Natural Learning Information

What is Natural Learning?

While homeschooling describes families who choose to educate their children at home, rather than sending them to school, this is often assumed to be children following a school-type curriculum at home. Children do lessons, much as they do at school, and their work is marked either by the parents or by a supervising teacher. Natural Learning, however, is a term which loosely describes families who homeschool, but do not follow a set school-type curriculum.

Rather than plan a lesson program for a child, the children's interests are followed, allowing them to learn about what interests them, to the level of expertise that satisfies their curiosity. Another description for Natural Learning is "child-directed learning", which more aptly describes what goes on. A common feature, although not universal, is that formal learning – ie. Learning from textbooks and worksheets or in a classroom situation – is delayed and/or reduced, especially for primary school aged children. Rather, learning takes place in the course of family life – arising "naturally" from every day experiences.

This is not to say that formal learning methods have no place in natural learning. Rather than the norm, however, they are employed, when useful, to further a particular child's interests, at a particular time.

What is the philosophy behind Natural Learning?

Modern homeschooling is a movement characterized by parents taking back the responsibility for their children's education. That is not to say that they are trying to do it all themselves. They are taking responsibility for ensuring that their children learn what they need to learn, rather than handing that responsibility over to a third party, such as a school.

Natural Learning takes the process one step further, by trusting that their children’s interests are worthwhile and lead to learning valuable skills. Natural Learning families allow children to take responsibility for their learning to a great extent. Rather than seeing themselves as teachers, Natural Learning parents see themselves as facilitators, helping children to pursue their own interests and find the resources they need to learn.

How many people are homeschooling / doing Natural Learning?

The growth of homeschooling (http://www.nheri.org/modules.php?name=Content &pa=showpage&pid=21) in the US has been phenomenal over the past 15 years. There are estimated to be between 1.7 and 2.1 million school age students across the US who do not attend school and learn at home, either using some form of formal curriculum, creating their own homeschooling study plan or doing natural learning. NO figures are readily available to indicate what percentage are choosing natural learning.

Although no formal studies have been done to ascertain the extent of homeschooling in Australia, there has still been tremendous growth over the past two decades. Informal estimates put the number somewhere around 5,000 and 12,000 families in Queensland and 30,000 to 70,000 Australia-wide. Of these, approximately 80% of families follow a school-type curriculum and the other 20% could be described as doing Natural Learning. It must be emphasised, however, that these families are not all doing the same thing. Natural Learning is as individual as the families who do it and is even tailored to the individual children within a single family.

How does it work? Does Natural Learning succeed?

I think that John Holt (http://www.holtgws.com), author of many books about children learning, has written one of the best descriptions of Natural Learning in his book “How Children Learn”.

Birds fly, fish swim, man thinks and learns. Therefore, we do not need to motivate children into learning by wheedling, bribing or bullying. We do not need to keep picking away at their minds to make sure they are learning. What we need to do, and all we need to do, is bring as much of the world as we can into the school and classroom (in our case, into their lives); give children as much help and guidance as they ask for; listen respectfully when they feel like talking; and then get out of the way. We can trust them to do the rest.

Children are born curious and with a natural desire to both learn and to fit into the family and society in which they live. They love learning. If the adults around them manage not to destroy this innate curiosity and drive to understand, but instead provide the resources and experiences that the children are themselves seeking, we can rest assured that they will learn.
What are the benefits of Natural Learning?

One of the major benefits of Natural Learning is that it reduces the pressure and stress that children face, often on a daily basis, in the school system. There is more time for them to play, which is when children do most of their learning, and for interacting with their siblings and parents. It can be very supportive for the children’s confidence and self-esteem and strengthening for families.

It has been said that it is much easier to catch up on a few maths lessons later in life, than to relax a stressed out child, repair a broken relationship with them or build up their self-esteem.

Other benefits include the ability to pick up on a child’s gifts and talents and let them explore them to the level that they are capable of, to recognise a child’s difficulties and provide additional assistance for them and to take advantage of key “learning moments”, where a child might be fascinated in a subject which at other times does not interest them so much. Deep learning in one particular areas can be more valuable than “well-rounded” superficial learning across a number of subjects.

Compared to the “school-at-home” curriculum based homeschooling, Natural Learning has benefits for both the children and the parents. Providing and supervising a curriculum program for children, especially if there are a number of children in the family at different ages and stages of development, can put a lot of pressure on the parent who is at home with the children. Homeschool burnout affects parents who have tried to reproduce the classroom in the home and have found it very difficult.

