

# A Brief History of Homeschooling

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Homeschooling is a radical idea to most people — after all, just how is a child supposed to learn what they need to know to get into college or to get a good job if they aren't learning all those important things in school? How are they going to grow into responsible citizens without 180 days or more for sixteen years of compulsory public and/or private education? And that time doesn't count preschool readiness programs and after-school enrichment programs! Schooling is so complicated, and learning so difficult, that a scientific, clinical approach to education seems to be what the best and wisest parent would want for their children. But something is wrong with these modern day assumptions, which is why alternatives to public and private schooling are thriving.

Homeschooling *is* radical, in the root sense of the word: in Latin, *radicus* means root. Compulsory schooling (forced attendance), and now, in the twenty-first century, compulsory education (forced learning) are very recent petals and offshoots of the root way humankind has historically nurtured its young into responsible adults and active citizens. Family, community, religious institutions, and work were all integrated into the daily lives and upbringing of children. Sometimes there were professional or informal tutors available that some families hired or shared to instruct children at various times for short periods each year; other families used daily chores, apprenticeships and internships to educate their children. Continuing in these traditions, similar arrangements are made by homeschoolers today. The concept of universal compulsory schooling is a very recent idea, one that is not even two hundred years old, yet we act as if it is an ancient, sure-fire way to make sure our children "learn something." Many teachers, parents, and students have written in many eloquent books and essays about how our children do indeed learn something during their schooling, but often it is in reaction against, in spite of, or not related at all to the fixed curriculum they are exposed to in daily doses (Heinemann, 1999, 1997, 1968 & Holt, 1995).

America's founders did debate a bit as to whether or not to force children to attend schools, and they decided to leave such decisions to individual families and local and state governments. The words "education" and "school" appear in none of our founding documents, such as the

Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, or the Bill of Rights. Some of our most famous inventors, writers, and politicians were self-taught, learning through mentoring or apprenticeships, conversation and reading, and this route to adulthood continues today (Plent, 1999 & Gordon, 1990). But by 1850, when Massachusetts became the first state to institute a compulsory schooling law, attitudes towards children and their place in society began to change. Children are forced to attend schools for many reasons, but in this early period it was largely to keep them out of the work force and to teach them to become "good citizens" (Katz, 2001 & Gatto, 2000). Nonetheless, one can easily find examples not just of the wealthy people, but of common people, opting out of mass schooling in order to home school.

Parents in the nineteenth century used itinerant teachers and books, such as Samuel Griswold's *Fireside Education* (1828) and Burton and Warren's *Helps To Education In The Homes Of Our Countries* (1863), to help them as they raised their children in their homes and communities. As more laws made public schooling more encompassing of children's time, some teachers and parents questioned the growing consensus that more and more school was better for children than time spent growing up in other settings. No one wanted to send children back to work in coalmines, but some people felt that school might not be the best place for children to learn. Tufts University professor A.A. Berle wrote in the introduction to his book, *The School In Your Home* (Moffit Yard, 1912), that American mass education has been a failure over the past twenty-years and that people from day laborers to University professors have written to him about it. Berle claims he holds hundreds of letters from parents asking him how they can teach their own children at home because of their dissatisfaction with public schooling at the turn of the century.

A fascinating example of early urban homeschooling comes from a mother in New York City, Rita Sherman. Her book, written anonymously, *A Mother's Letters to a Schoolmaster* anticipates many of our 21st century reasons for homeschooling, such as her deep concern that her son's individual learning style, creativity and intellect would be damaged by standardized, one-size-fits-all education (Alfred A Knopf, 1923). Her letters show her rationale for homeschooling, vivid descriptions of the success she is having with her son as she lives and learns with him, and the schoolmaster's reluctant approval for her to do so. Ms. Sherman can tend to over-inflamed speech, but she nonetheless makes many interesting social and educational arguments against

compulsory schooling but in support of public education (for example, work/study facilities open to all ages).

From the twenties through the seventies homeschooling was a relatively underground, usually rural, phenomenon. Homeschooling occasionally popped up as a topic of mainstream conversation, such as a two part series in the *Atlantic Monthly* in the late 1940's that eventually became a book, *The Home Education of a Boy*, by William Barrett (Publisher unknown, 1950), but homeschooling remained, at best, a fringe topic during this period.

All that changed in 1970 when Ivan Illich published *Deschooling Society* (NY, Harper and Row, 1970; reissued in London, England by Boyars, 2001). This short book called not for the abolition of schools, but for an abolition of compulsory attendance laws. Illich's ideas and language can be stunning and *Deschooling Society* spurred people into public debate (*Education Without Schools*, Peter Buckman, ed., Condor, 1973) and private action (*No More Public School*, Harold Bennet, Random House, 1972). For a man destined for Homeschooling fame, John Holt, these ideas spurred him to question his career as a popular education reformer.

