

## **Life Experience Debts: Why can't kids earn credit for life experience?**

By Patrick Farenga (Copyright 2006)

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I was eating lunch in our kitchen and Audrey, our ten-year-old, was typing at our computer in the living room.

"How do you spell 'business' Daddy?" she asked.

I told her.

"How do you spell 'receptionist?'" she asked.

I told her.

"How do you spell 'Personality?'" she asked.

"What are you doing?" I asked as I walked out to her.

Audrey held up the classified job section of the local newspaper and said, "I'm applying for a job. They asked that I reply using e-mail."

Curious, I read the ad. It was for a receptionist at a day spa.

"Audrey, you know you're too young to apply for this job." I said.

"But Dad! It says the job needs someone with personality and computer skills, and I have those!"

"Audrey, you do have those skills. And you'd probably do really well at this job, but they just can't hire a ten-year-old."

"But Dad! How do you know? It doesn't say I need a college degree like the other jobs in the paper!"

Lack of a college degree was what prevented Audrey from applying to an earlier job she found. Now Audrey thought she finally found a loophole that would let her participate in the real world of adult work, and once again I was shooting her idea down. I said to her that age, not ability, credentials, not experience, matter most to employers. But, Audrey, like many ten-year-olds I know, would at least like to try. Audrey has the discipline to stick with work she chooses to do (she has years of karate, gymnastics, and dance instructors who can vouch for her punctuality and determination), and parents willing to make transportation and other arrangements necessary to help her succeed, but our society simply won't tolerate such notions. In fact, our society is full of contradictions regarding children, learning, and work.

Middle-class and wealthy families can pay children for work or projects if they wish; some families simply give children a weekly allowance with nothing expected in return. But most poor families cannot afford any of this, which is a reason that any proposal to allow children to work should include real payment for the work. Before getting all worked up about this idea—paying cash or giving school credit for work done by children—I want to be clear that I don't think children, or anyone, should be paid for *any* work. For instance, chores around the house are best done as a shared task in a family because they can be monotonous and time-consuming, but we adults know—and children eventually learn—they are necessary to enjoy a family's standard of living. Usually if one person gets stuck doing all the chores around the house, they grow to resent doing them. There is plenty of work that needs to be done without payment each day, and, thankfully, children like to do it at different stages of their growth. Vacuuming, sweeping, washing dishes, doing laundry, watching younger siblings—they are all alluring tasks to children

of certain ages. Certainly the allure passes, but those lessons often last a life time. This isn't a proposal to make all our interactions with children into an ongoing economic exchange. It is about including children in adult society and paying them (pro-rated based on ability) for their help, giving them personal recognition, or giving them school credit, whichever is most appropriate to the child.

One of the reasons children remember what they learn when they do work with adults is because it is meaningful, it is what they see their parents and most adults talk about and do. For instance, many teachers know that allowing older children in their classes teach younger children often works successfully. Some schools arrange service-learning, internships, volunteer opportunities, etc. for some of their students, and there are organizations and universities that support these programs. But these programs aren't widespread, they are plagued by faculty concerns that academic content is being short-changed, and they are imbued with the artifice of the curriculum that make students know it is a planned program, someone else's idea about what they should be doing at their age, not real work they are interested in. This is why token economies and other reward initiatives fail in the classroom: the students know they're constructs, not the real thing, and they soon learn how to game the constructs. John Holt once told me that learning in school is like playing poker with matches: you'll bluff and play with abandon because all you have to lose or gain is matches. But when the stakes are real, the entire experience is different, and one's attention is more focused. We think that by raising the standards and stakes of schoolwork, by refusing graduation and diplomas, we are solving the problem, but this is simply more of the medicine that is making the patient sick.

I'm not suggesting that we allow children to engage in dangerous occupations, such as asbestos removal, or to be paid less than adults performing similar tasks at the same level of competence. I'm not advocating that we bring back the horrid days of child labor. I am saying that we can work with children's wishes to be useful and helpful when they ask, rather than delaying them until they are older or finish certain years of school. We can create laws and situations that would protect children and help them learn important skills and lessons outside the classroom if we desired to, but we don't have this desire.

For instance, in 1923 a mother in Manhattan homeschooled her son and wrote a book about it, *A Mother's Letters to a Schoolmaster* (Knopf, 1923). In the book she presents details and diagrams about the sort of public schools and learning centers she and her son would attend if they existed. In the school building would be permanent quarters for businesses, scientists, and artists to do their work, and so much more: a bank, a shopping arcade where you could purchase items made or harvested at the school, a museum, machinists room, garden, foreign language center, living rooms, theater, newspaper and print shop, artists and writers' studios, map and chart center, and so much more. In her son's proposal for a community learning center, he draws "a friendly court," with a grocery store, vegetable garden, flower garden, nursery, library, stationary and book store, needle crafts store, carpenter's shop, machine shop, and a meeting house. This is quite different than most learning center proposals I see in the 21st century, which emphasize their stock of educational "manipulatives" and tutoring in special rooms. School recognizes the value of these activities, but not on the serious, everyday scale envisioned here. They are, at best, incorporated in school as 'special visting artist/professional days." Like the mother in 1923, today's parents who want their

children to learn in a context of getting real work done must look outside of school, unless they are lucky to live near the few schools in America that have such programs.

