year old brother by being the first to leave home, and this has possibly caused him to latch on to the authorities of money, "independence", and in general too much too soon. And I, a couple of Saturdays ago, was far more nervous than I should have been at the prospect of playing the harpsichord in a flute-oboe-harpsichord trio for a few friends, because I had fantasies around one of those friends. Her children are professional musicians and I fantasized her saying to me, perhaps using the same intonation as my mother, "You know, your playing COULD be taken seriously" or "there's something TO your interpretation." If she had actually said any of these things, would I have considered taking up music as a third career, or even made room in my schedule to get together with her kids to play trios? Probably not. Still, those fantasies of "being discovered" were there, and they lent that small living-room concert far more authority than reasonable. And

so potential authorities can play upon our fantasies and thereby become actual authorities. In the case of the authority which is school, the prospect of straight A's, or for me "creeping into the teacher's heart," can help endow school with even more authority status than it already has.

Authorities usually have the properties of being structured, scheduled, and involving labels or degrees of some sort -- in other words, further forms of authority. Authorities usually also involve the expenditure of time, money, and energy -- that is, conspicuous concern. Because they arise out of the same elements and aspects of society from which school arises, or even actually out of the schools themselves, authorities often share many of the pitfalls of schools. In fact, authorities often have to meet the same standards as schools, though sometimes more subtly. (More about all this very soon)

It is important to note that something can be an authority AND have worth, simultaneously. Indeed, many authorities (perhaps even some schools, or some portions of schools) are in this category. It is when these offerings are TAKEN as authority, rather than as offerings, that they become detrimental. Bob McDougall, one of the first home-schoolers I ever met some sixteen years ago, said to me, "When you begin to question school, you begin to question everything." Adults need to be able to question, sift out, and separate authority from what we and our kids truly want or need. That often means, as we shall see, separating out our kids' needs from our own, or from society's, before making decisions. It is possible to satisfy, clarify, and perhaps alter or adjust both parents' and kids' needs without the extraneous time, money, and energy expenditures created and perpetrated by authority.

In this chapter many of the subtle authorities which parents encounter are identified and analyzed separately as to their basic attractions, parents' and/ or kids' motivations for choosing or continuing them, and how and to what extent, if at all, they have aligned with society to make them authorities. Thus each family, for each child, at each "age and stage," at each moment, can make an informed decision as to whether it wants or needs any said activity.

The point of this chapter is not to argue about whom to "blame" -- society? the government? big business? -- but to simply acknowledge the subtleties and pervasiveness of authority, in particular as it pertains to the interaction between adults and children. We adults, in our individual if not political lives, can then question, make choices and reject authority when it doesn't suit us. We can USE "authorities" such as dancing and art classes, rather than let them use us.

ADULT-RUN KIDS' ORGANIZATIONS AND ACTIVITIES

Many home-schooling parents, motivated negatively by insecurities, embarrassment, or pressure to “keep up with the Joneses,” or motivated positively by genuine observations of their children’s needs, make huge efforts to provide their children with some of the items that school would provide them with. “At least SOME structure,” “SOME scheduled activities,” “a chance to meet other kids” are among the items sought. With these in mind, many such parents enroll their kids in or encourage them to join organizations such as Boy or Girl Scouts, the Y, 4H, Little League, and/ or ballet or art classes.

Home-schooling publications abound with articles elaborating on and supporting this; there are, unfortunately, few words of caution. While the activities mentioned above can be interesting and fun, or even emotionally indicated at certain ages and stages, still, to me, most adult-organized kids’ activities, including those created by the home-schooling community, seem like school in many ways; reflect that they often display many of the pitfalls described in the last chapter (“What’s Wrong”).

“Too much time,” for example. Although usually not every day, these activities still tend to interfere with the lives of children and their families. “I can’t come over your house,” my own kids have frequently been told by friends, home-schooling and not. “I HAVE to go to Gymnastics.” The feeling I almost always get is that, while the kid might have originally begged, pestered, and chosen to begin Gymnastics, after a while it had become, more and more, another thing getting in the way and out of control.

At present Devin and his home-schooling friend Jerry love to get together. Every Monday Jerry sleeps over here and every Thursday Dev sleeps over Jerry’s. Jerry and his family do not live close by, and the kids are too young to take public transportation by themselves, so transporting the kids isn’t easy; they can’t visit only for an hour or two. Nor would they want to; on the contrary, they never seem to get enough of each other. They could spend, and have spent, several days in a row together and would like to do more of that kind of thing. However, Jerry has aikido on Saturdays and tap lessons on Tuesdays. (Parents often like to “spread out” these activities, and often wisely so, but this spreading out can also act as an interference in their lives. Of course, life is full of tradeoffs, but we still need to consider whether a given scheduled activity is worth the time it takes up (plus transportation, plus energy, etc.))

Is it “good” for children to have such commitments? I’m not sure. Devin doesn’t choose them. And I don’t particularly want him to. It would complicate my own life too much. My gut feeling is that, while it enhances living when the scope of a human being’s ENTIRE life includes commitment and caring in at least one meaningful endeavor, children don’t need adults to invent, or even encourage, commitments for them. Moreover, as Kitty Anderson says, “Kids don’t have to PRACTICE being committed. When they find something they’re truly... well, committed to, they’ll be... well, committed.”

In “Child’s Work” Nancy Wallace makes a similar point about, not commitment, but computers. Just as kids don’t have to PRACTICE commitment, so they don’t have to practice computers -- or not much. “The idea of using the Mac in the abstract made no sense to Vita... once she came up with a project for which she knew the Mac would be useful, she was eager to learn how to use it... Vita only gave the computer the time of day when she had a specific purpose for it in mind.” And so with commitment; why give commitment, in the abstract, the time of day? And indeed, why give the time of day to commitment to something one does not truly feel committed to (such as an adult-chosen, and/ or adult-enforced activity)? What’s important is commitment to something really special.

I also wonder whether the motive behind things like aikido, tap, ballet lessons, and home-schooling “field trips” is, more often than we realize, guilt feelings, along with worry and, again, some kind of subtle fear or veneration of authority. And perhaps the appearance of being “organized” (or “committed”), and of “concern”, assuages (or seems to promise to assuage) these feelings.

“Kids don’t just play together around the neighborhood any more,” lament many parents. “They’re always either in school, being transported to and from school, or in various after-school activities.” Yes, parents do, if asked and sometimes if not, admit that it’s important to “let kids be kids”, and be careful not to “load children down too much.” But there seems, sadly, to be great variety in people’s perceptions of what “too much” is. My son Devin, now ten, has, among my four children, displayed the least interest in organized activities. This past weekend, however, the two of us went to our first-ever home-schooling conference and there were many workshops for children. Dev was interested. For the four time-slots he chose beginners chess, volley ball, Fun with Wood, and Science and Engineering. He was very excited at the prospect of these workshops and very excited afterwards. “I loved them,” he kept saying, and he went into details. On the bus ride home I asked him, “Since you liked the workshops so much, maybe, just maybe, you’d like to take some kind of class, once a week or so...”

“No,” Dev answered, “I’d just like to come back next year to another conference.” Like me, he seems to think of these things as the exception rather than the rule; once a year is just about right. (Note: As of this revising, four years later, Dev is different, in that respect. Not only has he chosen to go to school -- and he’ll go to the High School of Creative and Performing Arts this coming September -- but he also enjoys activities -- AND he also knows and expresses and implements when he needs a BREAK from activities -- moreover, is able to work within reality when such a break isn’t possible, as (ahem) with school. Back to age ten --)

Significantly, although Devin is extremely interested in writing -- he spends hours a day at it, and learned to read THROUGH dictating his stories to me -- he was not at all interested in taking the writing workshop (entitled “As the Brain Storms) at that home-schooling conference. Dev and I read through the description of that workshop: “Creative writing tips for kids and adults.”

“So?” asked Dev. “What would we DO?”

“Well, “ I began lamely, “You’d... well, you’d write!”

Dev and I looked at each other knowingly. “So?” he repeated. “So I ALWAYS write.”

“Well,” I tried next, “you’d write TOGETHER.”

“So we ALWAYS write together,” insisted Dev, referring to his and my “parallel” writing sessions, as well as to the way he and his friends write together and discuss “what should happen next” in their stories and comics.

I think Dev was saying that he didn’t need any more input into his writing just then. (Just as I, come to think of it, don’t ever cultivate writing workshops or support groups. I pay attention to my FAVORITE writers, and also, the people whom I care whether or not they like or get anything out of my writings are the editors and publishers!)

All this brings us to “too much input.” Adult-run kids’ activities are often infested with the same “input mania” as the schools. They not only add to the overload of school kids; they can also become an overload for home-schoolers. Especially since home-schooled kids might pile on more of them, or take them more seriously, than schooling kids. In her book “Child’s Work,”

Nancy Wallace writes about how, at age eleven, her daughter Vita, “who normally spends several hours every day cutting, pasting, molding clay or folding paper in the art room... automatically stops working on art at home when she goes to even the nicest art class for any length of time... ‘What I like about art,’ says Vita, ‘is figuring things out.’”

Moving down the line --too much testing? Sure. The same need to prove prevails. Obvious things like Girl Scout badges, piano recitals, and sports competitions. And more subtle things like who makes the “best” papier mache puppet, or who gets the “leader” or “facilitator” to smile (Remember “creeping into the teacher’s heart?”) And children in these situations are more visible, more exposed, than they are in school, and they are often more nervous. They FEEL tested.

