

# Beverley Paine on Natural Learning

John Holt said “learning is as natural as breathing”. I believe this. Our society has turned something as simple and powerful as learning into a convoluted process in order to control the population. Once the media, motivated by profit, fully takes control of this process, I believe society will decline into chaos. Taking back the responsibility of learning, making it personal, making it meaningful to our individual lives, and to the development of our family lives, is the only way to build strong, healthy communities.

It doesn't matter what method or approach to home education we use – all are powerful statements of our determination to control and manage our own destinies, guided by respect and love for our children, the next generation, the future.

There are many misconceptions about natural learning, or as I prefer to call it, learning naturally. I want to talk about these, rather than define what learning naturally is, as I think it's important to break down the barriers of misconception that prevent communities of learners from having meaningful dialogue with each other. As homeschoolers we all face similar issues in our day to day lives as educators and parents. We need to share our experiences; to learn and grow from each others' experiences. One of the elemental aspects of learning is that it occurs in social contexts.

Our homeschooling style has, in the past, been described as relaxed. It is no more relaxed, or unstructured, than someone who follows a strict timetable and a meticulously planned curriculum. Many people struggle as they move to a learning naturally style of homeschooling – it takes time to let go of our own schooled beliefs about learning and to trust in ourselves as mentors and co-learners, to let go of our belief that the school method is the only or best way to educate a child. It was not always thus – for millennia children have learned without schools. For centuries the parents and the family home, and daily engagement within the local community, were the learning tools that took a child and grew him into adulthood. Learning naturally is simply a return to that time-honoured practice.

A useful place to start delving into the complexities of learning naturally is by sharing with you what I believe natural learning is not...

***It is not allowing the children to choose what, when and how to learn things on their own.*** It is, however, it allowing the children to participate in decisions made about what they want to do, and how, and when, and it gives them the opportunity to have greater responsibility within the framework of the family for their own lives. Children are not left to be responsible for their own learning, but are encouraged to explore and learn responsibility, knowledge and skills, and to develop self-motivation and self-discipline gradually according to their developmental needs.

***It is not exposing children to a plethora of experiences and activities – anything and everything!*** Nobody can learn everything there is to learn and know. Offering children a small taste of everything from the smorgasbord of life can often deny them the satisfaction of savouring something to the end of the experience, of investigating deeper and deeper, of uncovering new territory to explore. If you strive to offer everything then you doom yourself to failure,



Honing observation skills.



Respecting and caring for the environment and all living things.



Instilling a love of gardening and learning how to care for plants.



Imagination, fun, creativity and the impermanence of structures.



Becoming self sufficient and highly skilled.



Understanding the appropriate technologies we use at home.



"Junkasaurus" - a recycled garbage community art project.



Lots of time for play and fun with family and friends.

trying to fulfil impossible tasks! This way leads most definitely to symptoms of burn-out.

Natural learning is about matching up the available resources with what is needed – it is selective, temperamental and responsive to individual and family needs. It isn't about inventing a need to match the available resources. It is staying centred in the real world of everyday existence, not offering unrelated fragments of learning experiences for the sake of learning things others outside of the family deem important.

Natural learning recognises that happens unprovoked, incidentally, spontaneously, and values the quiet times of solitude and contemplation usually referred to a 'day-dreaming' or 'doing nothing'; More often than not these are periods of reflection, evaluation or consolidation of knowledge and skills – an essential part of the whole learning process.

*Learning naturally is not focussing on the child's life as the centre of the family.* All family members are learners, each with their own unique learning needs and experiences. Learning is a social phenomenon, moving naturally from the primary caregiver in the infant years, to the rest of the family, then the extended family and trusted friends in the toddler and early childhood years, to the local community as the child grows, and then to the wider community and beyond as responsibility, skills and knowledge grow, always allowing an interactive and interdependent process to occur. No one family member is more important to the family structure than any other – all have their own special unique contributions and places.

Natural learning allows the process of building families, and thus communities, in a time honoured and tested way. It emphasises the development of beneficial and cooperative relationships and associations. It is centred in family and community values and respect for all people.

I truly believe learning naturally is at the centre of all home learning situations no matter what method or approach we adopt.

*Natural learning is not something that we can do with our children. It is what happens, despite what we do.* Learning is a natural as breathing – while we live we can't help learning – it is our responsibility to learn what we can to survive and help others survive.