"But children's work is going to school!" I've been told when I bring this up with many adults. This view of children and school is paradoxical: we prevent children from physical labor during school hours, but we condone forced mental labor in school. But what's so wrong with physical work for children of any age? Why can't they learn any number of important skills while performing, observing, or participating in real work with adults if they choose to do so? I'm only talking about willing children; those who want to play or go to school would be able to do so. Choosing to work should remain a matter of individual choice, not coercion. Choosing to work, at any age, can be a productive way to educate oneself by controlling the way, and with whom, they want to learn. It need not be a way to gain cheap labor for employers, nor a fancy new curriculum to sell to the schools. It need not be vocational education, done in special schools at certain ages. The fact is welcoming children of all ages to partake in real work in our communities has been done for centuries as the way to become a self-sufficient citizen, and it continues to be practiced in some alternative programs and schools, and by many homeschoolers, with great success. However, working in lieu of classroom attendance, particularly for ages 13 and under, rubs folks the wrong way and is often viewed as a poor way to prepare workers of good citizens.

There are at least two striking ironies about the contentions by educationists that schoolwork prepares children for good citizenship and real work when they graduate. Study after study has shown that graduates of our schools have a very poor grasp of how our government works and are increasingly apathetic about politics. This decline in civics

has been noted for years; *A Mother's Letters to a Schoolmaster* noted this in 1923: "It is plainly to be seen that democracy cannot be learned in a place where it is not lived."

Therefore one of public education's great reasons for being compulsory—to make good citizens—is doubtful.

The other contention—that it teaches students skills that are transferable to the world of work—is simply not true, as employers often complain. A major analysis of many studies about the transferability of school skills to the world of work was done in the late nineteen-eighties by Dr. Lauren Resnick of the University of Pittsburgh; she is also a former president of the American Education Research Association. In an article entitled "Learning: In School and Out" Dr. Resnick concludes that very few of the skills taught in school are applicable and transferable to the world of work and that we should rethink school practices as a result. One would think the solution should have something to do with getting students more involved in real work and civics, rather than our conventional response: forcing students to spend even more time on school work.

Another irony is how our universities and businesses will give adults "life experience credits" but not children. "Life experience credits" are when a person who is working in a particular field is eligible to receive credit for classes without attending them because they have proven they know how to use the material covered in class through their own experiences. For instance, a mother I knew in Australia homeschooled her children through their compulsory school years. She had never gone to college, and when her children were grown up she decided she wanted to earn a college degree in education. When she applied to college, she received three years of credit based on her life experience, so she only had to do one year of undergraduate work to earn a bachelor's

degree. She earned these credits based on her work with her children and her homeschooling support group; she also had written many articles about homeschooling her children, and about homeschooling issues overall, that were published in various newsletters and magazines. These demonstrations of ability resulted in academic credit for her as an adult, but there is no such recognition of ability for children or teenagers. Life experience credits can only be earned by people over age eighteen. Does this mean that teens and children do not have valuable life experiences? That the only way for them to learn and grow during these years is in school-sanctioned settings?

We have increased the intensity of conventional instruction and testing in schools instead of letting willing families explore other ways to help their children learn in the world around them. Our obsession with seat-time in school blinds us from seeing how we are separating learning from living more and more by increasingly turning all aspects of our children's lives into measurable learning experiences. The superintendent of the Boston Public School system, Thomas Payzant, put it this way in the Boston Globe (9/7/99): "There is simply not enough time in the six hours of a school day to cover all the required material. While the schools are central to this process, they will not be able to do the job without a focused, energetic campaign on the part of everyone: community, business, and university partners, parents and especially students themselves. We can no longer afford the luxury of partnerships, projects, good will opportunities or experiences that are not squarely aimed at instructional improvement."

Now, the entire world must teach to the test. But the world should not be a classroom run by others. It is our birthright, our natural environment, and we need to be free to move in it in order to learn from it. To paraphrase John Holt, "Birds fly. Fish swim.

Humans learn." Learning is what humans naturally do in the world, but you would never guess that from our constant concern about learning as defined by school.

As I write about young Audrey wanting to be a receptionist, I remember how I worked as a receptionist when I was eleven. I grew up in a family business—a funeral business—and when I expressed a desire to work there my father proudly put me to work. At first I shadowed Dad, but eventually I worked alongside his employees and I enjoyed being "part of the crew." When I was first starting, I usually worked at the front desk alongside Andy, a shy, short, stocky man in his late fifties with a thick Bronx accent. He showed me how to direct people to the proper places in the funeral home, arrange chapels, caskets, and flowers, clean the premises, and answer the phone. I didn't even ask to get paid until I approached my teen years - the work was its own reward in my early years. I would work during the week after school, usually during "evening visitation hours," and it was infrequent. In the summer I usually worked at the funeral home whenever I could. I was in sixth grade when I started, and I continued working with my Dad until I was eighteen. Then I discovered other types of work I was interested in, and Dad reluctantly allowed me to try them. My early years of work in the funeral home are still a source of interest and pleasure to me. So Audrey's request to work at the day spa resonated with me in many positive ways.

