

Junior

September 2001

SPECIAL REPORT
is traditional
education failing
our children?
Junior investigates
the alternatives

ouch... again
first and
second teeth

what is it with
boys and
diggers ?

better sex, more
money and a
richer social life...
it's great to
be a parent

born with
clicky hips
a mother's tale

world of their own

from slowcoaches to secrets:
understanding your child's needs

plus teacher jargon, the return of knitting,
back to school fashion and captain scarlet

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Photography **Tricia De Courcy Ling**
Special thanks to Park School, Devon



forget crammed classes of
thirty pupils, strict
discipline and



regimented lessons – there are



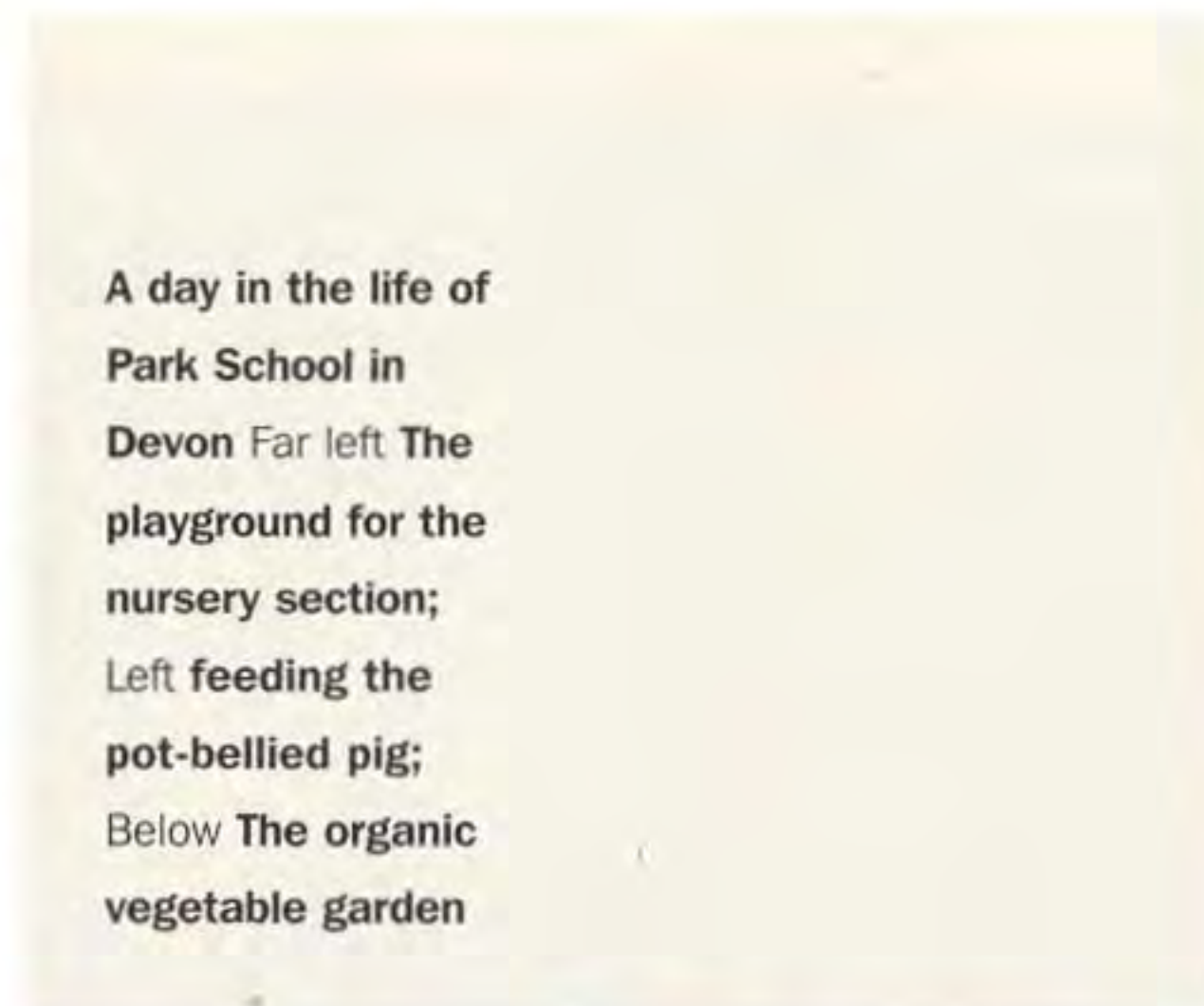
other ways for your
child to learn that

are exciting, stimulating and
much more fun.



