

## **Home Education: The Power of Trust**

Leslie Safran  
Independent Scholar

**Abstract** *Research into the effects of long term home educating on the parents suggests that a common educational approach involves parents trusting their children to learn on their own and also trusting their children's competence to contribute to the design of their educational programme. This involves sharing control of educating decisions with the children, expecting a degree of competence in their ability to decide, maintaining confidence in them and being willing to take some risks. Together, children and parents negotiate the meaning of education for themselves in an active creation of an educational style that suits them, changing the style in accord with their development. If the outcome is successful, further trust is elicited from the parents. Such a relationship with learning encourages children to be self-motivated, active in determining what interests them and at ease with the practice of acting on their decisions. The style of education which typically emerges will be examined in detail. Trusting children to make decisions about their education furthers a relationship to learning that both serves the child, encouraging self-determination, and, as an unexpected consequence, serves the parents who can develop the tools and the appetite for life-long learning.*

**Keywords** trust, home education, learning, self-motivation, children, parents

### **Introduction**

While home educating my children and co-ordinating The Otherwise Club (a community centre for home educating families in central London) and again in the course of my PhD research into the effects of home educating on parents (Safran, 2008), I was struck by the degree to which parents trusted their children. Although this was not the focus of my investigations the repeated evidence of parents trusting their children not only to learn by themselves, but also to take an active part in the design of their educational programme has prompted me to analyse the trust involved in this relationship.

Leslie Safran  
Independent scholar  
lesliesafran@googlemail.com

Home educating parents and children face daily challenges for which there are no rules, guidelines nor blueprints from mainstream society. Together, parents and children negotiate the meaning of education for themselves, changing their educational style in accord with their development. This creative practice is one involving both the defining and formative features of this style of education and, importantly, includes input from the child. It is this trust that the parents give their child, the belief that the child can learn, be taught and be a competent contributor to the design of their own education that is the subject of this paper.

Before describing in detail this trusting creative practice taking place, I would like to give some brief background to home education and outline the nature of the research which provides evidence for the wide spread phenomenon of home educating parents putting trust in their children.

### **Brief Overview of Home Education**

For the purpose of the study, a two part definition of home education will be adopted. Home education is firstly, “full-time education of children in and around the home chosen by their parents or guardians” and secondly, an undertaking “where the parents are committed to their [children’s] education and home-educating” (Petrie, 1998; Petrie, Windrass & Thomas, 1999). This definition highlights the elective nature of home education as well as drawing attention to the commitment required by parents in taking this step.

It was not until the 1944 Education Act in England and Wales and the rise of mass public compulsory schooling that “home education” could define itself as a distinct educational approach. John Holt was an early and influential proponent of home education in its modern guise, both in the UK and USA. Holt had been influenced by the free school movement of the 1960s and early 70s represented by the writings of Goodman, such as *Growing Up Absurd* (1960), Postman & Weingartner (1971), and Illich (1971), by the experiences at different types of schools described by Neill (1961, 1966, 1967) and Dennison (1970), and by more general educational theorists such as John Dewey and Bertrand Russell. In Holt’s series of publications it is possible to trace his transition from initial criticism of the school system to his final advocacy of home education. This can be seen from some of the titles of his books, for example, *How Children Fail* (1969) and *How Children Learn* (1970a), *What Did I Do Monday?* (1970b), and *The Underachieving School* (1972) to his last books, *Teach Your Own* (1981) and, published posthumously, *Learning All the Time* (1989).

Home education has always been legal in England and Wales (Scotland’s law differs slightly) and is enshrined in the 1996 Education Act. The responsibility to home educate is the parents’ alone. In the USA, while home education has been legal since 1993, each state has its own laws (Basham, 2001). Requirements vary from state to state with regard to the amount of monitoring and testing required by

educational authorities in order to allow families to continue to home educate (Lines, 2000; Basham, 2001).

