



The Dark Side of John Holt

Submitted by Sarah Fitz-Claridge on 30 June, 2005 - 22:11

Posted on the TCS list on Fri, 11 Dec., 1998, at 15:16:43 -0500

by **Sarah Fitz-Claridge** (<http://www.fitz-claridge.com/>)



A poster wrote:

We have based much of our approach to dealing with our sons on this quote, from John Holt's Growing Without Schooling. I am gathering that this goes against everything TCS stands for...right? That a child should be allowed the freedom to be silly, self-indulgent, etc, if that's his choice?

Er, well... let me tell you my criticisms of this quote.

First, here is the full quote:

"...In regard to Topher, though, I should add that though we were glad he was happy and enjoying himself [in school], we were also sad as we watched him deteriorate from a person into a kid under peer influence in school. It was much like we saw happening when he was in kindergarten. There are certain kinds of childishness which it seems most people accept as being natural, something children have to go through, something which is, indeed, a shame to deny them. Silliness, self-indulgence, random rebelliousness, secretiveness, cruelty to other children, addiction to toys, possessions, junk, spending money, purchased entertainment, exploitation of adults to pay attention, take them places, amuse them, do things with them - all these things seem to be quite unnecessary, not "normal" at all [note: except in the sense of being common], and just as disgusting in children as they are in adults. And while they develop as a result of peer influence, I believe this is only and specifically because children are thrown together in schools and develop those means...

... In all the schools I have taught in, visited, or know anything about, the social-life of children is mean-spirited, competitive, exclusive, status-seeking, full of talk about who went to who's birthday party ...

And I remember my sister saying of one of her children, then five, that she never knew her to do anything really mean or silly until she went to school..."

Now I'll explain why it does indeed go against everything TCS stands for:

...In regard to Topher, though, I should add that though we were glad he was happy and enjoying himself [in school],

“*Though* we were glad he was happy...”? Well were they or weren't they? And are they going on to say that despite the child's wishes, they find it necessary to override his preferences, just like any old conventional parent would?

What follows appears to confirm my fears. I cannot help thinking that this is a self-exculpatory pseudo-justification for coercion:

we were also sad as we watched him deteriorate from a person into a kid under peer influence in school. It was much like we saw happening when he was in kindergarten.

They were sad despite his happiness. His happiness at school must be discounted because, they allege, school changed him for the worse by their standards and they know best. In other words, first, they are viewing the child not as a person with his own mind, but as a mindless entity whose actions they attribute *not* to his own thinking, his own mind, his own personality – as *he* does – but to the environment of school, which they antecedently had decided will pour bad ideas into the allegedly mindless, uncritical bucket of his mind.

With this mistaken view of the human mind and of how people learn, they can “justify” just about any coercion they feel compelled to inflict upon their child. After all, they are doing it *for the child's own good*, to *protect* the child from the consequences of having bad ideas poured into his “mind.” Because he is a mindless bucket vulnerable to any bad ideas school might pour in, no matter how much he protests and no matter how happy he is in school, removing him from school is “justified” because they know best, just as the vast majority of parents forcibly send their children to school because they know best.

This whole passage is setting up a justification for coercively removing the child from school.

There are certain kinds of childishness which it seems most people accept as being natural, something children have to go through, something which is, indeed, a shame to deny them.

This is yet another justification for the coercion they feel compelled to subject their child to! Note the use of the word “childishness.” What does this little derogatory word make the reader think of? It makes me think of annoying, tiresome, silly, meaningless, useless, “self-indulgent,” unimportant, inconsequential actions -- actions which are worthy of our disapproval. People call it “childishness” when others are having fun and they don't like that. The writer seems to me to be inviting the reader to agree that it is perfectly justified for the parent to put a stop to any such actions. Being so unimportant and, moreover, annoying, what could be the harm of stomping on them (in a “gentle,” loving manner, no doubt)?