is your child ready

for an alternative education? ►



A day in the life of
Park School in
Devon Far left The
playground for the
nursery section;
Left feeding the
pot-bellied pig;
Below The organic
vegetable garden

If you could wish for the perfect school for your child, what would it be like? Would it be top of the league tables and have an excellent Ofsted report? Well, there's a growing band of experts who may disagree with your choice of criteria. They reckon that targets and league tables make teachers focus on the wrong things, and that 'good' schools are only those which can outmanoeuvre the assessment system. Some critics go further, claiming that our education system is outdated and based on the wrong principles for life in the twenty-first century. Many are now actively creating radical alternatives to mainstream education.

Last year, the then chief inspector of schools, Chris Woodhead, said that the number of grade As at 'A' levels is too high. "An education system must involve failure," he claimed. Roland Meighan of Education Now, one of the main publishers of books and handbooks about alternative education, disagrees. "This is the Grand National race concept of schooling," he says, "where children are required to fall at each hurdle, losing self-esteem in the process and often being turned off learning, so that 'winners' can be identified."

In a traditional education setting, there is often a strong work ethic, and children are expected to conform – and perform – from a very early age. When Ann Sherman, a university lecturer, investigated how children change after the transition from nursery to reception, she found that reception age children in mainstream education already come to view play as less important; something you do when you have finished your 'work.' However, as any psychologist worth her salt knows, for this age group play is an essential part of learning. Children with well-developed imaginative play skills, for instance, will grow up to be better at solving problems, and be more versatile thinkers.

So could a traditional education be letting our children down? Ann Sherman also criticises the fact that teachers are regularly obliged to interrupt children's activities to fit in with rigid school routines, leaving little room for spontaneity, or for work initiated by children's suggestions. "Of course, there are some benefits to traditional schools," admits Sherman. "Routines can help children learn about punctuality and time management, even sharing and taking turns, but there is a need for balance."

Society is changing rapidly and it is difficult to know which skills our children are going to need when they grow up. Those who criticise mainstream education claim that the current fashion for rote learning and externally imposed discipline is not an appropriate preparation for the world of flexi-time and shifting boundaries. They also point out that teaching topics such as maths and English for pre-determined chunks of time does not fit in with the holistic view of the world, which is becoming prevalent in our society.

Roland Meighan believes that the most effective learning takes place when a child's natural motivation and curiosity is encouraged, rather than forced into submission. "Children need to be empowered through activities they can control, such as play," he says. "Learning should be experiential, explorative and investigative." He claims that this is not happening in most mainstream schools.

So what are the alternatives? Alternative education philosophies have been around for almost as long as the schools they challenge. For instance, the first Rudolf Steiner School opened in 1919, barely 30 years after compulsory education for all was introduced. At first, though, alternative forms of schooling were few and far between, but today they are more widespread and most children will have access to

Can you handle it?

An alternative education might sound blissful, but before you rush off and sign up, there are several things you might consider:

- Is the school likely to last? Alternative schools have come and gone, and even if small is beautiful, it might not be cost efficient.
- Is your child right for it? You may like the philosophy, but will your child? What if winning motivates him, or he hates sharing?
- What happens later? If the school does not follow the national curriculum, will your child be able to take GCSEs and 'A' levels? (However, all the schools featured here have children doing well in conventional exams.)
- Expect to get involved! Alternative schools have more parental involvement than mainstream schools. Home education networks in particular will still require you to be the main educator.
- Look ahead. Young children on the whole will thrive in alternative education. However at age eight or nine, peer groups become more important, and if there are not enough children of the same age your child may be unhappy.



