

She's Got to Learn

by Michelle Yaeger



My daughter started school this fall. I thought we were ready. We dutifully eliminated from her weekday wardrobe shirts that are too revealing and shoes that are too high, according to the dress code. We cleaned up her brother's old lunch box and packed it with vegetarian items that contain no processed sugar, per the school's food policy. When the supply list arrived with the admonition to purchase only the brands on the list, we complied, although the shopping trip I'd expected would take twenty minutes lasted nearly an hour and a half and cost over \$75.

On the first day, I stayed with my daughter in the school yard for a few minutes, but when she recognized some girls she had met in art class during the summer, I was dismissed. As I walked away from her, I wiped the tears from my eyes, feeling embarrassed. After all, it wasn't like I was sending my kindergartener out into the world for the first time. In fact, my daughter is nearly thirteen years old and in the seventh grade. But that was her first day of school in five years.

While other parents were doing the happy dance that morning because they had long since run out of money and energy for keeping their children amused during the impossibly hot desert summer, I felt a confusing mix of

emotions. I wanted to believe that this change in our lives would be a positive one. Many of the school's practices mesh nicely with the educational philosophy that my family has developed over the past several years of homeschooling. But we have lost the blind trust that school is a necessary part of growing up. We are not school people anymore.

As soon as I tell someone that we have been homeschooling, I can count on a couple of well-worn responses. The first, somewhat patronizing comment is, "Wow, that's a lot of work. I could never be with *my* kids all day," as if homeschooling is only for those who place themselves at the mercy of their children's needs to the exclusion of their own interests—what you'd get if you grafted June Cleaver onto Mother Teresa. If this assumption were true, the shine from my halo would be blinding. But the fact is that for the past three years of our homeschooling experience, I have been in school myself, finishing my long-neglected B.A. Other homeschooling parents work at home or at regular jobs. Some simply (as if there is anything simple about it) attend to home and family, but those folks are frequently the parents of small children. By the time the kids are old enough to have their own lives, their parents are ready for a life of their own, too.

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Another comment about homeschooling invokes the "S" word: socialization. In the face of abysmal public school performance and declining academic competence among high school graduates, "socialization" is still the fallback justification for why children should attend school. My daughter's current teacher, aware that her new student had been homeschooled, commented to the class that she didn't think it was good for kids to learn at home because "they wouldn't have any friends." A moment's reflection would have reminded her that attending school is no guarantee of having friends, since for many, those years are some of the most miserable and lonely ones of their lives. Although the 2.1 million homeschoolers nationwide are actively participating in music groups, sports teams, 4-H, Scouts, and religious organizations, those who put forth the socialization argument are rarely dissuaded. Apparently, only school socialization counts.

To be honest, though, the "S" word was a factor in my decision to enroll my daughter in school this year. Two of her closest friends moved away at about the same time that her new school had an opening. And since my son opted to go to high school last year, she has spent a lot of time in her own company while I'm in class or studying. She was comfortable with the arrangement, but I was not. I worried that she was missing some of the fun of being a young girl. If she went to school, I reasoned, I could finish my degree with less guilt because she would be making some new friends.

"But I don't mind being alone," she protested to no avail. Ultimately, I overrode her resistance with my parental veto, and the experiment in "real school" began.

At its loftiest, the ambition of the school system is to teach children the skills they need to have in order for them to thrive in the world of adults. We expect most children in twelve or thirteen years' time to acquire some facility with mathematics and a basic grasp of the sciences; to speak and write English coherently; and to have some sense of their national and world history. If, along the way, a child also learns to play volleyball without getting her glasses broken or to draw a recognizable house on a hill with a sunset behind it—well, those are bonuses.

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And school is part of our culture, a rite of passage. When I was a small girl living on a farm, with three teenage brothers who were too busy to play, I looked forward to the first day of kindergarten with the same excitement that I felt about Santa's arrival on Christmas Eve. School was where the other kids were. Going there meant that we were big, not babies anymore.

We chose my daughter's school based on its reputation, geographic proximity, and what we believed was a laid-back approach to learning. Parents wait in line for hours to sign their kids up here, we thought, by way of convincing ourselves of our choice. At the open house, we spoke with soft-voiced administrators who told us about the opportunities for the children to engage in self-paced, hands-on learning. It seemed like a good fit for our independent, self-directed girl.

No one told us until after registration about the dress code, the food restrictions, or the hyper-controlling teacher.

