

Nature Suggests a Better Way to Educate

By Jesse Fisher, Founder
Freedom Preservation Foundation

What Child Development Can Contribute.

Among other things, child development reveals a better way to help our children become educated. The fact that children by nature are little learning machines suggests certain fundamental elements for helping a child become "educated." And, in turn, it stands to reason that we may not impose conditions contrary to the natural development of children without causing harm, or at least frustration. I propose that by working in conjunction with nature, and not contrary to it, we can best construct environments ideally suited for the education of children.

Children Are By Nature Learning Machines.

Consider the complexity of the tasks we all learned as infants. We learned to recognize our Mother's voice -- the programs required to enable computers to perform voice recognition are bulky and cumbersome at best. How remarkable it is that an infant human is able to accomplish such a feat with no instruction at all. We also learned to grasp with our hands, to move things to our mouths, to chew, to swallow, to roll over, to raise up on all fours, to crawl, to pull ourselves up, to stand, to step, and to walk.

And it's not just motor skills we learned. There were numerous complex mental skills we all acquired. Let's just look at learning to speak! Now there's a difficult task! They say the more languages you learn the easier it is to learn the next one. So it stands to reason that the fewer languages you have learned the harder it is to learn one -- and an infant knows no languages! So the first one must be the most difficult. Yet we learn it with no classroom instruction at all.

We also learned rudimentary reasoning skills, counting, and even persuasion skills -- what parent hasn't had a pre-schooler attempt to persuade postponing bedtime? The fact that children are able to learn highly complex skills, both physical and mental suggests that nature has placed in children the ability and capacity to learn large amounts of complicated tasks and make sense of immense amounts of data input.

What about desire?

How motivated are children to learn these skills? Many a parent has watched a baby struggle incessantly to master some new skill. Some even report a child acting frustrated because they are unable to quickly master something they see an older sibling or parent do. Apparently, we came prepackaged with high motivation to learn.

What are the implications for education?

First let's answer two questions, "What does a child need in order to learn the highly complex task of walking?" And then, "What doesn't a child need in order to learn to walk?"

As mentioned, the motivation seems to come inherently. There are prerequisite skills needed: standing, stepping, holding one's balance, etc. In fact, the late Dr. Esther Thelen reported that these precursor skills to walking "cannot be instructed beforehand, but must be individually assembled through experience."¹ The child certainly benefits from seeing adults and siblings modeling the behavior. Related research suggests that a parent "teaching" a child to walk only hastens the natural learning process by a very small amount.² The child essentially learns the skill on his own schedule. So, we can also conclude the child needs time and space to learn by experience, by trial and error, and resources -- in this case, a chair to hold onto.

I propose that the same nature-given elements that are present when a child learns complex tasks like walking and speaking are the self-same elements a child needs to learn any other skill or body of knowledge: Role models, space, time, a safe environment, resources, inner motivation and freedom to learn at their own pace.

The Three Rs

"Wait a minute!" you say, "What about reading and writing and arithmetic?" Glad you brought them up! Isn't it actually quite possible that a toddler who naturally masters the complex tasks involved in speaking a language can also learn to read, write and do simple math in the same way? Would it surprise you that there are *hundreds* of children around the world who are learning to read and write just fine without one single day of classroom instruction?

Learning comes natural, maybe we should just... set up natural learning environments, provide excellent role models, and then get out of the way!

What did the child NOT need to learn to walk?

The child didn't need a chalkboard to see diagrams of walking, a worksheet, or a desk. The child didn't need bells to tell him it was time to begin, or time to stop learning. Didn't need a curriculum to follow, or even, (are you sitting down?) a teacher to teach him. "Oh, but the parent is the teacher, right?" Not really, the parent is the role model -- so are the older siblings. The parent doesn't sit the child down in a desk and explain how to walk, or give the child contrived learning activities to do. Children are learning machines -- the switch is already on! Just give them space, a safe environment, freedom to try, resources, and model what you want them to learn -- they already came with the inner motivation.

Working Against Nature

As outlined above, Nature suggests that certain elements are sufficient for these little learning machines to learn highly complex tasks and knowledge. So what happens if we impose conditions contrary to the natural development of children? (You may want to pause here and consider answering that one yourself).

In America, and the many other nations that adopted the Prussian model of education, there are at least three applications of compulsion in our education system -- all are counter to the nature of children (and adults for that matter): First, children are compelled to "be educated" through compulsory attendance laws (ask yourself who really benefits from those).