Natural Learning not only provides for a less stressful homeschooling experience for parents, but also better learning outcomes for children, who are encouraged to pursue their own interests. It is a complete change of philosophy from a pre-planned curriculum, to an unplanned adventure.

What are the disadvantages/problems of Natural Learning?

Although many don’t consider it to be a disadvantage, other families find it difficult to adjust to a lifestyle allowing for homeschooling. In order to homeschool unless one parent needs to be at home every day, although some families manage to juggle part-time jobs. This puts a financial constraint on the family. It is virtually not possible to homeschool whilst bringing in two full-time incomes into a household. For single-parent families, it is even more difficult, as they must generally rely on the social security system to homeschool.

The benefits to the family, however, of having one parent at home, can be enormous. It becomes a question of priorities. Instead of a larger house, second car, expensive clothes and holidays, etc. families can gain home-cooked meals eaten together as a family, time to spend playing with children or watching their sporting activities, time to read to children each day, etc. These things cannot be bought, but can only be done with enough time during each day.

The other problem faced by Natural Learning parents is a lack of support in their family and the wider community. Although most people are now generally supportive of homeschooling, due to the large number of people who are now opting for this alternative to the school system, most imagine a school-at-home type experience, where lessons are reproduced at home and parents act as teachers. Natural Learners are a minority within the homeschooling minority and it can be difficult to continue to believe in children’s ability to learn when everyone else is doubtful.

It is very important for Natural Learning parents to seek out others who share their philosophy, to attend support group activities (http://eleanor.sparks.to or http://www.hea.asn.au) where possible, to travel to camps, or to join on-line discussions, so that their beliefs can be supported.

So, what do you do each day?

For many families, spending time with their preschool aged children each day seems natural. The young children learn to walk, to talk, to draw, paste, colour. They start recognising letters, turning pages in books and using the remote control for the VCR. They are learning all the time.

Suddenly as the children turn 5 or 6, everything changes. Parents expectations change. They no longer believe that their children will learn without going to school, completing lessons, filling in worksheets. In response, children change. They become less interested in the world around them. They become less inquisitive and more passive, waiting to be “taught” instead of actively seeking out knowledge.

For Natural Learning families, however, this change does not happen. Life with 8 or 10 or 12 year old children, or even teenagers, has very much the same quality as it does when they are preschoolers. People get up in the morning and get on with what they want to do. As children get older this becomes less and less what parents suggest (“Hey, let’s go the park with Rebecca and Thomas!”) and more and more what the children state.
suggest (“Mum, can you please drive me to the library to pick up my book and then drop me at James’ house on the way home?”)

To get a little more specific, however, here are a couple of lists of just a few things that Natural Learning parents and children might do at home. Remember, however, that each child is different and no child is going to do all of them, even through all the years they might be growing up!

**Primary Aged Children (5-10 approx)**
- Have a book read to them
- Play a computer game
- Play in a treehouse
- Visit a friend/family member
- Ride bikes in the park
- Go shopping
- Make something/paint a picture
- Dance to the radio
- Build a Lego world
- Write a letter
- Bake some cookies
- Build a bird-feeder from wood and nails
- Blow bubbles
- Put on a puppet show
- Knit a scarf
- Open a bank account
- Look up where a pen pal lives on a globe
- Slide down a grassy hill

**High School Aged (11-18 approx)**
- Read a book
- Play a computer game
- Fix a car
- Plant a vegetable garden
- Spend the weekend with a friend
- Go camping
- Work at a part time job
- Fashion jewelry for sale at a market
- Take music lessons
- Join a sports team
- Join an email discussion group
- Publish a homepage
- Cook a three course dinner for friends
- Help put up a new fence
- Build a solar-powered robot
- Sew costumes for a play
- Travel to another country
- Go surfing

Get the idea? The sky’s the limit.

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**How can parents teach their children everything that they would learn in school?**

Luckily, it is not necessary to learn everything that your children wish to learn in order for them to learn it! Although it is relatively easy to guide children through the basics of reading, writing, arithmetic, etc. many children are eager to pursue a particular topic beyond the expertise of their parents. Particularly if children are gifted in a certain area, and also once they reach high school age, it is important to guide them to information and resources to allow them to pursue that topic.