The reasons why a family begins to home educate will obviously influence their feelings about the enterprise. For example, if a family chooses to home educate because they are committed to a type of educational approach then they will see home education as a positive step. But if a family begins to home educate because their child is having trouble at school then they may see the step as a mark of failure for the family in that they and their child were not able to fit into the prevalent educational system and they may feel defeated and overwhelmed. In either case, however, they are both newcomers to the practice and must learn how to go forward in a way that suits their needs.

### **The Research**

Data for the research (Safran, 2008) came from 34 in-depth interviews of home educating parents who had been home educating for more than three years. This time period was selected in the expectation that this constituted a long enough time for families to be settled in their choice to home educate, and for them to have become articulate and reflective about it. This may be said to bias the research toward those who found home education a successful experience. However, given that it is the effect of positive experiences that was being studied this does not present a problem.

Parents were chosen from the United States, England and Wales to mitigate any objection that the results were not due to home education but to national characteristics. It was found that despite the national and cultural differences between these countries there were no appreciable differences in the attitudes of parents towards home education (Thomas, 1998).

A brief outline of the background characteristics of the parents will give some idea of the diversity of the parents interviewed. Of the 34 parents, four were interviewed as couples (three were heterosexual couples and one was a lesbian couple) and seven as single parents. Thirty one were women and three were men. In four cases two parents from the same family were interviewed. Thirteen of the 34 parents were from the USA. The number of children in each family ranged from one to seven. There were 87 children in the thirty families. Of the 30 families, eight families (33 children) began home education without sending their children to school. Twenty two families began to home educate after there had been a problem with their eldest at school. Fewer than half the parents have a first degree at university. Three have a further degree. Four are qualified teachers. Eight parents were educated to secondary school level.

The three fathers interviewed work full time in paid employment. Their wives are the main home educators. One parent in the lesbian couple also works full time.

Of the 31 mothers interviewed, eleven work part time in paid employment. Twenty mothers did not have paid employment.

The main reason for home educating mentioned was either that their children were unhappy at school or that home education was a natural extension of their parenting beliefs. Religion did not play a significant part in the decision to home educate among those taking part in this study.

The interviewed families volunteered to be part of the research project either through word of mouth or by responding to adverts placed on home education internet lists and in the home education press. After transcribing the interviews in full, it became apparent that analysing the interviews would be complicated (Perryman, 2007). Each interview consisted of about 5000 words leading eventually to nearly 170,000 words of interview material. A matrix was created for each interview question and a distillation and collation of the data from the matrices was then compiled with answers grouped into themes (Ball, 1991). After all the interviews were collated the number of parents who had commented on any particular issues could be easily identified. Threads and stories were then grouped into general areas of agreement between interviewees to see if any common significant themes arose (Ely, 1991).

Numerous methodological considerations related to this study have been detailed elsewhere (Safran, 2008) but include such issues as the role of the participant researcher, the problem of maintaining objectivity, the method of contacting interviewees, the way interviews were conducted and recorded and how the data was analysed.

### **An Analysis of Trust**

To understand the trust that parents bestow on their children when home educating, several factors need to be considered. These include handing over some control to another of a crucially important activity for their lives, it being reasonable to expect a degree of competence to be present in that person for the task at hand, maintaining confidence in the ability of the person on a long term basis and being willing to take some risks. The trust that parents bestow on their children is expressed through negotiating what education will mean to them and rests on the assumption that the parents are willing both to challenge their old ideas about education and to explore a new style of education with their children. Exactly what this practice entails in terms of trusting their children will now be discussed.

Trust is shown when parents who are charged by society with being responsible for their children's education become willing to hand some of this responsibility over to their children. This could happen gradually but as time goes on and if the outcome is, in the main, successful, more and more control can be granted to the child. Together, parents and children negotiate the meaning of education and while parents are willing

to support their children, it is expected that the children will eventually take on the main educational responsibility.

