

HOME EDUCATION



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BRIEFING NOTE

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A PARLIAMENT STREET BRIEFING NOTE

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Home education. It's a brave new world as parents across the land struggle with the comprehension that their children are at home, and it falls to mum and dad to educate them. A variety of techniques have been employed - books, lego, Joe Wicks - but memes of taped down kids have still spread around the Internet.

I see this with some bafflement. I don't have children, so I can't claim to be an expert in childcare. But I was home educated. Yes, all the way for my whole childhood. Yes, I did my exams. Yes, 11 GCSEs, 1 AS Level and 4 A Levels. Yes, I have a Bachelors, a Masters, a law Diploma and a good job. Yep, I know, it's amazing. With the Education Act simply requiring that children are education at school or otherwise, and following an incident at pre-school involving 3 year old me not speaking for three days after it, a hefty lass and a heavy wooden chair, my mother decided that perhaps primary school was not for me. She had already taught me the alphabet, reading basics and some arithmetic. She would only do it for a couple of years, she planned, but one of her friends was home-educating and she felt it couldn't be that impossible.

Admittedly at that time, she was a stay at home mother, later freelancing before returning to the office when I was a teenager, but also by the age of 8 or 9 I was self-learning with direction. By the time the Education Authorities wanted to start doing inspections of my work, the Inspector came in to piles of my work, staggered backwards (that's not journalistic licence, that's fact) and said there was no way she could go through it all. I guess she thought maybe I'd been learning computer games, hair braiding and singing along to Steps. What she found were extensive projects on

ancient civilisations, book reports and a tonne of algebra (to be fair, I hated algebra - although I did take Maths GCSE 2 years early). Having got that far, it just continued on, and when my mother went back to work, I simply self-studied.

Bragging rights done, how did this work?

Books. Books are amazing. Books are not the internet. The internet you scan down, vaguely read and have forgotten by the next day, even if it was genuinely interesting and you are now in your 30s and actually meant to take it in and be informed.

Books, books you read properly. My mother's technique was simple, we heavily relied on the library, and we were lucky in that a convent school happened to be closing down just as I was turning 7, and my mother basically bought one of every textbook from them. However now we have Amazon so that's, you know, a decent place to get books - not just wine and pasta. Aside from set textbooks, revision guides from Lett's got me through my GCSEs and A Levels with flying colours.

Maths books she would tell me the units to work through. English she would set me novels to read and then write about. Science and geography I had text books to work through the exercises set. History started at the Stone Age and worked forward, with three or four books on each era from the children's library - and yes she kept it old style, copying out text. Potentially less exciting, but proven by many to be a great way of remembering things, and also really good for handwriting.

PE was dance classes (OK, you can't do that right now) which I loved. Art was pottery class for a while, others at other times. And here I am, at the end, a fully functioning adult. So what would my tips be, if I had a friend with a child who needed educated now? This is on the basis of zero support from your school - which is unlikely. This is also for children who don't have special educational needs. All of this worked for me, and that's all this is based on - perhaps I was used to it and more studious, or perhaps it was a style that suited me, I'm not claiming to be an education expert. But it's what I'd try.

- Get a book for each topic. It doesn't need to be new; it can be second-hand. The internet is filled with second-hand books. Textbooks or factual books, but age appropriate for interest level. You need books, it's just a fact in my view (unless you actually are an expert in a subject, which you could be!).
- Do make the books interesting. No child is up for reading a tome of 8-point Times New Roman with two black and white photos in it. Remember Dorling Kindersley books as a child yourself - with pictures and lift up films to see inside the human body/the pyramids/a volcano? Those are a bit more interesting. Look for books with interesting pictures.
- Look online for resources to cover the core subjects - videos can be great if your child is better at listening than reading - because everyone has a different learning style.

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- Buy exercise pads and A4 refill pads and a load of pens. Don't underestimate the power of copying text - or writing it down from audio sources. It may not be the most expressive or energetic way of learning, but it works. Try it yourself - pick out any moderately stimulating book, copy out a passage and I bet you'll remember it a whole lot better a week later than if you hadn't copied it out.
 - EXCEPT - if your child is an artistic genius, vary it up a bit. I wasn't. But if drawing every organ in the human body will be more your child's bag, go for that.
 - If your child is literally just not interested in a subject, try to make it relevant. One of the great successes of my 5 year old maths career was my mother doing fractions by using a chocolate bar - you quickly learn what a quarter looks like when it's in chocolate, and you can fast work out that's a lot less than a third. Educational chocolate, who doesn't love that?
 - Make it interesting - your child not interested in learning about ox-bow lakes? Maybe they could draw a picture of Europe and plot the mountain ranges with stickers, and work out what caused them?
 - If there's something educational your child likes the idea of, don't stop it, jump on it. Sudden fascination in Latvia because their friend was meant to be going on holiday there and it's cancelled - use that, get a book on Latvia. Knowledge is knowledge.

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- Let's face it, in reality at 12 education isn't that fun compared to friends, games, make-up, sport. Do look for opportunities to change it up slightly - your child has been set Henry V to read? Get the film. Some would say that's terrible, because your child should imagine the characters for themselves. Personally, Shakespeare isn't the most kid-friendly language and seeing it acted is actually more true to how it was meant to be experienced, so at least consider it.
 - Try to keep sessions to school type timetables. I did 45 minutes per subject, give or take, with a break in between every couple. But find what works. Just keep breaks shorter than studies. I worked from around 9.30 to 4.00, not standard hours but gives you a bit of an idea.
 - Be honest with your kid. Do not tell them that you know all of this, because they'll soon find the hole.

My mother was honest with me. Some things you need to know because you'll use them in daily life - checking your change. Some things you need to know so you don't look thick - Romeo and Juliet does not have a happy ending, basics to be aware of there - or conversely to look clever with interesting cultural references. And some things - Algebra, I'm talking about you here - and here my mother was always very clear, you just need for a GCSE or A Level or other exam. You need the exam, not because the exam matters, but because it makes life a lot easier if you have it, easier to take the next step in education, and more importantly easier to get a job. Jobs may not be the be all and end all, but they do provide

money, and money is really good for going on holiday and buying things. And that might be a sad indictment on my personal motivations, but it worked for me. (I would say now knowledge for knowledge's sake is a lot more interesting to me, but at 14 I was perhaps not so worldly.)

I hope maybe this inspires you to think about how to deal with lockdown education. Mine was an entire lifestyle, this - unless you decide it works really well for your child - is for a limited period. But months matter in a child's education and it's fundamentally good to keep learning things at any age, and to ensure that your child doesn't forget all the work they've done to date.

If, of course, actually you are interested in home education (or the American home-schooling), then Education Otherwise and the Home Education Advisory Service can give you more information on making the switch and your legal obligations and rights.

And whatever happens, there's still always Joe Wicks...

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