There are a huge number of information resources available [here](http://eleanor.sparks.to) which can also be accessed quite cheaply – libraries, museums, galleries, clubs and associations, the CSIRO [here](http://www.csiro.au/helix) and even the ABC [here](http://www.abc.net.au) can all provide valuable support and expertise, depending upon the particular interests of the child. Many high school age children follow formal courses, either via correspondence or independently, or work as informal apprentices with professionals in a particular profession.

**Wouldn’t teachers do a better job?**

Many teachers do an incredible job in the school system, educating most of Australia’s children. It is extremely difficult to co-ordinate a class of 25+ students, who are at different developmental levels and interested in different things. It becomes almost impossible to give each child the amount of individual attention, cater for their gifts, as well as their difficulties, provide interesting and stimulating environments and maintain discipline at the same time.

Time and time again, studies have shown that it is not the teacher or the school or the new program or the amount of funding that is available that makes the most difference to improving the learning outcomes of the students. It is the amount of parental involvement. When parents become involved in their children’s education, helping them and spending time with them, then the student’s academic performance improves. Homeschooling is a situation where parental involvement is maximised.

This is borne out by the few studies that have been conducted into homeschooling students in the US. Across the board homeschooled students perform, on average, better than schooled students of the same age. In every subject from mathematics to English to arts and sciences, homeschooled students perform from the 73rd percentile to the 86th percentile on standardised tests, where the average score of schooled students is 50th percentile [here](http://www.nheri.org).
This is also supported by the fact that a disproportionately high number of homeschooling families have one or more teachers as parents. Many families with intimate knowledge of the school system and what happens inside the classroom choose to homeschool and do Natural Learning.

How do children learn to read/write/do maths without lessons?

Children are naturally eager to learn. They are also eager to understand and participate in the society around them. It is not a natural part of growing up that they lose this eagerness and curiosity. If children are allowed to pursue their interests and learn the things that interest them, they will learn just as much, or more, than if they were in school.

Reading, writing and mathematics are necessary for people to participate in the world that our modern society has created. Children desire to be part of that world and, to that extent, will pursue these literacy skills and master them.

What about socialisation?

This is probably the most common question asked of homeschoolers and many respond that socialisation is one of the top five reasons that they have chosen to homeschool! Dr Brian D Ray from NHERI (National Home Education Research Institute http://www.nheri.org) puts it well —

A main reason for homeschooling is to provide children with guided and reasoned social interactions.

Homeschooled children get plenty of typical chances to interact with age peers at clubs, sporting activities, church groups, etc. In addition, there are weekly homeschooling support groups and activities, including extended camps with children of many ages. These opportunities allow for extended social contact and play time for the children, which can be even more beneficial than daily short social contact times, such as lunch hour at schools.

Many homeschooling parents believe that this social contact is much more realistic as it provides for social interaction with family and friends of many different ages during the course of each week. This is in stark contrast to the socialisation that is prevalent in the school system, where children are exposed to a large number of children of the same age and often cut-off from siblings and friends of different ages.

Is it legal?

Homeschooling is legal in every state of Australia, including Queensland. Some states have little or no requirement to “register” as a homeschooling family, as long as the educational needs of the children are being met. This model of legislation is similar to other child protection legislation, such as the requirement to provide children with adequate nutritional meals. There is no need to “register” as a parent who provides these meals, but the responsibility to do so is squarely on the shoulders of the parents, who can be severely prosecuted for failing to meet that responsibility.

The registration process in Queensland (http://eleanor.sparks.to), however, is more onerous than any other state. An application must be submitted, including a full outline of the curriculum to be followed at home, and requiring the signature of a supervising teacher. This application must be approved by Education Queensland (http://education.qld.gov.au/corporate/doem/curristu/cs-23000/sections/preface_.html) every year. Natural Learning programs are not approved unless they are presented in the form of a school-type curriculum, which defeats the purpose of child-directed learning, effectively discriminating against parents who wish to choose this form of education for their children.

Most Natural Learning families in Queensland do not apply for approval from the Department of Education and many believe that the current legislation is unenforceable, as it is in conflict with the legislation in other states, as well as Commonwealth guidelines and United Nations charters. It has never been tested in court.

Currently, the Department of Education is reviewing homeschooling legislation with an intent to change it for the 2005 school year. Further information and updates can be found at http://eleanor.sparks.to

What about high school? University?

