

When Bringing School Home, Don't Sacrifice the "Home"

by Dr. Gordon Neufeld (April 16th, 2020)

There is a plethora of advice these days emerging on HOW to turn one's home into a school. The underlying assumption is that it is indeed in a child's best interest for this to happen. In many cases this could be true. For some children the cost could be too much.

The most important reason for thinking twice before turning home into school is that they would lose their sense of feeling at home with their family. Every child needs a home – that is, a relational place of safety, rest and invitation where their acceptance and value is not based on their achievements. It is true that not every child has this kind of home, but if they do, we would not want to spoil that. And if they don't, providing that kind of home should be our first priority. Even if the parent could somehow manage to multi-task, it doesn't mean that the child can still find the mother or father they need once the parent has turned into a teacher. Certainly this was true for one of our own children when we attempted to school him at home while we were on a family sabbatical overseas. This six year old was quite succinct about the impossibility of what we were trying to do. As he exclaimed to his mother at one point: *"You can't be my teacher. You're my mother!"*. In our case, his mother was a professional teacher and quite capable of the multi-tasking required in serving a dual role. But the reality for our son was that his relational home with his mother was threatened when learning became the agenda.

There are a number of ways in which school can threaten a child's sense of home with family. To start with, going to school typically involves separating from parents. If a child's sense of home with their family has not matured to where they can preserve a sense of connection when apart from them, this separation will evoke powerful emotions of frustration, alarm and pursuit. These emotions underlie most problem behaviour, straining the very relationships the child depends upon.

In addition, when children lose their sense of home with their family, they are compelled to find another home to substitute for what they have lost. Many children end up replacing their family with fellow students at school. Unfortunately schools have become unwitting factories of peer orientation, pulling children out of orbit from the parents who are meant to be their answers, and into orbit around other children who cannot possibly take care of them. As evidence of this dynamic, you will find that most children today go to school not to learn about their world but rather to be with their friends. In other words, they feel more at home with each other than with their own family. This loss of feeling at home with their family has devastating effects on their emotions, their development, their learning and even on society as a whole. The topic is so huge I wrote a book on it and still only scratched the surface of this phenomenon.

These downsides to institutional learning can sometimes be reversed by educating children at home but the threat to a child's sense of home with family can still remain if the child's schooling becomes the top priority for these parents. During my professional career, I sometimes found myself recommending to parents that the emotional and behavioural problems they were facing with their child might be mitigated by taking the child out of school, at least for a while. Sometimes the results were stunning and rather immediate. Occasionally, however, this arrangement backfired. It seemed to me that one of the primary reasons for the failure of home education as a prescription was when the child somehow lost the parent they needed in the process of that parent taking on the role of teacher.

We have a rather unique opportunity during this unprecedented crisis to actually get our priorities straight – home over school. Many children will need to be reclaimed and parents could well use the time to restore their rightful place in their children's lives. This is not necessarily an easy task but nothing will work right for the child or for us as parents unless our children truly feel at home with us and can find in us the emotional rest and fulfilling love they need. Since we have them at home and we are being called to stay at home, what could be more important than cultivating their sense of home with us? This is infinitely more important emotionally and developmentally than figuring out how to turn our home into a school.

When we see what a child truly needs developmentally in order to learn and to grow, it helps us know where to put our focus. As a theorist, my life's work has largely been devoted to putting the puzzle pieces together about what children require for emotional health and well-being, including the realization of their full human potential.

In short, when distilled to the essence, the irreducible needs of a child are:

- a) **right relationships** with the adults responsible for the child
- b) **a soft heart** where a child can feel tender emotions
- c) **sufficient rest** emotionally and from the work of attachment
- d) **true play** where the engagement is in the activity rather than the outcome

These are the key factors in healthy development regardless of race, religion, gender, culture or society. This was true for our ancient ancestors and will be still be true for our descendants far into the future. When these conditions exist for a child, growth happens, potential unfolds, individuality emerges, curiosity appears. In other words, if the conditions are conducive, Nature can take it from there.

The critical question is: where are these four conditions more likely to exist for a child – in a good school or in a good home? Unfortunately, we all know homes where these conditions are missing, with tragic results for the children involved. In these cases, school is certainly the better bet. But the tragedy in today's society is that parents in fully functioning homes are believing more in what school has to offer than in what they themselves have to offer their children. They have lost confidence in themselves as being the answer to what children need most.

Unfortunately, even the best schools in the world are not set up for providing these prerequisite conditions for children. Many schools are much better now than they used to be, but these four essential factors are rarely on the agenda in any shape or form, at least not systematically. My work with schools has largely been devoted to helping educators understand and foster these conditions in schools. There is no doubt that schools can greatly increase their effectiveness when they start acting more as a home in this regard. But the same could not be said in reverse. Homes do not increase their effectiveness by acting more as a school.

Back to the pandemic at hand. There is this idea that has taken root in our society that school is the most important factor in learning, if not development itself. The show must go on, we are told. In this context, I wish to remind parents who feel pushed to become teachers or at least teacher's assistants, that there is no more important role than being a child's home. Whatever you do, don't mess with this. And when things become too much, what needs to be sacrificed is anything and everything that could interfere with serving this role for a child. There is a bottom line – something to be believed in when adversity prevails. That bottom line is home – not school.

To summarize, it is not the interruption in schooling that should be our primary concern at this time. What we need to remember is that when school comes home, we must take care that it is not at the cost of the home a child needs. For many children and families, a break from school might be the best thing to come out of this pandemic.

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