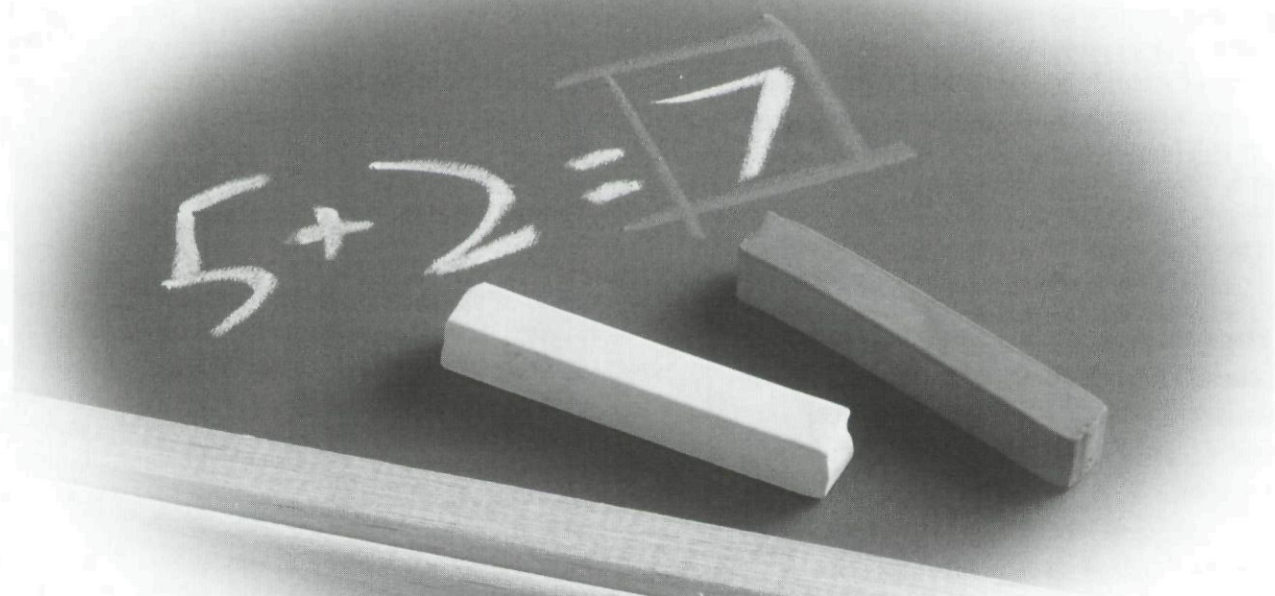
My daughter hated school with a purple passion from the start. Only the voice of restraint (my husband's, not mine) stopped me from withdrawing her after she had sobbed in my arms daily that first week.

"It's so hard, Mom. I'm not used to dealing with so many people for such a long time without a break." She loves her girlfriends, but not as much as she loves her alone time. However, the assaults on her solitude were only part of the problem. "Today my teacher said the neckline of my shirt was too low. And I just want to have a stupid ham sandwich for lunch!" The absence of animals from the lunchbox is a minor issue, far behind the question of whether or not my daughter should continue to attend school at all.

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Learning is one of my passions, one I hope I've passed on to my children. It's part of our family legacy. My mother loves to tell the story about the high value my grandfather placed on education. He was born to Irish immigrant parents in the late 1800s and never attended high school. His father died unexpectedly when my grandfather was in the eighth grade; and since he was the eldest son, the duty of supporting his mother and siblings fell to him. He left school and never went back, instead spending the next several decades pounding a living out of one slate quarry after another. "He never let us forget what a privilege it was to go to school," my mother remembers. "And if you got in trouble at school, it wasn't half the trouble you'd have at home." Apparently, the value he placed on learning made a strong impression on his children: All six of them were graduated from high school, all attended either college or trade school, two became teachers themselves, and one eventually assumed the presidency of a large university. So the fascination with and commitment to learning was already a couple of generations old by the time I received it.

But while I am passionate about learning, I don't believe in schools. It's kind of like believing in God but not going to church. Several years ago, when we were reviewing some math, my son pointed out the difference between learning and being taught. He had no understanding of any of the mathematical concepts he was studying, even though they'd been part of the curriculum at his



school the year before. Exasperated, I said, "You have to know these. You learned them last year."

"Just because somebody made me do them doesn't mean I learned them," he said.

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As I thought more about my own experiences in school, I found the truth of my son's observation staggering. I have spent decades in schools, and if I measure learning by computing a grade point average, the results indicate that I should know a lot about a diverse range of topics. The fact is, however, that I have been blessed with a strong short-term memory and a compulsion to follow instructions, both of which have served me well academically. But if my definition of "learning" narrows to include knowledge that I have actually retained and used, then I haven't really learned most of the subjects I've studied, not even the ones for which I've received A's. I can no longer calculate the area of a triangle or remember the names of the Native American tribes that live near the Grand Canyon. I can prove that I passed Calculus not because I can demonstrate any knowledge of the subject matter, but only because the course is listed on my college transcript; I've forgotten the plot of *To the Lighthouse* (I've even forgotten whether or not this novel has a plot); and the only thing I recall from Chemistry is the symbol for "change."