Most homeschooling families give their children the option of attending high school, or at least the senior years, if they desire. The experience of attending school is very different if a child knows that they have a choice and that they can leave, if they wish, and many previously homeschooled teenagers do very well. Others complete courses or certificates via correspondence, through the TAFE or Open Learning systems or follow independent study programs and then sit for standardised exams.

These qualifications, along with personal competency assessments and a variety of bridging courses provided by the Universities themselves, are all recognised when applying for University positions.
by Eleanor Sparks
http://eleanor.sparks.to

In fact, generally less than 50% of University places are offered to year 12 leaving students with an OP or equivalent result.

Many other homeschooling teenagers follow other opportunities that don’t necessarily lead to University, accepting apprenticeships or job offers, traveling, pursuing careers in the arts, volunteering or starting their own businesses.

Where can I find out more about it?

Natural Learning is usually referred to as “unschooling” in the US and most of the information available on the Internet can be accessed by searching for “unschooling”.

The original literature which described Natural Learning was written by John Holt during the 60’s and 70’s and any of his books contain a wealth of information. Some are held by the Brisbane City Library and other regional libraries or can be purchased from online booksellers. The two books specifically describing Natural Learning are Learn All the Time and Teach Your Own.

For many years the Holt organization published a fantastic magazine for natural learners called Growing Without Schooling. Unfortunately, it is no longer being published, however back issues are still available from Fun Books (http://www.fun-books.com) and are strongly recommended.

A new magazine upholding the Natural Learning philosophy is Life Learning Magazine (http://www.lifelearningmagazine.com). Locally Grace Chapman from Atherton publishes a quarterly magazine which is supportive of natural learning (http://www.australia.edu/steppingstones). Other magazines and websites can be found on the Australian Home Education website (http://eleanor.sparks.to).

People who are looking for support in Brisbane and Queensland there are newsletters and magazines, as well as support groups for children and parents. I would be happy to provide further information to people who are looking for local contacts. I can be emailed on homeschool@sparks.to

Natural Learning (Unschooling)
Recommended Reading

John Holt
How Children Learn (Revised Edition).
How Children Fail (Revised Edition).
Teach your Own (Revised Edition).

Learning all the Time
Freedom and Beyond.
Instead of Education
What do I do Monday?

Escape from Childhood - The Needs and Rights of Children.

John Taylor Gatto
Dumbing us Down
Exhausted School
A different Kind of Teacher
Underground History of American Education

Raymond and Dorothy Moore
Better Late Than Early

Grace Llewellyn
The Teenage Liberation Handbook - How to Quit School and Get a Real Life and Education
Real Lives - Eleven Teenagers Who Don't Go To School.

David Guterson
Family Matters - Why Homeschooling Makes Sense

Mett Hern (Ed)
Deschooling Our Lives

Nancy Wallace
Child's Work - Taking Children's Choices Seriously

M Larry and Susan Kaseman
Taking Charge Through Homeschooling - Personal and Political Empowermen

Mary Griffith
The Unschooling Handbook - How to Use the Whole World as Your Child's Classroom
Life Literacy

Inspired by Robert Heinlein —

A human being should be able to change a diaper, plan an invasion, butcher a hog, conn a ship, design a building, write a sonnet, balance accounts, build a wall, set a bone, comfort the dying, take orders, give orders, cooperate, act alone, solve equations, analyze a new problem, pitch manure, program a computer, cook a tasty meal, fight efficiently, die gallantly. Specialization is for insects.

I have compiled a list of "life literacy" skills that I think it is important for all children to acquire, in addition to traditional literacy and numeracy skills. These life skills cannot be taught in the classroom (or, if they are, can only be done poorly and inefficiently), but must be learned by “living life” — exactly what natural learning/unschooling families are doing each day. A human being should be able to —

Practical Skills
- cook a meal from scratch
- change a nappy
- grow vegetable
- clean a toilet
- catch a bus
- clean and iron their own clothes
- operate a photocopying machine
- use a video camera
- care for a pet
- live for a sustainable future
- maintain a vehicle
- change a tyre
- defensive driving
- change a fuse, a light bulb, a tap washer
- assist someone after a road accident
- apply first aid when required
- pitch a tent

Financial Skills
- plan and stick to a budget
- save up for a major purchase
- balance a cheque account
- calculate the real saving behind a special offer
- decline to purchase an item from a salesperson
- complete a Centrelink form
- count back change
- learn that any amount of money can be enough