Second, they are compelled to learn on someone else's schedule. And third, they are compelled to learn what the teacher (ie. the Curriculum Director) dictates, NOT what nature, their inner sense, or external role models suggest would be useful to them.

So why is that so bad? Well, consider for a moment how YOU would respond to such compulsion as an adult. Eating and procreating come as naturally to you as learning does to a child. What if you were compelled to eat certain amounts of certain foods every day on a certain schedule? What if you were compelled to have sexual relations every day at a certain time whether you wanted to or not? At first you might enjoy it (especially if you're a male), but

after a while you would lose your appetite, and both eating and procreating would become a burdensome chore. Isn't that what happens to most school children? Learning becomes a dreaded burden. "I hate school," is perhaps the most common childhood complaint.

Compulsion Kills Incentive.

Compelling children to learn given materials at given times, while sitting still in their desks is not only contrary to their nature, but it is also counter-productive. This should be no surprise since we have seen in our time the greatest example of the consequences of compulsion: the tremendously unproductive economy of the former USSR. Compulsory economics failed miserably in the old Soviet Union. Workers were told what to produce, when to produce it and how much to produce... and then they didn't.³

Compulsory economics resulted in inferior products produced by people seriously lacking in initiative and incentive. In contrast, economic freedom in the United States generated exceptional products and hard-working employees. If compulsion didn't work in Russia, why do we think it will work here?! There IS a better way.

With so much compulsion, it's no wonder many children hate school and learning - would you be surprised to learn that even many Nobel Prize winners hated school? Einstein, Churchill, Russell, Sakharov, Shaw, Feynman, and others. They had good reasons. (see http://learninfreedom.org/Nobel_hates_school.html)

Pathological Learners

In violating the natural order of things, current models for education create "pathological learners". Having been in the classroom as a teacher myself, I have seen the casualties first hand. Children, and especially teens, cope with compulsion in one of three ways: they play along, they pretend, or they subvert. Those that play along usually are those bright enough to pick up the material without much effort.

But those who aren't as gifted are left to pretend or subvert. For many, "rememberizing" for tests has replaced actual learning. Students don't care about

what is being taught, they just remember the material long enough to get a good grade on the test. The pretenders also quickly learn to cheat. A co-worker of mine caught more than half his class cheating on a math test by not telling the students that each row had a different test. Cheating is rampant -- even in colleges. So much for "Values" education!

The most frustrating group to a teacher are the subversives -- those who choose to cope by subverting the teaching process. These are the ones who motivate a majority of teachers to start taking anti-ulcer medicine, or, anti-depressants. Ask any teacher, they can tell you horror stories about what these children can do.

So, why am I dragging you through all this yuck? I'm showing you some of the results of our system which goes against the grain of natural learning. When we create learning environments which are contrary to human nature, we create a system which is only minimally effective. A few succeed, but many become cheats or subversives. There IS a better way.

Working With Nature.

Again, I contend that by working in conjunction with nature, and not contrary to her, we can best construct environments ideally suited for the education of children.

What then would a "school" look like that respected the natural learning skills of children?

I suggest they would include at least the following:

a. Access to older children and adults who model learning and applying knowledge.

Ideally the adults would be voracious learners and appliers of useful knowledge who are adept at modeling it in such a way as to entice children to follow their lead. They would also ideally be people who have exposed themselves to the writings of the greatest minds in history, and, are capable of mentoring students in that same pursuit.

b. Freedom for all to engage in self-directed exploration, learning, and application. Lots of learning and doing resources: books, magazines, games, and raw materials like paper, pens, paint, brushes,

computers, toys, tools, etc. etc.

c. An effective school government which provides protection from violation of the child's rights to life, liberty, property and learning (ie. the pursuit of happiness).

d. No classrooms, bells, or tardy slips. No principals, no teachers, or District Curriculum Coordinators. Most importantly, NO compulsion, because *Compulsion Kills Incentive*.

Benefits of Freedom-Based Education.

Now before you let loose your "yeah-but's," just ponder a moment what the benefits would be of such a learning environment.

- **Genius Unleashed.** You would be much more likely to discover your individual gift, your passion, your unique contribution to society, long before others because you will have so much more time to find it.