Shortly after my daughter's re-enrollment, I spoke with one of my long-time friends about this "to school or not to school" dilemma. She has known my kids all their lives, and we love her despite her mainstream attitudes. She says she isn't concerned about our ability to help our daughter learn academic subjects at home. My friend worries that, if my daughter returns to homeschooling, she will never learn to move beyond her comfort zone, never be able to tolerate boredom, and never be content in any job where the work isn't what she'd like to be doing. She's got to learn those things... doesn't she?

Or does she? While many of life's important lessons are learned through difficult experiences, I'm not sure that discomfort is a child's best teacher. Recently, I pondered the phrase *they've got to learn* and the way we use it to justify creating an unpleasant experience for someone else. As my husband and I were leaving a local hospital, a father and his toddler son came out of the lobby at the same time. The father had the look of a former high school athlete whose physique had deteriorated after too many beers. The little boy walked with the wide-legged gait common to cowboys and those who wear diapers. Suddenly the father picked up the child, flipped him over his arm like a rag doll, and spanked him. Mission accomplished. The man took the wailing child back into the hospital lobby. I had never seen anyone strike a child so young before, but we watched it in re-runs as we were driving out of the parking lot: The father brought the little boy back outside, turned him bottom-side up, and administered another spanking. He was still swatting as we drove away.

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My husband wondered aloud if we should intervene or at least call the hospital security guard, but we decided

that such action would be pointless and might even have worsened the situation for the child. Regardless of our disapproval, the father probably believed that spanking a baby would teach the child something. Maybe he thought it would teach him not to stick his fingers in electrical outlets or not to pull his sister's hair or not to throw tantrums. Whatever it was, the father clearly believed *they've got to learn*. We were not going to convince him otherwise in the middle of a hospital parking lot.

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The corollary to this theory is that school is a microcosm of the larger world of adults; the more practice you can get in dealing with boredom, frustration, a lack of privacy, and meaningless tasks, the more quickly you will adapt to the adult world.

The phrase *they've got to learn* is never followed by some lesson that might be fun or joyful. Nobody says, "*They've got to learn* to like ice cream/play with their favorite toys/be hugged and kissed good-night." No, we say *they've got to learn* only when we are referring to things that nobody wants to learn: that life is hard and that you need to know who's the boss and that you have to eat what's put in front of you. That your time isn't your own, adults know everything, and, if you're big, you can make smaller people do what you want by using force or coercion.

The corollary to this theory is that school is a microcosm of the larger world of adults. The more practice you can get in dealing with boredom, frustration, a lack of privacy, and meaningless tasks, the more quickly you will adapt to the adult world. Because, as we all know, the adult world is just that way: boring, frustrating, and pointless. Expect no control over how you spend your time and energy. Such is human existence.

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Is that the real role of schools? I wonder. Does school exist to teach kids how to put up with unpleasantness? I doubt that this goal is part of any school's mission statement. And while I agree that everyone inevitably needs to do things that they don't like to do, I question whether or not an educational venue is the arena in which we want children to practice that skill. Kids can wash dishes, they can scrub toilets, they can pick up after the dogs in the backyard—all jobs that need to be done in spite of the fact that no one wants to do them. My son is convinced that walking the dogs is the most appalling waste of time in his day, but doing it gives him half an hour of practice at

tolerating boredom. Perhaps I am an idealist in this regard, but I want learning to be a source of excitement—not the vehicle by which our children develop coping skills for dealing with the mundane.

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Three weeks into the school year, with a child who was exhausted and weepy nearly every day, I was constantly second-guessing my own motives for this experiment. One night, after my daughter had spent seven hours at school and almost two more doing homework, she had another mini-breakdown. I found these episodes particularly distressing, since she is not normally prone to tears. But crying was becoming part of the at-home routine.

"It's just hard, Mom," she said, sobbing. "My homework takes too long, and it takes too much energy to remember all the rules. And I know if I said 'crap,' I'd get in trouble. I spend the whole day trying not to be myself."

I wrestled with my own doubts and against the impulse to rescue her from her unhappiness.

"I don't know what this school experience will give you," I said, "but it probably won't have anything to do with academics. Maybe you'll learn how to manage your mental energy better. Maybe you'll figure out how to ask for help from someone other than me. Maybe it's just that you'll learn to cope with feeling uncomfortable, which is a skill everybody needs. But if you quit now, you'll never find out."