Information Skills
- touch type
- read a map
- read and take notes
- find solutions without being led through the problem
- program a VCR
- use a library
- discern the true meaning behind an advertisement
- produce a newsletter
- publish a homepage
- discern motives and vested interests
- cut and paste
- back up their data
- use a search engine
- write a letter to the editor
- use a telephone directory
- summarise information
- discern information from print or electronic media
- use a shopping list

Social Skills
- book a restaurant
- write a thank you note
- answer the telephone
- make a telephone call
- sing along with a group
- avoid a flame war
- converse with people of all ages and from all walks of life
- speak in public
- resolve an argument
- throw a party
- perform on stage
- empathise with the very young, the elderly and the disabled
- know the difference between love and sex
- correspond with a pen pal

Character Skills
- stick with their convictions, despite criticism from everyone else
- change their opinion for the better
- have the confidence to change the world
- develop compassion for others who walk in different shoes
- know a morality that is absolute and not variable on circumstance
- discover their life’s passion

(with thanks to Ben Mettes, Martin Howard, Judy Iland, Sonia and others)
A Reflection on Natural Learning

Over the past 14 years of motherhood and 9 years of officially homeschooling “school-age” children I have always leaned towards a philosophy of natural learning of “unschooling”. Although loosely defined as homeschooling without following a formal curriculum or program of study, natural learning has deeper philosophical implications for the shape of learning that occurs within a family. In traditional school settings learning is approached as something that is “done” to children – either by parents, teachers or other more knowledgeable experts – a concept which then sees teaching as the “infliction of learning”. Natural learning operates instead on a basic assumption that children learn all by themselves. The parents’ role is more that of a facilitator, who strives to provide the most interesting and satisfying environment for the child to experience. Teaching is therefore more an experience shared between the child and the people they interact with.

John Holt puts this so succinctly, in his book How Children Learn —

Birds fly, fish swim, man thinks and learns. Therefore, we do not need to motivate children into learning by wheedling, bribing or bullying. We do not need to keep picking away at their minds to make sure they are learning. What we need to do, and all we need to do, is bring as much of the world as we can into the school and classroom (in our case, into their lives); give children as much help and guidance as they ask for; listen respectfully when they feel like talking; and then get out of the way. We can trust them to do the rest.

The mainstream school system, which is the most widely accepted form of education, is based on a division between more knowledgeable people – the teachers and administrators – and the less knowledgeable people – the students. Authority is held by the teachers and all decisions about the content, style, timing and format of learning are made by them. It is assumed that unless a constant barrage of teaching is presented to the students, then learning will not take place. “Wheedling, bribing or bullying,” as John Holt puts it, are common methods employed by teachers and students learn to either submit and comply with the teachers’ requirements (the “good students”) or resist, either passively or actively, what is being done to them (the “poor” or “difficult” students). In either case the students are disempowered and not in control of their own learning.

Natural learning, tries to break away from this entrenched way of thinking. Whether students in a school setting perform well or poorly, natural learning recognises that if they had more control over their learning, the outcomes might be strikingly different. For children are born with an innate drive to learn, a curiosity about the world and a desire to be accepted in the society around them. They learn in the same way that they breathe and grow – naturally and enthusiastically, as long as we do not put undue impediments in their way.

This does not mean, however, that learning is necessarily obvious. Learning for children can take place on many levels, in different ways and at variable rates. Educational development, like physical development, can be gradual or uneven in bursts and plateaus; it can be invisible or happening before your very eyes; it can be silent or noisy and even painful.

For natural learning parents it can be difficult to continue in the belief that progress, at any given time, is being made. There are no programs and schedules laid out in advance, to provide confidence that nothing will be left out. There are no daily outputs which can be catalogued and filed away. There are no regular progress reports or tests where a standardized measuring stick can be used to measure a child’s progress. All that natural learning parents have is a deep sense of trust that their children will learn what they need to learn, to achieve the goals they will, eventually, set for themselves. And a belief that those goals will be worthwhile.

This can be a leap of faith for many parents and, for those of us hampered by a lifetime of education within the traditional, authoritative system ourselves, it can be a daunting leap indeed. The uncertainty of unplanned, spontaneous, often invisible learning does little to reassure parents in an area in which they feel keenly their responsibilities to raise and educate their children. Family, friends and the community at large can be unsupportive, disapproving or downright hostile. Even most homeschooling parents, themselves a minority in our largely schooled society, can turn their backs on what they – in ignorance – perceive as an irresponsible or even neglectful choice.