Usually, when trust is placed in someone in the sense of handing over control, such as to a doctor or a builder, they are being trusted to do something for you that you cannot do yourself. For example, I might trust the dentist to fulfil my expectation with regard to repairing and maintaining the health of my teeth because I do not have the skill or expertise to be able to do this. However, in the case of home-educated children, they are being trusted with creating and devising their own education for themselves. They are not being trusted to do something for another, as is a dentist. Also, while they are given power over something for which they have no initial expertise, unlike the dentist, hopefully the children will develop some expertise regarding their educational choices through actual practical experience. Further, unlike the dentist, the child might not see itself as being trusted and not be aware that the parent expects something of them, but they might be pleased to be taking part in the decision process of the family.

The parent does not leave the child entirely to their own devices, but rather is at hand to advise, monitor, support and facilitate the child in its educational practice. The negotiation of what 'education' means and who has the immediate control over it is continually being reconsidered and weighed by both parties and the balance of influence can subtly shift time and time again as any tension between the child and the parents is played out on a daily basis. Ultimately, however, it is expected that the parents will become the minor player by slowly relinquishing control over the child's education to the child itself.

Trust is furthered by successes, reinforcing the parents in their belief that the child is competent to devise and put into practice education for itself. It is not clear that anyone can know what is in the best interest of another, or even of oneself, but this home education style of education has a reasonable chance to serve the interests of the learner given that they participate intimately in the devising of it. In participating they can discover and even create their interests. Also, the parents who are helping to negotiate the education, should have a better understanding of their unique child than a teacher facing a classroom and are therefore more likely to meet the child's needs. But even if the content of the education turns out to not be relevant to the child, their style of education will give the child the tools with which to develop critical abilities, to learn to prioritise, to learn to research and to generally develop the educational skills needed to become a lifelong learner.

The parent constantly assesses the child's ability to assume the responsibility for its education and renews the trust placed in the child although the parent may not be conscious of this. They monitor the situation over time to determine how well their expectations are being fulfilled and whether their confidence is justified. The parents will need to continually judge whether the procedure is showing promise and whether what children are learning and how they are spending their time is in line with their educational vision. It is important that the parent stand by this approach through

problems as well as successes. But as this is not a static testing of the child but something that happens naturally within the ebb and flow of everyday life, parents can develop a minute understanding of the child and become more competent themselves to judge the adequacy of their choices. The trust that parents put in the children to contribute to their educational practice involves a long-term commitment as the child's competence can ultimately only be tested through its future outcome. This may take months or possibly years.

As well as the potential benefits there are obvious risks involved in trusting children to learn for themselves and to help decide the form their education will take. The risks are taken in several areas. First, parents are taking a risk through the choice to home educate at all as they are implicitly rejecting the tried and tested mainstream social methods of education in favour of largely unknown and unresearched practice for which they and their children now have sole responsibility. Second, parents have to live through the real and daily concern of having made a decision that could adversely affect their children's future in an important way. Third, by passing on the daily responsibility for deciding what, where and when to learn to their children, parents are risking the children feeling a failure if the outcome is not successful. Lastly, by not following an authorised curriculum endorsed by experts but instead placing an enormous expectation on their children, parents open themselves up to the criticism that they have disadvantaged their dearly beloved and cherished offspring.

However, in practice, through small daily lived ups and downs and continual interactions, the trust the parents have placed in their children can be extended and could lead to parents taking more risks by departing even further from the mainstream if that is what the children want to do.

### **Trust and the Practice of Home Education**

Despite the style of education being devised independently by the families in my research, they all developed a child-led educational approach to some degree. The characteristics of this child-led learning are that the education is open ended in time and place with little or no regard of formal structures, that families use an eclectic mix of educational styles, that there is a heavy reliance on conversation as a method of learning, and that the role of the parent becomes less a teacher and more a facilitator.

