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# how children fail

JOHN HOLT

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## How Children Fail John Holt

First published in the mid 1960s, *How Children Fail* began an education reform movement that continues today. In his 1982 edition, John Holt added new insights into how children investigate the world, into the perennial problems of classroom learning, grading, testing, and into the role of the trust and authority in every learning situation. His understanding of children, the clarity of his thought, and his deep affection for children have made both *How Children Fail* and its companion volume, *How Children Learn*, enduring classics.

## How Children Fail Details

Date : Published September 4th 1995 by Da Capo Lifelong Books (first published 1964)

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Author : John Holt

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# From Reader Review How Children Fail for online ebook

## Leif says

Holt has a way of cutting through the bullshit when it comes to how children learn (or more realistically, as the book contends: how they do NOT learn) in schools. He approaches the subject almost as a scientist, eschewing fancy, obfuscating academic language as well as cleverness and finger-pointing. It is a remarkably gimmick-free book that attempts to put aside the supply-side notion of "how can we as teachers discover clever methods for imparting knowledge to our captive charges?" in favor of "how do students actually and naturally learn, and how can we as teachers facilitate that learning?" The difference between these two questions may seem subtle, but the distinction is crucial if our goal is to truly educate.

The structure of the book is built around Holt's journal of his experiences team-teaching with another man in the late '50s/early '60s (one taught while the other observed the children), interspersed with Holt's own comments, amendments, contradictions, and clarifications some 30 years later. Indicative of Holt's earnest desire to objectively account for how children learn or don't learn is his willingness to be as critical of his own methods and philosophical conclusions as he is of others'. This is refreshingly honest in a field crowded by lazy and cowardly theory and practice aimed at maintaining conventional wisdom and the status quo, both of which are deadly to real and lasting education.

I was at once encouraged and depressed by this book. I was encouraged because Holt's experiences seem to confirm many of the ideas I have been bandying about in my head as I try to educate my own students, ideas full of hope and the notion that we CAN change society's screwed-up, anti-instinctual notions of how people are best educated.

But what is depressing is that this book was written SIXTY YEARS AGO, and way too many of the backward, counterproductive, even harmful practices, thoughts, and attitudes Holt identifies in the book still dominate education! In fact, some of them (such as the Sacred Cow known as standardized testing) are even MORE ingrained now, at once bloating and eating away at education in the exact ways Holt predicted if they were not corrected. It is amazing and alarming that the diseased seeds Holt saw being planted in the mid-twentieth century have now blossomed and flourished into full-blown rotten, choking vines, an educational Kudzu from which it is almost impossible to extricate actual education. This is sad and frustrating for anyone truly invested in educating anyone. It is akin to watching *Network*, a movie which was supposed to be a satirical "what if?" about the merging of news and entertainment, but is now merely a darkly funny reflection of the frightening reality in which we live. Remove the satire and the dark humor (Holt is straightforward, honest, and sincere), and the same can be said of this book, only in terms of education.

So why read something so depressing? Because any honest assessment of how we educate is bound to be depressing, given how broken everyone knows our educational system to be. But as with any dysfunctional social institution, ignoring the depressing truth about it can only serve to perpetuate that dysfunction, since the continued existence of the dysfunction is certain as long as we blindly obey the uniquely human instinct to pretend that the dysfunction does not exist. "What most teachers want and reward," says Holt, "are not knowledge and understanding, but the appearance of them." This unthinking, blind allegiance to appearance at the expense of reality is at the heart of every social dysfunction. I recommend this book to anyone who is interested in challenging that dysfunction and looking for ways to make the system healthy again.

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## **Tim says**

This book is a highly personal rumination on why so many schoolchildren have trouble absorbing and understanding the material being taught in school. The main focus is on the difference between the passion for learning readily observed in infants and the boredom, frustration, and rebellion against learning that is already manifest in students in the earlier grades. Through a series of memos that read almost like diary entries, Mr. Holt describes his observations of his own and other teachers' classrooms.