Our family chooses to celebrate our ability to learn twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, to grow our awareness of our learning needs and how we, as individuals, learn, in order to become trusted, valued and effective members of our community.

There is a general misunderstanding in the homeschooling community that unschooling or learning naturally is simply a matter of letting children do whatever they want, or not setting out anything for them to do - that is, completely unstructured learning. Some people think that natural learning means children are supposed to educate themselves.

However, it doesn't happen like that. We allow life, with all its complexity, to guide the content and direction of our learning, rather than impose a rigid list of particular objectives or skills, determined by others, to be reached by certain ages or year levels. We reject the notion of a traditional school-based curriculum. Our home learning



program isn't devoid of a curriculum - not at all - but from a casual perspective, from a visitor's viewpoint, it would look like it.

In order to feel confident educating my children as we walked along the path of homeschooling I studied education and child development, both on my own using library books, the internet, and talking to other educators and friends who were teachers, and also at University level for a couple of years in the early nineties. It was important for me to know what my children were learning and why, and how to help them set and achieve their own learning goals. I discovered much about individual learning styles and about how learning occurs, and applied this to each learning situation. At the same time we constantly evaluated our values and life goals and designed activities that would move our family in the direction we wanted to go, with life, learning and relationships.

Most people don't know they are natural learners. They don't know they have the ability to celebrate the learning that occurs in their lives every moment of each day. They have been completely dumbed down by the concept that to learn one must be taught. Natural learners often present as passionate, confident, and fulfilled people with a high-level of self-awareness. They tend to celebrate their ups *and* downs, and capitalise on whatever comes their way to grow as individuals and community members. They are problem solvers, creative people, often high achievers in whatever field of endeavour they focus on. Most people don't recognise their own learning ability in each and every moment, and thus don't capitalise and learn more. Awareness is the key. Schools and traditional educational methods of learning don't value self-awareness. It is not valued highly by our society because it empowers the individual to act to root out corruption and uncaring and unethical practices by others.

Self-awareness is something I see homeschooling parents encouraging in their children across the board, regardless of their home education motivations or methods.

Some people believe that natural learning is a "do nothing" or "anything goes" approach." I've found that "anything goes" quickly leads to children feeling so out of control that conflict arises – it isn't long before my guiding hand is needed to bring their life back into balance. The key element to learning naturally is the natural hierarchy of *experience guiding the inexperienced*. Some call this the apprenticeship model of learning, or mentoring. We are our children's first mentors, their first and most trusted teachers.

Some people believe that learning naturally means abandoning a structure. I'm not sure we would have survived homeschooling as a family without a solid structure or scaffold in place! In practice this meant setting long term goals – we envisioned the type of adults we wanted our children to become and the type of children we wanted them to be. We set yearly educational goals for each child, as well as short-term goals that encompassed anything from a week to a few months. Goals like learning to read simple sentences, know the times tables, learn first aid, etc. Our short term goals were often stated as projects - build a fox proof duck yard; learn about the solar system; or the history of South Australia. We set daily objectives – both educational and lifestyle, and often recorded these as a list of things we wanted to do that day. Our days, weeks, months and years were definitely planned and structured, although from an observer's viewpoint it would have looked like we were doing whatever we wanted to each day based on what our immediate needs were.

Looking back I am amazed at what we've achieved as a family. We've all led busy and full lives and learned a great deal.



Caring for wild life.



Life is a balancing act!



Learning from Nature, bushwalking at Deep Creek



Learning building skills from a young age.



Using computers powered by solar energy!



Retelling old stories and wisdom with music, puppets and friends.



Designing and building landscapes comes naturally through play.



Dance classes.

Some people think that parents who focus on allowing their children to learn naturally refuse to teach their children anything, and make them learn by themselves, without help or guidance. This would quickly lead to conflict between parent and child, with the child feeling abandoned and lost. It's a recipe for disaster.

'Teaching' children is something parents do from the child's birth onwards. I don't understand why the very effective and natural way that parents teach their child complex skills and detailed social and intellectual knowledge should be abandoned just because a child turns five. We tried 'school at home' and found it less effective than what we'd done before. Our children taught us that by strongly resisting our urge to teach them things that were unrelated to their conceptual and developmental abilities, or were so far removed from their world of meaning it didn't make any sense.

Instead we taught the children what they needed to know *right now*, what *we* needed them to know *right now*, and what *society* needed them to know *right now*. We kept their learning in the context of their lives, which was firmly rooted in their family and community experience.