This handing over control varied between and within families, at different times of the child's life and with the length of time during which home education was practiced. Some parents entirely accepted the practice of not setting a fixed time or place for learning and not making a clear distinction between learning time and non-learning time. For example, several parents mentioned that education happens anywhere and at any time so there is no need to set up formal and rigid educational structures. Jane trusted her children entirely to create the education they needed. She said of her style of education: "They do what they want to do when they want

to do it” (interview, April 2000). Jackie described her style of education as “just basically going with whatever they want to do. Not trying to push them to do anything” (interview, July 2004). Sarah talked about letting the children set the agenda for their education. Sarah did this by purposely not reading anything about ‘how to’ home educate but letting her children tell her what they wanted: “my way was to learn along with my children. I deliberately didn’t read books about it at the start as I wanted to do what felt right” (interview, April 2000). In this way not only did she learn from her children what style of education they felt comfortable with but incidentally, gained knowledge and skills, along with them. One mother, Beth, described how she learned to hand over control of her children’s learning to her child:

From when [my daughter and son] were particularly young... There was the time that they were working on some project and they couldn't get the glue bottle opened and I was working in the kitchen and they were just over in the corner and they came to me with the glue bottle that they wanted opened, and it took me a while and I asked them what the project was and started telling them how to do it, and then in seconds they were nowhere to be seen. (Beth, interview, September 1999)

Because Beth’s inappropriate response to their project pushed the children away, she modified her behaviour. She spoke about another time when she was able to put into practice what she had learnt and trusted that her children would ask for what they needed to know:

[My daughter] came in and asked me a question, and I had been to school and I knew that lesson and I had just a brilliant reflection about the whole topic beyond the answer to the question. But I had learned [what] not to do with answering questions. So she asked her question and I answered her question very briefly, whatever it was. And then in my head I racked up the entire topic and came to a brilliant conclusion [...]. (Beth, interview, September 1999)

Beth feels that her traditional understanding of education prepared her to deliver a lecture on the topic her daughter had asked about but she chose not to, remembering how she drove her daughter away on the earlier occasion. Instead she had learned to trust that her child asked for the information needed.

Parents and children keep revising their ideas about what education means to their family as their children develop. Annie said:

We kind of go along, I try and talk to the kids and find out where they are at the moment, what they want to achieve and stuff and work out

between us what's the best way to go about that. But it changes a lot. My twelve year old now works on big projects and asks for help when he needs it. I find [home education] changes constantly. I find you can't really apply one method to all of them at all times. (Annie, interview, July 2004)

It is obvious that these parents relinquish control over the educational practices and trust their children to push them forward.

Other parents retained more control over their children's education but still trusted their children to distinguish what they needed and when they needed it. Sophie described her family's educational style: "I would suggest something and they would either say 'yes let's go with it' or not" (interview, August 2004).

The flexibility of home education allows for different children to find different ways to suit their educational style often even within the same family using an eclectic mix of educational styles. Which educational style is used is negotiated with each child at any one time through the tailoring of the curriculum to suit different children's different educational needs, preferences and abilities. Maggie said that her older child did not like set, structured work. However, her younger son liked having "some structured bits. We actually do maths properly. We have a bag with all his maths books in. He actually likes doing maths and stuff" (Maggie, interview, July 2004).

Sue agreed, saying her two children were very different from each other: "my eldest daughter, she likes the academic work and I have another one just hates everything that you could think of that's academic but is very intelligent" (interview, July 2000). The lack of an externally set curriculum allows parents to incorporate and validate children's differences into the informal educational setting. The home education situation allows families not only to vary their curriculum over time but also to vary learning and teaching with each child.

It is becoming apparent from these cases that the child is the prime controller with the parents being guided by the child's educational wishes. It is through participation in creating and implementing their children's education that parents and children attach new meaning and practice to "education." This mutual devising of the education requirements develops and continually reinforces the trust that the parents place in their children's ability to learn.

In this child-led learning style there is a concentration on spontaneous and immediate learning with an emphasis on conversation. Conversation is an important vehicle for sharing thoughts, developing intimacies, making ideas explicit and working through problems (Jeffs & Smith, 2005). It is unpredictable, immediate and can have a life of its own. Many parents said that conversation played a big role in their educational package. For example, Linda said: "We chat a lot about what he's doing and where he's going" (interview, April 2000).