Kitty described her experience as coordinator of the Children’s Program at the Buddhist Center to which her family belongs. “The other parents seem to want to make everything into a play, or an exhibit,” she says. “Little things that catch the kids’ attention [for a moment] they want to mushroom into this big thing. [But] just because the kids like doing it doesn’t mean they want to KEEP doing it.” (Remember Bret with his comment about being interested in slavery, but ending with “I’m not THAT interested, Mom.” And Dev’s version of that is “Don’t KEEP ON GOING.”)

And on to “too much age-mate group.” It’s often more a problem with non-school than school activities. A home-schooler recently said to me, “When I was a kid I dreaded summers. I hated camp far more than I hated school.” For me also camp was horrible. (Fortunately, my parents didn’t force or even encourage me to go; I merely decided to try it out for a week one summer, and then, unwisely, as kids often do, decided the following summer to try it out for TWO weeks, then a few years later for THREE weeks.) Camp for me was ALL age-mate group. There seemed to be no cover, no refuge, just a bunch of kids who were not my friends thrown together and told what to do. Or NOT told what to do. It was almost all gym, very little arts and crafts. I missed my diary and “my” math. The one hour’s “quiet time” was used up for writing letters home. I counted the days ‘til I would GO home. (Indeed, my parents at that time quoted other parents as saying, “The best thing about camp is coming home.”)

At that home-schooling conference in Pittsburgh there were several teen-agers; home-schooling teens tend, in general, to be less hostile, less distrustful of adults, more self-directed and motivated, and sweeter. Nonetheless, as I had watched them interact, I had wondered: Would I, as a teen-ager, have felt comfortable with them? Would I have been interested in hanging out all day with them at a conference? Or would I, as during the school dances, Y meetings, and camp of my actual teen-age years, have missed my diary and my math? I don’t know. Nancy Wallace recently talked to me about how Vita at fifteen feels alienated in Youth Orchestra. My point is that age-mate groups can possibly be a problem with home-schooling activities also. It can certainly have its limitations. And non-school adult-run kids’ activities have the same mindset about, and the same over-emphasis on, age-mate group as schools do.

Non-school kids’ organizations and activities often display the same “potential trap” as do the schools. Attitudes like “You CAN do it, if you’ll only try” prevail. And instead of teacher’s jobs or promotions being at stake, it’s the group leaders who have, if not money to gain, then a possible career or resume boost; or it looks good on grant applications; or funding is involved. Thus comes the same need for tangible results.

Instead of “things like book reports and nature journals,” a la the previous chapter, out-of-school activities sport “things like papier mache puppets.” I also remember making miniature rafts out of twigs. It was a good idea -- a rather cute, relatively simple, thing to do -- but I remember the FEELING of it. It somehow was not the same feeling as sewing dolls’ clothes

on my bed, or making Dolly Dimple paper dolls around the kitchen table with the neighborhood kids, or doing summer crafts over the park with “Mrs. Q”, or writing this book NOW. According to my memory, I felt alienated, not creative, and slightly out of control in some way, probably because building miniature rafts had not been my nor any of my friend’s idea, and perhaps because, in general, I did not feel as though I was among friends.

Many of the features of schools which are oppressive to poor and minority groups are also features of outside-of-school children’s activities. These activities are, anyway, for the most part a middleclass phenomenon. They are less likely to be found in “bad” neighborhoods, and those that are situated in such neighborhoods are often different in flavor from, or (on the other hand) perhaps imitative of, the ones in middleclass neighborhoods. In any case, the outside-of-school activities often sport more equipment than the schools and, though there might be less waiting to use it, there is possibly a similar sense of alienation felt by poor kids who don’t, for example, have computers in their homes. Again, the language and personalities of the leaders is often of the middleclass ilk, not what minority kids are comfortable with. This runs the risk of depriving minority kids (and their parents) of their culture, or of respect for their culture. “Equality in, or outside of, the schools?” Probably not much.

Does the history of non-school adult-organized activities for children parallel that of schools? That is, were they (in some metaphoric if not actual way) formed by either the government to oppress the lower classes, or by the upper classes to exclude the lower classes? Besides “reading as embroidery,” have our society and other societies created “papier mache puppets as embroidery” (or indeed embroidery as embroidery!)? I don’t know. Considering that, in a no-school society, SCHOOL is a “non-school” activity, it would make sense to answer that question yes. Put another way: Why should the history of “papier mache schools” be much different from that of “reading schools?”

Just as in the schools, out-of-school activity facilitators often talk down to mothers (again, more so than fathers). Thus these activities are often oppressive to women. Parents, mostly mothers, then become, as with schools, low on the totem pole. Mothers dutifully bring in their kids, sometimes staying WITH the kids and thereby becoming students themselves, perhaps FEELING like kids. There also emerges the bake sale and raffle syndrome described in the previous chapter, again “making too much of a big deal” and influencing everyone’s definition of “good parent.” In other words, conspicuous concern.

It is true that out-of-school kids’ activities are not compulsory (unless, of course, the parents force the kids to go, which often happens. Or the parents simply enroll the kids and EXPECT them to go. Or the kids THINK they have to go; it doesn’t occur to them that they can tell their parents they’d rather not. Or their parents seem so wrapped up in it, and after all they invested so much money, the kids haven’t the heart, or the nerve, to say anything.) They do tend to be more child-directed, or at least the kids get more chance to talk and don’t have to sit still. They are also often about things which the kids have chosen and about which they might feel passionate.

Still, many of these organizations seem to subscribe to the the credo that accomplishments should be made every day (or perhaps every week), rather than in spurts, or even not at all in the visible future, which is what actually happens in life. And they subscribe to the work ethic, work for work’s sake, or perhaps to some “play ethic”, play for play’s sake, with quantity as the criterion. A liberal arts mentality also prevails; “don’t get bogged down on any one thing.” To me it sometimes smacks of militarism. In general, the values which they embrace seem similar to those of schools, which should come as no surprise since they arise from the same society as the schools and are often designed to supplement the schools (as though, without them, kids won’t know what to do with themselves).

Also, most of these organizations, like schools, seem to worry about things like “disruptive behavior,” (Or the set-up is such that “regular behavior” is disruptive.) and to be based on the premise that adults know what is “good” for a particular child, and that adults have to discipline children, however gently, in order to “get” them to do certain things. Judgement is given, if not grades; there IS a difference between Girl Scout badges and report card A’s, but how significant is that difference? There’s that same division between success and failure, usually via the equations: Getting along in the organization = success; not getting along = failure. Or at least success and failure are set apart. They seem to buy into the same school-like mindsets concerning, for example, the order in which topics are to be learned. As Bret used to say about karate class, “They treat us like kids.”

In “Child’s Work” Nancy Wallace says, “Most schools, where the traditional teacher/ student relationship prevails, are no different from hospitals, or any institution for that matter, based on the inequality inherent in a professional/ client relationship.” This could very well apply, not only to schools, but to ALL situations where “the traditional [or even the non-traditional] teacher/ student relationship prevails.”

Kids and/ or parents often get involved in such organizations because they feel, somehow, that they “should”. In this society it sometimes seems to make better cocktail-party, or park-bench, conversation to say “Johnny’s taking an art class at the Y” than to say “Johnny loves drawing pictures.” This is perhaps another way of saying that these organizations and activities represent authority.

Let’s look in more detail at some factors, besides true desire, enjoyment, and purpose, that go into motivating parents to want their kids in such activities. First, as alluded to in previous passages, parents might feel pressure, and the pressure comes from society. When friends and relatives ask, “How is Johnny?”, the activities that Johnny is enrolled in provide something to answer. Home-schoolers especially feel this pressure; after all, such organizations provide the chance to assure everybody, ourselves included, that our children do have social lives, that they do have contact with the “real” world, that we’re not “depriving” them of “opportunities”. In other words, the pressures might be the same as those which cause many parents to send their kids to school.

Giving in to pressure is usually associated with fearfulness, and sometimes this fearfulness is particularly obvious. “If they don’t take karate, they might get mugged.” “If they don’t take swimming lessons, they might drown.” “If they don’t take piano lessons, they won’t grow up to appreciate music.” It seems to be the same sort of over-simplified, and over-reactive, reasoning we see in schools. (“If they’re not given homework, they won’t learn responsibility.” “If they’re allowed to chew gum, they won’t learn respect.”) Fearfulness and distrust seem to lead to inflexibility. And to the feeling that informal karate, swimming, or piano lessons from a friend of the family is somehow less “real”.

For several years my mother forced my sister to take piano lessons because I, out of true love and interest, was taking piano lessons. My mother wanted Rosalyn to have, as she later put it, “the same opportunity as you, Marion.” At the time I felt it was stupid of my mother to equate “opportunity” with “obligation”, but now I understand the pressures that parents are under (especially 50’s mothers!). My mother didn’t want anyone to be able to SAY that she wasn’t providing Rosalyn with the same opportunity as Marion.

Perhaps my main objection to these activities is that they’re so hard to quit. This is part of their authority status. For the same reasons as they joined to begin with, parents and kids alike feel the pressure to continue. Especially if they’ve already paid for the six weeks, or the year. Quitting becomes an emotional and painful decision. It took my mother a couple of years to discontinue Rosalyn’s piano lessons.

