

Home Education For The Under Fives

(Article originally published in Parentwise magazine)

Introductory Remarks

It's a striking thought that throughout the history of man, in all cultures, and at every time, young children have been raised by their parents, within their own community, without the long hand of the professional educator ever getting hold of them! Why then in recent years has the idea grown that our children need the benefits of a nursery education if they are to grow up as acceptable members of society?

Has some body of new knowledge appeared which shows the errors of our forefathers? Has educational research proved that our children will be handicapped for life if they do not experience the benefits of preschool education?

Some would lead us to believe these very things. The National Commission on Education, which despite its title, had nothing whatsoever to do with the government, reported last year that US research has demonstrated that children who do not attend nursery schools are more likely to be unemployed, turn to crime and live in council houses! Here at last was the evidence: all those parents of bygone eras had it wrong. If we keep our young children at home we will jeopardise their future, and in all probability raise delinquents! The cry went up immediately, "State funded nursery places for all three and four year olds." Had we found the answer to the problems of a sinful society?

What the National Commission failed to say, was that the research which they hailed as conclusive was questioned by many, including educationalists. In fact there is no conclusive evidence to show that nursery schools benefit children at all.

Many Christians are aware that the home is a God given environment for the nurturing of those little ones He has placed in our care. Large numbers of Christian families enjoy the brief opportunity which they have, to be involved 'full time' in raising their children. These families come from all sorts of backgrounds including single parent families who may find their decision a financially difficult one.

When asked why, parents give all sorts of reasons for keeping children at home: their children are too young to be placed in an institution, they simply enjoy sharing their lives with them, they believe that early years spent in the community, weighing real ingredients for a real cake and spending real money in real shops is better than anything which can be offered by schools. Finally, there are those who believe that God has called them to raise their children for Him and they do not believe that they have the right to delegate that to anybody else.

At this point we must ask the question, What does the Bible say about these matters? In fact the Bible says virtually nothing about schooling. Throughout the Old Testament, parents are given the principal responsibility for nurturing their children. The only educational experiences children received were within the community, in the main, alongside their parents. Removing children from the influence of their parents and the community, and placing them in institutions is quite alien to the Old Testament. Why was this? Was it simply that schools hadn't been thought of? Or perhaps Hebrew society was so primitive that schools

were unnecessary? For hundreds of years, the Hebrews were aware of the existence of schools - Greek schools. Despite this they chose to follow a different path in raising their children, the path which God had directed them to take.

In Deuteronomy, the Lord lays down a clear pattern of child rearing. Look at Deuteronomy 4:9-14, 6:6-9, 6:20-25, 11:19 and 32:46. Here we see that parents, and particularly fathers were given the responsibility for training their children in the Lord.

They were responsible for teaching their children a Biblical world and life view. The book of Proverbs is packed full of advice to a son to learn from his parents, Hear, my son, your father's instruction, and do not forsake your mother's teaching. (Proverbs 1:8) There was no advice to children to learn from a teacher.

Are there advantages to keeping children out of nursery schools? Contrary to all that the National Commission on Education said last year, much research has shown that children are better off in the home and the community rather than the nursery school. A good example is language development. Children at home were seen to ask and answer questions and hold conversations on a much wider range of subjects than those in nursery schools.

Surely the earlier children learn how to socialise with their peers the better, is an argument often used in favour of nursery education. However, research has shown that junior school children who attended nursery school have no greater ability to get on well with their peers than those who did not. And of course there is no other time in life when people spend so much of their time exclusively with their peers.

The mother of one young family who is herself a trained teacher said when asked about the disadvantages of home education

"Where do I start? It's hard work. I don't have a lot of time for myself, young children can be very demanding, and, let's face it, there are times when it is easier not to have them around. My home is often full of paintings drying in corners, half finished models a la Blue Peter on the table and with a neighbour whose house is always spotless... but I wouldn't change a thing!"

DO's & DON'T's of Home Education for your Under Fives

Don't set unrealistic goals for you or your children - being at home is more about enjoying growing together than achieving targets.

Don't compare your children with all the other children at Church. Remember that children develop at different rates -Einstein couldn't speak until he was five, and didn't read until he was ten!

Do give your children opportunities to enjoy real activities -baking cakes, shopping, etc. Do read vast numbers of books to your children - take a look at Jim Trelease's The Read Aloud Handbook, published by Penguin, for suggestions.

Do allow your children to make a mess! I don't mean, create havoc, but there are folks who are so house-proud that they will not allow their children to paint, to make craft models, or have more than one toy out at a time. Just remember that you will probably have twenty or thirty years to do all the cleaning you could ever wish, after your children have left home.

Don't try to imitate what goes on in nursery schools. They just don't match up to what goes on in an average family!

What Happens At Five?

For those with any experience of working with young children, the answer has to be, very little. There are no big educational reasons why five year olds should be in school. For a growing number of families, the conclusion they have drawn from this fact, is that they will not send their children to school at all at this age.

Home education is a real, and legal, option which a large number of families are seriously considering. It's an adventure which many families have already embarked upon.

So what must you do, if you decide not to send your children to school. NOTHING! You have every legal right to teach your children at home, and you're not obliged to tell anybody, including the local education authority. If you do decide to tell the LEA, then simply inform them that you are exercising your rights under the 1996 Education Act - do not ask for their permission!.

Make contact with the Home Service, a support organisation for Christian home educators. The Home Service can offer advice and help you to make contact with other home educating families near you. (www.home-service.org)

If you do decide to teach your children at home and in the community, do NOT try to imitate schools. Children learn in many ways - but the best way has never been to sit with twenty-five of their peers and be taught.

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Further Note regarding this copy:

Please note that this article was originally written and published in 1996, shortly after the publication of the report of the National Commission on Education. This report proved influential and laid the foundation for much of New Labour's early years developments after they came to power in 1997. Whilst this article could and possibly should be updated, its central theme remains valid; indeed it could be argued that after nine years of substantial investment in institutional early years education the article's central theme – that young children are better off outside institutions has been vindicated. (See, for example, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/6073192.stm>)