Silliness,

What does “silliness” mean? Playing happily. So “silliness” is another demeaning word for something *good*. Its use here is chilling when you remember the context – that the child is, according to their own admission, *happy*. Perhaps the parents can't bear the sound of happiness because they themselves are too screwed up psychologically to experience much of it themselves?

self-indulgence,

There is something deeply distasteful to me about this word. It implies that the *right* thing to do is to act against one's own will instead of as one wishes. It is a nasty word for something *good*. People *should* act in accord with their own wishes.

random rebelliousness,

What exactly is the child rebelling against, if not the parents' mistaken and immoral attempts to make him act against his own wishes? No TCS child would ever “rebel” because there is nothing to “rebel” against: TCS families seek *mutually preferred* solutions to problems or resolutions to conflicts. Why would anyone “rebel” against an outcome they wholeheartedly *prefer*?!

Note also the use of these two words: “random” – once again the parent is appealing to the idea that the child is not a person with his own reasons for acting as he does, but a mindless entity blown hither and thither by whatever evil ideas he is exposed to; “rebelliousness” – disobedience justifying coercion “to help the child improve as a person” no doubt.

The purpose of this list of words is to justify their coercion of the child. Is that clear yet? Well, let's continue...

secretiveness

Note the derogatory word for wanting privacy. Note that the use of this word implies that these parents invade others' privacy.

This word implies that if we give children a little *privacy*, something *bad* might happen, like, we might not know enough to control them as much as we “need” to “for their own good.”

Privacy is *vital* for the healthy psychological development of any child. If anyone doubts this, please, please post your reasons/questions/criticisms here so that I can explain this further.

Why choose all these derogatory words? That the parents are using these particular words, loaded as they are with coercive and, in my view false, premises, must mean that they accept the premises upon which these words rely. The only possible reason to use these words is to justify coercion. The parents are listing all these ghastly things to convince the reader to agree that the situation merits discounting the child's own preferences and happiness at school.

cruelty to other children,

It is a shame that the parents don't also think that their own cruelty to their child is bad too. Perhaps they don't recognise it as cruelty because they consider riding roughshod over his wishes to be perfectly justified, as they have and are arguing. But is it not cruel to override someone's wishes on an on-going basis about a major life choice? Most parents think not, of course, but I'll bet that they would feel differently if it were they who were on the sharp end of such coercion.

Perhaps some convince themselves that overriding their children's desire to go to school or not go to school is not coercion because they are only doing it because they love the children and want what is best for them. It is still coercion. No matter how lovingly, subtly, quietly, and calmly parents override their children's wish to go to school or not go to school, it is still coercion, and it is still harmful, and it still hurts.

addiction to toys,

I am sorry to say that yet again, we find this parent using a derogatory term whose sole purpose is to justify the coercion the parents feel compelled to inflict on their child: “addiction.” Addiction is a very bad thing, is it not? The word implies that the person is “mentally ill,” or in the grip of evil forces, *mindless*, devoid of *reason*. When someone is devoid of reason, and we are responsible for that person, it follows that we are right to coerce her for her own good. Addicts are a danger to themselves and to those around them. Addiction justifies coercion for their own good and possibly for those around them.

I find it particularly disheartening that in these parents' minds, apparently, “toys” is a dirty word. Could it be that these parents detest toys because children love them so much and enjoy playing with them? I am finding it difficult to think of a more positive explanation for this apparent contempt for toys, whose sole purpose is to give children pleasure and facilitate their thinking.

possessions,

Groan... yet *another* justification for coercion, this time the nasty old idea that it is wrong to own private property, or that we should share everything equally. How repulsive. How immoral and sad to inflict that destructive idea on one's children. See Taking Children Seriously, the paper journal, issue 23, for a full editorial on the relationship between the “sharing equally” theory and the coercion of children. (For details of how to obtain it, see the [journal](#) page.)

junk,

The child is “addicted” to “junk.” What do parents mean when they brand something their child values, “junk”? They mean possessions that they deem not worthwhile, and thus, possessions that it is fine for them to steal from the child – for his own good, of course. The “junk” the “addict” wants so badly must be taken away for his own good, must it not?

spending money,

...which no doubt the parents have more *important, worthwhile* uses for. So coercively withholding money that the child thinks they owe him is, they are arguing, *justified*. (And no doubt the child would only be acting mindlessly, or under the evil influence of his peers, so the coercion is, we are led to believe, doubly justified. And of course money is the root of all evil so parents are “right” to keep it from their children, and to use it as leverage to get their children to do their bidding.