In general, the word “quit” has far too negative a connotation in our society. “Quitter” seems to have the same stigma as the buzzwords “chicken”, “nerd”, and the like. In actuality quitting is very often a positive thing. The very decision to quit can feel liberating. Moreover, quitting something you don’t like leaves time and space for something you do like. When my sister Rosalyn and I were little, she and several of her friends didn’t like their Brownie troop leader and, over the course of several weeks, they decided to quit. I suggested they form a “Quit-Brownies” Club. They had a Quit-Brownies motto, Quit-Brownies slogan, Quit-Brownies song, and in conversation often said “Quit-Brownies honor.” As I recall, they never held a meeting but they had more fun in Quit-Brownies than they’d ever had in Brownies. Quit-Brownies became a beginning rather than an end. It lasted only a few weeks (It was soon time for Quit-Quit-Brownies!) but it lasted as long as it SHOULD have and quitting was not a big deal.

If people, kids and adults alike, are made to feel afraid of quitting, they might be afraid to START anything in the first place, or to accept any offering such as membership in a club or organization. Indeed, organization and activities could be seen as offerings, not obligations or authorities. In children’s lives I view them as exceptions rather than the rule, and I approach them with caution. (And they, rather than their absence, bear the burden of proof.) My own kids have gone through karate and gymnastic stages, of their own finding and choosing, and I am always on the alert for signs of “pre-quitting”. When I notice enough of these signs, I am quick to suggest quitting and supportive if they do quit, and also if they don’t. In fact, as a mathematician I can say: For every X there is a Quit-X, and Quit-X can be another opportunity.

THINGS LIKE ECOLOGY CLUB

What I love to see are KID-organized kids' organizations. Things like Quit-Brownies, the Button Club of my tenth summer, and my sister's Have Fun Club, of which she was specifically the only member!

But kid-organized organizations, too, I approach with caution. For kids imitate adults, which can mean they imitate society, which includes adult-organized kids' activities. So the school-type ingredients of these adult-organized activities can get into their kid-organized counterparts. Sometimes this phenomenon is minimal, harmless, and "cute", but not, in my opinion, always. I remember the year my best friend Frances organized a play. She was, at least in my perception, so bossy about it that I didn't enjoy it and felt alienated. She seemed to be acting like a teacher. Eventually I quit that play.

Also, "kids" organizations are often inspired, encouraged, and interfered with by adults, to the point that they're really ADULT-organized. And the adults that have done the organizing often have their own agendas. Perhaps things to prove. A parent who's a writer, for example, might not be able to resist suggesting, "Why don't you form a Writing Club?" Or a political activist: "Why don't you form an Ecology Club?" (Or me, with Bret: "Why don't you form a Slavery Club?!" Just kidding; I didn't actually say that.) Such parents might fantasize eventually sending articles or letters about these clubs to their school newspaper or some children's magazine; home-schooling parents might relish the idea of sending them to a home-schooling publication.

In fact, suspiciously many home-schooling magazines seem to be full of letters and articles about Writing Clubs and Ecology Clubs. It's almost like nature journals. And I have to admit that I'm suspicious of Writing and Ecology Clubs. There are just too many of them. It seems to me that kids' clubs "should" have silly names like Kitty's daughter Joy's Blue and Green Club (for anyone whose favorite color is blue or green), or the Elle and Jill Club that Marielle and Jill formed when they were both eight. (And Marielle wrote an angry letter to her brother Arin: "I am starting a Elle and Jill Club. I am not starting a Elle and Arin Club.") Kids' clubs should be more subtle, more varied and unpredictable. And the ways in which they're organized, or disorganized, should be likewise. Like Quit-Brownies, they could never meet, could be just something to TALK about; perhaps one could say they ALWAYS meet. (Just as, perhaps, never going to school really means always going to "school", which might be the idea behind the title of John Holt's "posthumous" book, "Learning All the Time.") In general, when too many kids' organizations last long enough to be reported in a home-schooling newsletter, I get suspicious!

True, the clubs that kids form might reflect their own experience, which might include their parents' interests and beliefs. But I would expect things to happen, at least sometimes, in less obvious ways. The home I grew up in was intellectual and progressive; over dinner my parents discussed stuff from the New York Times, the Cold War, Suez Canal, and so on. "Isn't it terrible that...?" "Isn't it interesting that...?"

But Roz and I didn't form a Current Events Club or a New York Times club. Instead we played it out with our dolls. We invented various "nationalities", corresponding to the various dolls we had, with names like Ginny and Joanie; all the "nationalities" were part of a land called O-by Land, they spoke a language called O-by, and their enemies were the Pi-Pi's and the Roughy-Toughy's. During supper, as our parents discussed the Suez Canal "situation", we discussed "the Pi-Pi conflict" or "the Roughy-Toughy invasion." It wasn't a club; it was a game, a way of life, eventually a newspaper "O-by News" and a book "The History of O-by Land," almost finished and of course never published.

Similarly, our ever-increasing concerns about religion and the nature of good and evil got played out in our book, again almost finished, about a kid devil named Mischief and a kid angel named Angelette.

In contrast, when things get too much like book reports and nature journals -- too pat and too prevalent -- I get suspicious. "Authority alert!" I think. "Somebody wants something from kids."

LIBRARIES

When I was a kid, it seemed to me that everybody was always wanting me to go to the library. School assignments increasingly involved trips to the library, to look up some reference in some mini-print maxi-paged volume. And my mother, who rarely pressured me in any other way, was always saying, in what seemed a pep-talk-y sort of way, "Why don't you hop on your bike and ride on over to the library?" (Reflecting on it now, I remember that she sometimes sported a worried look and tone.) Going to the library seemed to me almost a sport, almost like Gym!

I was then, as I am now, more of a writer than a reader, and I just was not as enthusiastic about libraries as the adults in my life seemed to want me to be. In the back of my mind, I sometimes felt pressured, judged, worried, and guilty. In other words, libraries seemed to be an authority, for my parents and for me.

In my early and middle teens I began to discover that libraries could be something I WANTED to bike, or walk, to. On my own I discovered, first, the Nancy Drew and the Betsy-Tacy books, and then, in the adult section, I discovered what I came to call "the prison books." What drew me to these two small back shelves were my own interests and emotional needs, and these books have since shaped some of my adult feelings, beliefs, and writings. One of the books was called "Prisoners Are People;" another was written by a woman who had served three months for refusing to divulge names of members of a particular political organization; what I remember is her stories of the other prisoners she'd met; a woman serving years for killing her husband because he'd molested their daughter. "Why can't you come home?" the little girl asked. Another woman was in for something like robbery. "When're you coming home, Mommy?" asked her child, and she answered, "The people in charge think I have to stay here 'til I'm sorry I did what I did." "But you're ALREADY sorry," the little girl said. "The people in charge don't BELIEVE I'm sorry," she answered. I learned about prison abuse, visiting restrictions, especially glass enclosures so they couldn't hug. And, at age twelve in the mid 50's, I learned, through the account of an ill-fated homosexual love affair in a maximum security prison, that homosexuality is neither a crime nor a disease.

I learned and I grew, and I realized that libraries could be an offering, not an authority. I was using them rather than they using me. They had become enjoyable, useful, and meaningful. I felt in control.

But too many people, especially parents and children, look upon libraries as an authority, something to feel guilty, worried, and pressured about, something to fixate on. There seems to be a "library mania." Summer reading contests based on the number of books read seem to take over when school is out, and the kids often cheat by not reading the entire book or by taking out books they're already read. Various businesses sponsor the "program".

And just as my mother was made to feel worried when I wasn't particularly interested in libraries, so I confess to feeling worried every once in a while about Devin not being particularly interested in libraries. At the very least, I'm worried about being judged; what will other people think? Not only doesn't he go to school but he doesn't even go to the library! The fact that we're constantly buying books at thrift stores or yard sales, the same or different from those found at the library, or that our HOME is a library, or that he's constantly WRITING books, doesn't sound as good at some cocktail parties, park benches, or home-schooling meetings.

Libraries are often like schools. For example, a disproportionate percentage of librarians seem to be joyless, formidable, nervous people, nor particularly filled with the love of books or of learning or of children. (They often look and act like teachers, I'm tempted to write -- and then

I stop myself. Is this a prejudice? But if so, why would I have that prejudice? Perhaps because libraries are like schools, and occupy a place in society similar in many respects to school.) Consider the metaphor of children's story hour. I brought Devin, once and only once, to story hour. Our local children's librarian was well-meaning but she spoke as though her every syllable were rehearsed. The kids, aged three to four, were supposed to sit a certain way, behinds touching the rug and not on their mothers' laps. Afterwards I asked her why. Shrugging, she answered, "It's partly to get them ready for school."

Indeed, the libraries and the schools sometimes seem to be sort of in cahoots. And although libraries can be and often are wonderful opportunities and adventures, too often they become, like school, a source of stress, and a distraction from what is truly important in an individual or a family's life. Taking it all in perspective, we might reflect that libraries are not the only way to gain access to books. And, for contact with our world, they are no more necessary than school, Girl Scouts, or music lessons. They are ONE source of books, and a good one, and I hope society will continue to have them, though possibly with a different emphasis. Still, other sources of books, most of which my family and I have used, are thrift stores, yard sales, flea markets, regular book stores, attics, the trash, and friends to borrow and exchange with. And reflect that there are advantages to actually OWNING books. We need, I believe, to be sensitive and responsive to children's perceptions, and to let them, ourselves, and daily living itself be our guides, rather than worship of authority.

PERFORMANCES “FOR” CHILDREN

Many parents, schooling and home-schooling alike, seem to be forever taking their kids to things like magic shows, story-telling, children’s theatre, and so on. What could be wrong with this? Am I going too far in my investigation into authorities?