What impressed me most about this book was Mr. Holt's obvious passion for his subject matter. As a concerned teacher, he noticed a problem in his classroom and, the more he thought about it, the more he realized that the problem did not make any sense to him. Accordingly, he threw all his powers of observation, reason, and empathy into trying to understand it. The result is a fascinating and unique book that seeks to understand, not through studies or "science" but rather through direct firsthand observation, what exactly is going on in the minds of kids.

The book makes a lot of good points and raises a lot of interesting questions about the nature of education and learning. To my mind, though, none of its conclusions were unquestionable, and more than once I found myself wondering if Mr. Holt's deeply felt empathy for the children he was observing caused him to focus too exclusively on the child's point of view. Also, he takes it for granted that the kind of keen desire to learn about the world found in infants would continue unchanged through adulthood if only adults would "get out of the way." This conclusion, though possible, seems to me unprovable in either the positive or the negative sense.

Still, I think everyone should read this book. The questions that an obviously concerned individual has about education deserve to be considered and answered, in one respect or another, in the minds of every citizen of a free country, all of whom have a vested interest in the process and results of the education of the young.

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## **Oktawian Chojnacki says**

School is a jail of some sort. Is there a room for growth in such environment? I doubt it and so does the author.

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## **Zechy says**

I would recommend a different title: How Children are Failed.

Fantastic. Cannot recommend this highly enough. Some of the references are a bit dated, but the main points are just as valid as ever. It is nothing short of criminal what is done to children "in their own good".

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## **Cassandra says**

Excellent! Definitely a book worth rereading. I can't wait to read some of his other books.

A few of my favorite quotes

A few good principles to keep in mind:

- 1 - Children do not need to be "taught" in order to learn; they will learn a great deal, and probably learn best, without being taught.
- 2 - Children are enormously interested in our adult world and what we do there.
- 3 - Children learn best when the things they learn are embedded in a context of real life, are part of what George Dennison, in *The Lives of Children*, called "the continuum of experience."
- 4 - Children learn best when their learning is connected with an immediate and serious purpose.

What this means in the field of numbers and math is simply this: the more we can make it possible for children to see how we use numbers, *and to use them as we use them*, the better.

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The attention of children must be lured, caught, and held, like a shy wild animal that must be coaxed with bait to come close. If the situations, the materials, the problems before a child do not interest him, his attention will slip off to what does interest him, and no amount of exhortation or threats will bring it back.

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Since we can't know what knowledge will be most needed in the future, it is senseless to try to teach it in advance. Instead, we should try to turn out people who love learning so much and learn so well that they will be able to learn whatever needs to be learned.

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### **Kerri says**

Insightful is an understatement. Written in the 50s but still very relevant today. Everyone should read it. Everyone.

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### **Sara says**

This book, more than anything else, is what sold me on homeschooling. Anything to save my kids from this.

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### **Kris says**

This was the first book I read about homeschooling. It was recommended in my Montessori Teacher Training, and I fell in love. Despite the dreary title, John Holt has an intuitive sense of good teaching and the innate joy children can find in a good learning environment.

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### **Moktoklee says**

Pretty intense. I have decided not to rate this book with gold stars (John wouldn't have approved).

It definitely wasn't perfect, there were certain points where the spelling and grammar made it difficult to understand what was going on. Another aspect that I wasn't crazy about was the product placement. I can tell that John was just trying to be helpful and give pointers to other teaching personnel and share what he was interested in, but it's clear in revision notes that John wished he hadn't included products in the work. This brings me to another, more minor problem, which is that he takes such a long time to go through the revision notes on the products that I've forgotten about what the main idea of the paragraph or chapter was about. I definitely don't hate this book though. It's very clear from his narrative sections that he really does care about and respect children in the up most. I agree with most of his ideas as they are brought up. I think that John Holt I could have accomplished great things, were he alive today. His ideas are well logically and methodically mapped out and respectfully put forward so as not to offend anyone. This book made me realize that there are other people in the world who care about what happens to students. Definitely a necessary read for anyone thinking about attempting the formal education system.