I am drawn to conclude that these parents coercively deny their children toys, money, and other things they want. How is that consistent with TCS? How is that consistent with nurturing their children's autonomy?

purchased entertainment,

Evil capitalist ideas?! Yes, let's all eschew purchased entertainment and go back to the Stone Age when life was pure... (pure *hell*, I'd say) And while we're at it, let's treat our children in ways guaranteed to bring them up with the same narrow, twisted, austere view of life, which they will then inflict on their own children, and so on, down through the generations until the end of time. Is that what the writer would prefer? Is it right to foist such a mean-spirited preference on someone else?

exploitation of adults to pay attention,

Does that make you think of poor little mummies and daddies being exploited by their power-hungry, evil coercive little monster children? Are adults so vulnerable? Then maybe we adults need some laws to protect us from exploitation from these dangerous tyrants? How about criminalising child labour? Oh yeah, it already *is* criminalised. Well how about bringing in a law to make it impossible for a child to leave his family to live elsewhere unless his family allow it? That would show 'em! They might think twice about exploiting those poor little mummies and daddies if they knew that if they tried to leave they would be brought back kicking and screaming by agents of the state. Oh, that already *is* the law. Well then how about introducing legal discrimination such that parents can beat their children without fear of legal censure whereas in other cases such action would be criminal assault? That'll show those nasty little exploiters! Oh yes, there already is such legal discrimination. And much more besides.

But the thing the parent is complaining about is... that children want *attention* from their parents! Is that outrageous? Does that make children *exploiters* of their parents?

Why do people like this *have* children, one wonders? I am tempted to think that it must be for the slave labour they can legally extract from them!

take them places, amuse them, do things with them - all these things seem to be quite unnecessary, not "normal" at all [note: except in the sense of being common],

Does anyone else find this an appalling thing to say? Is anyone else worried by the fact that John Holt used this quote as an argument for advocating home education? Is it really wrong for children to expect their parents to amuse them, take them places, and do things with them? Why ever did this person have children if he resents their wishing him to spend time with him?

and just as disgusting in children as they are in adults.

Maybe they need a few cold baths, followed by a good thrashing? That'd teach 'em to behave better!

No, it would not. It couldn't teach these parents to behave better any more than it could help *children* learn anything.

I am finding this all rather distasteful. In fact I think that, shortly, I shall do something more pleasant than this unsavoury business of poking around in these "fetid" ideas.

And while they develop as a result of peer influence,

When there is a problem with a child (which there may well not have been in this case anyway, as I have argued), it is always someone else's fault, never the parents'. TCS parents take responsibility for problems they cause, they don't blame peer influence, or anyone else.

I believe this is only and specifically because children are thrown together in schools and develop those means...

... and therefore it follows that Topher's father is "justified" in causing his child unlimited distress by forcibly preventing him attending school as he wants to. Does that sound reasonable to you? It does not to me.

... In all the schools I have taught in,

He is speaking with authority on this subject, is he? So who are we TCS types to question his judgement?

visited, or know anything about, the social-life of children is mean-spirited, competitive, exclusive, status-seeking, full of talk about who went to who's birthday party ...

Whereas in the *home* prison, the parent can control and mould the environment much more easily, whether the child likes it or not – for the child's own good, naturally. And life at home isn't mean-spirited, etc? Perhaps Topher's father should re-read his own horribly mean words. It might give him a shock. But probably not. After all, the difference is, *his* mean coercion is *justified, important, necessary*. Just like the coercion of parents forcing their children to go to school against their will. Is there any difference in the logic of the two arguments? I think not.

And I remember my sister saying of one of her children, then five, that she never knew her to do anything really mean or silly until she went to school...