This page Children playing and learning in the grounds of Park School, Devon



alternative education in some form. Most share similar principles and philosophies, such as holistic learning, which develops and educates the child physically, intellectually, socially and emotionally; an emphasis on co-operation rather than competition; small classes with mixed-age learning, and democratic processes within the school. There's also usually lots of parental involvement and environmentally sustainable values are encouraged, such as the recycling of paper ■

Human Scale Education

Philosophy: the promotion of small schools and small class sizes, and a flexible approach to teaching. Children have real involvement in the running of a school

Human Scale Education (HSE) campaigns for large schools to be restructured into smaller, 'human scale' units. In human scale education, the idea is that teachers can be more flexible and innovative in their methods, while parents and children can be more involved in the running of the school.

One example is Park School, set in spacious grounds on Dartington Hall Estate in South Devon, and seen in the photographs accompanying this feature. The school currently has 50 to 60 children aged between three and 11. There is one teacher per eight pupils and children work in mixed-age groups, moving to a new class when they are ready.

Park School is run on a democratic basis and children raise issues at the weekly school meeting. While there is a curriculum, it is flexible, so if a child brings something into the classroom teachers are willing to go off on tangents. "We are not restricted by the national curriculum," explains Richard Hickman, the head teacher (or teacher in charge, as he is called at Park School). "If it takes a term to do something that we really want to do, then that's how long we take. We make the most of our flexibility, otherwise there is no point in being in a school like this."

There is also an emphasis on community living, with equal stress on social, intellectual and emotional development. "Our children should be able to speak for themselves and listen to others, to have discovered the excitement of learning and to be able to pursue it for themselves," says Hickman.

There are high expectations of behaviour – the emphasis on learning to live in a community is seen as a vital part of growing up, and includes knowing the boundaries of reasonable behaviour and the reasons for them. "Some people think that in alternative schools 'anything goes', but nothing could be further from the truth," explains Hickman.

"Most schools are curriculum- rather than child-driven; in the case of the state system they are test-driven as well. We feel that the children have much more ownership of what goes on in our school. If the children have real involvement, then they become extremely responsible."

The biggest problem for small schools in Britain is the lack of statutory funding. In Denmark, parents have the right to choose an appropriate education for their child, with generous financial support by the state for different types of schools. In the United States many new small schools are being established, while large schools are being actively encouraged to restructure into smaller units – all publicly funded initiatives.

"Killings and violence in American schools have forced many politicians to realise that children must be educated in human scale settings, in which they can be known and supported as individuals," says Fiona Carnie, co-ordinator of HSE.

HUMAN SCALE EDUCATION publishes a list of small schools throughout Britain, many of which are free. Contact them at: 96 Carlingcott, Near Bath BA2 8AW; tel: 01275 332516. Or visit www.hse.org.uk

PARK SCHOOL Park Road, Dartington, Totnes, Devon TQ9 6EQ; tel: 01803 864588. Email parkschb@globalnet.co.uk. Fees are on sliding scale up to £2,877 per year, depending on what parents can afford.

Montessori

Philosophy: children are not pressured to achieve but are encouraged to follow their own path of development. Teachers act more as facilitators within a highly structured curriculum

Maria Montessori was an Italian doctor whose work with special needs children led her to develop new theories about how children learn, and her schools are famous throughout the world. In Britain, her ideas have been mainly implemented in nursery schools, but in the past



Right and below
Upper-school class
playing volleyball,
and a typical
classroom setting at
the Steiner school,
Michael Hall



Above and left
Oxford Montessori

five years, several Montessori primary schools have opened, and now children up to the age of 12 can have a Montessori education.

Montessori teachers see themselves as facilitating learning rather than teaching, and believe all children should learn at their own pace. Great emphasis is placed on learning through cultural activities; and through topics such as geography, history or biology children learn that they are part of a larger world. In primary schools, children work in vertical age groups, often staying with the same teacher for several years. A teacher develops an education plan for each child, based on that child's own interests and ability. In a classroom, every child is engaged in a range of very diverse activities at any given moment.

