



TENTATIVE EPIPHANIES

Amid the Alleged “Risks of Homeschooling”

by Rafe Hawkins

Working Paper No. 02-2020



EFI

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Working Paper Series

efinstitute.org/workingpapers

TENTATIVE EPIPHANIES AMID THE ALLEGED “RISKS OF HOMESCHOOLING”

(The author was home educated in the 1990s-2000s)

by Rafe Hawkins

DUE TO THE PANDEMIC LOCKDOWN, a whole lot of parents have been suddenly tasked with something they may have never even considered before: educating their child at home. While for some this is just a strange, temporary condition that they have no wish to integrate into their post-pandemic lives, many others are having tentative epiphanies. They see their children becoming happier, more curious, and more energized the longer they spend away from school. The question is being asked: what if educating at home is actually better? And it is being asked at scale, by people who may never have had reason to ask it otherwise.

This is happening in the context of a worldwide crisis which demands the height of innovation and dynamic adaptability to avert a level of human misery that we can no longer tolerate in the 21st century. So, it struck a jarring chord to see a piece published in the Harvard Magazine entitled ‘The Risks of Homeschooling’. A factually misleading caution against any departure from educational norms, the article even calls for an outright ban on all home education “until we can figure out what’s going on”.

Underlying the tone-deaf totalitarianism and the crippling disregard for logistics of such a demand, the real message of the Magazine article is a profound discomfort with the idea that home education might become widespread. Many people never encounter home education, nor do they expect to. It is for other people. Tolerable if confined to a small lunatic fringe of hippies and religious devotees – but terrifying if it threatens the golden calf of institutional education.

Yet, over the past few weeks, parents have begun seriously exploring the possibility of life without school, asking for input from experienced home-educators, or even just seeking reassurance that it is okay to like having your child at home. Many people are already unsatisfied with what they have had from schools. They want better; the demand is there. They can intuit the lasting benefits of home-education after just a few weeks of trying it, and many who might have previously dismissed it as desirable-in-theory, impossible-in-practice are now finding that they’re jolly well making it possible in practice now that the schools are shut. Barriers once perceived as insurmountable are being overcome, or turning out to be illusory, and we are starting to look closely at what lies behind them.

It’s unfortunate that many of those people, at a critical and vulnerable moment, might have read the Harvard Magazine and found themselves shepherded firmly back to familiar impotence and resignation. So, I hope that some of them also read this article, where I aim to properly inform those who want to know about the difficulties and advantages of home education.

THE REAL CHALLENGES OF HOME EDUCATION

I WAS EDUCATED AT HOME; my first time attending a school was at sixteen, at my request, and I stuck it out, but that was a mistake. My family’s social circle was diverse, and included home-educators of vastly different flavors as well as conventionally-educating families. I will undoubtedly educate my own children at home.

But when I'm asked for advice or input on home education, it isn't good enough for me to simply say "it's great, you should do it", even if that is true. School is a deeply entrenched cultural institution. Opting out is not a consumer choice; it requires an adjustment of one's mindset, sometimes a deep one. To support this adjustment, I have laid out the five most significant challenges that you might encounter if you continue educating at home, followed by the greatest benefits.

CHALLENGES

1. YOU WILL HAVE TO EXAMINE YOUR OWN RELATIONSHIP WITH BOTH LEARNING AND PARENTHOOD. This might be easier if your child hasn't attended any K-12 institution yet, but if your children's school has shut and you're now thinking that you might never make them go back, you will likely find that you have to reclaim a few things. You may not even have noticed that you'd given them up.

You will have to be prepared to enthusiastically champion your child's interests, both to others *and to your child*. Schools constantly present parents with the moral and practical dilemma (which they would never tolerate from any other source) of having to choose between acting in their child's best interests and maintaining the authority of the school. In the absence of school, you should not look for anything to fill that power vacuum. Get on your child's side; for the rest of their lives, they will thank you for being their ally.

You may also find that you have to rediscover how to take delight in their learning in the same way that you did before they started attending school. This will likely be a rediscovery for your child, too, who will have struggled more with each passing year at school to keep their natural curiosity alight rather than being incentivized only to attain grades and evade punishments. You must be ready to seize this opportunity to help them – they will need your help.