This statement is so typical of parents seeking to exculpate themselves for the distress they inflict upon their children. If it is not school, it is television-watching, or video-game-playing, or any number of other things. Always, the unanswerable assertion is that the coercion is justified because until the undesired activity started, the child was as sweet as pie, but engaging in whatever it is caused the child to become a monster/"hyperactive"/"aggressive" etc. What can one say to that? "That is not true. First you wanted to see the bad effect to justify overriding the child's wishes, then you behaved in such a way as to cause it."? That sounds a little rude, doesn't it? Nevertheless, that seems to me to be the truth of the matter.

In summary... I was slightly disheartened when I first discovered that John Holt liked this quote. Moreover, given that the ideas expressed in the above quote are absolutely incompatible with respect for children's autonomy and the idea of autonomous learning, I do not feel confident that John Holt was advocating autonomous learning/non-coercive education. At least, he certainly was not advocating that when he used the above quote as an argument for home education.

to post comments

Comments

John Holt, dark?

Submitted by a reader (not verified) on 24 September, 2005 - 22:00

I'm afraid that I don't have time to comment point-by-point on your criticisms of Holt, but I would like to make several points. I am certain that you're reading much too much into his comments and putting words (through your interpretations of his actual words) into his mouth. I also believe that to deny the adverse cultural influences of (especially government) schools upon its child inhabitants as well as the influences of other children (who, after all, are also already heavily acculturated as to time and place by the time they reach such institutions) and to decry what you assume are unjustified negative conclusions based upon years of behavioral observation (as Holt certainly possessed) is rather naive and admittedly, like something I would have said 30 years ago myself. Yes, it's true. Experience matters. That doesn't mean that I (or the late John Holt) wish to constrain or oppress kids. Quite the contrary, I have often been accused of being much too laissez-faire in regards to children. But while it's a terrible mistake to view children as some kind of sophisticated Play-Doh to be moulded by rigid adults, it's also a mistake to devalue the years of wisdom and knowledge which SOME adults possess (and I certainly count John amongst those who possessed them) and to also assume that there is of necessity an operative self-guiding innate wisdom possessed by children as a class (but which many DO indeed possess) that would not also benefit from sage advice and guidance from some adults. That's the sort of shrill and polemical view that I might have once espoused myself (if only life were as simple as I had once imagined it...). Too, notice that I'm trying to make the additional point that humans, children and adults, are highly individual. Keep in mind, also, that cruelty to other children (as an especially critical example) is a behavior which demands observation and immediate intervention by adults. After all, without such adult mediation, children themselves become casualties. We can talk for days and days about which conditions give rise to childhood cruelty and to what extent it is innate, learned, etc., but when it happens, you, as an adult, had better be there and figure out how to limit its effects and prevent its reoccurrence.

Now, I don't agree with everything John said in your quote. But he was hardly dark or (by implication) menacing by any stretch of the imagination. And his was certainly a voice to which we should still listen carefully. You see, experience matters a great deal and can be a very valuable gift we can bestow upon the young. Children benefit enormously from didactic and intimate learning relationships with adults, something which very ancient civilizations, such as the Dorians and Greeks, seemed to understand much better than our culture today.

to post comments

Bah

Submitted by a reader (not verified) on 1 October, 2005 - 16:35

I'm reading "How Children Fail" and I so far I'm disliking the way he observes children like they were test subjects.

So far there was one only instance where he actually thinks of asking the children how they feel and listens to them. He puts children through silly tests, observes their behaviour like they were lab rats and does guess work on how their minds work. The psychological analysis he does on children just adds to the myth they are these mysterious creatures adults cannot comprehend unless they are the experts.

Also, he punishes and threatens children and then claims he didn't, that he cooperated with them, like with that Q thing he does.

[to post comments](#)

Q thing?

Submitted by katherand on 8 December, 2005 - 04:02

Do tell. Does anyone know what's meant by the Q thing John Holt did? I'm curious.