This generally meant talking to them, showing them, helping them, challenging them, encouraging them, and listening attentively to them. I never left my children to learn things by themselves – I always made sure that guidance and help, if needed, was at hand.

I question the direction and intent of school curricula, and the emphasis on 'success' in education in general. I'm not happy with the push for young people to 'reach their full potential' by age 18. I think the pressure on young people to achieve unrealistic goals begins with the school curriculum and is reinforced by the media and misguided parental desire. We encourage our children to be the best sports star, pop star, or film star. If they fail at that then we encourage them to acquire wealth, as though that equates with success. Seldom do we encourage our children to determine their own destinies, to seek self-fulfilment, or seek a life of service to others. It doesn't surprise me that Australia has the second highest youth suicide rate in the world.

The traditional curriculum doesn't value or reflect the learning styles of a good many children – and it fails those young people miserably. There are very many ways to learn and the most effective is hands on activity combined with intelligent and respectful conversation. It is better to learn mathematics with someone who needs to use it for a meaningful purpose than to pour over a silent book trying to make sense of abstract figures. Mentoring is far superior to passive teaching. Society was constructed this way in the past and it produced great minds and great progress. We've forgotten the merits of the old ways of learning, the natural ways.

Some families worry that allowing a more natural way of learning to unfold in the home will mean that children will choose not to learn subjects that are unpleasant to them at the time.

If the learning is meaningful and in context children will work on a concept until they have mastered it, even though the tasks involved may be unpleasant, frustrating or difficult. This is a fact of life and it's one that children accept from the cradle. Not all things in life are pleasant. Our current obsession with the fad "learning must be fun", one of the most wicked tools of the companies that make profit from



education, demeans the natural intelligence of our children and ourselves.

Some of my most poignant and important lessons in life have come at times of greatest conflict, or sadness. I see this also in my children's lives. We celebrate the learning that each moment brings and reject the notion that learning has to be fun, or happy, or cheerful, or easy...

That said, however, my children and I question the need to learn specific things in a specific order at specific times in a young person's life. We determine our own learning goals. We negotiate those goals as a family, to help each other learn best.

We instructed or helped our children learn the things we thought were important when learning them was most meaningful to the learner. Instead of learning a particular skill at say age six, my son learned it at age ten. Learning still followed a natural sequence, but much of the dull repetition and rote learning used in schools was not necessary. Learning, like physical growth, didn't follow a smooth curve, but leapt and lagged and lagged and leapt. Our goals, nonetheless, were reached.

As John Holt emphasised in his writing, parenting and educating our children in this way takes faith in their ability to learn. We must trust that they can, and want to, learn, and that they can guide us in that process as much as we can guide them.

Most of us begin with 'school at home' because that is what we are comfortable with and what we know. It's a great place to start. All families move on to find the structure and routines that best suit their individual family values, needs and lifestyle. We select from a vast variety of learning tools. John Holt, the writer and educational reformist who coined the word 'unschooler', believed in text books as a useful method of instruction. As a natural learner I've learned from text books and courses, both in class and as a distance education student, as have all three of my children. The difference is that we are in control of our learning processes – we negotiate with our mentors the learning objectives. We make the learning tasks personally meaningful.

Underpinning our educational endeavour is the swift current of learning naturally, taking us on exciting voyages of self-discovery and community building.

From time to time I would worry that I was neglecting my children's education, but as I recorded our daily activities it was easy to see how they filled with learning. I learned how to convert our daily activities into educational jargon – this trick was especially reassuring. Dressing up and playing postman naturally covered language learning, social studies, personal development, some maths learning and drama. Likewise with Lego – I've learned to recognise the traditional curriculum in everyday Lego play: classifying, sorting, patterns, symmetry, levers, pulleys, planning, and design - all elements of the mathematics and technology curriculum learning areas. It is by doing this consistently over many years that I was able to see how closely our non-curriculum followed the school curriculum, which led me to believe that the school curriculum is based on a child's natural developmental progress as well as society's requirements (employment training based aspect of all school curricula).

I've been asked if children learn basic skills in their teens. It depends upon what skills they are and how relevant they are to one's life. I don't believe that it is easier to learn certain things at certain ages, or before certain ages. I have 80 year old friends that, when they apply themselves diligently to a learning task, experience success, in the same time or less than it would take a child to learn the same task. In many ways it is easier to learn as an adult as



Performing.



Art and craft work.



Playing pretend games with toys and siblings.



Helping each other learn new skills.