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## **Hira says**

There is a special place in heaven where angels sing dirges for children herded off to school each day. Lamenting the destruction of their infinitely creative capacities as fear of authority, fear of being made fun of, is inculcated deep within their minds. And which drives them towards the hunt for right answers to please countless adults around them and very far away from truly discovering life and their own selves. This, in a nutshell, is what John Holt's book is about. Its immensely sad to read as he recounts case after case of little kids floundering in the midst of the slave-like circumstances they are thrust into. Tethered to their desks for hours, in perpetual dread of the adults around them, who only seem to be interested in developing a very narrow form of learning. Made to learn about things that basically just don't matter to them. Things that they just parrot to get through the tests. Or to escape adult disapproval.

Sad, anger-inducing and such an immense wastage of time. School really is the place where we destroy life, destroy everything joyful and beautiful that exists in it, and our capacities to experience it all. Brilliant book. Wish I could lay my hands on more of John Holt's stuff.

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## **Claudia says**

Original copyright date: 1964. Holt's work rings just as true now as it did when I read it in the late 60's. As I read, I could see his warning about our current testing craze: "One ironical consequence of the drive for so-called higher standards in schools is that children are too busy to think...to a very great degree, school is a place where children learn to be stupid...our 'tell 'em and test 'em way of teaching leaves most students aware that their academic success rests on shaky foundations." Holt is passionate, a zealot. He talks about the difference between thinkers and producers...thinkers are comfortable with not knowing, with ambiguity. Producers, on the other hand, are driven by the need to produce the right answer...thinking optional. "Practically everything we do in schools tend to make children answer-centered...Schools are a kind of temple of worship for 'right answers'" I see this play out with adult learners also...many of whom would have been educated during this time Holt's writing about.

His warnings are as fresh now as they were then. When will we have a politician who lets us truly educate students to become thinkers, to trust themselves, to take risks as they learn?

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## Bethany says

As a student, I schooled the educational system. I was the teacher's pet, the A student, the girl with all the answers. Yet, when I finished it all (including grad school), I knew hardly anything, and I was frustrated that I could remember so little. Nineteen years and thousands of dollars, and not much to show for it.

As a teacher, I started asking questions. Am I actually helping my students learn? Why are kids graduating from college with absolutely no idea about what they're good at or even interested in? Why is our entire educational system basically a false measure of intelligence based on arbitrary goals and silly comparisons?

Then I read this book. Holt, with his years of experience teaching kids, makes some brilliant observations and offers some helpful insights that have heightened my awareness of the pathetic state of what we call "education" today. If you're interested in education, this will definitely rile you up in one way or another. I was literally putting my book down and yelling "Yes, that's right!" at my confused husband. Note of caution: Holt's passionate about this, and his conclusions sometimes seem a bit exaggerated; in addition, not all of his assertions are provable. However, I definitely recommend this book to ANYONE interested in education (which should be everyone). It'll at least provoke your thinking, and that's never a bad thing.

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## Jan Martinek says

A great insight into learning (& somehow also a view into some adult behaviors). Just some quotes in place of a review. The book is rich in its specificity.

*"The very natural mistake that Bill and I made was to think that the differences between the children in our class had to do with techniques of thinking, that the successful kids had good techniques of thinking while the unsuccessful, the "producers," had bad, and therefore that our task was to teach better techniques. But the unsuccessful kids were not trying, however badly, to do the same things as the successful. They were doing something altogether different. They saw the school and their task in it differently. It was a place of danger, and their task was, as far as they could, to stay out of danger. Their business was not learning, but escaping."*

*"I see now that I was wrong about Emily's task. The task for her was not to spell "microscopic," or write a word backwards, or balance a weight. The thought in her mind must have been something like this: "These teachers want me to do something. I haven't got the faintest idea what it is, or why in the world they want me to do it. But I'll do something, and then maybe they'll let me alone." "*