Again, it’s the prospect of authority status that seems wrong. Often these performances are just another thing to fit into a schedule (sometimes sandwiched between a birthday party and a baseball game), another thing that nobody really wants to do, another thing to feel guilty about if you DON’T do, another instance of conspicuous concern. Rushed, anxious, and guilt-tripping often seem to describe what’s going on. Does taking your kids to performances make you a better parent? And does not taking them make you a worse parent? And how much of it all is a function of economic, of some other, status?

One day a couple of years ago I was watching seven-year-old Devin and some of his friends as they watched a TV special over Jonathan’s house; a children’s guitarist was playing and singing to a small group of kids. I noticed the difference between the kids in Jonathan’s livingroom and the TV kids. Devin and his friends were sprawled on a mat, alternating wrestling and playing with action figures, most of the time appearing not to be listening at all to the program but hearing it just the same. The TV kids, however, were not allowed to be wrestling or playing with action figures. Their eyes had to be totally on the performer and they had to be sitting relatively still. I could only imagine the before-hand behind-the-scenes instructions and, perhaps, admonitions.

As a group, the TV kids seemed to display sufficient enthusiasm, at least in certain ways, and at least as a group. There were indeed SOME spontaneous shouts of joy and waving of hands. However, when I zeroed in on any ONE of the kids and watched her for a moment, what I saw was very often a bored, partially-withdrawn individual. In particular, there was one little girl who never smiled when the rest did and seemed not to want to be there.

The most significant impression I got was the adoration in the eyes of many of the children. It was almost worship. Now, I understand that a performer can often deserve adoration, along with a kind of worship inspired by a magical feeling. But this scene seemed to go too far. I didn’t, for one thing, know how much of it was real and how much had been coached. In either case, it seemed to me that the image which the TV people seemed to want to convey -- the idea that it wanted to perpetrate -- was that kids need adults to entertain them, perhaps to lead them around as Arnold Schwarzenegger did in the movie “Kindergarten Cop.” It was as though kids prefer being lead around or serenaded to leading THEMSELVES around or singing to themselves or just plain playing, almost as though kids CAN’T play without adults helping them along, as though without adults kids would sit around bored and unhappy.

it seemed to me that the phenomenon of performances for children is but one example of a more general phenomenon by which adults first tell kids to “play”, “have a good time,” “be uninhibited,” “use your imagination” (as though they wouldn’t do those things anyway) and then (in the form of school and school-like things, like some children’s performances) tell them NOT to play (to sit still and laugh and sing and stare in adoration, as they’re told, perhaps subtly), and then turn around once again and say, at these very same performances, “yeah, go ahead and use your imagination.” There seem to be some mixed messages here.

I don’t mean to advocate the abolition of performances for children, but I am interested in the role they play in society’s shaping of the concepts of childhood and adulthood (and perhaps in thinking about changing that role). And I’ve always questioned such performances (as in “question everything”). Linda Goss, well-known storyteller, author of several children’s books, and recent member of Center City Home-Schoolers, has told me that, in general, she doesn’t

approve of the phenomenon of children's performances.

When I was a kid as well as when I became a parent I've always been wary of them. I remember a magic show at the school where my mother taught. I was about ten years old and my pleasure, as I remember, was in being taken somewhere by my mother, introduced to her co-workers and students, and in general being treated like my mother's kid. I also remember how anxious I was to be called on by the magician (to "creep into his heart"?) And although I furiously waved my hand, it seemed a long time before I was called on, and then it was only for a minute and only to tap the handkerchief three times. The other kids he'd called on had been given more interesting parts in the performance, things which involved talking, and which made the audience laugh. It felt obvious that I wasn't one of the MAIN ones, nor was I one of the FIRST ones. It wasn't a matter of picking teams in gym but it felt like it.

In other words, the magician was an authority figure to me. Like a teacher. Decades later I took six-year-old Marielle to a magic show. She seemed to enjoy it very much but afterwards, when she went up to him to compliment him, something happened that disappointed her. "I like your play," she told him, and he answered (too automatically for her) "Thank you very much, dear." Immediately afterwards, so Marielle noticed, a little boy about Marielle's own age came up to him and said the same thing, "I liked your play," and this time for some reason the guy turned to the boy, bent down closely, and said, "Oh, thank you. And how old are YOU...?" Marielle was profoundly hurt. "And DURING the show he seemed so nice," she later told me.

A question that concerns me about performances for children is: To what extent is it the job of the performer to discipline the kids? To keep them quiet enough so that he can be heard, to keep them from becoming so inspired by the performance that they spontaneously begin performances of their own? And what happens when he does discipline? What happens, for example, to his audience's perception of him? To what extent is he a teacher?

In the midst of a recent Franklin Institute magic show the magician's look, voice, and entire manner suddenly changed as he said, "Some of us need to stay in our seats." And at a Borders Bookstore children's concert the guitarist suddenly switched who he was addressing: "Could you try to keep them back?"

Why mayn't the kids get up on stage? Why mayn't they get close to, maybe touch, the performer or the instrument? If they WERE allowed, would that be enough for the kids? At a recent library program about rain forests, the kids were allowed to touch the live iguana. But they had to stand in line to do so. And time was running short. The kids were told to hurry. Each kid had time for "only a pat." It seemed both funny and sad. Devin wanted me to take a picture of him with the iguana but time wouldn't permit. The librarian was looking nervously at her watch. The parents also looked nervous. The kids shuffled along like robots, not terribly interested in the iguana.

At that same program the kids had been shown three live animals: a boa constrictor, an iguana, and a cockatoo. Devin and I liked the cockatoo; he seemed such a happy animal, and there seemed to be genuine friendship between him and the young woman presenting the program. But when it came time to let the kids handle the animals, the woman for some reason said, "We only have time to ONE animal. Your choice, What'll it be, the iguana or the boa constrictor?" "What happened to the cockatoo?", Devin and I whispered to each other. But the woman's body language told us that there wasn't time for us to ask.

And so the show stays show, the performer stays performer, and the kids stay audience, within their bounds. The performer has been paid, or publicized, appearances of order have been protected, and, if "using your imagination" is the purpose of it all, it's hard to see how that's possible.

Now, what about the EMOTIONAL relationship between the performer and his kid audience? At a closed-circuit TV concert for kids the singer sang a song called "Hugs". It was a charming tune but the words were predictable, about how nice and vital hugs are. During the last verse they had the kids in the TV audience take turns running up to the singer and each giving her a hug. It was at least slightly moving.

But I would not have wanted to be one of those kids. For one thing, each hug lasted two seconds. ("We have time for only one hug," comes to mind!) For another, after the fifth hug, the singer ran out of personalized looks and gestures. For yet another, I recalled reading somewhere that it's not hugging that kids and other people need and crave but holding. Also, most people know about the kind of hugs so repeatedly demonstrated in the song. They're glorified "relative hugs," the kind kids don't feel quite comfortable with, the kind that are forced, or pressured, on them. I was reminded of some kids' reactions when they're brought (often forced) to see Santa Claus and sit on his lap.

Kids want and need love, not hugs, and then they want hugs from those they've grown to love, or at least know. To me that song made light of children's need and capacity for love. In some way it was subtly abusive. In fact, perhaps all performances for children are subtly abusive -- or at least invasive. They might not force hugs but they force interest or attention. And if a kid is allowed to get up and leave, does it feel to that kid like failing a test? (Does she feel like a "quitter"?)

On the other hand, if children really do come to love or bond with the performer in some way, a whole range of new questions arises. Do kids need a performer to bond with? Are they receiving "hugs" from the performer INSTEAD OF from the people in their daily lives? Or are there people with them at the performance, perhaps hugging them? And is this the ONLY time they get hugged by those people, the only chance parent and child have to be together for a reasonable stretch of time? (Perhaps, at home, they're always doing homework...) Is a performance a kind of lullabye or bedtime story? If so, why? What does all this say about parents and children, in their individual relationships and in society?

No doubt questions like these concern life in general, and are existential in character. They are not only societal questions and, again, they certainly are not meant to indicate that there shouldn't be performances for children. But parents and society should still be asking these questions, and making up new ones. Mainly, children's performances, and performers, need not be taken as authorities. Parents shouldn't have to feel pressured to race around chaffeurung their kids to magic shows. Conspicuous concern need not always reign.

CHILDREN'S BOOKS

Like children's performances, children's books are often wonderful, truly imaginative, "cute", creative, and enjoyable. They also do a great job of describing children's (and sometimes adults') feelings, perhaps having the potential to put them and the adults in their lives in touch with these feelings.

However, I have several reservations, not so much about the books themselves as about the ways in which they are used in this society. Namely, too much. There seems to be a "book mania." Understandably, many adults love children's books, and sometimes to manic proportions. Parents often feel guilty if they don't "encourage" their children to read them (or if their children don't want to read them., making it SEEM as though the parent didn't encourage them). Libraries, bookstores, and of course schools join the party, or initiate the party. (although the books that schools try to get kids to read are often different from those which libraries try to get them to read).

Children's books have, I believe, reached authority proportions. Everyone seems to want children to read, and to want kids to spend a lot of TIME reading. In fact, everyone seems to think that reading is what children, and adults, do when they want to be alone and/ or pensive. Reading is sort of EQUATED with pensive, or "quiet time." Perhaps reading is equated with THINKING.

As a result, so much time and energy is expended on books (along with homework, piano lessons, and performances), both by kids and adults, that there's no time or energy left for the kid's own feelings to surface. It's maybe a little as though adults want kids to be TOLD, by the books, what their feelings are. A good book can be a catalyst, and affirming, but the way the phenomenon of books is overdone, there's often little time to develop anything to affirm.