I agree that it's possible to make too simplistic an interpretation of Holt's writings. He generalized at points and this invites one to draw conclusions that he perhaps could not have intended. Or maybe he **did** mean the obvious in some things he wrote which don't jive well with other things he says about children.

As far as sounding like he's testing children as though they're lab rats... as maybe he unwisely portrayed it. Putting your subjects into a lab setting was all the vogue in those days. It's no longer the rage. Now it seems just ICK. That does stick out like a sore thumb in his books. I agree. In some ways, we're all still living under the almighty sway of the Age of Enlightenment-- where the Scientist got on the historic map and stayed there! It probably got him kudos, respect, and all that jazz.

[to post comments](#)

It was me who posted that

Submitted by Leo on 18 January, 2006 - 17:10

The Q thing is from page 62 to 67 on the Penguin edition with the blotch on the cover. There is even an illustration on page 64. Basically, he would draw a Q on the blackboard when he wanted the class to be quiet.

The fishy bit is on page 66. The Q system wasn't quite working and he says: "[...]If I don't have the Q, I'll have to control it the way the other teachers try to, which is not to let you talk at all."

He believed this to be a system based on cooperation and not on fear, but I see this sentence as a disguised threat.

[to post comments](#)

John Holt

Submitted by R. Allen (not verified) on 20 January, 2006 - 02:00

I recently read "How Children Learn" in the revised version. It was interesting to see that Holt himself was very upset with his earlier behavior and writing in many cases, and saw some bad coercion/I'm better than you stuff going on in his interactions with children. It was great that he kept the revised part separate, so the reader can see the development of his thinking and his character over time.

Q thing

Submitted by a reader Anna R... (not verified) on 22 February, 2006 - 01:01

First of all I want to say I enjoy reading John Holts books. He was a journal keeping type of personality. He was ever so kind as to convert those journals into books for you and I to follow along. I feel privileged to have been invited along thru his life's learning/growing pains. I perceive John Holt as a real person on a life loving journey. He was not the same person by the time he wrote his final book just as you and I are not the same person we were 10 or 20 years ago. We each evolve thru time. I personally am grateful John Holt was willing to share with us as he evolved.

About the Q: I own a copy of "How Children Fail" Revised Edition, it is yellow with age. In this book the Q can be read about from the middle of page 62 right on thru the middle of page 67. I think I read of it in another of his books also.

John took 5 pages to explain the Q and how it came to be, evolved, became own by the children, was tested and judged to be a fair working system. I won't even attempt to summarize all that into a paragraph or two.

I will say here what is clear to any reader. He was working within the typical classroom setting. In John's later writings he says the ideal "school" would more closely resemble the environment and mind set of those staffing and members of a country club. John Holt was not writing from the country club setting he was writing from the confines of a classroom. Had he been writing from a life long learning country club I am personally sure we would not have been informing the world about "How Children Fail".

Here I'll quote from: Forward To Revised Edition p5

"After this book came out, people used to say to me, "When are you going to write a book about how teachers fail?" My answer was, "But that's what this book is about."

"But if it is a book about a teacher who often failed, it is also about a teacher who was not satisfied to fail, not resigned to failure. It was my job and my chosen task to help children learn things, and if they did not learn what I taught them, it was my job and task to try other ways of teaching them until I found ways that worked."

Clearly Mr. Holt was not stating he had arrived, he clearly stated he was on a journey. Anyone reading John Holts works would do well to realize by reading one of his earlier books you are joining him in the first or middle stages of that journey. Were Mr. Holt still with us I feel certain he would endorse and applaud the current work of Taking Children Seriously.

Where were you 10 years ago? Seven years ago I was apologizing to my husband. I had been reading a couple of John Holts books. I had come to the realization I had treated my husband with considerable disrespect, had even considered him a liar. He had told me of wiring lights to his hot wheel cars at approximately 4 or 5 years of age. I had asked who taught him and he told me he taught himself. That statement of teaching himself was seriously outside my box prior to exposure to writings of John Holt.