In contrast, although the journey of a parent as a child grows from a baby to a pre-schooler can be difficult and hard work, most parents do not find the prospect of educating their children through these years to be daunting. These children learn to sit and crawl and walk. They learn to speak and understand much of the world around them. They
develop social skills and start picking up the basics of literacy. They do this as parents and children interact together “naturally” without the need for formal learning programs.

Continuing this natural learning pattern through primary school can be more stressful for parents, who usually have to struggle against a lifetime of assumptions that children have now reached the age when they need to be “taught”. Until children are reading well, parents can worry about their lack of reading ability. Until they are writing legibly and spelling in an intelligible fashion, parents will worry about that form of literacy. Until children are adding and subtracting, multiplying and dividing, parents will worry that mathematics is beyond them. At times it is very tempting to sit children down and “teach” them these requisite skills, in order to relieve this parental anxiety.

That is not to say that form teaching has no place in natural learning. Far from it. A formal teaching/learning relationship, either between parent and child or between the child and a teacher outside of the family, can be a valuable learning experience to many children, for learning different skills at different stages of their education. Likewise, textbooks, structured programs, correspondence courses and even school-based courses can all play a part in the educational development of a particular child. The key to natural learning is to determine whether the child agrees that it is valuable.

Young children, and even not-so-young children, do not always have the necessary experience to determine whether a particular style or method of learning will be valuable to them. Yet, having tried a particular learning activity, children will be able to determine whether they want to continue with it. If they are learning, they will find the activity interesting and enjoyable and will want to continue. If they are not learning, they will not find it enjoyable. And vice versa – if they are not enjoying an activity, they will not be learning much and what they do learn will probably not be retained.

This is where the parents’ role as facilitator is particularly important. We need to be offering our children a variety of learning experiences and paying attention to the ones the children want to pursue, against the ones they are reluctant to participate in. It might be helpful to read about different learning styles, in order to help our children more effectively. It will certainly be helpful to seek out activities and groups of people within our community – other homeschoolers, clubs and interest groups, church and youth groups, sporting associations, cultural festivals – the list is endless. The more varied an environment we can expose our children to, the more likely we are to find the kinds of experiences that will benefit them at any given time.

Of course, although many natural learning parents find themselves quite busy, not all children will be interested in all of the wonderful experiences that we expose them to. In fact, I would venture to say that most children will not be interested in pursuing most of the activities that they try. A child might casually enjoy listening to an orchestral performance or occasionally hearing a choir sing, but not be at all interested in a further study of music. The role of the parents is to pick up on the activities that the children do show an interest in, and provide opportunities for them to investigate that topic further.

One tenet that many natural learning parents believe is that the pursuit of one particular subject in depth is at least as valuable, if not more so, than the superficial study of a variety of subjects. This recognition of the value of deep study allows a child to investigate a single area of interest – for example dinosaurs – until their curiosity has been satisfied, without the distraction of any imposed requirement to study something else. “Expert knowledge” is favoured over “well-rounded education”.

Parents can be reassured that the basic skills of literacy, reading, writing and arithmetic – to which, in our modern society, we should probably add computer and research skills – will be acquired by a child investigating almost any particular subject in depth. These children are investigating the world around them and will be driven to acquire all of the literacy skills demanded by the world, in order to pursue their investigation. Parents can also rest comfortably in the knowledge that most in-depth, almost obsessive, interests displayed by their children will, in time, pass. And those that don’t will often lead to life-long passions and career opportunities.

The recognition of children’s learning as being their own, under the natural learning philosophy, has many other advantages for the child, the parent and the rest of the family. The innate curiosity and love of learning that a child is born with is protected and nurtured. Many parents believe that this advantage alone justifies a natural learning approach. There is nothing more disheartening than to see a group of new students at a University approach their lectures with an attitude of “will this be on the exam?”, not showing the interest to ask even a single question of the lecture in an attempt to further explore the topic they are studying. It is a far cry from the bubbling excitement displayed by a five-year-old, before their entrance to school, upon making a new discovery about the world.