CERTAIN RITUALS AND PROJECTS

There are numerous practices that parents, teachers, and other adults often sic on kids, and on themselves, which neither they nor the kids want or need. I'm talking about at-home stuff, not school or ballet class. Like many of the authorities described in this chapter, in themselves they can be fine and wonderful but as authorities they aren't. The practices described in this section are so ingrained in our society, and so endowed with conspicuous concern, that few people question them.

I'd like to start with birthday parties. Not so much birthday parties in themselves as certain rituals WITHIN birthday parties. For example, "party games"; many parents, and many kids, feel that without these games it's not a party; and when kids get home from the party, they seem to need to be able to tell everybody, "I won THREE prizes." But that's not the same thing as having enjoyed the party. It's more like a proof of some kind. In general, viewing birthday parties as continuous entertainment (like school or like performances "for" children), supervised activities going on every minute, with no time to just play, is an example of a ritual. Now in their mid-twenties, my daughter Marielle and her friends remember how much fun her birthday parties were because, as they say, "we played with the presents as long as we wanted."

I've talked in the introduction about "the supper table." Many adults I know have BAD memories of the supper table. The father would grill everone on their schoolwork; both parents would enforce table manners. As a kid, I often had certain secrets (such as a bad grade in a history test) that I didn't want to divulge, and suppertimes were when I felt most fearufl. Indeed, the supper table can be the stage upon which a family's issues, imperfections, and dysfunctions (sometimes abuse) are played out. it can also act as an authority.

I've heard somewhere of a study which resulted in the finding that in families with a supper table routine the kids tend to go to college. The implication seems to be that a supper table routine produces more successful children. But is that true? Perhaps, simply, college and supper tables go hand in hand. What is it that college and supper tables represent? Love? Security? Commitment? Time and money? Perhaps the truth here is simply that "successful children type families" are also both "college and supper table type families". And what about societies which don't HAVE supper routines?

Holidays can be hotbeds of authority, as attested to by the fact that parents often can't wait until they're over. Holidays tend to fill the days and weeks with too many things that they don't really enjoy doing. Halloween is an example. It's full of beautiful children pretending to be things that they love to pretend to be. But I'm also thinking of parents who sew costumes, and of the question, do they really want to? Creative sewers come in all varieties, but the two that come to mind right now are: those who like to make Halloween costumes and those who don't. It can vary from year to year. Just because you're creative doesn't mean you have to make Halloween costumes. Nor do you have to make costumes to PROVE you're creative. Nor do you have to make anything at all. You don't have to make all, or most, of your children's clothes, or toys, or whatever. Nor do you have to work WITH your children to make these creations, in order to prove that you share interests, or whatever.

I call this phenomenon "the project syndrome." Projects, indeed, can act as an authority. from papier mache puppets to fingerpaints to Halloween costumes to scientific experiments. YOu don't have to do them. They neither make nor break a good parent.

Society seems to be full of slogans which to me smack of "project syndrome propaganda." "ENJOY your children." "TALK to your children." "PLAY with your children." READ to your

children.” How can you “enjoy your children” when you’re doing things you don’t enjoy?

I hate fingerpaints. I also hate Shrinky Dinks. Also scientific experiments. Anything messy. When Devin and I do Health Science, I just READ about the various experiments; we don’t actually DO them. “Okay, I believe them,” I quip. Devin, at this stage, isn’t particularly eager to do the experiments either.

I also hate mazes. I never did them when I was a kid and now, that Devin likes to make his own and wants me to work them out, I of course do them, or some of them, but I don’t get involved in any big way, such as making my own and having Devin solve them. They’re Devin’s projects, not mine.

Perhaps more subtly, I don’t particularly enjoy bending down to hold a baby’s hands as he learns to walk. Perhaps it’s that I’m not as anxious about babies walking as some parents are, or perhaps it’s that I’m tall and have further to bend down! Whatever: is bending down to hold a baby’s hands as he learns to walk an authority thing?

I do sometimes grapple. Last week Devin suggested twice that I make him a particular object; at the library we’d picked up a flyer for an exhibit on children’s book illustrations; the drawing on the flyer was wonderful, perfect for Devin’s cat collection; a sign tacked to a tree read “Animal Orphanage”, under the sign lay a huge mother cat nursing her family; only, the family consisted of a baby squirrel, baby raccoon, puppy, and lion cub; on top of the cat perched a kitten, and the balloon emanating from that kitten read, “What kind of a family is this? Can a kitter belong to it?” Devin thought of the fabulous idea of making the stuffed animal equivalent of that illustration. He wanted me to help him make it, but I didn’t want to. (At the time I was embroiled in creative sewing endeavors of my own; I was making pillowcases out of old ties and brocades found in thrift stores.) But Devin did mention it twice and I know that sometimes certain things are important to kids. I’m weighing all the variables. Maybe this “project” ISN’T only an authority! Maybe it’s actually something I should do. How long would it take? Would it really cut into my energy that much? Maybe I’d enjoy it more than I think. Or maybe I could cut corners and make only the mother cat and buy the animal babies in thrift stores. (It would be an excuse to go thrifting!) I’m grappling -- intelligently, I hope. (Epilogue: As of this writing, ten years later, Dev and I now have fond memories of that project. We DID go to thrift stores to buy the animal babies, and we also, at home, made a giant cat. We also sewed velcro in appropriate places, so that the nursing babies could nurse or not-nurse, at Devin’s bidding. We still have some of these animals down the cellar.)

Another ritual I’d like to explore is the bedtime story. Sometimes wonderful, sometimes bothersome, it can feel like an authority. Are we bad parents if we don’t read bedtime stories? I once slept over a friend’s house and observed her reading a bedtime story to her kids. It seemed to me like library story hour. The kids wanted to grab the book, play and wrestle as they were listening, and so on; my friend was tired and anxious to get it over with, plus she had school-like expectations as to what reading to kids “should” be. For example, every five minutes she’d stop reading, sit up straight with her hands on her hips, and ask, in a kind of moralistic tone, “Are you reading the story with US?”

In families where kids go to bed the same time as the adults, and especially where the kids sleep in the same bed as the adults, do the parents read bedtime stories? If so, do they have to do so every night? When the whole family arrives home from a trip at 2:00 A.M., do the kids need a bedtime story? Perhaps if it weren’t for bedtime, we wouldn’t need bedtime stories!

In fact, does a bedtime story make bedtime easier? I once baby-sat for a three-year-old whose parents had instructed me to read her a bedtime story. This story did everything but lull

her to sleep. It made her RESISTENT. The closer we came to the conclusion of the story, the wider became her eyes, the more she wriggled around and the more questions she asked in order to delay bedtime. And no sooner did I announce "the end" than she countered with "Let's get another book."

I'd agree (and have experienced, plenty of times) that a bedtime story can indeed lull a kid to sleep. But still, parents don't HAVE to read bedtime stories. They're just one idea. Singing, conversation, and just plain holding or massaging are other ideas, other ways to lull a kid to sleep (or not).

In general, children and adults can make up their own rituals, and know when to not have rituals at all.

CERTAIN LOADED WORDS AND IDEAS

Patty, a home-schooling friend of mine, has just begun a career of giving piano lessons. She was telling me about a problem with one of her students; he has ADD and has trouble sitting still for more than two minutes. He had seemed interested at first, she said, but now the lessons weren't working out and would probably have to stop. "Huh?" I said to her. "WHY does he HAVE to sit still? Can't he just mess around with the piano, the way John Holt describes, and your role as teacher can be to just be there for him to turn to when he has a question or needs other input. You say he was interested at first; why can't he just keep doing the same things that got him interested?"

"I know what you mean," Payy answered, "but then his parents couldn't call it a piano lesson."

Yes, how, then, could Patty justify CHARGING the kid's parents? And how could she ensure that the designated half-hour, neither more nor less, would be used up?

It seem to me that the problem here is the authority given the word "lesson". If "piano lesson" didn't have to involve the preconceived notions of, for example, sitting still at the piano for half an hour with the "teacher", then Patty could call whatever developed between her and her student a "piano lesson" and be paid for sharing her expertise and appreciation for music.

This is precisely the kind of "lessons" that Kitty, my co-coordinator, is often looking for, for her children -- for example, when her five-year-old daughter Joy was going through a stage when she was fascinated by weather. "It's very hard," Kitty says, 'to find somebody who will just TALK about it, or share enthusiasm for it.'" I also am looking for someone "low-key" for Devin's sudden interest in the violin. But everyone seems to have the "lesson" mindset. "How often do you want me to see him?" "How long do you want the lessons to last?" "The violin? How marvelous! He'll be able to play Beethoven sonatas with you." "Why didn't he start earlier?" To me, the word "lesson" often means "overkill".

When I was a teen-ager passionately interested in math, my parents and teachers did NOT arrange "lessons" or "courses" for me. I have always been glad about that. I am also glad that my parents said to me, "Gee, we have an old friend, Al Schwartz, who used to be interested in math. He has a Masters degree in it and, the last we heard, he was teaching at C.C.N.Y. He used to always like working on math problems, the way you do; maybe you'd like us to call him and invite him over for a visit." Al Schwartz and I wound up corresponding by mail for years, covering our pages with equations. No one called any of this "lessons", but in fact I still consider what Al Schwartz gave me to be among the best feedback on my own work.

There are other words besides "lesson" which seem to me to be given undue authority, and thus operate to the detriment, rather than the advantage, of teaching, learning, and interacting among human beings. "Teaching" and "learning" are two such words. When is someone teaching? When is someone learning? When has teaching and/ or learning occurred? One cannot always know. If Patty's student "messes around" at the piano without once needing Patty's input, has Patty "taught"? Has the student "learned"? What if that happens five "lessons" in a row?