Would I be where I am now had I never read a single book of John Holts? Who's to say. I can only say I can look back and recognize a turning point, a point at which my box had windows punched in it and the possibilities of enlarging began to reach into infinity. I will forever be grateful to my friend Natalie for advising me to read

anything I could lay my hands on by John Holt and to John himself for writing them in the first place. I became an unschooler and found sources such TCS and GTI as I opened my mind and explored outside the box.

Any resource that that gets one outside a stagnant box is a good resource. I applaud John Holt for allowing us to accompany him on his journey. I am so glad he did not wait to get it right before publishing his first work. All the lights will never be green as we travel thru life. And if there ever is such a thing as a perfect ...anything... I will not be allowed in. Those who are so ready to criticize another's work I challenge you to find the courage to publish your life's journal.

to post comments

Quite the Opposite

Submitted by [KPalicz \(not verified\)](http://www.oneandfour.org) on 27 February, 2006 - 22:38

Quite the opposite really, Holt actually spoke out quite clearly against the kind of sterile, impersonal lab experiments you are ascribing to him. I'll have to re-read How Children Fail, but I'm re-reading How Children Learn right now and I don't see much to criticize him for. Especially get the second edition copy. Most of his "experiments" are just his anecdotes from playing with these kids in a natural, authentic way.

to post comments

'How Children Fail'

Submitted by a reader (not verified) on 30 June, 2006 - 06:51

'How Children Fail' was one of his earliest books. At that point he still thought school was a good idea. That all changes later on. Perhaps you should try one of his later books. Have you read 'Escape from Childhood'?

to post comments

Holt? Forcing?

Submitted by HoltNut (not verified) on 13 February, 2008 - 23:44

John Holt WAS THE FOUNDER of TCS. He was the one that first thought that children should not be forced into anything, the guy who inspired A.S Neill to create Summerhill, thus leading into the free school movement. The guy who coined the word unschooling. The guy bitterly against forcing a child to do anything. So you found one quote where he contradicted himself. He wrote how many books? 5? 7? 10? Made how many lectures? Responded to how many interviews? Holt slipped, but so could anybody. It's like making a grammar mistake in a fifty page essay. So what? Acting as if he was an advocator of forcing children is simply incorrect.

to post comments

On happiness...

Submitted by A Reader Passin... (not verified) on 26 February, 2008 - 06:03

It seems to me that this article was written under the assumption that our beliefs about our own happiness are infallible - which is in pretty stark contrast to much of the other material on this website.

I know that I've often held to a bit of cognition like "I am happy and what I'm doing is good for me" when in fact I'm not all that happy and what I'm doing is actually quite lousy for me. I am grateful for intimate friends who have helped me to see that I was mistaken about my own views on my quality of life. They didn't coerce me, but they certainly thought they knew, in some sense, what was better for me than I did. The two are not equivalent. And besides, they were right: my self-understanding was inaccurate. I wouldn't want just anyone to claim to know me better than I know myself, and I certainly wouldn't want to be forced to act in accordance with another's view of my well-being, but I also don't mind certain friends, in the context of a certain level of intimacy and trust, believing that they know something about me that I don't know, or that my attempts to secure my own happiness are misguided. A philosophically robust account of what it means to avoid coercing others should be able to account for those dynamics.

Anyway, I'm pretty sure Holt said that if children wanted to go to school we shouldn't stop them (I can find a reference if there's interest) - so the idea that this passage is implicitly endorsing some form of coercion (namely forced removal from school) is probably not a good reading. If Holt explicitly said that he was opposed to that coercion, then we should read this as exactly what it is - a statement indicating Holt's belief that the school environment has had, in at least one case that he observed, a negative effect on the character of a child. Ultimately Holt built a case that there are systematic reasons why it has the effect, but we can decide to accept or reject those arguments based on their merits while still respecting a child's decision to go to school (and making sure that the child knows that if she ever changes her mind that she can always remove herself from school again).

