



Midwinter on the Telephone by Earl Gary Stevens

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I am writing in midwinter, the time of year when I get the most calls from parents who are suddenly desperate to take their children out of schools. In Maine it is a time of darkness and cold. June and the beginning of summer vacation are in the impossibly remote future. The parents call because they perceive that instead of nurturing their children, schooling has begun to hurt them, and they are determined to put a stop to it.

Our conversations are not about educational philosophies. These parents are launching a rescue operation for a child in trouble. They have been doing some hard thinking, and they are ready to take any steps necessary. They begin talking on a note of tension, sometimes tears, but as it becomes clear that they have the power and the capability to take matters into their own hands I begin to hear hopefulness and resolve.

Parents in this situation are grateful to realize, often for the first time, that they are speaking with somebody who takes their suspicions about schooling seriously, understands their worry, and supports their perception that something is terribly wrong with the way their children are being treated.

These parents no longer trust the experts who want to fix their children. What they want now is freedom from this kind of intervention and a chance to establish a life that makes sense. They are thinking for themselves.

The stories are depressing and familiar. They involve disrespectful treatment of children by both school officials and peers: intense pressure, harassment, demeaning punishments, labeling with imaginary disabilities, teasing, bullying, and even out-right violence. This disrespect can result in lowered self-esteem, failure to thrive, depression, and, in extreme cases, flirtations with suicide.

In many instances parents feel that they must fight their way out. Almost universally school officials seem unable to admit that any child ever needs to be freed from any school for any reason at all. The parents are told that children must learn how to cope with "real life," as though we expect adult life to be miserable and that one of the jobs of compulsory schooling is to train people to endure it. It seems as though no matter what kinds of problems are visited upon a child, by schools or by life in general, business comes first, and the business of compulsory schooling is to promote an environment which creates both winners and losers.

It is wonderful to hear a parent say, "I will no longer allow them to do this to my child."

When they call me, parents first want to know if it is legally possible to immediately remove their children from school. They are not interested in arguing with authorities over the constitutionality of state equivalent education regulations; they are interested in extricating their children with the least amount of conflict and trauma. They are glad to learn that in Maine local school officials have no authority in the matter and that it takes only a few minutes a year to jump through the state's paperwork hoop.

Then they are free to pursue their own version of the good life. Many parents wonder if they are capable. I tell them that they will soon be wondering how they could have thought otherwise.

They ask very basic questions: What about keeping up with grade level? I suggest that they do not need to even accept the concept of grade level. It is an administrative tool used for managing large groups of children and is usually counterproductive in other settings.

Curriculum? Some people use them; others don't. Families can think of their first few months away from schooling as a time of discovery in which they will find what kind of daily life is best suited for them.

Reading material? Begin by subscribing to both Home Education Magazine and Growing Without Schooling. There is a whole world of knowledge and insight in these two magazines, and a \$49 investment will bring approximately 600 pages of current information. For teenagers, find a copy of The Teenage Liberation Handbook.

Attention deficit disorder? Speak with those parents among us who notice that such disorders mysteriously disappear once their children are away from compulsory schooling.

College? Success in college is so common among kids who engage in independent learning that it is no longer an issue for anyone who has seriously investigated the option.

Any suggestions? Join a support group, and get to know other families who are exploring independent learning. It is the easiest and best way to avoid feeling isolated, to find others of like intent, and to discover just how many ways it is possible for families to live happily and productively.

Above all, parents need to break away from institutional thinking about education, and to trust in themselves and in their children. Independent learning is a remarkable adventure, and it thrives on free exploration. I find it immensely gratifying to hear the dawning comprehension and excitement in voices that sounded so lost at the beginning of the conversation. While I'm simply talking about things many of us have discovered through our own experience, to these parents it is as though they have stumbled upon a new world.

Now spring is coming. I am busy again and feeling as though there are not enough hours in the day. The phone rings, and a mother's voice says, "I have a little girl who is deeply unhappy in school, and somebody told me that you could give me information

about bringing her out."

"I sure can. Do you have a few minutes?"