*"Our way of scoring was to give the groups a point for each correct prediction. Before long they were thinking more of ways to get a good score than of making the beam balance. We wanted them to figure out how to balance the beam, and introduced the scoring as a matter of motivation. But they out-smarted us, and figured out ways to get a good score that had nothing to do with whether the beam balanced or not. "*

*"I haven't forgotten Jack and his falling down. One thing I have discovered is that there is a peculiar kind of relief, a lessening of tension, when you make a mistake. For when you make one, you no longer have to worry about whether you are going to make one. "*

*“The remedy is not to think of more and more tricks for “building intelligence,” but to do away with the conditions that make people act stupidly, and instead make available to them a wide variety of situations in which they are likely once again to start acting intelligently. ”*

*“The idea of painless, non-threatening coercion is an illusion. Fear is the inseparable companion of coercion, and its inescapable consequence. If you think it your duty to make children do what you want, whether they will or not, then it follows inexorably that you must make them afraid of what will happen to them if they don't do what you want. ”*

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### **Antoniolarsongmail.com says**

This wasn't the best book on self guided pedagogy i have read recently. it does, however, seem to be one of the standards, due to its early observations (mid '50s) on the destructive nature of institutional instruction's crippling effect on learning (and happiness). It wasn't the most scintillating read due to its focus on the author's math students and their struggles with basic math. Still, it was worthwhile to read Holt's process of unraveling each student's approach to the subject until he could understand how exactly they were approaching their work. He was more often than not horrified at what he found. The majority of students were conditioned to not work through understanding how number relationships actually worked, but how to spit out the right answer for the teacher's approval, as soon as possible. when this didn't work, they would revert to the next step of coping mechanisms, solidifying the damage.

We don't get too much in the way of wholesale recommendations for teaching approach until the final chapter of the book. I was somewhat surprised when Holt outlines how he doesn't think any subject matter should be forced on young people. This bedrock principle of self guided learning wasn't overstated in the body of the book, so i was happily taken aback that he would feature it in his summary.

Still, the book doesn't set out to explain how to educate, but rather, how not to. Good read.

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### **Heather says**

As my husband is a teacher by trade, he has read several books on children and education that he recommended I read. One of these is *How Children Fail* by John Holt. I found it to be profound and fascinating and recommend it to anyone who cares about what their children learn or education. (Plus at under 200 pages, it's a quick read.) John Holt was a teacher and this book is a collection of memos that he shared with other teachers and his administration. His memos were based on observations in teaching his own students and observing other teachers in their classrooms. Here are some of my favorite quotes from the book:

- \* The only answer that really sticks in a child's mind is the answer to a question that he asked or might ask of himself.
- \* Our aim must be to build soundly, and if this means that we must build more slowly, so be it. The work of the children themselves will tell us.
- \* The invention of the wheel was as big a step forward as the invention of the airplane—bigger, in fact... Above all, we will have to avoid the difficult temptation of showing slow students the wheel so that they



may more quickly get to work on the airplanes...Knowledge that is not genuinely discovered by children will very likely prove useless and will soon be forgotten.

\* There must be a way to educate young children so that the great human qualities that we know are in them may be developed. But we'll never do it as long as we are obsessed with tests...How can we foster a joyous, alert, whole-hearted participation in life, if we build all our schooling around the holiness of getting "right answers?"

\* A child is most intelligent when...he cares most about what he is doing.

\* When a child gets right answers by illegitimate means, and gets credit for knowing what he doesn't know, and knows he doesn't know, it does double harm. First, he doesn't learn, his confusions are not cleared up; secondly, he comes to believe that a combination of bluffing, guessing, mind reading, snatching at clues and getting answers from other people is what he is supposed to do at school; that this is what school is all about; that nothing else is possible.

\* Kids really like to learn (they) just don't like being pushed around.

