The educating of school-aged children outside the public or private school environment, typically by parents or guardians. Home schooling is a legal option in all the 50 U.S. states and is often chosen for religious reasons or because of dissatisfaction with institutionalized educational settings.

See also
Educational Law, Educational Policy

Summary Article: Home Schooling
From Sociology of Education: An A-to-Z Guide

This is an era of discontent over the quality and efficacy of compulsory public schooling. Concerned about the education and safety of their children, an increasing number of parents are seeking educational alternatives. The options include private schools, charter schools, and school vouchers. A small, but growing number of parents are forgoing institutionalized schools altogether in favor of home schooling. Estimates of the number of children currently home schooled in the United States range from 1.5 million to 2 million. Though parents vary in their justifications for teaching their children at home, they share a common family structure: most are white, middle-class, with at least two children, a breadwinning father, and a stay-at-home mother. In virtually all cases, the mother is responsible for the daily operation of the home school. Home schooling, defined as educating children primarily at home, rather than in schools, has been practiced in the United States as long as public schools have existed. The contemporary American home school movement has emerged out of two historical strands, both beginning roughly four decades ago: one counter-cultural and leftist, the other conservative and religious. Education researcher Jane Van Galen refers to these groups as “pedagogues” and “ideologues,” respectively. In general, pedagogues promote home schooling because they view public schools as incapable of catering to the specific needs of each child. Ideologues, on the other hand, fault schools for not teaching the conservative social values and fundamentalist religious beliefs that their families espouse at home. Understanding the varied origins and ideologies of these two movements within a movement provides some insight into the characteristics and beliefs of the current generation of home schoolers.

Pedagogues and Radical School Reform

Early proponents of the modern home school movement were initially more interested in keeping children in public schools than taking them out. During the 1960s and early 1970s, countercultural scholars and social critics focused their energies on reforming public schools. Radical scholars such as Herbert Kohl, Jonathan Kozol, and Ivan Illich criticized public schools for their one-size-fits-all curricula and their hierarchical structure. They opposed the unequal power dynamics between the teachers and administrators who ran schools, and the students and families they served. These critics saw schools as factories that reproduced unequal social relations. Their first impulse, however, was not to abandon schools altogether, but to work to change them.

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Radical school reformers sought to wrest control of educating American children from the state, and give it to parents and local communities. They envisioned schools that would provide high-quality education for all children. In their view, schools could, if properly reformed, promote democratic principles and ameliorate race and social class inequalities. For many, this optimism quickly faded, as efforts to change school were thwarted by conservative politicians and nonsympathetic parents and educators. A number of these reformers gave up on schools and began to promote a new way of educating young children: home schooling.

The most prominent and influential radical school reformer, turned home schooling advocate, was the late John Holt. Holt, a former teacher in private schools, wrote extensively about the inadequacies of public schooling and, at the end of his career, the promise of teaching children at home. In Why Children Fail (1964) and How Children Learn (1967), Holt synthesized his theories on the failure of compulsory public education. His main criticism was that schools squash children's natural curiosity with standardized testing and inflexible curricula. Holt opposed formal instruction of any kind, and thought that children best learned when left to their own devices. In Teach Your Own (1981), his only book on home schooling, Holt advocated a pedagogy of “unschooling,” which is a child-centered, self-directed, informal approach to education. By the late 1970s and early 1980s, most home schoolers in the United States identified with Holt's counter-cultural philosophy.

**Ideologues: Religion and Authority**

What John Holt was to the pedagogues, Raymond and Dorothy Moore were to the ideologues. During the 1970s, the Moores were well-known across the United States for their controversial views on early childhood education. Trained educational researchers and Seventh Day Adventists, the Moores challenged the assumption that schooling was good for young children. Working with a team of like-minded colleagues, the Moores surveyed thousands of studies and consulted with over 100 family and child development specialists. They concluded that placing young children in institutionalized schools before the age of 10 could negatively affect their normal development.

Though they initially supported school reform, the Moores eventually shifted their focus. Like Holt, they became advocates of taking children out of public schools and teaching them at home. While they shared Holt's commitment to home education, they developed a different pedagogy of home schooling. Whereas Holt and his followers rejected hierarchical, authoritative relationships of any kind, the Moores presumed the God-given authority of parents over their children. In their widely read books Home Grown Kids (1981) and Home-Spun Schools (1982), the Moores advocated a model of home schooling that was based on parental authority, formalized curricula, and Christian values. The unabashed religious conviction of the Moores' message appealed to scores of conservative Christian families, who were becoming increasingly disenchanted with the secular social institutions of the state. A new wave of home schooling had begun.

