

# SELF-DIRECTED EDUCATION: How unschooling and consent can ignite a disengaged learner

By Judy Arnall



Jenny is sitting on the couch reading a book on alligators. She needs to research alligators for her school's Grade 6 science project, even though she has no interest in alligators. Her friend, Jared, is also sitting on the couch reading another book on alligators. He is self-directed under a home education program and so is not required to read it, but he is fascinated by alligators and wants to know everything about them.

The difference in the educational approach between Jenny and Jared is very large. Jenny is forced to learn about a subject that someone else chose for her. Her learning is extrinsically motivated as she did not give consent, and often coaxed along with carrots (marks) and sticks (detentions). Jared, on the other hand, is intrinsically motivated to learn, driven by his own interest to know more. The payoff for him is satisfaction of his own curiosity. Jenny's education is owned by the government, school, principal and teacher. Jared owns his education.

Self-directed education has been around for 100 years, ever since Summerhill, the first "self-directed education school", was established in the United Kingdom in 1921. Today, at least 500 schools in North America are "Sudbury Valley Schools," a type of self-directed school. Self-directed education, or SDE, really came into fashion in the 1970s when the term "unschooling" was invented by John Holt, a prominent leader of the secular home education movement. The term is a misnomer, in that it doesn't necessarily mean anti-school, but it embraces the philosophy of learner self-determination, whether the learner is a child or an adult. The learner can choose to learn whatever they are interested in. Self-directed education allows the child to control more than just the pace of taking a course, which is often called self-directed learning. By taking control of their whole entire education in life and subject matter, children can choose what they want to learn, when they want to learn, where they want to learn and how they learn in addition to pace of learning.

SDE is usually undertaken under the provincial home education jurisdiction but can be implemented into a classroom environment. People choose SDE as an educational philosophy

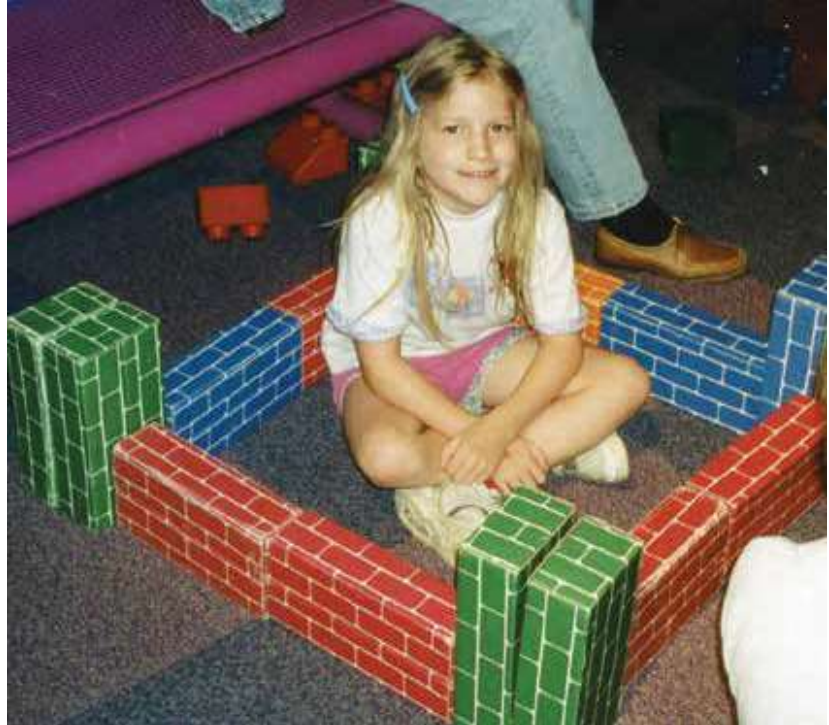
because they trust in the science that all humans know what they need to learn, when they need it, children included. Children are always learning. If we breathe, we learn. We never need to learn “how to learn.” We just do it. We begin learning from the moment of brain consciousness in the womb, and we never stop learning until we are in our graves. We learn to walk, talk, read and do arithmetic without direct instruction when the brain is developmentally ready to do so.

A common objection to SDE is that it is perceived as handing too much control over to a child, but children already control their learning. If they don't like what they are learning in school, young children act out, older children tune out and teens drop out.

The benefits of SDE are many. Motivation, one of schoolteachers' greatest challenges, is never a problem, because the learning agenda is never forced on a child. Another benefit is that children are always developmentally ready for the material they choose. Absorption of learning is high when the learner is interested, and the child can delve into an interest as deep as possible. With a lot of unstructured time, children can explore their passions and interests and may find a career path sooner than institutionally educated children. It has never been a better time in history to be under a self-directed education because the Internet has made information universally accessible. Self-directed education is stress-free learning, free from comparisons, forced curriculum, bullies and pressure.

Is SDE evidence-based? In the absence of standardized test results in home education, it is very difficult to provide systemic evidence that SDE works. Anecdotal evidence is plentiful. If one talks to families of SDE, one will hear how well the children have grown in confidence, direction and education. Many self-directed learners don't experience their first classroom environment until university or community college, and they do just fine. In fact, they thrive, because they have had the practice of owning their learning all their lives, unlike their cohorts who have just been released from 12 years of being strictly monitored, directed and spoon-fed education by their parents and teachers.

How do you educate with a SDE approach? It's pretty simple. Live your life, but be attentive to what your learner wants to do. Let the child lead and you follow. If your child wants you to read a book, read her a book. If she wants to play a game, play a game. If she wants to build a dollhouse, help her get the materials and build it together. If she wants to do it herself, let her. If she wants to see a movie, buy tickets and go. Travel, play, explore, build, work, volunteer, get outside and point out things you find exciting. Share your love of knowledge and curiosity.



What would a typical SDE day look like? Imagine a Saturday morning in July. Where the day takes the family members depends on what has been planned and what gets sidetracked. Every day is different. Younger children learn through play, older children through projects and teens through self-directed investigation. It would involve a lot of free play, board games, working on a family project, cleaning the house and/or socializing with their friends. The day unfolds and the learning fits with whatever meandering comes of it. Outcomes are not pre-determined, but can be recorded in retrospect. Many families take photos, notes and videos in order to keep a permanent record of learning. SDE may seem new, but it is how children learned for many thousands of years and may be the future where learning is everywhere.

## About

Judy Arnall, BA, CCFE, DTM, is a certified brain and child development specialist and master of non-punitive parenting and education practices. She is the founder of Unschooling Canada Association and is the bestselling author of five print books translated into five languages, including *Discipline Without Distress* and *Parenting With Patience*. She has also compiled a handy tips book titled *Attachment Parenting Tips Raising Toddlers To Teens*. Her latest book, *Unschooling To University: Relationships matter most in a world crammed with content*, is becoming a bestseller in an age of parents seeking educational options. She is the parent of five self-directed educated children of which three have already graduated university, one is halfway through, and one is enjoying a master's program. She can be reached at [www.unschoolingtouniversity.com](http://www.unschoolingtouniversity.com). ■