Moreover, "teaching" and "learning" are, in some circles, such buzz-words, so deified that they can't be argued with. Their mere mention seems to require bowed heads. Is learning always a beautiful thing? Conversely, can something be beautiful that is not learning? "EVERYthing is learning," say some home-schoolers (and I can't help wondering whether the title of even John Holt's book, "Learning All the Time," serves to help sell copies via promising

parents and other adults never-ending learning). Indeed, perhaps everything IS learning. But what if it weren't? If something were discovered that was not learning, would that be so terrible? Are people AFRAID to do something that's not learning? In general, what are we afraid of?

Some other loaded words, in both schooling and home-schooling circles, are "education", "reading", "literacy", "excellence", "motivate", "potential", and "concern". It seems to me that what these words are loaded with is authority. And often big business is behind them; they run rampant, for example, in advertisements for schools, curricula, books, and toys.

"Do to captivate. Discover to motivate. Dramatize to visualize. Dialogue to internalize. Drill to crystallize." This is an excerpt from an ad in a HOME-SCHOOLING magazine, for a home-schooling curriculum! (It sounds to me like an ad for a military school!) Note all the buzz-words. "Captivate", "discover", "internalize", "drill", "crystallize". All (except possibly for "drill") might be perfectly reasonable and meaningful words, but they run the risk of being misinterpreted, exaggerated, and given too much authority. They seem to be geared towards "pep-talk" and the illusion of control. Look through the pages of almost any periodical about education, be it traditional or home-schooling, and you'll find an abundance of these words. You'll also find a sprinkling, or an abundance, of real words and ideas (things I like). For example, in the same ad quoted above also appears a quote from a child: "I'm sitting on the outside but I'm wriggling on the inside!" And in fact the title of the page-long ad is "Working with the Wriggle."

"Just because a child sits compliantly still does not mean he is learning," continues the ad, but then it goes on to talk about "drill to crystallize." It seems to me to be using the child's quote for its own ends. In truth there are many ways to "crystallize" besides drilling, and crystallizing often does not happen for years after something has been taught ("drilled" or not).

When I leaf through the many home-schooling publications on whose mailing list Center City Home-Schoolers seems to be, I see what seems to be a lot of hypocrisy. So many curriculum suppliers and home businesses use buzz-words and phrases like "the whole child," "hands-on math," "creative learning," even "wholistic" and "gentle", often right alongside words and phrases like "drill" and "unity study." And the myriad of magazines which run articles about how unnecessary curriculum is have, in order to survive financially, to fill its pages with advertisements for curricula, which include all those buzz-words.

Then, too, there are specific things that adults seem to think are "good" for children, and these often serve (or dis-serve) as authorities. What comes to mind are "things like dinosaurs and rain forests." I believe that, for parents in this society, "dinosaur" is a loaded word. Nothing wrong with it in itself; dinosaurs are cute, fascinating, concise, self-contained, connected to history and science (which adults want kids to learn) and, perhaps most important, good clean fun. And I was one of the original dinosaur advocates ten years ago when, pregnant with Devin, I made him a baby-dinosaur quilt. But if your three-year-old hasn't yet heard of them, or has but couldn't care less about them, does that make you a bad parent?

Next I'd like to talk about loaded IDEAS. Many home-schoolers, again out of doubt and fear, seem to turn, not only to home-schooling curricula, but to various, so to speak, "schools" of thought regarding children and how to "help" them learn. Better Babies Institute, Montessori, Susuki, Waldorf, and so on. I don't consider myself enough of an expert to analyze and judge any of these conclusively. However, I can give some of my IMPRESSIONS, in particular of what people SAY about them. Buzz-words and phrases abound. Waldorf, so a parent tells me, considers "the spirit of the child." But what school would advertise that it DOESN'T consider "the spirit of the child?"

To me learning seems an uncomplicated matter. I fail to understand the need for any

“method” of teaching or learning. Yes, there’s something to be gained from just about everything, but Anne Sullivan, teacher of Helen Keller, wrote, “I am beginning to suspect all elaborate and special systems of education.” It seems to me that, unless a child (or adult) is specifically PREVENTED from learning via negative learning experience, or negative experiences, period, that person will learn, or at least learn what is important. As the posters say, “A child learns what she lives with.” If it’s there, and relevant, she’ll learn it. Or, more accurately, she’ll CONSIDER learning it. To me, in fact, that’s what learning means; it means looking at something and reacting to it in some intelligent way, and deciding (often very quickly, and perhaps subconsciously) whether that something is worth absorbing (perhaps storing), to what extent, and then acting accordingly.

Many home-schoolers talk, I believe erroneously, about “the John Holt method” or “the John Holt way.” But John Holt’s whole point was that there be NO specific way, that adults be open to all ways of interacting with children, and not get caught up in any one way. Home-schoolers often treat John Holt as an authority; curriculum and educational materials companies make use of this by, for example, wording part of their ads in home-schooling newsletters, “John Holt used our Worm Computer Bin.” But, as Kitty Anderson says, “John Holt didn’t say ALWAYS use it!”

A member of Center City Home-Schoolers, and the mother of two pre-school aged children, talks about how she would like to eventually home-school in an un-structured way and how the Waldorf method has caught her attention. It has not, however, become an authority to her. “I’m fascinated by some of the ideas,” she says, ‘by the way it views the human mind. But I’m not necessarily interested in applying any of the methods. I just like to read and think about it, and I’ll probably take a lot of it into account when I interact with my children.”

This is, perhaps, a good model, for how to deal with loaded words, ideas, and ALL authorities -- take them into account.

ETIQUETTE

In the alternative education newsletter ALLPIE (#15), which always gives much space and attention to home-schooling, a father, Dr. Sam Yulish, describes his family's very un-structured style of home-schooling. "I never asked him an educational question, never told him he was doing anything wrong." However, he seems to feel some need to add, "and, by the way, he was raised with strict behavior guidelines, and turned into a real gentleman..."

Etiquette, perhaps, is a crutch as well as an authority. "Johnny can't read but at least he has manners." Or maybe it's some kind of measure. a way of proving. Or what starts out as a crutch, or a measure, becomes an authority. And how, I wonder, can a child be raised with "strict behavior guidelines" without ever feeling that he's "doing anything wrong"? How, in general, is etiquette different from academics? Or, perhaps more pertinent, how is etiquette LIKE academics? For some home-schoolers, does etiquette REPLACE academics, in some metaphoric way? That is, do the two serve some common emotional need or agenda on the part of adults? How, perhaps, is etiquette like Girl Scouts, book reports, or ecology clubs? What does it prove?

The point of this section is not to discuss the pros and cons of etiquette, or of any particular examples of etiquette. (My belief is that some rules of etiquette make sense, while some don't; with some it depends on the situation.), but to discuss the ROLE which etiquette plays in the lives of people, in particular as (often) an authority.

Here are some examples of instances of etiquette issues among home-schoolers. The magazine HOME-SCHOOLING TODAY (Nov/ Dec '95) contains an article by Mary Ellen Carlise called "Teaching Etiquette to Children." "When eating," she writes, "we take small bites, always chewing with our mouths closed, speaking only when we are completely finished chewing and swallowing." It isn't so much these rules per se that rub me the wrong way, as the attitude. it seems, again, to smack of the need for the appearance of control.

Still, I'd like to say something about the rules, and practices, per se. When, during a meal in the above household, a child has something so important on her mind that she forgets these rules, she is told in a friendly and non-judgemental way, "I'd like to hear what you have to say after your food has been chewed and swallowed." But I wonder whether that kind of thing can feel inhibiting to a child, perhaps even irrelevant and alienating. Can it also feel distracting, or just plain insensitive? Even in Hollywood movies people talk while chewing. Are chewing and swallowing really that important? Sometimes yes, sometimes no. But why do adults so often fixate on it? Is it, I wonder, INSTEAD of fixating on academics? Or of forbidding gum-chewing? The sidebar to that article contains a heading, "What a Two-to-Four Year Old Can Learn." This to me sounds school-like in several ways; in particular, it smacks of the "potential" bit; "can" and "are emotionally ready to" are two different things.

At a child's birthday party several months ago, the four-year-old cousin of the birthday kid was very excited about the cake. He had watched it being made, decorated, and set out on the big table in the living room where the other kids at the party were playing around, virtually ignoring that cake. But this little boy seemed impatient for "cake time", kept exclaiming and asking questions, most of them amounting to "When are we gonna get to the cake?" To me he seemed simply enthusiastic and not at all pesty or annoying; I was charmed and moved. But the birthday mother was feeling, understandably, rushed and hassled, and she saw his joy and anticipation as pressure on her, to hurry up and "do" the cake. "Cut it out," she kept snapping. "Let it be." "Get away from that cake." "If you say one more word about that cake..." She was, so it seemed to me, trying to get him to be "polite", or rather, her version of polite. According to my own version of polite, this kid was being extremely polite because he

was showing her how much he appreciated the cake. Possibly, in fact, earlier in the day, he had felt very close to her as they were making it together and she had been very loving with him; possibly he expected that closeness and loving-ness to continue; he might have been bewildered when it didn't.

This morning Devin's needs and mine were at odds. Devin wanted me to write down his book as he dictated it and I wanted to get an early start on my planned thrifting expedition. More than once he asked if we could do "just one page," and I said no, not this morning. At one point he said, "We didn't get to write the book last night, either." Finally I said, I hope facetiously, "How about, every time you criticize me, you counteract the criticism by finding something to compliment me on!" A second later I had second thoughts about that. "Actually," I told him, "a lot of criticisms are AUTOMATICALLY compliments because, when you criticize something you're also saying that that person doesn't USUALLY do that thing. Also, when you criticize by saying I haven't done a particular thing enough, you're at the same time complimenting me by telling me how much you like that thing that I usually do." Devin nodded.