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A child’s self-esteem is also protected by natural learning. Because children are allowed to learn when they are ready, which often required physical and emotional stages of development to be reached, children are not ever put into a position of being “taught” something they are not ready to learn. Success is a much more common experience than failure and the confidence built by such success empowers children into tackling subjects or activities that are difficult or challenging. Contrary to some educators’ point of view, the experience of failure does not better equip a child to cope with failure in the future. In fact, quite the opposite.

The relationship between a child and their parents and other family members can be strengthened by natural learning. Compared with the “school-at-home” approach to homeschooling, where the parent becomes a traditional style teacher, implementing a formal program of study, natural learning allows a much more relaxed interaction between parent and child. Most homeschooling parents who try to reproduce school at home find themselves employing some combination of the school’s techniques to get their children to comply – wheedling, bribing and bullying. Natural learning parents have no need of such techniques, as the approach to learning is co-operative, rather than confrontational.

Throughout my years of homeschooling, the doubts and fears, the myriad of different methods and activities I have tried with my children, I have held fast to one rule. Learning shall not become a battleground. If my children are not willingly participating in a learning activity and I find myself at odds with them – reaching for the “bribe or bully” options – then something is wrong, and I back off. It may be the activity, it may be the setting, or the developmental stage of my child, but what I am doing at that time is wrong. It is affecting my relationship with my child, it is affecting my child’s attitude to the subject being studied and they are certainly not going to learn anything meaningful under those conditions.

The challenges for natural learning parents during these years can be difficult to overcome. Facing our own prejudices and assumptions about learning, formed over years of indoctrination within the traditional schools ourselves, provides many opportunities for self-introspection and growth as a person – and such growth is rarely pleasant or easy. We can alternate between gritting our teeth and wondering why our children don’t seem to be actively learning and screaming at the immobile (usually teenage) form on the couch to “just get up and do something!” We spend our time justifying our family, friends and even other homeschoolers the fact that we are not “teaching” our children anything and then turn around and have several abortive, rather disastrous weeks striding from textbooks, as our own doubts and fears get the better of us. We look at the few children who actually seem to enjoy formal study, happily completing maths sheets and producing beautiful project posters and exclaim “Why can’t I homeschool a child like that!”

The key at such times is to take a deep breath and try to get back to the reasons that we choose natural learning in the first place. Read some of John Holt’s work, or another supportive author. Get into an online discussion with other experienced natural learning parents (often called “unschoolers” on the Internet) or attend some activities, if there is a local support group. Remember the testimonials from all the parents whose children have grown into delightful adults, each finding their own way in the world. If you can’t find anything else to interest your child, read to them. Read to your babies and pre-schoolers. Read to your teenagers and young adults and everyone in between. There are novels that should interest anyone, so pick one up and start reading. Reading aloud together is a wonderfully relaxing and healing activity that also provides parents with the satisfaction that they are at least “doing something”. Just don’t let your teenagers read ahead – that completely spoils the surprise!

Remember that young adults find productive endeavours in many ways. The traditional expectations of senior and then tertiary study, leading to some form of career, are not out of reach of natural learners. But there is a great number of alternative ways to gain employment and explore the world, each seemingly tailor-made for the young person who creates that opportunity. Many naturally educated young adults volunteer in positions in their chosen field of interest. As John Holt, once again, puts so elegantly —

By “work” I ... mean something very different, what people used to call a “vocation” or “calling” — something which seemed so worth doing for its own sake that they would gladly choose to do it even if they didn’t need money and the work didn’t pay. .... to find our work, in this sense, is one of the most important and difficult tasks that we have in life...

Naturally educated young adults have been finding things to do that interest them for their entire lives and many of these interests lead to careers in the most unexpected ways.

Remember, also, that it would be a simple matter for your confident, responsible, enthusiastic
naturally educated child to do some catch-up study in spelling or mathematics, if needed, at a later stage in their lives. Whereas, it is extremely difficult for a troubled, unconfident, easily-led child, who feels alienated from their family, to adjust to the demands of adulthood – no matter how well they can spell or do algebra.

Above all, keep your relationship with your child honest. If you are worried about your child’s lack of formal study experience, let them know. Talk it over with them. Show them some different options. Even require them to complete some kind of study unit. Just make sure to explain that this requirement stems primarily from your own insecurities as a parent and the things you were taught growing up in the school system. Your child may readily agree to your requirement, understanding that it would make you feel more relaxed about homeschooling.

Just beware of any confrontation that develops into a “them or me” situation. In such a case you should seriously consider that the problem lies with you, and not with your child.