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Children's Education

At Kindergarten

At Home

VOVA had long dreamed of the day when he would start going to school. Granny, who had brought him up had told him so many interesting stories about not only to read and write but also to draw and sing and even to play hockey!

The first school lessons delighted the boy. He liked every thing the teacher the child he shared a desk with and who also knew all the letters the flowers in the classroom.... But a week went by and Vova announced "I'm not going to school anymore! You have to sit there and listen all the time...." And Vova burst into tears.

Vova grew up in a family which realized that preparation for school is essential. The lad's parents were not opposed to his attending kindergarten but whenever the subject arose the grandmother would retort in affront: "Do you really imagine that I, an educated woman cannot handle my grand son's education? Do you seriously think that he will learn to read and count more quickly in a kindergarten?"

And in truth Vova read wrote and counted better than many of his coevals he was what is often called a bright child. Then why did he lose interest in school? Oud what in general enters into the concept of being prepared for school studies and what role in this question should be allotted to the kindergarten?

Kindergartens came into being through necessity when the intensive process embracing all segments of society, of the emancipation of women began. Starting in the 1920s pre-school children's institutions began to appear everywhere throughout the USSR: in cities, villages, workers' settlements. In the first instance their purpose was simple and straightforward: to keep an eye on the children to see that they were clean fed healthy. The rest depended on the educational level of the supervisor and the human qualities.

With the years however experience was accumulated emerged who solved these problems. The programmes according to which today's kindergarten teachers raise children are worked out by the Institute of Pre-School Education, the Institute of Psychology, the Pediatrics Institute of the Academy of medical Sciences and various faculties of pedagogical institutes. These programmes cover the most diverse aspects of a child's development from the ability to tie a shoe-lace to music and rhythmic lessons from morning exercises to the instilling of the first mathematical concepts.

Kindergartens enroll children from the age of three. Before that they can be taken to nurseries where naturally the main stress is laid on care for the children (the cost to the government for each child going to kindergarten is 750 roubles annually in nurseries it rises to 800).

It is one considers that two specially trained teachers and one nanny work with each group of children. That there are kindergartens which accept children on a five-basis i.e. for the working week and that the majority of city pre-school institutions move to the country for the summer it is understandable why kindergartens are enjoying ever greater popularity.

Nevertheless many families that have a grandmother or a non-working mother prefer to raise their children at home, considering that an adult needs no special qualifications in or caution. There is no doubt that a mother who is taught his ABCs by mama or papa even if only the "rudiments" who is taken to film shows who watches TV and listens to the radio acquires some essential knowledge before he starts school. However more often than not it is unsystematic. Moreover when parents prepare their children for school independently they consider only the volume of knowledge that has been learned and pay no attention to the method of how the knowledge was absorbed.

run preparatory groups to which parents can take six-year old. But then the question arises isn't it too late at six to start preparing a child for school?

Sociologists conducted an experiment among parents. They divided them into two groups: in the first group they included those whose children had been going to kindergarten for several years and in the second those whose offspring were attending a preparatory group the year before starting school. Then the identical question was asked of both groups: what do they consider the most important aspect of preparing a child for school? 70% of parents at home believed that "psychological preparedness" meaning a poem to count to measure a poem tell a story to help to memorize. There

were also parents who maintained that modern life is so filled with information that there is no point in specially teaching a small child anything. The parents of kindergarten children looked at the problem in quite a different light. Rather than worrying about the humdrum total of knowledge they singled out the fostering if the need to know as the most important factor.

It was also discovered in the course of the experiment that families which raised their children at home often paid little attention to speech defects and their correction believing that with time they would disappear of themselves. This problem does not exist in a kindergarten. Not only is speech development assisted by regular lessons with the children but a speech therapist constantly checks the pronunciation of each child and in cases where it is needed immediately renders required help.

This brings us to the most important aspect.

Ira was raised by her grandmother. The girl was obedient but timid. Sometimes her father would devote some time to her but she always answered his questions uncertainly which irritated him: "How are you going to make out in school?" When Ira went to school her teacher had to devote a lot of time and effort to overcome the child's painful shyness and withdrawn nature.

Andrei also a "home-raised" child displayed the opposite extremes at school. On the surface his relations with his classmates were fine. The boy was bright and good at inventing interesting games. The children enjoyed playing with him but only those who were willing to play a subordinate role. In the opinion of educators such combinations are undesirable in any case they must be supervised by an intelligent teacher. Because the very fact that the child's authoritarian inclination developed at home are not resisted may aggravate his negative traits. On the other hand the acceptance by his coevals of subordinate roles fosters obsequiousness and takes away initiative.

Parents whose children have been going to kindergarten for a long time attach a lot of importance to the ability to get along in the group. From their own experience they realize how important this is for the child. The children themselves often talk about their relationships with the other children. The parents in the other group obviously underestimate this index. They think that pre-schoolers are too young to understand such a complicated feeling as friendship. This is incorrect.

The ability to adjust desires and aspirations to those of others to be able to do something for others and not just for oneself and to find pleasure in that is the guarantee of future mental equilibrium. Good relations with coevals foster kindness in a child, sincerity and responsiveness, conflicts engender alienation, coarseness, secretiveness and aggressive behaviour.

