

EDUCATION VERSUS FUN

I (Barb) have been pondering the question of ‘natural learning’ for many years. As a new home schooling mother I thought the notion of interest-led education sounded lovely—both for my child and myself. I doubt that many parents really enjoy the task of disciplining their offspring in any area. Additionally, the current social pressure, to not build ‘negative’ impressions in the mind of the young, encourage parents to continually seek ‘fun’ activities as an insurance policy for their children’s future happiness.

However, having now home-schooled one child for five years, it seems blatantly obvious to us that, for our child, it is in those areas of learning where his parents enforced regular, disciplined practice that he now experiences the greatest sense of accomplishment and genuine enjoyment. Learning should be largely interest-led—but we still need to direct those interests and encourage responsibility and application towards assigned tasks. That is why children need parents—to train them in good habits for life. If human nature were not basically sinful, maybe this may not be so, however, the Bible states that we are not born perfect, in any sense of the word!

My husband and I are approaching that age milestone of the half century, so have had the opportunity to observe a generation of children grow from babyhood to adulthood, and in some cases enter parenthood. Those children whose parents advocated the ‘life should be fun’ philosophy almost exclusively feel short-changed as adults. Many of those parents who commented on the great potential shown by their children in Kindergarten—by reading at an early age or completing tangrams in record time—now lament that their kids never study or help with the housework. The story of ‘The Hare and the Tortoise’ comes to mind.

So much time is wasted in a child’s life seeking ‘fun’. Schools seem to compete for the ‘most fun’ workbooks, activities, and excursions with which to entertain (rather than educate) their pupils. I am yet to read any verses in the Bible that suggest that life is about ‘fun’, but there are many that address work, training and discipline. Isn’t that what we should be preparing our children for?

Does work have to be the antithesis of ‘fun’? I do not believe so. The sense of satisfaction gained from a job well done is more enduring and worthwhile than the fleeting ‘high’ derived from being amused. Many educational approaches have been developed to stimulate and feed the interest of students. ‘School’ work does not have to be ‘boring’ and different children will prefer different approaches. However, any real learning will take effort, and the discipline of life, for most of us, requires that we make the effort (to work, teach, wash, cook or whatever) whether we feel like it or not. This is a much harder lesson to learn as an adult than as a child.

We are not doing our children any favours for life if they do not develop a taste for the pleasure and rewards of hard work in childhood. The art of education, I believe, is to balance the genuinely ‘hard’ work (which will differ for each child) with those activities that they find more attractive.

There seem to be many activities in modern curricula that have been designed solely for classroom ‘busy work’ but do not intrinsically teach the child anything of value. As children get older they are much more astute about the value of educational activities. It is important that they can distinguish between the ‘enjoyment’ and the intrinsic ‘value’ of any activity, and we do them a great disservice to serve up lessons in trivia in the name of education.

Educational ‘experts’ can help to explain products, approaches and a very wide range of non-essential ‘gizmos’ but your child’s ‘success’ in life will depend not on the ‘right’ curriculum but on the ‘right’ attitude to work. And, whether we like it or not, they learn that by example from their parents. If we shirk the hard stuff, they will probably do the same thing. I believe

that no amount of 'resources' spent on 'education' will significantly alter the impression that we pass on to them from the way we live.

So, why work? For money? For fame and prestige? For Christians, I believe we must work 'at whatever your hand finds to do' because it is 'right'. Does that mean we can't have any fun? No—unless we do not apply ourselves willingly to the tasks we have been assigned. But God never assigns an overload—if it feels that way, maybe we are not relying on Him to guide us.

To 'parent' and educate our children requires much wisdom. I have found that the best source of wisdom, customised for my family, has come from my Maker, and sought through earnest prayer. When days start to unravel, I find it useful to remind myself that God is in charge of the 'Big Picture'—I just have to take it one day at a time.

And, no, His goals may not be the best ever exam result for your child. We all know children who have acquired impressive results in various tests, but lacked the motivation to apply themselves later in life. He has a bigger picture than isolated tests of scholastic progress. I now believe He desires that we educate, first and foremost, with the goal of producing men and women with His character.

*Good family life is never an accident.
It is always an achievement by those who shape it.*

James H. Bassard