- **Economic Development.** A national study showed that only 2 to 4% of the graduates of public and charter schools end up starting a business by the time they turn 30, depending on the county they live in.⁴ Reviewing the data myself, I discovered that the original freedom-based school inadvertently graduates 42% entrepreneurs without even trying.⁵ I believe it is because their students shoulder 100% of the responsibility for their own educations. This gives them all the confidence, initiative and drive they need to launch their own businesses and become employers – and we all know that our economy needs a *lot* more employers right now than it needs employees.

- **College would be cheaper.** Penn State reports that 50% of college students change their majors at least once. I personally heard a young women admit to changing her major 9 times as a college senior – she just couldn't figure out what she wanted to do. Students in a freedom-based educational setting have years to figure out what they want to do as adults and zero in on what to major in long before they start paying tuition.

- **Kids would love school.** No unprosecuted bullies, no homework, no mean teachers. None of the top 10 things kids hate about school would even apply here. One staff member at a freedom-based school reported, "When I worked at a Sudbury school, kids

used to complain about [getting out of school for] weekends, summer vacation, and once I had a kid try to sneak past me when I went outside to tell her parents we were having a snow day." So, ask inside, "Am I willing to allow my child to enjoy learning, or, do I think they should hate school as much as I did?"

Just as an aside, before addressing your concerns -- have you ever noticed how the foods that are the best for you are often the least expensive? Just so happens that this formula for education is the least expensive form (outside of home schooling, of course).

Addressing Your Concerns.

All right, let's address your doubts and fears. First, you may be thinking:

- **"It won't work, it'll be chaos."** It works. I have seen it work. It's been working in Framingham, Massachusetts for over 40 years. Over twenty "schools" have copied the model world-wide and it works for their students as well.

- **"Children won't learn if they are not taught."** It is actually more accurate to say, *"Children, who have had their natural inclination to learn squelched through compulsory schooling, will probably not take the initiative back right away."* This has proven true at freedom-based learning hives (I hesitate to call them "schools"). They report it takes public school transfers roughly a year before they re-shoulder the responsibility for their own learning. But once they do, watch out!

- **"Children will not take on the responsibility for their own education."** (see above)

- **"Children can't know what is in their best interest to learn."**

At first, children don't know what is in their best interest to learn, but they CAN learn to discern what is in their best interest. But ONLY if you give them the freedom to try and fail – like you did when they were learning to walk, remember?

- **"What about grades?"** They need good grades to get into college (so they can get a degree, so they can get a good job working for someone who got C's in school). Studies reported by Dr. Thomas J. Stanley, author of *Millionaire Mind*, have conclusively proven that good grades are NOT indicators of later success in life. The only thing that good grades are good predictors of is one's scores on standardized tests. But

freedom-based "schools" report that **all** their students who choose to attend college get into the college of their first or second choice. They tend to amaze the college entrance personnel with their social poise and quiet wisdom.

In Conclusion

Our search for a better way to educate children should begin and end by pondering what elements children need to learn. These elements are present when small children master highly complex skills like walking or speaking a language – role models, space, time, a safe environment, resources, inner motivation and freedom to learn at their own pace. When we later deny children these elements of a natural learning environment, we rob them of the joy of learning and introduce all the elements that bring children to utter those immortal words, "I hate school". If we work with Nature instead of against her by providing those same elements for children and teens, they can and do shoulder the responsibility for their own educations and their natural-born love of learning can thrive and blossom.

Notes

- 1 – "Motor development as foundation and future of developmental psychology", Esther Thelen, International Journal of Behavioral Development, 2000, 24 (4), 389.
- 2 – *ibid*, page 386.
- 3 – "[The Soviet Economy Has No Future](#)", PBS interview with Soviet economist Grigory Yavlinsky conducted 10/09/2000. See also quote by [Valery Kovalchuck](#), Former manager of the Norilsk Factory in the USSR.
4. "[Does School Choice Increase the Rate of Youth Entrepreneurship?](#)" by Professors Russell S. Sobel of West Virginia University and Kerry King of Penn State Erie.
5. [Legacy of Trust](#), by Daniel Greenberg and Mimsy Sadofsky.

About the Author

Jesse Fisher, a recovering public school teacher and lifelong entrepreneur, is founder of the Freedom Preservation Foundation, a non-profit organization dedicated to preserving freedom in America. He is currently working on a business plan for a nationwide network of freedom-based "learning hives". He can be reached at jfisher (at) freedombasededucation.org.