Daniel Ardizzone and his partner Judith Walker set up Forest Farm Montessori School in Oxfordshire in January 2000. They were already running a network of five Montessori nursery schools, and although they always believed that there was the demand for a primary school, it wasn't until they started investigating local schools for their own children that they were spurred into action.

"Something strange has happened to education in the UK," says Ardizzone. "A formal academic style has taken hold, which is so prescriptive there is no room for spontaneity, even though there's a back-drop of research suggesting that this can do more harm than good. We could not imagine our children in this system without some cost to their wellbeing, which is why we started to explore the alternatives."

OXFORD MONTESSORI SCHOOLS Forest Farm, Elsfield, Oxford OX3 9UW; tel: 01865 358210; www.montesso.demon.co.uk. The school now has two classes for 17 children aged five to 12. Fees from £3,615 per annum. For a list of Montessori schools in the UK, tel: 020 7584 9987; or visit www.montessori.org.uk

Steiner Waldorf

Philosophy: encourages free creative play with a gentle pace to learning and a desire to "protect childhood". Emphasis on practical and artistic education; from six years of age children learn two languages

There are around 800 Steiner Waldorf schools throughout the world, and in the UK there are over 50 Steiner Waldorf nurseries, plus 26

schools for children aged from four to 18. Although often state-funded in other countries, Steiner Waldorf schools are fee-paying in the UK.

Rudolf Steiner's philosophy focuses around three seven-year cycles of development, each with a particular characteristic. From birth to seven, children are in an 'active' or 'will' aspect; from age seven to 14 the child is governed by 'feeling', and from 14 to 21 the child's main aspect is 'cognitive' or 'thinking'. Steiner believed that introducing abstract concepts too early could be detrimental and, as a result, formal learning is not rushed. For example, children do not learn to read or write until their second teeth have come through, at around age six or seven, when they enter the second cycle (see feature on page 50).

One of the key components of Steiner education is free creative play. Steiner schools claim to "protect childhood", the practical and artistic is emphasised, although the education philosophy is holistic and trans-disciplinary. For example, children might learn maths through cooking by weighing and measuring ingredients. In Steiner schools, your child will also learn two foreign languages from the age of six; mental arithmetic is practised daily and no calculators are used until age 12; while computers are not introduced until age 14.

A teacher must stay with a group of children through each seven-year cycle, thereby getting to know each child intimately. GCSEs and 'A' levels are taken a year later than in state schools, and for this reason Steiner Waldorf schools do not feature in league tables because DfEE only lists passes at a particular age. However, results speak for themselves, with grades around double the national average. This is despite the fact that 'A' levels are taken as part of a whole curriculum, unlike mainstream schools where children just study the two or three chosen subjects.

One example of a Steiner Waldorf establishment is Michael Hall School, which stands in beautiful grounds on the edge of the Ashdown Forest in Sussex. It opened in 1925, as the first Steiner Waldorf School in the English-speaking world. They have 565 children from babies to 19, with the youngest getting involved through a parent and child group. Fees for Steiner Waldorf schools are expensive, partly due to the south-east location, ranging from £2,985 to £6,455 per annum, with £4,760 additional costs for boarding. The Michael Hall school has two classes per year, with about 23 children in each class.