And something else that is important: in a kindergarten children systematically receive new information about the surrounding world. This is vital for the beginner of a contemporary

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EDUCATIONAL Theorist John Holt author of Why Children Fail, used to tour the lecture circuit trying to persuade elementary and secondary schools to cease rigid rules and cut red tape. No longer despairing of reform within the nation's educational establishment Holt has now decided to proselytize among parents urging them to keep their children out of school and teach them at home.

Though Holt's message flies in the face of a century old tradition home schooling was much more common during earlier centuries. Its notable graduates include the likes of Alexander the Great and John Stuart Mill. Says Holt: "What impedes learning today is teaching too much of it. The teacher takes all the fuel that makes the learning engine run and turns the students into passive laboratory rats."

Holt 55 is winning a growing if still small number of converts. A year ago he launched a bimonthly newsletter 'Gir'ling without Schooling' that now has 1000 subscribers (at \$10 a year). Within a decade he estimates almost 500,000 U.S. families will be schooling their children at home. That figure concedes comes "out of a blue sky", yet it might not be all that fanciful. More and more parents are becoming disenchanting with rigid programmed school strikes and the reluctance of teachers to accept responsibility for students' failures to learn.

The ranks of the stay-at-homes are growing for other reasons as well. In Washington State a Mormon mother keeps her two daughters out of public schools because she fears they will be taught Darwinian concepts of evolution. Parents of some 1,200 children in California's San Fernando Valley have set up small home classes in protest against a local busing order; most say they object not to integration but to their kids spending one to three hours a day on school buses. Then too there are parents who teach their own youngsters because they have decided to pull up stakes and spend a few months or even years touring the U.S. in mobile homes.

One family with two boys who have never been enrolled in school lives on a small farm in Sheffield, Mass. Both parents read to their sons aged eleven and nine take them in hikes and involve them in farm chores; their mother a college graduate also takes them to special art poetry and music classes in town. "They decide when and whether they'll learn something," says she. "We help them when they ask but I'm more interested in how happy people are than if they can stand on their heads."

The impact of this educational laissez-faire on the children? "Quite marvelous for all of us says their mother. "They need much less attention and entertainment than other children their age. They're not anxious about whether other people approve of them. They are moving in the direction of becoming truly mature people who have judgments, peacefulness and care for each other." Says her eleven-year old son: "For some reasons I'm lucky and for some reasons I'm not. I know lots of things other

children don't know. I know how to plant seeds and how to grow a garden. Last spring I read Tolkien and all of James Herriot's books. Oh and I like C.S. Lewis. "The boy does concede that he is "not so hot at arithmetic" but he counters; "I ask lot of questions. That's how you learn in school you can't ask question."

To satisfy the local school district this family has accepted a school "administrator" for their home curriculum. Sheffield's district psychologist Paul Shafiroff, who is responsible for evaluating the children's progress. The boys, he says, "possess skills generally equivalent to their grade level." Shafiroff notes: "More parents would like to do this if they could get the support of the schools."

One advantage cited by many of the parents who teach their own children is the freedom to allow them to pursue a subject for as long as they remain interested. Navy Commander Dennis McCahill, and Annapolis graduate, yanked his four children from their Annapolis, Md. school because "the system clamps down on any originality or creativity." How he asks "can one teacher answer all the children's questions when there's one teacher for 25 or 30 children? If a child is really interested in geography or any particular topic, after one hour he is expected to put away whatever he is doing and start some thing new."

The burdens imposed by home schooling can be formidable. "I would not recommend it to everyone," says Housewife Eileen Trombly of Natick, Conn., who for a time schooled all three of her daughters at home. "The house went to pot," she recalls. "The kids were home all the time. Then too there is the problem of disapproval from neighbours. People in the community think we're fanatics," says Robert Sessions a philosophy teacher at Iowa's Luther College when were really pretty ordinary people.

What disturbs some parents most is the fear that their children will make fewer friends because they stay at home. "Yes she's a little lonely," admits a father whose eight-year old daughter is learning at home, "and in a few years that could be more of a problem." John Holt bristles when the issue of social skills is raised. Says he: "If I had no other reason to keep kids out of school the social life would be enough. In all the schools I know anything about the social life of the children is mean spirited competitive exclusive status seeking full of talk about who went to whose birthday party and who got how many Valentine cards and who is talking to so and so and who is not." To those who claim that home schooling constitutes realistic preparation for life's hard knocks Holt replies: "The best preparation for bad experience is good. In any way I don't want to prepare people to get along. I want them to resist to change society for the better."

This month a Massachusetts judge upheld the right of parents "to preserve home education" under that state's laws. But many parents of stay-at-home find themselves entangled in legal controversies with local truancy officers. Laws on school attendance vary widely from state to state: some permit children to enroll in school as late as age eight (Arizona) and to leave as early as age 14 (Massachusetts). In addition some parents are asked to prove they are qualified in some cases professionally certifiable as schoolteachers before a local judge or board of education.

Some parents seek to avoid legal tangles by registering their children in correspondence schools. Among the largest are the Home Study Institute of the Seventh-day Adventist Church (1,100 elementary school children, 2,000 high school level) and Baltimore's Calvert School (4,500 elementary). Calvert's home instruction is said to have started when its headmaster made up lesson packets for children kept away from school in 1803.

For parents who fret not being trained like John Holt has this advice: anybody can do it. You can do it following a few steps: once you get out of the box on your own. Of course you can't hop out of the box.