That makes me think that, in general, when kids pester somebody for something, or merely repeatedly ask for that thing, adults often view them as being impolite and they teach or discipline them out of it. To me this seems a shame. It's so wonderful, the way kids want. The way they appreciate and get pleasure. It warms me when kids (or adults) are impatient for something which I have to give. I don't think I'd choose it any other way.

True, it does sometimes seem obnoxious and annoying when kids "pester". But that's possibly only when there's something more than genuine want involved, when perhaps there's a kind of hostility, or challenging, or flirting, or goading, going on -- or when it is, indeed, a matter of want, but when what is wanted is not the same thing as what is being asked for and pestered about -- or when the impatience is for something which I DON'T HAVE to give.

At any rate, the whole matter of manners or etiquette seems to me much more complicated and interesting than many adults see it. As in the above example of the "pestering" for that cake, what some adults call lack of manners can express something. and insisting on etiquette often seems like forcing a child to speak in a different LANGUAGE, which of course interferes with communication. It can be invasive in the worst way.

How can we distinguish between those times when etiquette is truly called for and when etiquette is used as a crutch, or an authority? We can ask ourselves questions about OURSELVES. What are OUR needs? What is OUR agenda? WHY are we insisting on etiquette? Are we worried about what others will think? Are we embarrassed? Are we trying to impress, or keep up appearances? Is it, perhaps, the appearance of control that we are trying to keep up, or protect? Has our kid really done anything wrong? And then there are reality-considerations, such as: Is she chewing with her mouth VERY full or only a little full?! Is it full of mashed potatoes, banana, or something less squishy?! Each separate incident will yield different answers, and we can try to answer them honestly.

THOUGHTS ABOUT TV

The issue of TV and video games is often discussed by home-schoolers and home-schooling publications. In some home-schooling circles, not-watching TV acts as an authority; the less TV one's kids watch, the more status one has. This section will not specifically draw conclusions about the TV issue. Rather, it will shed some light on it by examining "the anti-TV syndrome" as an authority and by exploring some feelings and motives, both children's and parents'.

During the twenty-six years that we've been parents, my husband and I never quite made up our minds about the TV issue. Indeed, we were torn between the two opposing stands taken by home-schoolers: (1) worry about the quality of TV programs and about the possible negative effects of the very act of watching TV, versus (2) the belief that kids can be trusted to make their own decisions, even with respect to TV. In our family the second viewpoint won out most of the time, and the year Bret was twelve we felt rewarded (and, in the face of the home-schooling community and the home-schoolers we knew, proud, perhaps a little relieved) when, all on his own, Bret decided that he was tired of the TV, Nintendo, and several piles of Nintendo games taking up space in his room; he sold them all, making comments to us like "now I'll have time to meet people" and "I want, at the end of my life, to have only a few very favorite things." Several years later this same decision-making led Bret to buy another TV! And, several years still later, he sold that TV! In short, he went through the various "ages and stages". All told, I've been glad we handled things the way we did. And we were also sustained by some of the following ideas.

For many children, perhaps most children, especially children who are loaded down with too many authorities (as described in this chapter), the ONLY way to relax and sit still, and also to have some control over their lives, is to watch TV. I remember myself at ages nine, ten, and eleven, rushing home from Girl Scouts every day at 5:00 to watch Howdy Doody. I was very careful not to miss an episode. Kids in general (adults, too) sometimes have to have some excuse to just sit there and "do nothing" and not be bothered by anyone; in this society they are not encouraged or supported when they ACTUALLY do nothing, even for a couple of hours. Perhaps this is the reason why many children, and adults, like and need TV so much. And perhaps children who are allowed to live relaxing uncomplicated uninvaded lives don't in general need TV as much. At any rate, it seems important for adults to realize that TV might be useful on an emotional level, and that when discussing the TV issue, these emotions need to be taken into account.

Many of the counts that some people have against TV seem to be authority related, even school-like. The most obvious of these is "TV interferes with homework." Or, for home-schoolers, just plain work. A subtle version of this is "TV prevents you from using your mind" or even "TV is a waste of time." Do people have to be using their minds every minute of the day? Do they have to always be making the most efficient use of all, or even most, of their time? As described in previous sections, ideas can incubate as we sleep, as we play, and they can also incubate as we watch TV. (And if they don't, that's okay too.)

Consider the statement: "TV exposes kids to violence." Yes, many programs do go overboard in the violence department. But do WE have to go overboard in the ANTI-violence department? Does it have to be such a big deal? Years ago a neighbor of mine, an artist and mother of two, confided to me, "I think this whole anti-violence business is a yuppie thing." Certainly, although many workingclass families are concerned about violence (often, though, in imitation of the middle class), there is a significant segment of the population that is both middle-class and concerned about violence. Also, the "better" schools seem to be the ones that concern themselves with things like anti-violence. This is not the place to deal with

questions about EMOTIONAL and PSYCHOLOGICAL violence, but I can't resist posing the question: Are authorities a kind of violence? And do they help, in subtle ways, perpetrate actual PHYSICAL violence? There is, I believe, an "anti-violence mania", in particular the APPEARANCE of anti-violence -- a special case of conspicuous concern. Again, the questions to ask are: How much concern do we need? How much APPEARANCE of concern do we need? Perhaps, even, how much anti-violence do we need?!

Next consider the refrain "TV is passive." Does that translate into "When my kids watch TV, they don't accomplish anything?" Would that be another version of the ol' tangible products / proving bit? Again, I wonder whether that's precisely the reason that some kids watch TV, because that's their only opportunity to curl up and not accomplish anything. Actually, kids might prefer to curl up IN THEIR PARENTS' LAPS and accomplish nothing but they might not be allowed, or not for long enough time periods. On the other hand, sometimes kids need to GET AWAY FROM parents and other people, especially if they associate proximity to other people with the pressure to do something. So sometimes, when kids say "Leave me alone; let me finish my program," it's the "leave me alone" part that's really important.

Many adults say "TV isn't creative." The next chapter will explore in detail what I call "the creativity mania." During what fraction of the day does a human being have to be creative? Every creative person knows that the answer to that question varies, and that the fraction is often very small. Then, too, we need to ask ourselves about creativity versus the APPEARANCE of creativity, perhaps about "conspicuous creativity." When a kid watches TV, does the appearance of non-creativity embarrass the parent? Is it, as my neighbor says, "a yuppie thing?" And do workingclass parents sometimes copy it? Across class lines, do parents worry what people will think? And do they worry about the implications of the TV-watching, that perhaps the REASON the kids are watching "so much" TV is that they're not well-adjusted, or not loved enough, or not stimulated enough, or not "provided" with enough? In other words, do parents worry that it's their fault, or that people will THINK it's their fault?

Consider the barrage of anti-TV statements on the order of "If they watch too much TV, they won't [take your pick] read / go to the library / take part in outside activities / have a social life..." Perhaps many adults are simply afraid that "too much TV" means too few authorities. So they strive to eliminate TV, in order to create time for one more art or karate class. It would be helpful to parents if they kept all this in mind, were honest with themselves and asked, for example, how much for our children's sake and how much for appearance's sake are we discouraging or forbidding TV? And then they could base their decisions, and their household TV rules, on this new, more accurate information.

In the pediatrician's waiting room last week, I browsed through the magazine "Healthy Kids" and came upon the article "What's the News about TV?" by Valerie Latona. Her basic stance seemed to be that TV is a fact of modern life and that parents might as well make constructive use of it. Perhaps not a bad idea in itself, but her suggestions towards that end seemed to mean: Use TV as you would use school; that is, as an authority.

Here are some of her suggestions: "Watch TV with your kids and help them understand what they're viewing." "Avoid placing a TV in your child's room." "Help your child select TV programs." "Get your child interested in follow-up activities. If you find that your child loves TV shows about animals, take him to the zoo or the aquarium." "Position educational aids near the TV set... an atlas, globe, dictionary, reference books." "You can also develop questions for your child to answer."

I looked up from reading and remarked smugly to Dev, "The kids would HATE all that." Indeed, it seems to me that these are surefire ways to get your kid to give up TV! They take away whatever it is about TV that kids like, in particular autonomy and privacy.

While few of the suggestions per se are completely contrary to my own beliefs and practices (at least to use SOME of the time), they smack of self-consciousness, nervousness, and mania. Some of them seem to me horribly invasive. They positively reek of an authority agenda! Consider a kid brought up in a life already cluttered with activities and authorities, a kid who needs TV to get away from it all, to be left alone, to curl up, to hang out, to do nothing, to let ideas incubate, to rest up from being creative or intelligent, to learn to love animals without being taken to the zoo or the aquarium, or to rush home from Girl or Boy Scouts to. How could these needs be met in a home with the above TV rules and attitudes?

Is using TV as another authority better than using TV as escapism? Which authorities are "better" (or worse) for children? And again, what are we really afraid of? What do we really want and need?

OTHER THINGS I'M SUSPICIOUS OF

I hope this section will be taken in the spirit of speculating, of “brain-storming.,” rather than of definitely formed-for-all-time opinions. This way we can all feel uninhibited; you might even add your own things to be suspicious of.