Looking after and playing with each other.



Studying together.



Learning occurs anywhere, at any time.



Learning from experts during homeschool excursions.



Learning to play a musical instrument with friends.



Pets are an important part of our lives.



Caring for animals.

learning can be more meaningful and purposeful – related to personal goals.

When I look at how I learn best I can see the following processes happening:

I become **immersed** in whatever it is that I am interested in learning. I **find out as much as I can** about my task or interest - it becomes almost obsessive, until my appetite for information or quest for skills has abated. I become **totally focussed** and involved. It doesn't matter if I am learning to tie a shoe lace or rebuild a combustion engine; the concentration that follows my intense interest drives the learning process. This is immersion. This is natural learning.

I recognise that as an individual I would learn very little on my own and left to my own devices. Humans are social creatures - we learn by watching and by listening to others. Sometimes this is called imitation, or another, less favoured word is copying. But more importantly I **observe the demonstrations** that take place everyday of those skills and actions I need or want to emulate. The higher my interest or passion the closer I observe and learn. If I wanted to learn to play piano I would seek out the company of other pianists and watch, listen and learn, copy their playing techniques, ask them to demonstrate their skill for me. **Observation and demonstration** are key aspects to natural learning.

But learning doesn't flow from simply observing others demonstrating skills, or listening to the knowledge and wisdom of others. Learning involves **engagement**, actively doing whatever it is I need to do in order to learn. The best learning occurs when my interest is focussed and I am using my whole body. I am an active learner. A person that 'does' as well as 'think'. I actively construct my experiences, in a social context.

No one learns in a social vacuum. Whether the **expectation to learn and succeed** comes from within us or from others this expectation is a necessary aspect of learning. A high level of expectation of success is a prerequisite to success. Natural learners **trust** in the innate ability of children and adults to learn. This trust is grounded on a firm foundation of acute observation of past experience. Most importantly, as a learner, I feel supported by this trust and faith in my ability to be a successful learner by important people in my life.

I understand the **responsibility** for learning rests completely with me, the learner. To engage in meaningful and successful learning I may engage the services of a teacher, but the teacher can't coerce or force me to learn if I am not interested or motivated to learn at that particular moment. I can remember many times learning 'parrot fashion' or memorising lessons in school that had no meaning for me. I scarcely remember the content of those lessons at all, and realise that much of what I learned at school was because I had to, rather than wanted to. I rarely understood why I needed to learn at all everything put before me, and most of it has either left me completely or has never been of any practical use in my adult life.

When I think back to my most successful learning experiences as a child I can see that I was fully engaged, interested and passionate. I now recognise that these were also the times that I carried the responsibility for my own learning; times I was allowed to be fully responsible for the learning occurring.



Of course, it is important to *use and practice* new learning or it quickly fades. This isn't the same as rote memorising or doing pages and pages of drill exercises... for the natural learner using the new skill or knowledge in a meaningful context a couple of times is all that is required to firmly cement it into the realms of experience, ready to be recalled and used at any time in the future. We tend to forget those things that are not of use, or interest or learned without full engagement of our minds and bodies.

As a learner I often make mistakes - *make guesses, approximations, have a go, try things out*. This is another essential aspect of the learning process. Everyone makes approximations in the learning process - there is nothing inherently wrong with it. Some people value the ability to make approximations highly, seeing it as creative or lateral thinking! Viewing 'mistakes' as positive learning experiences opens up many doors, inviting learners on journeys of discovery... The wisest piece of advice on learning that I've ever heard was to value the process of asking questions over that of discovering answers. The question is the key to discovery, and the question can never be wrong!

All of us need feedback, some kind of *response* to our learning journeys. I know I do. Natural learners don't thrive on reward or punishment - stickers, certificates or detention - no one does. Natural learners thrive on meaningful and positive feedback. *Critical evaluation needs to be continuous, reflective, constructive, positive and supportive.*

Learning is a natural phenomenon. It is like breathing. When it stops, you're dead! It occurs in the home learning environment regardless of educational philosophy and methodologies adopted. Taking advantage of this type of learning offers a superior education seldom found in educational institutions.

## Tips for Natural Learning

If you want to take advantage of your children's natural learning you need to become astute observers of their behaviour, interests, likes and dislikes, and to begin to understand the ways in which they learn best. Allow your children to choose what, when and how to learn things on their own. Allow them to participate in decisions made about what they want to do, and how, and when; and give them opportunity to have greater responsibility within the framework of your family for their own lives. Don't leave your children to be responsible for themselves, encouraged them to explore responsibility, and to gradually accept self-responsibility according to their overall development.

