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School is a prison — and damaging our kids

Longer school years aren't the answer. The problem is school itself. Compulsory teach-and-test simply doesn't work

[Peter Gray](#)

Parents send their children to school with the best of intentions, believing that's what they need to become productive and happy adults. Many have qualms about how well schools are performing, but the conventional wisdom is that these issues can be resolved with more money, better teachers, more challenging curricula and/or more rigorous tests.

But what if the real problem is school itself? The unfortunate fact is that one of our most cherished institutions is, by its very nature, failing our children and our society.

School is a place where children are compelled to be, and where their freedom is greatly restricted — far more restricted than most adults would tolerate in their workplaces. In recent decades, we have been compelling our children to spend ever more time in this kind of setting, and there is strong evidence (summarized in my recent book) that this is causing serious psychological damage to many of them. Moreover, the more scientists have learned about how children naturally learn, the more we have come to realize that children learn most deeply and fully, and with greatest enthusiasm, in conditions that are almost opposite to those of school.

Compulsory schooling has been a fixture of our culture now for several generations. It's hard today for most people to even imagine how children would learn what they must for success in our culture without it. President Obama and Secretary of Education Arne Duncan are so enamored with schooling that they want even longer school days and school years. Most people assume that the basic design of schools, as we know them today, emerged from scientific evidence about how children learn best. But, in fact, nothing could be further from the truth.

Schools as we know them today are a product of history, not of research into how children learn. The blueprint still used for today's schools was developed during the Protestant Reformation, when schools were created to teach children to read the Bible, to believe scripture without questioning it, and to obey authority figures without questioning them. The early founders of schools were quite clear about this in their writings. The idea that schools might be places for nurturing critical thought, creativity, self-initiative or ability to learn on one's own — the kinds of skills most needed for success in today's economy — was the furthest thing from their minds. To them, willfulness was sinfulness, to be drilled or beaten out of children, not encouraged.

When schools were taken over by the state and made compulsory, and directed toward secular ends, the basic structure and methods of schooling remained unchanged. Subsequent attempts at reform have failed because, though they have tinkered some with the structure, they haven't

altered the basic blueprint. The top-down, teach-and-test method, in which learning is motivated by a system of rewards and punishments rather than by curiosity or by any real, felt desire to know, is well designed for indoctrination and obedience training but not much else. It's no wonder that many of the world's greatest entrepreneurs and innovators either left school early (like Thomas Edison), or said they hated school and learned despite it, not because of it (like Albert Einstein).

It's no wonder that, today, even the "best students" (maybe especially them) often report that they are "burned out" by the schooling process. One recent top graduate, explaining to a newspaper reporter why he was postponing college, put it this way: "I was consumed with doing well and didn't sleep a lot the last two years. I would have five or six hours of homework each night. The last thing I wanted was more school."

Most students — whether A students, C students, or failing ones — have lost their zest for learning by the time they reach middle school or high school. In a recent research study, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Jeremy Hunter fitted more than 800 sixth- through 12th-graders, from 33 different schools across the country, with special wristwatches that provided a signal at random times of day. Whenever the signal appeared, they were to fill out a questionnaire indicating where they were, what they were doing, and how happy or unhappy they were at the moment. The lowest levels of happiness, by far, occurred when they were in school and the highest levels occurred when they were out of school playing or talking with friends. In school, they were often bored, anxious or both. Other researchers have shown that, with each successive grade, students develop increasingly negative attitudes toward the subjects taught, especially math and science.

As a society, we tend to shrug off such findings. We're not surprised that learning is unpleasant. We think of it as bad-tasting medicine, tough to swallow but good for children in the long run. Some people even think that the very unpleasantness of school is good for children, so they will learn to tolerate unpleasantness, because life after school is unpleasant. Perhaps this sad view of life derives from schooling. Of course, life has its ups and downs, in adulthood and in childhood. But there are plenty of opportunities to learn to tolerate unpleasantness without adding unpleasant schooling to the mix. Research has shown that people of all ages learn best when they are self-motivated, pursuing questions that are their own real questions, and goals that are their own real-life goals. In such conditions, learning is usually joyful.

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I have spent much of my research career studying how children learn. Children come into the world beautifully designed to direct their own education. They are endowed by nature with powerful educative instincts, including curiosity, playfulness, sociability, attentiveness to the activities around them, desire to grow up and desire to do what older children and adults can do.