For starters, I hate the word “excellence”. It smacks of military school. It sounds competitive, “preppy”, and just not particularly sensitive. It seems to imply that worth is linear, everything judged on a scale from I to IO, any two things comparable as to which, or who, is better or “more excellent.” Strangely, I don’t hate the adjective “excellent”. This could be because, if you say something is excellent, you’re simply complimenting it, you’re not comparing it to anything else. Also, “excellent” has come, in the ‘80’s and 90’s, to have a colloquial meaning.

One of the first books written about home-schooling is titled “Home-Schooling for Excellence.” The authors have stated, in the book and in their presentations, that not ALL home-schoolers have to wind up at Harvard, that that is not the point of home-schooling, and that kiids should basically be allowed to follow their paths, whatever they might be. Still, for me, home-schooling is NOT “for excellence”; that is not the point of home-schooling, and I wish the authors would publicly renounce that book-title.

Another thing I’m suspicious of: reading campaigns. “Read to your children at least fifteen minutes a day.” “The family that reads together...” Buses, billboards, and libraries are plastered with it all. Rah-rah-reading! Rah-ra-literacy!

I’m an author; where would I be without readers?! And how would I have known to write books if I hadn’t known about books to begin with? Still, I believe society goes overboard. I’ve heard parents tell their toddlers, “Don’t write on your books. Books are to be respected.” (What, I ask, about Hitler’s “Mein Kampf”?) I buy most of my kids’ and my own books in thrift stores, and (thus not worrying about the expense, and knowing that I can very probably find another one just as inexpensive) I do let my kids write on most of their books. (Just as I let them write in my diary, which is often the first draft of my own books). I consider the books enhanced by their drawings, or first draft of their own writings. I also consider the books as inspiration for this drawing and writing. I’ve heard college students remark that the main disadvantage of selling a textbook at the end of a course is that they can’t write in it, which, they say, is one of the ways in which they learn. It’s certainly one of the ways in which I prepare lectures.

Books per se seem to me to be TOO respected or, perhaps more accurately, respected in the wrong way (which in a sense means LESS respected). And I’m suspicious. Books are big business and so are things associated with books, such as schools and other authorities. Who has what to gain? Whose psychological tendency towards what is being played upon? What authority is invoked?

Kitty Anderson says, “This over-serious attitude towards books can create a rift between author and reader. It’s as though the readers have to learn from the authors, and not vice versa.” In other words, books act as school, or an authority. In that same conversation Kitty admitted to me, “Years ago when I first met you, you said you were suspicious of all the fuss about reading, and I thought that was a bit nuts. But now, that I’ve been thinking about these things awhile, I see what you meant.”

I’m also suspicious of the “creative writing” in several magazines put out by home-schooling kids. It seems so uncreative! So much of it is so predictable, not much different from what I’ve

seen in adult-run mainstream children's magazines or on school bulletin boards. Instead of "How I Spent My Summer Vacation," it's "My Day at the Home-Schooling Curriculum Fair." What I suspect is that adults are behind these writings; moreover, that these adults have their own agendas, their own things to prove. To me the ultimate in this "creative home-schoolers" phenomenon was a program once organized by a group of parents and put on by their children for "our legislators" to "thank them for passing the home-schooling law and allowing our children to home-school" and to "show them what home-schooled children can do." In actuality home-schooling children, like all other children, might not have ANYTHING truly important to "show" until they've grown up, often to a ripe age, and "our legislators" might never understand that; indeed, neither do many home-schooling parents.

Here's what, in my experience, kids REALLY write: My sister Rosalyn at eight: "Dear God: Do you love me or do you only like me?" Devin at eight: "Dear My butt: You fart too much." and currently, at ten, his "Die with Grandpa" series, complete with decorative T-shirts and sneakers and fan-club cards. Or Bret at ten, for a school project: "My Invention: A lot of people have the same key chain because, there are not that many different kinds of key chains businesses don't think about key chains that much Why, I don't know, but, I have discovered that dipping tea bags in urethane glosses and hardens so you can have a keychain that looks like a teabag, And then I poked a hole in the tea bag, and then I took a ..."

Or they write imitative stories, or first chapters of books, often (apparently) violent. And, ad infinitum, they do, rather specifically, NON-creative writing, and make no bones about it. I often wonder whether, or to what extent, kids want to share -- with teachers, with parents, or with "our legislators" -- their deepest, most intimate, more "creative" writings.

Another source of suspicion, for me: Why do home-schoolers, home-schooling groups, and home-schooling publications seem to like to KEEP thinking of home-schooling ideas? (Just as the schools like to keep thinking of schooling ideas) This project, that activity, the other game; there's literally no end. It's enough to drive people away from home-schooling, and from SCHOOL-schooling, and it very often does. It's literally "just too much."

Why, I brainstorm, can't there be a FIXED set of ideas? A SMALL set that would work, once and for all? (like the "Extended Casino" game described in the Introduction, for learning arithmetic). Why does everyone have to go overboard in thinking up new things all the time?

Is it because Life Has Never-Ending Possibilities? Because Life would be boring without all these possibilities? Because, as home-schoolers often say, "there are as many different learning methods as there are children." (Something which I think is an exaggeration; more likely, learning methods fall into categories, though subtle.) Because there are as many teaching methods as there are parents? Perhaps. But I'm still suspicious. Why THAT many? And why do the same so-called "new" ideas keep re-appearing in different periodicals under different guises? Why, as people often say, do they "keep re-inventing the wheel?" I believe that at least one answer is: So that there can BE periodicals.

Yes, diversity is big business. More and more magazines. More and more books. More and more products. And business, even home businesses, or home-schooling businesses, probably don't want any ONE idea to solve any particular problem once and for all, any more than drug companies want any one inexpensive, or free, cure-all.

In my life as a parent, my main problem has not been finding, for example, children's books, but CHOOSING among the overwhelming number of children's books. As a reader, I have to same problem: Not any lack of books to read but, on the contrary, all the good books on my shelves that I haven't yet read, along with the worry that I'm missing out on the "best" books, or the books I'm "supposed" to read. Clutter. "I'm overwhelmed," says Kitty, "by this wash of

stuff. it takes up too much time. Does more somehow mean better? Even if it does, why this desire for constant improvement? Why do things have to keep getting better?!"

Diversity is often good. And things do need to be said more than once and in different ways and from many perspectives. But HOW many? Isn't there some limit? Does "changing times" mean that ideas and information have to change quite THIS much? Won't there be any let-up?

The next-to-the-last suspicion dealt with in this section occurs in my mind when home-schooling parents say "I took Johnny out of school because they wouldn't teach cursive" or "because they wouldn't let him move ahead" or even "because he was bored." When parents say things like that, I usually (though not always) feel that they're subtly bragging about how far ahead their kids are, or want to be. I also suspect that the brand of home-schooling they embrace is of the "out-school the school" ilk. (Further along in the conversation, my suspicions are usually born out.)

When I was a kid, I LIKED it when I was 'way ahead of the class -- when I had, for the time being, learned all the teacher would teach; I could relax, almost as though I didn't go to school. I could be bored, and I could think of ways to alleviate the boredom. I drew on my paper, worked out math problems, and day-dreamed. Nancy Wallace once remarked to me, "You escaped school by being 'smart'. Some people escape school by being 'dumb'."

When my kids were in school (and I've had both "smart" kids and "under-achievers"), I never wanted the teachers to move far ahead or to give much work, especially homework. (And word got back to me that the teachers liked me because I didn't pressure them -- for example, I didn't ask, during Home and School Association meetings, things like "When are you going to start them on long division?") I wanted my kids' school classes to be relaxed and I preferred more time spent on the topics they did learn. My reasons for taking my kids out of school would never, under any circumstances, be that "they" wouldn't teach cursive, or long division, or even creative writing. I never wanted more of ANYTHING from the schools, or from my kids. Indeed, contrary to what some home-schooling parents say, I took my kids out of school, not "because [speaking metaphorically] they wouldn't teach cursive," but because they INSISTED on teaching cursive. And not "because they wouldn't let them move ahead," but because they wouldn't let them STAY WHERE THEY WERE. And not "because they were bored" but because they seemed AFRAID of boredom, because they wouldn't allow boredom in the learning process, nor in the living process.

The final suspicion (at least in this section!) is the fact that so many home-schooling parents, when discussing the pros and cons of non-structured learning, seem to qualify this style by saying things like "Everything has SOME structure. An INTERNAL structure. Structure is part of life. A natural consequence of living..." On and on they go. What do they need to prove, I wonder? The answer, I believe, lies in their (almost inevitable) conclusion: "It's not like what we do doesn't have structure."

It seems to me that such people are turning to structure as a crutch. (Conspicuous structure!) They seem to NEED that word, "structure". (If not structure itself) They somehow don't want to give it up. As Nancy Wallace says, "They can't let go." Perhaps to them lack of structure is synonymous with lack of effort. And lack of effort means they're bad. There's possibly some kind of work ethic going on.

The question here is not whether or not it's true that "everything has internal structure," (Frankly, I don't particular CARE whether or not everything has an internal structure.) but that so many home-schoolers SAY that. Let's brainstorm again; suppose one's home-schooling style DOESN'T involve structure? Not even "internal structure?" Would that be so terrible? What is

the threat here? What, again, are people afraid of?

Suspicious are important. Like Geiger counters, they can be authority detectors.

Perhaps my own suspicions, just described, seem far-fetched to some. Perhaps it seems as though I'm "making a big deal." Perhaps, even, you're suspicious of my suspicions! Perhaps you prefer your own suspicions! Perhaps one person's suspicion can be another's authority.

Suspicious are important. John Stuart Mill once said, "Dissent is the prelude to revolution." Perhaps suspicious are the prelude to dissent.