By the mid-1980s the countercultural pedagogues, the first home schoolers of the modern movement, were eclipsed in size and visibility by the fundamentalist ideologues. At 20 years later, religiously oriented home schoolers are arguably the best organized and largest segment of the movement. However, some observers suggest, this initial distinction between counter-culturalists and conservative Christians is no longer completely accurate. A broader range of families is choosing to home school than was true two decades ago, and their motivations sometimes blend both pedagogical and ideological concerns.

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Inside Home Schooling: What We Know

There is currently no mechanism for locating and identifying all home schooling families in the nation. Though currently legal in all 50 states, the extent of state oversight of home schooling varies. In some states, parents are required to register their children with the local school board and to keep meticulous records of their children's educational goals and achievements. Other states have no such requirements, and some parents choose not to register their children. Hence, statistical accuracy varies by state. There is also an ideological dimension to the difficulty in studying homeschoolers. Many hold alternative world views and are reluctant to participate in studies conducted by unfamiliar researchers. This makes it less likely for them to voluntarily offer information about their activities.

Home school advocacy groups, such as the National Home Education Research Institute, have estimated the current population of home-schooled students to be 1.5 million to 2 million in the United States. Meanwhile, the federal government’s estimates are slightly more conservative, ranging from 1 million to 1.1 million. The home schooling population has grown significantly over the past 30 years, and it continues to grow. The U.S. Department of Education estimates that there were between 10,000 and 15,000 home schoolers in the early 1970s, as many as 244,000 by 1985, and up to 300,000 in 1988. According to some researchers and home schooling advocacy groups, the number of home schoolers grows annually by 15 to 25 percent. Second, home schooling may be the largest of the current educational movements, yet receives less public attention than other school options. Charter schools, for example, receive far more scrutiny by both scholars and mass media, despite attracting fewer students.

Why Home School?

There are four sets of overlapping frames that parents use to justify home schooling. First, there are religious motivations. Between 30 and 39 percent of home schooling parents teach their children at home in order to provide religious instruction and to shield their children from public schools’ alleged anti-religious bias. Second, there are families who are primarily motivated by academic and pedagogical concerns. Nationwide, about a third of home schooling parents feel that the academic quality of schools is lacking, and about one-half feel they can do a better job of teaching their children than schools. A third category includes general concern about the school environment. For these parents, concerns about the safety of their children and negative peer influences are paramount. Finally, there are some families who cite “family lifestyle” reasons. This includes families who home school because it provides a source of family cohesion and unity.

Who Is Home Schooling?

Despite the methodological challenges of studying home schoolers, researchers have produced a demographic picture of home schooling families. Based on socioeconomic variables, most are middle class. Home schooling parents have higher than average incomes and levels of education, and the fathers tend to be employed in professional positions or are self-employed. In most cases, the father provides the family’s main source of income and the mother does not work outside of the home. When mothers work, it tends to be part time. The vast majority of home schooling families comprise married couples with two or three children. Research also suggests that although increasing numbers of people of color are choosing to home school, this remains largely a white phenomenon. Between 75 and 90 percent of home schooled children in the United States are white. Home schooling families tend to be more religious and politically conservative than the general population and the largest segment of religious home schoolers is fundamentalist. Researchers have also shown that the overwhelming...
majority of the daily work of home schooling is done by mothers. Some estimate that mothers are the primary teachers in 90 percent of families. Most of these women are financially dependent on their husbands. In one large scale study of home schooling families, 78 percent of women listed "homemaker/home educator" as their primary occupation, while most of their husbands worked in professional, technical, and managerial positions. Furthermore, women are also responsible for most of the local and national organizing on behalf of the movement.

**Sociology of Home Schooling**

There is a small, but growing literature that explores home schooling from a sociological perspective. For example, some scholars have applied a social movement perspective to examine the role of resources, cultural beliefs, and politics in this burgeoning movement. Other research has explored the gender dynamics of home schooling. This research tends to focus on the experience of mothers as the primary home educators, within a broader context of feminist critiques of social institutions such as family, education, and the workplace. In general, this literature needs to be further developed to understand the social significance of this growing alternative education movement.

**See Also:** Charter Schools: Family Structure and Education, Feminist Critiques of Educational Practices, Religious Education, School Choice.

**Further Readings**


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