

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

Level 1 • Pre-intermediate / 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 will help you.

anxious

carer

case

encourage

juggle

1. an example or instance of something _____ (para 1)
2. someone who looks after another person who cannot look after themselves _____ (para 2)
3. worried because you think something bad might happen _____ (para 2)
4. try to do several things at the same time, especially when this is difficult _____ (para 2)
5. give someone hope or support to do something _____ (para 4)

explore

mind

pandemic

resource

trial and error

6. the part of you that thinks, knows, remembers and feels things _____ (para 5)
7. doing something by trying different ways and learning from your mistakes _____ (para 5)
8. something that helps you learn or study _____ (para 7)
9. discuss and examine something _____ (para 7)
10. a disease that affects many people across the whole world _____ (para 7)

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

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- 1 For perhaps the first time in the history of modern education, millions of primary and secondary students may begin the new school year from home. Pupils in England should return to schools in September, but Covid-19 cases are rising, so this may not be possible. Scientists also warn that there will be many more cases when pupils return to schools. Some parents may choose not to send their children back for their family's safety.
- 2 Teachers are worried about children who have fallen behind in their school work. Parents and carers are feeling anxious about the need to juggle work and home schooling.
- 3 Parents may also worry that they cannot remember enough about some school subjects such as maths. But an experiment by an 18th-century French schoolmaster, Jean-Joseph Jacotot, may help them to worry less about home schooling.
- 4 Jacotot had to teach in Belgium. His pupils spoke only Flemish, and he spoke only French. He gave his students a novel written in his mother tongue and a French dictionary. He encouraged them to teach themselves. It worked. The students enjoyed solving the "puzzle" for themselves.
- 5 Learning does not only happen when someone older puts 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.) Learning happens when you ask children difficult questions at the dinner table, encourage them to build a treehouse or find things for themselves on Wikipedia.
- 6 In the 18th century, when only the sons of rich men got a school education, Jacotot believed that "all human beings are equally capable of learning".
- 7 Jacotot wanted to show how poor children could learn. Parents could teach them by encouraging and asking questions. It's the same today. If students have the right resources to explore ideas for themselves, then many people can "teach" – including carers and parents during a pandemic. However, some poorer students will do worse because they do not have access to the internet.
- 8 Jacotot showed that learning does not only happen in a classroom and that human beings are learning beings. That should make us less worried about children during this difficult time and more hopeful about ourselves.

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3 Comprehension check

Make these sentences true. Cross out the words that you don't need.

1. During the Covid-19 pandemic, schools in the UK have been **open / closed**.
2. Many children have been learning at home in **dining rooms / virtual classrooms**.
3. In the 18th-century, a school teacher in **Belgium / France** showed that children can teach themselves when they are encouraged.
4. Parents do not have to be good **at all school subjects / at juggling work and childcare** to help their children.
5. Parents and carers can help children to learn by **asking questions / telling them to make a treehouse**.
6. Children who **have / do not have** access to the internet might do worse than other pupils.
7. Jacotot's experiment should make us feel **good / bad** about our ability to help our children learn.

4 Using the key words

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

1. The internet is an important _____ for students.
2. I worked out how to use the new software by _____.
3. Zena was _____ about her exam results.
4. The children went outside to _____ the garden.
5. The teachers _____ the pupils to write poems.
6. Luckily, there has only been one _____ of Covid-19 in our town.

5 Discussion

Talk about a time you learnt something by trial and error.

When I was about ... years old, I learnt to ...

While I was learning, I found it quite ..., but afterwards, I felt ...

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. Make notes about the things you would do with them to make the time interesting and educational.

Share your plans with other groups.