2. YOUR PEERS WILL PRESSURE YOU MERCILESSLY TO CONTINUE BUYING IN TO SCHOOL. The Harvard Magazine piece provides a taste of this. Other adults who are still fully invested in the idea of school may be very uncomfortable with what they perceive as a betrayal. They will both expect and want to see you to screw things up, and they will make sure you know it.

You will be told that you're making an arrogant mistake that will ruin your child's life. They will want you to account for a long list of hypothetical problems and fears, such as how your child will make friends – something that will really depend on what kind of person your child is, and what kind of people they happen to meet, as it does for everyone. Of course, it would never occur to them to ask a parent intending to choose a school how they plan to cope with all the bullying. But even if you are the first home-educator they've ever met, they will immediately unleash a wide array of aggressive questions and demands.

If you send your child to school, you will never encounter such questions. It will be assumed uncritically that things will work out, despite the near absence of agency available to you if you should need to act against the school to protect your child. But as a home-educator, if you are unable to present in advance your strategies for warding off all potential problems, real and imagined, the response may progress beyond mockery into genuine rage.

People who under normal circumstances are supportive friends and family may let you know that they now consider you an irresponsible parent, intentionally endangering your child's happiness and future. This is a powerfully coercive force on a parent. It may be difficult to resist it. If you are able to keep your head, you may still regret that when your friends had the opportunity to support you and think of ways to join in and help, they instead chose to make this more difficult for you.

3. AFTER HOME-EDUCATING FOR A LONG TIME, YOU MAY 'LOSE YOUR NERVE' AND BE TEMPTED TO SEND YOUR CHILD TO SCHOOL ANYWAY. If attending high school is something your child truly chooses for themselves, and they have internalized that they have your full support should they change their mind, then this is not likely to do too much harm. But if it is a decision you make, and simply try to convince your child (perhaps with genuine success) that it's what they ought to do, they will find it hard to reverse course if it turns out to be a bad call for them.

If your child has experienced little or no school, and then attends a formal educational institution later in life such as high school or university, they may be unprepared for it. They will not be used to the amount of time-wasting that is so commonplace in schools that students and teachers alike don't seem to notice it; your child will be acutely aware of it, however. They will not want to have a limit placed on the number of questions they can ask; it will feel shocking to be invited to 'learn', only to have their curiosity identified as something to be limited, tightly regulated, and even punished if they display too much.

They will have learned to pursue their interests at home in an emergent, evolutionary way, joyfully explaining new discoveries and asking questions without a trace of shame. They won't be expecting ignorance to be treated as a contemptible personal failure rather than an exciting opportunity. An arbitrary limit will have been introduced on what they are allowed to not know while still retaining their dignity, and they will be keenly aware of how intolerable it is to live under such a limit. The natural trust they have learned to feel toward adults will not prepare them for the experience of being humiliated in front of their peers by a teacher, as happens to so many.

By then, they will expect better than to experience these things, which people are never obliged to tolerate without recourse outside of schools – and when they are made to experience them, it will be painful. They will have enough context and experience with normal human relations that they will not try to justify or make excuses for the pain; they'll perceive that they are being wronged. But the damage will be done, and their relationship with constructive failure and the pursuit of their own curiosity will never be the same.

4. ON REVEALING THAT THEY WERE EDUCATED AT HOME, YOUR CHILD WILL BE SUBJECTED TO THE SAME PREDICTABLE SET OF QUESTIONS FROM ADULTS AND CHILDREN ALIKE; THIS WILL CONTINUE HAPPENING FOREVER AND WILL BECOME EXTREMELY TIRESOME. Top of the list will be 'how do you make friends?'

At first it will be interesting for them to wonder how people in school make friends when they spend most of the day under the condition that talking to one another will result in punishment. Equally bizarre questions that you can expect to hear, unanswerable in any meaningful way and sometimes vaguely insulting in their implications, will include: 'what's

five times eight'; 'how on earth did you learn to read'; 'don't you get really lonely'; and the really baffling 'what do you do all day then?'

5. YOU WILL HAVE TO KNOW YOUR RIGHTS, AND PREPARE YOURSELF TO ARGUE FOR THEM, to a far greater degree than most 'schooling' parents will ever have to (though this is arguably an oversight on their part). In the United Kingdom, for example, you have every right not to enrol your child in school. You are not obliged to follow the national curriculum. By law, the state has no say in assessing the needs of your child; their only role is to protect children from people who are doing them harm, just as they protect anyone else from harm – which includes protecting children from harmful parents, when that situation arises. In the United States, the precise laws vary from state to state but the situation is essentially the same.