Maria said open conversation was a good way to frame educational activities:

[B]ut I don't direct the discussion so much, I mean, I don't say, 'so what do you think of the...?' ...I guess I go about it in a very unstructured way as if I were reading with you. You know, or my husband and I when we're together, and one of us would say 'wow, do you believe this' you know, it's just very, very loose (Maria, interview, August 2000).

The immediacy of conversation is an important part of the educational role of parents but it also plays a part in parents maintaining the trust placed in their children (Thomas, 1994). Maria reported that their day involved work on the house and smallholding and “conversation.” The conversation would be around some items in the newspaper or a book that was read aloud to the whole family. She said:

[O]ver the years we have done so much talking in the garden, and the quality of that time was more important, and even in the teenage years when the mother and daughter relationship is not always that easy... When we get in the garden and we're just working there or reading or doing some mindless task, there's an opening, there's an opening up. (Maria, interview, August 2000)

Maria remarks that open conversation around an activity was able to keep trust alive during difficult times.

Parents who having understood and internalised this child led practice, allowed their children to be the prime motivators and creators of their education. They used the term “facilitator” to describe their new role in their children’s education. Peter described his role as a facilitator in detail:

[Y]ou're not a teacher. You're a facilitator. It's a very different function in 'HE'. Because your children have to want to acquire that knowledge and have a thirst for knowledge. They have to be going out there looking for it. Our function, as I see it, is just to help them do that. Not to feed them the information. The information's there for them. You don't need somebody to do that. (Peter, interview, July 2004)

The term “facilitator” describes how Peter sees his role in his children’s education and this word was frequently used by other parents in independent interviews. Joan said: “[W]ell I think of myself less as an educator but as a facilitator really. To enable my children to discover who they are rather than me imposing things on them” (interview,

April 2004). Linda said: “I felt my role was as a facilitator. I would find out. He would come to me and say he wanted to do this thing” (interview, April 2004).

The maintenance of trust through the daily lived experience of handing over control is exemplified by a story from my own experience with my son. When he was five he began to learn to play the violin. I thought he needed to practice for half an hour a day, as was the prevailing wisdom of the time. This practice time was fraught and invariably ended with him in tears and me yelling with frustration. I realised this experience would soon put him off the instrument. I decided to stop the scheduled practice time entirely and leave the violin playing and practice to him for a month. If his teacher realised that he had not practiced and said that this was a problem I would think again. His teacher never said anything. My son did not practice but his playing improved and he eventually became a good musician. This experience taught me that it was safe to trust him to do what he needed for his own education and I further relinquished my own control allowing him to be more in control of his education. His continued development maintained my trust that this was the right approach with regard to the violin.

Small “successes” that were identified by Beth in her daughter’s learning process and her own facilitating role reinforced her trust that this educational style was working. Beth, having already answered one of her daughter’s questions, said:

[My daughter] came to me with her next question, she had taken my answer and connected it to whatever she was thinking about, and she had her next question. And you know, it had nothing to do with my entire non-verbalised lecture frame. And so I answered her new question, and she was satisfied and ran away. I had time then to figure out how [my daughter] got from A to Z when B was obviously the next [step]. Once she was away I could think about how she got from the first to second. But what I did realise was that if I had been talking I would have interfered with any thinking that she might have been doing. (Beth, interview, September 1999)

Beth’s daughter had taken a different path through the topic than her mother. That may be because she did not have the school experience of her mother, or it may be due to her particular circumstances such as her age, interests or experience or it may be that she had her own context in mind when asking the question. However, for whatever reason they differed: Beth had learnt that there are many good ways to develop a topic and that her daughter was receiving the information she required with the assurance that her pursuit of the topic was worthwhile. For Beth the most important lesson was to allow her daughter to develop her own thought process and not to impose her own thought processes. She learnt to trust her daughter’s ability to devise and implement her own education.

