

“I would rather Summerhill
Produced a **happy street sweeper**
Than a **neurotic Prime Minister.**”
– A S Neill

Summerhill Policy

As an introduction here is a chapter from the book ‘Summerhill - a radical approach to child rearing’ by the school’s founder, A.S. Neill.

A.S. Neill is widely considered to be one of the great educators of our time. UNESCO list him as one of the 100 most influential educational thinkers and he was also listed as one of the twelve greatest educators of the last millennium by the “Times Educational Supplement” in December 1999.

His writings, together with other radical thinkers of the period such as Bertrand Russell, confronted the values of the establishment for many years.

This extract from Neill’s book “Summerhill” is an example of his challenging views on education and freedom for children. It is reproduced here to give some background and history to the Summerhill Policy Statements.

“I hold that the aim of life is to find happiness, which means to find interest. Education should be a preparation for life. Our culture has not been very successful. Our education, politics, and economics lead to war. Our medicines have not done away with disease. Our religion has not abolished usury and robbery. The advances of the age are advances in mechanism – in communications and computers, in science and technology. New wars threaten, for the world’s social conscience is still primitive. If we feel like questioning today, we can pose a few awkward questions. Why does man hate and kill in war when animals do not? Why does cancer increase? Why are there so many suicides? So many insane sex crimes? Why the hate that is racism? Why the need for drugs to enhance life? Why backbiting and spite? Why is sex obscene and a leering joke? Why degradation and torture? Why the continuance of religions that have long ago lost their love and hope and charity? Why, a thousand whys about our vaunted state of civilised eminence!

I ask these questions because I am by profession a teacher, one that deals with the young. I ask these questions because those so often asked by teachers are the unimportant ones, the ones about school subjects. I ask what earthly good can come out of discussions about French or ancient history or what not when these subjects don’t matter a jot compared to the larger question of life’s fulfilment – of man’s inner happiness.

How much of our education is real doing, real self-expression? Handwork is too often the making of a wooden box under the eye of an expert. Even the Montessori system, well known as a system of directed play, is an artificial way of making the child learn by doing. It has nothing creative about it. In the home the child is always being taught. In almost every home there is at least one ungrown-up grownup who rushes to show

Tommy how his new engine works. There is always someone to lift the baby up on a chair when the baby wants to examine something on the wall. Every time we show Tommy how his engine works we are stealing from that child the joy of life – the joy of discovery – the joy of overcoming an obstacle. Worse! We make that child come to believe that he is inferior, and must depend on help.

Parents are slow in realising how unimportant the learning side of school is. Children, like adults, learn what they want to learn. All the prize-giving and marks and exams side-track proper personality development. Only pedants claim that learning from books is education.

Books are the least important apparatus in a school. All that any child needs is the three R's; the rest should be tools and clay and sports and theatre and paint and freedom. Most of the schoolwork that adolescents do is simply a waste of time, of energy, of patience. It robs youth of its right to play and play and play; it puts old heads on young shoulders.

When I lecture to students at teacher training colleges and universities, I am often shocked at the ungrownupness of these lads and lasses stuffed with useless knowledge. They know a lot; they shine in dialectics; they can quote the classics – but in their outlook on life many of them are infants. For they have been taught to know, but have not been allowed to feel. These students are friendly, pleasant, eager, but something is lacking – the emotional factor, the power to subordinate thinking to feeling. I talk to these of a world they have missed and go on missing. Their textbooks do not deal with human character, or with love, or with freedom, or with self-determination. And so the system goes on, aiming only at standards of book learning – it goes on separating the head from the heart.

It is time that we were challenging the school's notion of work. It is taken for granted that every child should learn mathematics, history, geography, science, a little art, and certainly literature. It is time we realised that the average young child is not much interested in any of these subjects.

I prove this with every new pupil. When told that the school is free, every new pupil cries, "Hurrah! You won't catch me going to lessons!"

I am not decrying learning. But learning should come after play. And learning should not be deliberately seasoned with play to make it palatable. Learning is important – but not to everyone. Nijinsky could not pass his school exams in St. Petersburg, and he could not enter the State Ballet without passing those exams. He simply could not learn school subjects – his mind was elsewhere. They faked an exam for him, giving him the answers with the papers – so a biography says. What a loss to the world if Nijinsky had really to pass those exams!

Creators learn what they want to learn in order to have the tools that their originality and genius demand. We do not know how much creation is killed in the classroom with its emphasis on learning.

I have seen a girl weep nightly over her geometry. Her mother wanted her to go to university, but the girl's whole soul was artistic.

The notion that unless a child is learning something the child is wasting his time is nothing less than a curse – a curse that blinds thousands of teachers and most schools inspectors.

Classroom walls and the National Curriculum narrow the teacher's outlook, and prevent him from seeing the true essentials of education. His work deals with the part of the child that is above the neck; and perforce, the emotional, vital part of the child is foreign territory to him.

Indifferent scholars who, under discipline, scrape through college or university and become unimaginative teachers, mediocre doctors, and incompetent lawyers would possibly be good mechanics or excellent bricklayers or first rate policemen.

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In all countries, capitalist, socialist or communist, elaborate schools are built to educate the young. But all the wonderful labs and workshops do nothing to help Jane or Peter or Ivan surmount the emotional damage and the social evils bred by the pressure on him from his parents, his schoolteachers, and the pressure of the coercive quality of our civilisation.

The function of the child is to live his own life – not the life that his anxious parents think he should live, nor a life according to the purpose of the educator who thinks he knows best. All this interference and guidance on the part of adults only produces a generation of robots.

We set out to make a school in which we should allow children freedom to be themselves. In order to do this we had to renounce all discipline, all direction, all suggestion, all moral training, all religious instruction. We have been called brave, but it did not require courage. All it required was what we had – a complete belief in the child as a good, not an evil, being. Since 1921 this belief in the goodness of the child has never wavered; it rather has become a final faith.”

A.S. Neill