In order to discharge this duty, the British state has chosen to delegate to Local Education Authorities the power to conduct inspections. As with police, you are not obliged to allow LEA inspectors into your home and, under ordinary circumstances, they cannot compel you to. But they may prefer to test their luck in case you are one of the people who doesn't know that, or to attempt to intimidate you if you are not a particularly assertive person. This is not unique; there is a constant supply of examples of heavy-handed overreach from policing to recycling to parking tickets to TV licensing. Whether such authorities act well or badly in any one particular case, it is totally naive to *rely* on them to champion your rights for you. And when you are home-educating, the consequences of being unprepared will not only affect you, but your child as well. Preparing and educating yourself to handle authorities acting beyond their powers is a duty that you will have to carry out in order to preserve your child's peace of mind and quality of life.

Of course, school teachers and administrators are prone to overreach as well. If you have to send your child to school, thoroughly understanding your rights as a parent vis a vis the school is one of the best things you can do to protect them. But it is still unlikely to require the same level of galvanization demanded by home education, where you must prepare to contend with inspectors – total strangers, far more so than schoolteachers – who may strongly hold the view that all children ought to be in school, or any number of other biases and prejudices, and may be prepared to abuse their authority in order to satisfy those views, to your disadvantage (and your child's).

Elizabeth Bartholet, the faculty director of Harvard Law School's 'Child Advocacy Program' who is cited in the Harvard Magazine article calling for a ban on home-education, is a perfect example of why this is necessary. Of all the options open to her as a person occupying a position of power in this area, she has chosen to style herself as a kind of educational Cruella de Vil, promoting exactly the policies that will keep her in furs at the expense of other people's puppies. Harvard Law School has already announced an anti-homeschooling convention this June, and there are plenty of other people who have your educational rights in their sights – but there are plenty on your side, too.

BENEFITS

If you are willing to contend with these challenges, then you will also be able to enjoy the benefits:

1. YOUR CHILD WILL BE AT LIBERTY TO PURSUE WHATEVER THEY CURRENTLY LOVE – *AND STILL HAVE ACCESS TO THE REST LATER*. Consider: every single person who attends K-12 takes math, year after year. A few excel, some fail, most pass; that isn't surprising, that's the intended outcome of standardized testing. But what should surprise us a lot more than it does is that only a tiny fraction of those people still remember how to do it afterwards –

and a majority of them *hate* math. Even thinking about it induces some level of anxiety and inadequacy; perhaps mild, perhaps severe. With few exceptions, the result of the way math is taught in school is not only that you do not actually learn math, but that you are prevented from ever wanting to learn it in future.

Math, for various reasons, is the worst subject for this phenomenon, but children can experience it in any subject. While the act of reading words comes up too often in daily life to be entirely forgotten in the way that trigonometry can be, many children who have a bad time with English in school are turned off reading books for life, gating them off from a vast chunk of cultural expression, for the sake of... what, a C+ in English on their high school transcript?

The reason for this is not that they were never going to be interested anyway and the teachers did their best. It is because the profound sense of shame that arises when an error, treated as an intrinsic personal shortcoming, is weaponized via the structure and culture of schools and standardized testing, and becomes the sustained punishment for being unable to perform quickly enough the first time.

It is literally better not to 'teach' at all than to continue the way we currently do. *The knowledge is not retained any more than if it had never been taught, and is rendered inaccessible, often for good.* We must be able to subject a system that produces these kinds of results to criticism, and that criticism must be rigorous and free from limitations. It must also allow access to options that are not part of the existing system.

As for pursuing what they *do* love, once you remove the arbitrary age and time limitations on access to knowledge, this becomes so frictionless that it can be hard to remember that anyone perceives it as a challenge. All children love something; nearly all love many things. Being at liberty to attend the public library at all hours, browse the internet outside of 'computer lab time', travel off-peak, conduct the science experiments that are most interesting instead of only those that are in the curriculum – these things are rocket fuel to a child's engine. There is no shortage of resources, and they come at minimal expense. My keen interest in mathematics was certainly helped along by adult family friends who shared that interest, but, actually, my strongest memories of learning math involved talking to my 'nerdier' friends on AOL Instant Messenger, trying out differential calculus equations together, when I was fifteen. This wasn't painful, it wasn't a chore, no one forced me to do it or even recommended that I should. It was just as fun and exciting as when I would read a new novel, learn a new piece of violin music, draw a picture I was proud of, or successfully bake cookies without burning them.