Don't fall prey to exposing your children to a plethora of experiences, activities - anything and everything! Recognise the richness of everyday existence and take time exploring that. Build on the interests and strengths already present in children. Be selective, temperamental and responsive to individual and family needs, and as your children grow, to the needs in your immediate social community. Stay interested in what is on offer (as resources and activities), and choose wisely, matching what is out there to what is needed, not making up a need to match what is available! Learn to let go of what you don't need - unhelpful attitudes, experiences and materials, and focus on what you really want out of each experience. Stay 'rooted' in the real world of everyday existence, not offering unrelated fragments of 'learning experience' for the sake of learning.

Recognise and celebrate how much learning happens incidentally, unprovoked, unstructured, spontaneously. Allow for quiet, calm times of solitude or togetherness, recognising the learning value of them, as well as encouraging lots of activity. Don't focus on your child's life as the centre in the family. Remember that everyone one in your family is a learner, with unique needs and experiences. No one member is more important to the family's social structure



Helping to building our house.



Caring for plants – working in our home orchard.



Landscaping projects around the home – building a greywater system.



Running their own L.E.T.S. stall with friends at a community market.



Helping Dad install the new solar panels. Thomas, now 17, monitors the system.



Thomas working and studying on his computer.



April, 23.



Roger, 21, feeding the magpie.



The house that Robin, Beverley, April and Roger built.

than any other - all have their own special unique contributions and places. Natural learning for children is a social phenomenon, moving from the primary caregiver, to family, to local community, to wider society and beyond, always allowing an interactive and interdependent process to occur.

Natural learning is building family, and then community; it places emphasises on the development of beneficial and co-operative relationships and associations. It is not something you can do with your child. Natural learning is what happens anyway, despite what you do. Natural learning is what we allow to happen - not what we make or create. Learning is a process, not a product or outcome.

Self education is a good term for what I now call 'learning naturally'. I don't like the term 'natural learning', even though I occasionally use it as it's too vague and nebulous - all learning is natural. Learning occurs 24/7 (as my daughter would say). If you're breathing you're learning. You can't help it. Most folk don't see 'sub' or 'un' conscious learning as learning.

Self directed learning, or allowing a child the right to control their own learning, is fine once that age/stage mentioned above is reached. Until then parents (caregivers) have a responsibility to see that the child's learning needs are met. This is the hard bit, where parental/societal values must 'fit' the child if all is to go well. Mostly it's a hit and miss affair. The closer to a 'natural' social setting/environment the child lives in, the easier it is to 'hit'.

I place a lot of importance on the learning environment - not just physical either. Emotional, social, spiritual aspects of environments are important.

I believe that a child will follow a learning naturally process as a matter of course - he or she has no option. It's up to the parents (caregivers) to understand what the child's learning needs are and to work towards meeting them. Luckily we're all human and have more in common/alike than not - and are thus our needs are common and easily determined. We can use empathy and sympathy and honest memory to guide us as to what young children need and want in order to grow happily in all directions.

I think that any one can learn any thing any time if they work out how to drum up enough motivation. Knowing who we are and what we want (from life) seems to be a key to successful accomplishment of any goal. Naming the goal (based on who we are and what we want - understanding of 'self') seems crucial in this process. Young children don't articulate this verbally, of course, they live it. Hence their very successful learning experiences in early life.

Pioneering members of the home education movement in Australia, Beverley and Robin Paine are passionate advocates of true educational choice for families. They began homeschooling their children in 1986 and three years later started the [South Australian Home Based Learners](#) network. Beverley wrote [Getting Started with Homeschooling](#) in 1995-97 and since then continues to write books and booklets on home education. She balances spending time helping home educators with working in her garden and renovating her home, as well as continuing to build her collection of writing on a variety of homeschooling subjects. Beverley maintains an [extensive collection of websites](#) as well as several Yahoo groups supporting families teaching their children at home. In 2007 Beverley joined the [Home Education Association](#) and was a committee member for three years during which time she edited and produced the HEA Newsletter, Stepping Stones for Home Educators magazine, annual Resource Directory and other HEA publications. If you'd like to keep in touch with what Beverley is up to her in her life, sign up for the [Homeschool Australia Newsletter](#) or visit her Homeschool Australia [Facebook page](#).