MICHAEL HALL SCHOOL Kidbrooke Park, Forest Row, East Sussex



Above The exterior of Summerhill School, with bonfire

Left The Summerhill meeting at the House of Commons, Jubilee Room, May 1999



Left and below Making mini-gardens during the Garden Workshop; and discussing what to do next in the Iron Age Hut Workshop at the Learning Studio, Bishop's Castle, Shropshire



RH18 5JB, tel: 01342 822275; www.michaelball.co.uk

For a list of Rudolf Steiner schools in the UK contact Steiner Waldorf Schools Fellowship, Kidbrooke Park, Forest Row, East Sussex RH18

5JA, tel: 01342 822115, www.steinerwaldorf.org.uk; or visit the Rudolf Steiner archive at www.elib.com/Steiner/eLib.html

A Radical Approach

Philosophy: a unique school where children are involved in all decision-making, and lessons are optional. Internationally recognised as a school that respects children's rights

The most famous and perhaps most radical alternative school is Summerhill in Suffolk. As with many other alternative schools, there is democratic decision-making and rules are decided at school meetings, but the main difference at Summerhill is that lessons are also optional. As one child put it: "You can choose not to go to lessons, but if you pee on the toilet seat you must wipe it off."

Younger children tend to opt out of lessons more – the art room is very popular – but mostly they spend time playing in mixed age groups. Older children often decide they want to gain qualifications and so work at their GCSEs and attend relevant classes. However, the school views choosing not to do exams as a positive step. "I teach science and can see little in GCSEs that is really useful," says teacher Michael Newman. "We have a working party at the school looking into using alternative ideas such as portfolios and references."

The main challenge within the school, which the teachers see as particularly valuable, is that children must actively try to sort out problems between themselves. "Learning about and developing boundaries within a community takes a long time," says Newman. "We give our children the space to learn about the world and themselves, and most children react positively to the opportunities we offer."

Summerhill is also internationally recognised as a school that surpasses expectations in the field of children's rights, but recently they had to fight in the High Court against the DfEE's attempts to close the school. The children argued eloquently in defence of their school, and won their case. As a result, they were given an appointed expert

representative to speak on their behalf to the Department of Education: now Summerhill pupils are the only children in the country with the right to have their views about their school and education listened to by Ofsted inspectors.

SUMMERHILL Westward Ho, Leiston, Suffolk IP16 4HY, tel: 01728 830540. Caters for children aged six to 17, boarding and day. Fees range from £2,253 to £6,876.

Home Education

Philosophy: parents decide to educate their children at home or in learning clubs, rather than delegating it to school. Not as socially isolating as once believed, this form of education is thriving in the US

Home-education is another growing sector (see feature on home education in *Junior July/August 2000*). Education Otherwise, the self-help group for families educating at home, was set up over 20 years ago, and the number of families involved has grown from ten to around 50,000 – about 150,000 children, or 1 per cent of the school age population.

In the United States, home schooling is undergoing an extraordinary growth of up to 15 per cent per year, with 1.7 million children, 3 per cent of the school-age population, currently receiving home education. The biggest increase is among children of lawyers, doctors and other professionals. Swelling numbers mean that in some areas of the US, parents have been able to set up communal classes, as well as a Home Education radio network and regular conferences for parents wanting to discover the best teaching methods. Now similar moves are happening here, which is good news for those who are put off by the potential isolation of home education.

The Otherwise Club, held in a community centre in Kilburn, London two days a week, is a place where home-educated children of all ages meet. Around 40 families are involved at present, and although they can offer plenty of projects, events and outdoor space, they would really like to get their own premises open five days a week, with a permanent home for their resource library, a nursery and café. "A bit like the Carlton Club [a famous London men's club] for home educators!" according to organiser Leslie Safran.



Left Children enjoy an art project at the Otherwise Club
Above and right The Dharma School

Children are grouped by interest rather than age, although there are broad age bands; for instance the nine- to 13-year-olds do history projects together one day a week, while older children can do the Duke of Edinburgh Award.

"We're always out and about," says Safran. "Twenty-five children have just returned from a stay on an organic farm, we are going to visit the London Eye, we do rock climbing, stained-glass workshops and we have recently visited Legoland."

Similar initiatives are happening in rural communities as well. The Learning Studio in Bishops Castle, Shropshire, is a centre where home-educated children meet, play and learn together. Running on a small scale at present, in about two years' time there will be space for 24 children and a full-time facilitator in their own purpose-built building, which will be part of a larger, environmentally friendly development of timber-framed houses, offices, workshops and community buildings.