I cannot stress enough that this is *completely* the norm amongst home educated kids. They learn to code 'early'. They read books 'early'. They learn new languages 'early'. But from their perspective it is not early at all, it is exactly the right time. And when they learn things 'late', it is also at the right time, and they happily devour the new knowledge in a fraction of the time it takes to get through it in a metered curriculum. And they retain it afterwards.

2. YOU CAN HELP YOUR CHILD PREPARE FOR REAL LIFE. If you type the phrase 'mitochondria is the powerhouse of the cell', including the grammatical inaccuracy, into Google, the number one result is not a science website. It's the KnowYourMeme.com entry on this phrase, which has become a byword amongst millennials and younger generations for useless information acquired in school at the expense of knowledge they wish they'd received instead. Increasing numbers of "school-leavers" are becoming frustrated by this

experience. It is jarring to work very hard and under often adverse conditions for years-on-end to achieve good grades, only to find yourself unprepared to tackle the very first set of challenges you encounter afterwards. The *schools* want good grades to bolster their reputation; the *students* want to succeed in life, and more and more of them feel that attending school has not set them up for that.

Outside of the confines and constraints of school, you can introduce your child to all sorts of practical knowledge, as it becomes relevant and interesting to them – perhaps you can help them to apply for their first job and to file their taxes; how to follow up on an appointment; make a difficult phone call; negotiate effectively; read contracts before they sign them and know what to look for. Perhaps they will want to be able to repair their computer or their car, or cook food for themselves. These are all skills that most young adults end up having to teach themselves only after suffering the consequences of being unprepared, if they acquire them at all. As children, they were busy doing homework.

A young adult who is able to effectively handle themselves, their finances, their transport, belongings and living space, and can speak with confidence in formal situations, is a happy one indeed – happier still if they have also spent the past decade discovering knowledge and honing skills that they find fascinating and useful. Children, teens, and young adults alike yearn to be effective in what they want to do. If they are not acquiring the knowledge that will actually lead to that outcome, they are being conned.

3. YOUR CHILD WILL BE HEALTHIER. They will be able to get the amount of sleep they actually need. Study after study has concluded that teenagers require more sleep, later in the day, than we are allowing them to get, and the fact that they're not getting it is doing them harm. Educating at home means that your child can sleep according to their developmental needs.

We also know of the lasting damage done to the whole body by sustained high stress. Life already provides plenty of stress in its natural course; time-sensitive problems we don't know how to solve, situations we didn't predict and weren't prepared for, encountering mean or cruel people, attempting something and being disappointed in the results. There are ample opportunities to learn to cope with stress without having to artificially engineer more in the form of high-stakes exams, adversarial teachers, hated subjects, or feared bullying and humiliations.

At home, a child can go outside when they're excited to, when the weather is right, when they have the energy. They can eat when they are hungry, and eat the amount that is right for them, instead of learning to override their hunger (or fullness) signals, which may take a lifetime of work for them to get back in touch with at the cost of their physical wellbeing. And if you and your child enjoy it, you can prepare more food at home, which is often both cheaper and healthier.

With less stress, a person is at less risk of developing depression or anxiety linked to high cortisol levels. And outside of school, children are less at risk of being incorrectly diagnosed with – and medicated for – conditions like ADD and ADHD, which is a particular problem in the United States, but exists elsewhere too. It may seem easier for adults to medicate children into fitting the requirements of schools, but it is not better for the child.

4. YOUR CHILD WILL BE ABLE TO PROPERLY DEVELOP SOCIALLY. Socialization is a complex phenomenon with far more inexplicit content than explicit. It calls on culture, subculture, values, principals, and personalities. How a particular individual develops socially depends entirely on the context in which they develop.

So, it should strike us as really odd that from the age of five, the very earliest point of memory for many people, we relegate our children's social environment more or less exclusively to other children of their exact age and experience level, and to absolute authorities. Proper socialization cannot be learned from other people who have also not yet learned it. It develops by forming natural, unforced relationships – friendships – with a range of people who are both older and younger than you. It requires children to be able to experience non-authoritative relationships with older children and with adults on a day-by-day, minute-by-minute basis, and to put what they learn into practice in their own non-authoritative relationships with younger children. They must be at liberty to interact in an unstructured, unforced way with parents, older and younger siblings, older and younger individuals, grandparents, other children's' grandparents, etc. – a few visits per month is not enough to create that context.