No one is perfect, but it seems a little strange to me to take an obvious ally like Holt and attempt to knock him down, to suggest that he was not such an ally after all - that beneath all that work in favor of treating children with the same respect and decency that each human being deserves was a more malevolent impulse towards control and coercion. There's an important difference between saying, "Isn't it surprising that Holt advocated coercing children with respect to school attendance" or "Am I reading this correctly - John Holt, of all people, seems to be advocating coercive and disrespectful behavior towards children" and claiming to have insight into "The Dark Side of John Holt." The first two approaches acknowledge the broad framework and good work of an ally. The third implies that he wasn't such an ally after all.

Peace.

[to post comments](#)

Holt and A.S Neil

Submitted by James (not verified) on 29 May, 2008 - 13:25

Summerhill was founded in 1929 so was not inspired by Holt. They did meet however and were friends by all accounts.

[to post comments](#)

Get your facts straight

Submitted by a reader (not verified) on 4 December, 2008 - 14:48

Summerhill was founded two years before Holt was born.... so he hardly could have inspired Neill to create the school.

to post comments

The original post by Sarah Fitz-Claridge was wrongly attributed

Submitted by Julie Ross (not verified) on 11 June, 2011 - 18:21

The original post that is supposedly attributed to John Holt did in fact appear in one of his books entitled "Teach Your Own" however the quote is a statement made by Jud Jerome (a writer, poet, former professor at Antioch) and were words Jud Jerome had written about his son, Topher. John Holt had no children. I'm not sure how Sarah (the author of the original post) could have misunderstood this since Holt clearly attributes the paragraph as the words and opinions of Jud Jerome. Here is how the entire passage appears (along with the question & answer that spurred the selected quote) in Holt's book "Teach Your Own":

Q. If children are taught at home, won't they miss the valuable social life of the school?

A. If there were no other reason for wanting to keep kids out of school, the social life would be reason enough. In all but a very few of the schools I have taught in, visited, or know anything about, the social life of the children is mean-spirited, competitive, exclusive, status-seeking, snobbish, full of talk about who went to whose birthday party and who got-what Christmas presents and who got how many Valentine cards and who is talking to so-and-so and who is not. Even in the first grade, classes soon divide into leaders (energetic and - often deservedly - popular kids), their bands of followers, and other outsiders who are pointedly excluded from these groups.

I remember my sister saying of one of her children, then five, that she never knew her to do anything really mean or silly until she went away to school - a nice school, by the way, in a nice small town.

Jud Jerome, writer, poet, former professor at Antioch, wrote about his son, Topher, meeting this so-called "social life" in a free school run by a commune:

[Begin Quote by Jud Jerome]..."Though we were glad he was happy and enjoying himself (in school), we were also sad as we watched him deteriorate from a person into a kid under peer influence in school. It was much like what we saw happening when he was in kindergarten. There are certain kinds of childishness which it seems most people accept as being natural, something children have to go through, something which it is, indeed, a shame to deny them. Silliness, self-indulgence, random rebelliousness, secretiveness, cruelty to other children, clubbishness, addiction to toys, possessions, junk, spending money, purchased entertainment, exploitation of adults to pay attention, take them places, amuse them, do things with them - all these things seem to me quite unnecessary, not "normal" at all (note: except in the sense of being common), and just as disgusting in children as they are in adults. And while they develop as a result of peer influence, I believe this is only, and specifically, because children are thrown together in school and develop these means, as prisoners develop the means of passing dull time and tormenting authorities to cope with an oppressive situation. The richer the families the children come from, the worse these traits seem to be. Two years of school and Topher would probably have regressed two years in emotional development. I am not sure of that, of course, and it was not because of that fear that we pulled him out, but we saw enough of what happened to him in a school situation not to regret pulling him out..." [Endquote by Jud Jerome]

*****For me, this is one more reminder that anything on a blog or website needs to be fact-checked, preferably before tempers and personalities flare up!*****

to post comments

Julie: Two problems. (1) The

Submitted by Alan Forrester2 (not verified) on 5 January, 2012 - 02:08

Julie: Two problems. (1) The rest of the content written by Holt that you quoted above is also bad. (2) Holt approves of the quote by Jud Jerome, so quoting it as an instance of a view held by him and criticising it is entirely legitimate.

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