Work at the Learning Studio is project-based. "For example, water is the main theme for the moment, out of which comes science, history, myths, poetry, dance, painting, maths, and so on," explains Carole Salmon, a director of the Living Village Trust, which owns the 18-acre site. "In life we don't separate things into subjects as we do in school. You wouldn't decide to do 20 minutes of maths, for instance, so why teach children like this? Our students do practical hands-on activities, so that the world is accessible to them now. They don't learn the theory and then try it out when they grow up."

EDUCATION OTHERWISE PO Box 7420, London N9 9SG, tel: 0870 730 0074; www.education-otherwise.org. Offers legal advice and support, a bi-monthly newsletter, and can put you in touch with other home-schooling parents from their list of 70 local contacts.

LIVING VILLAGE 5-7 Castle Green, Bishops Castle, Shropshire SY9 5BY. E-mail living.village@btinternet.com; or visit www.livingvillage.com.

OTHERWISE CLUB The Granville Centre, Granville Road, London NW6; or visit <http://www.choiceineducation.co.uk/toc> Membership: £150, concessions £100, per year per family to join.

Cassells produces "a unique state of restful awareness".

The younger children, up to age 11, are taught a simple meditation technique which they do with their eyes open, while carrying out other tasks such as tidying their desks or walking around the school. Older children sit and meditate for ten minutes every morning after registration.

The other unique aspect of the school's methods is teaching "creative intelligence". This consists of a series of simple principles, such as 'do less, accomplish more' – the idea being to integrate what the children are learning into a more holistic view of the world, and making topics personal and relevant. Not only do pupils seem to perform above average in GCSEs, they also frequently win prizes for creativity at national levels.

However, the Maharishi School does not teach religious education. "It is up to the parents, although we are pro-religion," says Cassells. "Transcendental meditation is not dogma, it is an intellectual exercise."

The Dharma School, in Brighton, on the other hand, is the only Buddhist school in the country, but seems to have a similar atmosphere, where children practise meditation every day after playtime. The school has 70 pupils aged from three to 11 in three mixed-age classes plus a nursery.

The Dharma School also uses the National Curriculum, and has its children sitting SATs. "We don't believe in competition, so we don't have internal exams," explains head teacher Kevin Fossey. "However, our children take SATs so that when they move on to secondary level, they are not marginalised – they have a 'grade'."

Buddha taught that everything is interdependent, but also impermanent: everything changes. The Buddhist School therefore tries to develop a child's flexibility and resilience to deal with change. "Every opportunity is taken to demonstrate the inter-connections between all beings, and between beings and their environment," says Fossey.

THE DHARMA SCHOOL White House, Ladie's Mile Road, Patcham, Brighton BN1 8TB, tel: 01273 502 055. Fees: £3,000 pa, although vouchers fund the nursery.

MAHARISHI SCHOOL Cobbs Brow Lane, Lathom, Ormskirk, Lancashire L40 6JJ, tel: 01695 729912; www.maharishischool.com Fees: £2,736 per annum ages four to 11, £4,008 pa 11-16 years.

Alternative Religious Schools

Follows the national curriculum, but also the daily practice of transcendental meditation. A unique emphasis on developing a child's 'creative intelligence'

Church schools have grown in popularity due to their reputation for high standards and good moral frameworks, so what about a school based on Eastern philosophies? At least two such schools exist, and by all accounts their pupils are attaining excellent results.

The Maharishi School, in Skelmersdale, Lancashire, was founded in 1986, and now has around 100 pupils aged from four to 16. The school uses the National Curriculum, but in addition all pupils practise transcendental meditation, which according to head teacher Derek

RESOURCES

Find out more at the **Alternative Education Fair** on September 29, 2001, Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1. Organised by Human Scale Education – see page 26. Meet individual schools, as well as organisations such as Steiner Waldorf, Montessori and the Home Education Advisory Service.

Education Now 113 Arundel Drive, Bramcote Hills, Nottingham NG9 3FQ, tel: 0115 925 7261 www.gn.apc.org/educationnow Publisher of books and newsletters.