As a society, we are systematically depriving schoolchildren of the situations they need in order to to develop socially in a balanced way, and then have the audacity to blame them when they behave inappropriately toward each other, or even toward themselves. At the moment, we are lazily confusing respect for authority – which stems from fear – with respect for human dignity, which can only stem from self-confidence. Children must be given the opportunity to be agents within a real social environment. School cannot provide this, but home education can.

DEPENDING ON THE FAMILY, THEIR COMMUNITY AND THEIR INDIVIDUAL CIRCUMSTANCES, how any given child can best be educated at home will vary considerably. All individual children face their own unique set of problems, and the solutions to those problems will be unique as well. Many parents who are interested in solving these problems are currently working out their own answers during this lockdown.

The worst thing these parents can do right now is to be afraid to act on possible solutions without external sanction. In reality, no such sanction exists. School purports to provide it, but it only offers the most appropriate solutions for perhaps a tiny fraction of its students, if that – and only by chance, not by design. In fact, due to its structure, it is fundamentally not possible for schools to intentionally determine the right solution for any one student. Even the very best teacher must balance the needs and interests of their entire classroom, which in practice means trading off the actual needs of one student against another. Parents do not suffer this constraint, and they have the added advantage of being able to work *with* their child to this end, rather than waste energy and creativity excluding them from the process.

Given the benefits of home education, and the fact that dissatisfaction with schools is steadily increasing among both parents and students, it is appropriate to ask why, exactly, the folks at Harvard have committed themselves so earnestly to demonizing it.

For example, the organizer of the June anti-homeschooling conference, Professor James Dwyer, has said that “the reason parent-child relationships exist is because the state confers legal parenthood”. Even a moment's thought is enough to dismiss such a totalitarian absurdity, but an examination of psychology, biology, anthropology or history does just as well.

But given that Professor Dwyer has managed to secure a conference under the banner of a globally respected institution to promote this view, *every individual parent* who could be affected by policies inspired by it should consider whether they agree with him, and if they would want to conform their own parenthood to that worldview – that means every American parent, and those in other countries whose legislative bodies might follow the American lead. Since there is enough support to organize a conference, Dwyer can't be the only one who believes in that position. But those who do not agree must retain the freedom to act on that disagreement, not merely to express it abstractly.

Given the relative power and prestige enjoyed by academics, there is something inconsistent about the fact that they are not rising to the widespread demand for something different – and better – than school. There is a world of difference between using your expertise and platform to suggest your own scaled solutions to people's problems, and using it to tell people that they are wrong to think they have a problem at all. It is also inconsistent that they are not engaging with their own arguments. Harvard directors and professors are supposed to rank among the best of the best in our society. We should expect to see them proposing ever-better ways to improve schools, and promoting their amazing benefits, rather than scrambling to call for a ban on divergent views.

No one holds a monopoly on truth, and there is always the possibility that their very best theories are wrong, as there is for everyone. It must be acknowledged that if these academics have got it wrong, they will not personally experience any consequences for their error. This is an abstract consideration for them. If a policy is adopted on their recommendations, they will not lose their position, their job security, or any other privilege they currently enjoy if that policy turns out to be a disaster for those it *does* impact. Nor will they be forced to have their children educated in a way that they consider harmful, when the opposite will be true for the parents and children affected by such policies.

Regardless of the intent behind this anti-home-education, pro-authoritarianism and conformity push, the best way to preserve any right is to use it. For those who already know that they want something better for their children than school and are really just seeking a stronger framework for that desire, I can only suggest exercising your right to educate at home as vigorously as you can, *right now*. It is necessary to understand the very real challenges, which I hope I have helped to elucidate here, and to recognize that there isn't a magic bullet to solve the problem of how to raise a child well – there are no magic bullets for any complex problems. We have to engage with these problems; there is no substitute. There is a vast, diverse, well-informed, articulate, and knowledgeable community of home educators across America, the United Kingdom, and worldwide, who are already engaging directly with these kinds of problems every day. This community is eager to offer support to parents looking to educate at home in whatever capacity they need to succeed. It is not verboten to allow yourself to see the immense benefits of educating at home, and to see that these benefits *are for you*, if you want them.