The evidence for all this as it applies to little children lies before the eyes of anyone who has watched a child grow from birth up to school age. Through their own efforts, children learn to walk, run, jump and climb. They learn from scratch their native language, and with that, they learn to assert their will, argue, amuse, annoy, befriend, charm and ask questions. Through questioning and exploring, they acquire an enormous amount of knowledge about the physical

and social world around them, and in their play, they practice skills that promote their physical, intellectual, social and emotional development. They do all this before anyone, in any systematic way, tries to teach them anything.

This amazing drive and capacity to learn does not turn itself off when children turn 5 or 6. We turn it off with our coercive system of schooling. The biggest, most enduring lesson of our system of schooling is that learning is work, to be avoided when possible.

The focus of my own research has been on learning in children who are of “school age,” but who aren’t sent to school, or not to school as conventionally understood. I’ve examined how children learn in cultures that don’t have schools, especially hunter-gatherer cultures, the kinds of cultures in which our species evolved. I’ve also studied learning in our culture by children who are trusted to take charge of their own education and are provided with the opportunity and means to educate themselves. In these settings, children’s natural curiosity and zest for learning persist all the way through childhood and adolescence, and into adulthood.

Another researcher who has documented the power of self-directed learning is [Sugata Mitra](#). He set up outdoor computers in very poor neighborhoods in India, where most children did not go to school and many were illiterate. Wherever he placed such a computer, dozens of children would gather around and, with no help from adults, figure out how to use it. Those who could not read began to do so through interacting with the computer and with other children around it. The computers gave the children access to the whole world’s knowledge — in one remote village, children who previously knew nothing about microorganisms learned about bacteria and viruses through their interactions with the computer and began to use this new knowledge appropriately in conversations.

Mitra’s experiments illustrate how three core aspects of human nature — curiosity, playfulness and sociability — can combine beautifully to serve the purpose of education. Curiosity drew the children to the computer and motivated them to explore it; playfulness motivated them to practice many computer skills; and sociability allowed each child’s learning to spread like wildfire to dozens of other children.

In our culture today, there are many routes through which children can apply their natural drives and instincts to learn everything they need to know for a successful adulthood. More than 2 million children in the United States now base their education at home and in the larger community rather than at school and an ever-increasing proportion of their families have scrapped set curricular approaches in favor of self-directed learning. These parents do not give lessons or tests, but provide a home environment that facilitates learning, and they help connect their children to community activities from which they learn. Some of these families began this approach long ago and have adult children who are now thriving in higher education and careers.

My colleague Gina Riley and I recently surveyed 232 such families. According to these families’ reports, the main benefits of this approach lie in the children’s continued curiosity, creativity and zest for learning, and in the freedom and harmony the entire family experiences when relieved of the pressures and schedules of school and the burden of manipulating children into doing homework that doesn’t interest them. As one parent put it, “Our lives are essentially stress free

... We have a very close relationship built on love, mutual trust, and mutual respect.” She went on to write: “As an educator I see that my daughter has amazing critical thinking skills that many of my adult college students lack ... My daughter lives and learns in the real world and loves it. What more could I ask for?”

Riley and I are currently completing a study of approximately 80 adults who themselves were home schooled in this self-directed way when they were of “school age.” The full results are not yet in, but it is clear that those who took this approach came from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds and have, as a whole, gone on very successfully into adulthood.

As the self-directed approach to home education has increased in popularity, more and more centers and networks have popped up to offer resources, social connections and additional educational opportunities for children and families taking this approach (many are listed on a new compendium website, AlternativesToSchool.com). With these — along with libraries and other community resources that have always been available and, of course, the Internet — the educational opportunities are boundless.

But not every family has the wherewithal or desire to facilitate children’s self-directed education at home. For many, a better option is a so-called democratic school, where children have charge of their own education in a setting that optimizes their educational opportunities and where there are many other children with whom to socialize and learn. (Such schools should not be confused with Montessori schools or other types of “progressive” schools that permit more play and offer more choices than do standard schools but nevertheless maintain a top-down, teacher-to-student system of authority and a relatively uniform curriculum that all students are expected to follow.)