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"But I'm so tired," she wailed.

"And you will be, for a while. But this school year is bound to get easier for you as you get used to the new routine." *I hope.*

She remained unconvinced but seemed satisfied to go to bed knowing that she had been heard. Meanwhile, I wondered if I had channeled that speech from some very wise person, or if I had only manufactured a response to make us both feel better. As a non-conformist, I definitely lack confidence.

School perpetuates a similar distrust of self by presuming that the student is incapable of making good choices on her own. Students rarely know what is best for them, the thinking goes, so decisions about learning are best left to parents, teachers, and administrators. The student's job is to sit in her seat, stand in line, ask permission

to go to the bathroom, and study what the teacher and the school board have decided is important for her to learn. If she is interested in veterinary medicine or flower arranging, she is free to learn these things—but not in school. She may attend to those interests only “on her own time,” a phrase that unmask the lie that schools are for children. The hours between 8:30 and 3:30 do not really belong to them.

Oddly, however, while schools teach conformity to the system and distrust of one’s own judgment while one is at school, adults somehow expect children to develop the strength to discern when *not* to go along with the crowd. Programs aimed at preventing gangs, pregnancy, and drug and alcohol abuse among young people all blame these problems on the negative effects of giving in to peer pressure. Kids are told to listen to their own inner voices; don’t follow the crowd. It is unclear when children are supposed to have the time to develop that inner voice or the confidence to make their own choices—such as the choice not to cave in to peer pressure. Certainly their school experiences have taught them exactly the opposite: do what you are told, other people know best, fit in.

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The lessons I learned about fitting in still follow me. At a recent “mandatory” parent meeting at my daughter’s school, I had hoped to glean some information about the pedagogical methods the two teachers would be employing. Instead, however, I received handouts on the emotional, social, and physical needs of the adolescent. Like most homeschooling parents, I am accustomed to spending extended time with my children, so I already feel qualified to discern and respond to their changing needs without coaching from outside agencies.

As I looked around the room at the other parents, though, I found that none of them seemed to be gritting their teeth, as I was. In fact, they appeared to welcome the insights of “professionals” into the behavior and needs of their own children. No one questioned the discussion’s movement away from the school’s approach to academic subjects and into the realm of parenting.

Meanwhile, I felt as if my turf had been invaded by an uninvited but well-meaning visitor. Or as I feel when my mother buys me a gift that she thinks I should have, instead of the one I actually want. As the years have passed, I have grown more and more suspicious of institutions and bureaucracies, no matter how well-intentioned. I have lost confidence in experts whose opinions seem to change with the wind, and I do not trust any authority who presumes to know what is best for all children. To my discredit, however, I did not object



during the meeting or afterward, when I met with the teachers in private. Apparently, for me, adulthood has done little to mitigate the effects of peer pressure.

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than my child needs the system.**

We're also concerned about the amount of time that school demands from children who have other, non-academic lessons to learn as they grow up. When she was homeschooling, my daughter used to finish her academic work in a couple of hours. Now that she's in school, the same amount of work takes seven hours a day and follows her into her "free" time in the form of homework. Although in school she does have more opportunities to get to know other children her age than she had when she was homeschooling, she now has less time than she used to have in which to get to know herself. Similarly, she has less time to spend with her family and on the other activities that she used to enjoy. School's demands aren't limited to the thirty-five hours of class attendance each week. By enrolling her, we have apparently given permission to the school to come home with her at night and sometimes even to intrude upon her weekends.

With this renewed awareness, I began to consider that

the school system might need my child more than my child needs the system.

School is an institution, and no matter how good they strive to be, institutions are not designed to meet the needs of individuals. They are intended to deal with groups of people, based on the assumption that most of those people's needs and behaviors will be the same. Creativity and individualism cannot flourish in that kind of soil.

After considering our daughter's situation for several weeks, we have decided to retake our original stance, despite the concerns of well-meaning friends and relatives (not to mention the school administrators). Our position radically challenges views towards children held by many mainstream parents and other educators, but it is commonplace among people who see and treat children more holistically. Simply put, we trust our daughter to choose the approach to learning that works best for her. Her education does, after all, belong to her.

When the academic quarter ends, she will become a homeschooler again. Soon she will sleep until she wakes up, read the books she chooses, and wear what feels comfortable while she eats a tuna sandwich for lunch. She'll spend most of her time reading because it's her favorite subject, and she'll study math, too, even though it comes in a distant second. She'll also go to birthday parties and 4-H meetings, and sometimes she'll sit in her room for hours doing absolutely nothing. After all, she's got to learn. ☐

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