This intimate portrayal by Beth of her educational relationship with her child illustrates her continual negotiation of the meaning of education and her continual tailoring of the practice. Beth's practices help maintain her trust in her daughter's ability to devise the education that she needs.

Risk is also a factor in this relationship of trust. The risk inherent in this educational style was evidenced by Jane:

I was very conformist about things like exams, GCSE's and 'A' levels and university degrees, whereas now I'm very aware that I've changed. It wouldn't bother me if [my children] didn't have any [exams], because I think [home education] is so great that if they didn't have them I would feel that it was because they didn't want them. Whereas maybe ten years ago I would have thought they didn't have them because they failed. (Jane, interview, April 2000).

Jane shows her trust in her children's opinions about their education. Through her home educating experience she no longer accepts the usual educational standards but was willing to risk that her children's choices about their future will be worth making whatever these choices may be. She trusts that even if some decisions her children make were wrong, they have still learnt how to make choices and correct them. They have developed into self-determining, responsible individuals with the means to negotiate a good life for themselves.

Jane's position is not something that she has come to quickly. We can surmise from what Jane says that she has reached this attitude through numerous small steps over a number of years of trusting her children to make reasonable decisions with regard to their education. If the children are successful in knowing and finding what they need and in overcoming setbacks over the years of home educating, this trust is validated and joined by pride in her children's accomplishments. Jennifer talked about how her views about reading age have changed:

It's quite shocking really to think that I actually used to think that because now you see kids in the group and some are small and they can read and some are fourteen and they can't read. I realise it doesn't matter. (Jennifer, interview, July 2004)

Jennifer no longer feels that it is necessary to define an age when a certain level of literacy must be attained. This is quite different to mainstream educational theory and practice and could be seen by some as a risky attitude towards reading abilities. Many would hold that if a child did not read by a certain age that the child had learning difficulties. But Jennifer is willing to take the risk that abilities will develop by the child when that skill is needed.

These characteristics of child-led education are the result of parents putting their trust in their children to choose their own learning styles.

### **Conclusion**

When parents first trust their children to participate in devising and implementing their own education, both participants engage in a new relationship regarding something neither of them know a lot about. They are embarking on a shared adventure. Gradually, as they continue to negotiate the meaning of education for themselves and experience even modest success, the initial trust is reinforced. As the child develops, the parent can hand over more and more control, and feel less worried about the bad times encountered or about the false starts and wrong paths. The children, on the other hand, become more and more self-motivated, learning to think for themselves, becoming adept at the process of attaining knowledge and skills, being active in determining what interests them and feeling at ease with the practice of acting on their decisions.

Eventually, in most cases, this trust in children to educate themselves is vindicated by the production of self-determining individuals with the necessary knowledge and skills to both live a full life and engage in lifelong learning. Further, the children would be entitled to be proud of their endeavours in shaping their own education and may even come to realise that through their parents placing trust in them they feel appreciated and encouraged to trust their own decisions. They may also discover the value of trusting others.

The home educating parental undertaking requires time, effort and commitment. It is practiced 24 hours a day, seven days a week and involves an important responsibility for which parents typically feel inadequate. On top of this, the fact that it concerns one's cherished children means that the activity is highly emotionally charged which both motivates and terrifies. But through the trusting and creative practice of negotiating and facilitating what education means for them and their children, parents not only create new bonds but also develop abilities and attitudes that will stand them in good stead for the rest of their lives.

Not only does trusting children to actively take part in educational decisions enhance their personal development and promise a relationship to learning which serves the children well, but as an unexpected consequence it also serves the parent who can attain the tools and appetite for lifelong learning. Further, parents can come to see that being trusted with control over one's life, despite setbacks and risks, can be extended, over other areas of their lives which they may once have handed over to 'experts', such as health and career. Parents learn the power of trust through trusting others to do for themselves, possibly without realising the implications for their own personal development.

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**Author Details**

Leslie Safran is an international author and lecturer on home education and children's rights. Email: [lesliesafran@googlemail.com](mailto:lesliesafran@googlemail.com)

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