In 1976, Holt wrote *Instead of Education: Ways To Help People Do Things Better* as his way to show how we can support people to learn without forcing them into conventional schooling (Holt Associates, 1988). Holt had decided, after nearly 20 years as a vocal public and private school reformer, that schools were doing exactly what most people wanted – sorting children into economic winners and losers based on test scores – and that trying to reform that system was therefore a truly Quixotic pursuit. Holt wanted help make meaningful change in education, and he was tired of being on talk shows and the university circuit as a type of entertainment.

After reading *Instead of Education*, people from various parts of the country began to write to John telling him about an option he failed to mention explicitly in his book, homeschooling. Holt soon turned his attention to those families who wrote to him to say that they were teaching their own children (Sheffer, 1991). Within a year, Holt founded *Growing Without Schooling* (GWS) magazine, the nation's, if not the world's, first journal about homeschooling. Families of different backgrounds, faiths, and educational philosophies relied on Holt's considerable free advice and help during this time and he worked to

create an inclusive network of support for homeschoolers. Holt recognized that many parents were homeschooling for reasons that he personally didn't support, and he seemed to anticipate the current fractious nature of homeschooling politics when he wrote in the second issue of GWS in 1977: "What is important is not that all readers of GWS should agree on these questions, but that we should respect our differences while we work for what we agree on, our right and the right of all people to take their children out of schools, and help, plan, or direct their learning in the ways they think best" (Holt Associates, 1999, p.25).

In 1981, Holt published a book just about homeschooling, *Teach Your Own: A Hopeful Path for Education* (Dell, 1981), and he was again on the talk show circuit, speaking about his ideas on learning in the milieu of family and community, which he called "unschooling," a neologism of Holt's. Holt preferred "unschooling" over the term "homeschooling" because little of the learning he was describing occurred exclusively at home and most of it did not resemble conventional schoolwork.

The work of educators Dr. Raymond Moore and his wife Dorothy also became more well known to the general public during the 1980's. The Moore's had already written extensively about the value of delaying formal education until at least age 10 based on their work and research within the Federal government and at various universities, and they readily embraced homeschooling as a complement of their work. The Moore's soon became vocal and popular advocates for many homeschoolers, particularly Christian families. By the early eighties more overtly conservative and religious homeschooling publications and groups emerged, some in direct reaction to Holt's ideas about education, others as a way to avoid sending their children to what they perceive as the "godless monstrosity" of public school (Stevens, 2001). Homeschooling easily accommodated the differing factions, reasons, and political views that these groups espoused and it is now becoming more of a mainstream choice than a radical move; indeed homeschooling has grown tremendously from John Holt's estimate of 15 – 20,000 children being taught at home in 1981 to a recent Federal Government survey that found nearly 850,000 children are being homeschooled in the United States as of 1999 (Bielick, Chandler & Broughman, 1999). Homeschooling, in many ways, is a return to the roots of our society, where family, community, religious institutions, and work are all integrated into the daily lives and upbringing of children. Homeschooling, including mentorships and apprenticeships, still serves to educate many of our country's children as it did a majority of our influential leaders

throughout history. Bolstered by the works of John Holt as well as Dr. Raymond Moore and his wife Dorothy, arguments supporting homesechooling began to be widely communicated through books, magazines and popular media during the 1970's and 1980's. Holt's theories about schools being a place for sorting children into economic winners and losers based on test scores ring true for many, influencing an ever-widening range of families who embrace this style of learning for their children. With a Federal Government survey finding nearly 850,000 children being homeschooled in the United States as of 1999 (Bielick, Chandler & Broughman, 1999), this style of learning is definitely a trend, not a fad. So, how is a child supposed to learn what they need to know to get into college or to get a good job if they aren't learning all those important things in school? Throughout history, homeschooled children have been showing us how. Reflection on the history of homeschooling identifies this trend is an increasingly popular and enriching lifestyle that has been evolving with our culture's dynamic approach to helping children learn.

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**Author's Biography:** Patrick Farenga worked closely with John Holt, and is the President of Holt Associates Inc. Since 1981 he has published numerous books, articles and tapes about homeschooling, and about John Holt's unschooling ideas in particular. Pat and his wife homeschool their three girls, ages 16, 13 and 10. He has addressed audiences throughout the United States, Canada, England and Italy about homeschooling, and has appeared on The Today Show, The Voice of America, NPR's The Merrow Report, and CNN's Parenting Today. Farenga works as a writer, speaker and education consultant. To contact him, or to learn more about John Holt, visit the website: <http://www.holtgws.com>. His latest book is TEACH YOUR OWN: THE JOHN HOLT GUIDE TO HOMESCHOOLING (Perseus, 2003).