

What a 200-year-old experiment teaches parents about home schooling

Level 2 • Upper intermediate

1 Warmer

Discuss your answers to these questions.

- What is your mother tongue? How did you learn to speak it?
- What foreign languages do you speak? How did you learn them?
- When and how did you learn to ride a bike?
- Approximately how old were you when you first used a computer? Who taught you how to use it?

2 Key words

Match the key words with the definitions. Then find them in the article to read them in context. The paragraph numbers are given to help you.

trial and error
radical

anxious
special needs

grapple with
curriculum

invaluable
juggle

privileged
remarkably

1. worried because you think something bad might happen _____ (para 2)
2. try to do several things at the same time, especially when this is difficult _____ (para 2)
3. the subjects that students study at a particular school _____ (para 3)
4. in a way that is unusual and surprises or impresses you _____ (para 5)
5. doing something by trying different ways and learning from your mistakes _____ (para 6)
6. try hard to understand a difficult idea or to solve a difficult problem _____ (para 6)
7. a way of doing something that is very new or unusual _____ (para 7)
8. having advantages and opportunities that other people do not have because you have a lot of money or high social status _____ (para 7)
9. the particular requirements of people who have physical or mental disabilities _____ (para 10)
10. extremely useful _____ (para 10)

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What a 200-year-old experiment can teach anxious parents about home schooling

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4 August, 2020

- 1 For perhaps the first time in the history of modern education, millions of primary and secondary students may begin the school year from home. Pupils in England are due to return to schools in September, but there is still some uncertainty as Covid-19 cases rise, local lockdowns begin and scientists warn about sudden increases in cases caused by pupils returning to schools. Some parents may choose not to send their children back for their family's safety.
- 2 School leaders and teachers are worried about kids who have fallen behind in their school work. Parents and carers are feeling anxious about the need, once again, to juggle work and home schooling.
- 3 Parents may also worry that they cannot support their children because they don't remember enough about some topics such as maths. An experiment carried out by an 18th-century French schoolmaster, Jean-Joseph Jacotot, may help them worry less about home schooling and their lack of knowledge of the school curriculum.
- 4 Jacotot had to teach in Belgium. His pupils spoke only Flemish, and he only spoke French. But he didn't worry about this. He gave his students a novel written in his mother tongue, *Les Aventures de Télémaque*, and a French dictionary, and encouraged them to teach themselves.
- 5 Remarkably, it worked. The students enjoyed solving the "puzzle" for themselves: "The intelligence that had allowed them to learn the French in *Télémaque* was the same they had used to learn their mother tongue: by observing and retaining, repeating and checking, by relating what they were trying to know to what they already knew, by doing and thinking about what they had done."
- 6 Learning often has nothing to do with someone older putting the right information into the learner's mind. (Think about how often children and even adults learn from trial and error, from learning to ride a bike to using a new technology.) Instead, learning has to do with creating in the student the desire to grapple with interesting challenges. It has more to do with asking a child difficult questions at the dinner table, with encouraging children to build treehouses or find things for themselves on Wikipedia, and less to do with filling in the blanks of workbooks.
- 7 Jacotot later taught other topics he knew nothing about, like painting and the piano, using his new style of teaching called "universal education". He believed that "all men have equal intelligence" and that "all human beings are equally capable of learning". The idea was radical in its time, when only the sons of relatively privileged men received a formal education, and it is still radical now.
- 8 The challenges facing Jacotot were similar to those facing our education system today: unequal access to education and parents who know little about the topics their children are supposed to be learning. Jacotot wanted to show how underprivileged children might learn. Parents could teach not by knowing but by encouraging and asking questions. If students have the right resources to explore ideas for themselves, then many people can "teach" – including carers during a pandemic.
- 9 We should worry less about the number of hours that children spend on Zoom and more about their access to books and technology, which they can use to explore the world around them from the safety of their own homes. At present, some poorer students are falling behind during virtual learning because they do not have access to the internet.
- 10 This does not, of course, mean that we shouldn't worry about virtual learning at all. Studying from home still means missing out on social learning that is so important during childhood. Some students with special needs also do worse. Home schooling should not be completely left to carers and parents. Teachers' knowledge of the curriculum and their expertise in the classroom is invaluable, and students need more experiences, structure and resources than parents alone can give them.
- 11 But as history shows, learning does not only happen in a classroom. Jacotot's discovery is that human beings are learning beings. It should make us less worried about children during this difficult time and even more hopeful about ourselves.

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3 Comprehension check

Are these sentences true (T) or false (F) according to the article? Correct any that are false.

1. According to the article, all children in the UK will return to school in September.
2. During the Covid-19 pandemic, schools have been closed and most children have been learning at home in virtual classrooms.
3. In the 18th-century, a French school teacher in Belgium showed that children are able to teach themselves many things with the right encouragement.
4. Through his experience, Jacotot developed a radical new style of teaching that claimed boys are more intelligent than girls.
5. The results of Jacotot's experiment should make us worry about the time our children spend on the internet.
6. Parents and carers can help children learn by asking questions and giving them challenges even if they do not understand or remember all the school subjects.
7. Teaching children at home means that they miss out on social interaction with other children.
8. If they have a computer, all children are equally able to learn and do their school work at home through virtual learning.

4 Using the key words

a. Complete the sentences using some of the key words from task 2.

1. The internet is an _____ resource for students.
2. I worked out how to use the new software by _____.
3. Zena was _____ about her exam results. Would they be good enough for university?
4. Latin is no longer on the school's _____.
5. Daniel did _____ well in his practical exam.
6. Chloe had a very _____ upbringing.

b. Now use the key words in sentences of your own.

5 Discussion

- Talk about a time you learnt something by trial and error.
 - o How did you feel during the process?
 - o How did you feel afterwards?
 - o Are you still be able to do the thing that you learnt?
- Talk about someone you know who has special needs. Do they use any special equipment or do they need any special assistance at work or at school to help them learn or do certain tasks?

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6 Small-group task

You have been asked to look after two children for two weeks. If possible, this should be children you know – for example, relatives of yours, or your neighbours' or friends' children. Roughly plan what you might do with them to make the time interesting, challenging and educational.

Share your plans with other groups.