Over many years, I’ve observed learning at one such place, the [Sudbury Valley School](http://SudburyValleySchool.org), in Framingham, Mass. It’s called a school, but is as different as you can imagine from what we usually think of as “school.” The students, who range in age from 4 to about 18, are free all day to do whatever they want, as long as they don’t break any of the school rules. The rules, which are created democratically at the School Meeting by students and staff together, have nothing to do with learning; they have to do with keeping peace and order and are enforced by a judicial system modeled after that of our larger society. The school currently has about 150 students and 10 staff members, and it operates on a per-student budget that is less than half that of the surrounding public schools. It accepts essentially all students who apply and whose parents agree to enroll them.

Today approximately two dozen schools exist in the United States that are explicitly modeled after Sudbury Valley, and others exist that have most of its basic characteristics. Compared to other private schools, these schools charge low tuitions, and some have sliding tuition scales. Students come from a wide variety of backgrounds and with a wide variety of personalities.

To people who haven’t witnessed it firsthand, it’s hard to imagine how such a school could work. Yet Sudbury Valley has been in existence now for 45 years and has hundreds of graduates, who are doing just fine in the real world.

Many years ago, my colleague David Chanoff and I conducted a follow-up study of the school's graduates. We found that those who had pursued higher education (about 75 percent) reported no particular difficulty getting into the schools of their choice and doing well there once admitted. Some, including a few who had never previously taken a formal course, had gone on successfully to highly prestigious colleges and universities. As a group, regardless of whether or not they had pursued higher education, they were remarkably successful in finding employment. They had gone into a wide range of occupations, including business, arts, science, medicine, other service professions, and skilled trades. Most said that a major benefit of their Sudbury Valley education was that they had acquired a sense of personal responsibility and capacity for self-control that served them well in all aspects of their lives. Many also commented on the importance of the democratic values that they had acquired, through practice, at the school. More recently, two larger studies of graduates, conducted by the school itself, have produced similar results and been published as books.

Students in this setting learn to read, calculate and use computers in the same playful ways that kids in hunter-gatherer cultures learn to hunt and gather. They also develop more specialized interests and passions, which can lead directly or indirectly to careers. For example, a highly successful machinist and inventor spent his childhood playfully building things and taking things apart to see how they worked. Another graduate, who became a professor of mathematics, had played intensively and creatively with math. And yet another, a high-fashion pattern maker, had played at making doll clothes and then clothes for herself and friends.

I'm convinced that Sudbury Valley works so well as an educational setting because it provides the conditions that optimize children's natural abilities to educate themselves. These conditions include a) unlimited opportunity to play and explore (which allows them to discover and pursue their interests); b) access to a variety of caring and knowledgeable adults who are helpers, not judges; c) free age mixing among children and adolescents (age-mixed play is far more conducive to learning than is play among those who are all at the same level); and d) direct participation in a stable, moral, democratic community in which they acquire a sense of responsibility for others, not just for themselves. Think about it: *None* of these conditions are present in standard schools.

I don't mean to paint self-directed education as a panacea. Life is not always smooth, no matter what the conditions. But my research and others' research in these settings has convinced me, beyond any doubt, that the natural drives and abilities of young people to learn are fully sufficient to motivate their entire education. When they want or need help from others, they ask for it. We don't have to force people to learn; all we need to do is provide them the freedom and opportunities to do so. Of course, not everyone is going to learn the same things, in the same way, or at the same time. But that's a good thing. Our society thrives on diversity. Our culture needs people with many different kinds of skills, interests and personalities. Most of all, we need people who are pursuing life with passion and who take responsibility for themselves throughout life. These are the common denominators of people who have taken charge of their own education.

Peter Gray is a research professor of psychology at Boston College. His most recent book is ["Free to Learn: Why Unleashing the Instinct to Play Will Make Our Children Happier, More Self Reliant, and Better Prepared for Life"](#) (Basic Books, 2013). He is also author of an introductory psychology textbook ("Psychology," Worth Publishers, now in its sixth edition), a regular blog for Psychology Today magazine called [Freedom to Learn](#), and many academic articles dealing with children's natural ways of learning. Along with a number of colleagues, he recently launched a web site ([AlternativesToSchool.com](#)) designed to help families find or create settings for children's self-directed learning.