Now there is so much pressure to "do academics" that children who work are viewed as missing out on important learning opportunities, and their parents are viewed as uneducated or uncaring. It is sad to think how ingrained the separation of living and learning has become in our lives, how thoroughly we believe that school is the best preparation for life, work, and citizenship for all children. For some, perhaps. But for all?

Aren't other formulations possible? I see a great need for us to find other ways to help children learn and grow in society, and if school won't change to accommodate different development schedules, learning styles, multiple intelligences, and life-styles we can still create change as individuals.

For instance, in my home business Audrey helps me with stamping, mailing, data entry, and other basic office tasks. I may ask for her help, or, more typically, she asks for work and if I have stuff she can do, we set a price then go to task. All three of my girls have wanted to work at Holt Associates Inc. over the years, and all of them have come and gone as helpers. We let them know what work was coming up at the office that they could do, and they could turn it down if they wanted to, which they often did. After all, they have friends and a life too! But we treated them seriously as helpers and they returned our respect. When we paid the younger ones it was often much less than the adults, usually just change, because they took so long to do things or required much supervision. But the more competent they became, the more they could earn. It was not always a workforce you could count on - they were volunteers, subject to frequent interruptions and silliness, and it required lots of coordination among parents to make certain arrangements work. But some children became valued co-workers and overall the adults who worked in the office appreciated the children's help, enjoyed their company and conversation, and they grew to be at ease with their young helpers. As my own experience shows, integrating children into the workplace can be done without exploitation.

We justify child labor laws by claiming they prevent the unfair exploitation of children, but, again, I'm struck by how hypocritical our society is about exploiting

children. Adults can encourage young children to spend hours practicing to act like adult cabaret and concert singers in order to appear on national TV in bitter contests for large cash prizes, but we won't let them spend a few supervised hours a week during school to help in a nursing home for a dollar. And, as I noted earlier, if they were over eighteen they could at least be eligible for "life experience credits" if they did this work, but younger children are not. It is considered as after-school, extra-curricular, or purely volunteer, work by elementary school officials, if they consider it at all.

At this stage of her life Audrey wants to do real work, not imaginary play, and we try to work with this desire of hers as much as possible. But there are only so many yard sales, drink and food stands, lawn and pet jobs available to enterprising ten-year-olds. And this pool is shrinking, as older, laid-off, and better-educated adults crowd-out kids from even these venerable kids' jobs. I'm only half-kidding: remember when your newspaper was delivered by a child on bicycle, not by a middle-aged man in a SUV? But children are much more capable than we think, and not just as receptionists.

Carolyn Ellis wrote about this in an article entitled "This family works side-by-side" in *Countryside and Small Stock Journal* (May/June 2000):

We had never dreamed the children would want to be so involved in this very long and laborious project: cutting down scrub trees/bushes, hauling the resulting debris from the back of the lot to the front, cleaning up trash, tearing down an old shed, trimming the larger mature trees, cutting grass, taking down a huge, more-than-half-dead elm... Working side-by-side with the children, teaching one child how to handle an ax, another where and how to prune a tree (another monster tree)... brought us all to a new level of

unity and closeness. At the same time, we had the pleasure of not only watching the children acquire new skills and grow in physical strength and stamina, we enjoyed seeing how the kids so easily managed to turn what looked like quite a formidable project into fun. For example, when I asked Margaret Mary (now 12) what she thought about when she mowed the back end of the lot (a 90-minute job, at best), she told me she pretended she was mowing hay on her "horse ranch"...

Since building the house generated some surplus lumber, as soon as we moved in, the children got inspired to start building their own private out-buildings. Our 5-, 10-, and 12-year-olds have already built and rebuilt their own private spaces. Using money earned from his 10 hours of work a week with a local miniature horse breeder, our 14-year-old son is currently in the process of finishing an 8' x 8' shed which he and his 10-year-old brother intend to use as their bedroom! This same teenage son introduced our family to composting and is counting on planning and preparing a sizable garden this spring. Fred and the older children have also worked to design and build a large 15' x 70' kennel for our four big dogs...

We should focus on how to we can change schooling to allow children to grow in competence and knowledge so they can find their place and work in the world. Instead we are extending the age ranges of compulsory school attendance and demanding more years of higher education before letting our young enter the world of work. We have laws, tests, and social norms that infantilize, rather than nurture, our young, and it is time to seriously question them. We need to acknowledge that valuable learning can take place at any age and not just in school.