Throughout the book he talks a great deal about the use of fear to get children to learn. Fear is not an effective motivator. It may have immediate results, in that children grasp at whatever means possible to find the right answer, but they don't usually understand or retain the process this way. As he described the children he worked with and their various learning failures I thought back to a girl I had worked with during my psych rotation of nursing school. She started out as bright, smart, cheerful, healthy and happy. After a weekend visit to her father, she was found abandoned and huddled in a little ball. No one knows exactly what happened to her. They suspected some extreme abuse, but she never came out of the secret world that she had run away to. I observed her more than a dozen years after the incident and she was still rocking and hiding somewhere else, only emerging occasionally to scream. This is obviously an extreme example, but I think that it holds true. Children can become so crippled by fear and stress that they don't learn. Afraid of failure and disapproval they often hide away within themselves, away from the unpleasant stimulus that they can't bear.

Another method that he speaks against is tricks and formulas. I remember as a student being bothered by formulas. They didn't tell me why I was getting the answer I was getting. And when I would I ask why, my teachers would be annoyed and generally tell me in an exasperated manner, that's just the way it is. As a result I forgot most algebra as soon as I possibly could. No one could ever tell me where these answers were coming from, I was just manipulating numbers. The "right answers" were not relevant to me, so I didn't retain it.

This book makes me resolved to be a better teacher of my own children. I want them to love learning.

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## **Jessica says**

I know, I know, five stars? for an educational classic? Yes, not only does it really deserve to be considered a classic in the sense that it is very thought provoking and could bear multiple readings, but unlike many classics (esp. in education!) it is a very engaging read. I find myself very drawn in by his style as much as anything and his compelling insights into the thinking and world of children. His observations are grounded in concrete examples as they happen (as all journaling will produce), but they have a philosophical weight that always extends beyond the immediate moment under contemplation to the larger questions of "How can I help these children learn?" and "what can we do to fix education?"

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## **Garden Gal says**

Are you a learner? A teacher? Do you think you might like to teach?

READ THIS!

It will teach you as much or more than any college or grad course in pedagogy and in a much more enjoyable manner with more inspiration than any pedagogy professor I've ever encountered.

It is a true today as it was when it was written.

It is an easy read, without jargon.

As a young college student, I read a library copy and as soon as I could afford to, I purchased a copy and promised myself I would read it at least once a year while I taught and while I raised my children -I promise I kept.

(How Children Learn , What do I do Monday, and Mr. Holt's autobiography grace my book shelf as well. My only regret is that these are replacements for the first editions I happened to buy; the originals were loaned to a friend who forgot to return them before her family had to make a sudden move to Texas.)

Better than Dr. Spock as a guide to the psychology of parenting.

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## **Tani says**

So, after all these years of homeschooling I finally read John Holt. And, believe it or not, I whole-heartedly agree with a lot of what he has to say. He so eloquently puts into words many things I have thought about education and learning. I don't know if I could've understood so much of this before experiencing it through learning with my own children. One of my many favorite quotes: "But a child who is learning naturally, following his curiosity where it leads him, adding to his mental model of reality whatever he needs and can find a place for, and rejecting without fear or guilt what he does not need, is growing--in knowledge, in the love of learning, and the ability to learn. He is on his way to becoming the kind of person we need in our society...the kind of person who, in Whitney Griswold's words, seeks and finds meaning, truth and enjoyment in everything he does. All his life he will go on learning. Every experience will make his mental model of reality more complete and more true to life, and thus make him more able to deal realistically, imaginatively, and constructively with whatever new experience life throws his way."

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## **Rebecca The Files of Mrs. E, says**

While I don't agree with all of John Holt's ideas, his book definitely made me think. I wish I had read this back when I was starting out as a teacher because it gave me a different perspective on some of my struggling students. Some of the information is dated (such as his treatment of special needs students) but the

general ideas are still applicable. And I think his statement that teachers take responsibility when students learn and blame students when they don't is still true in many classrooms. While students do need to do their part, I also think he is right that we need to meet them where they are, not where they should be, and I liked his real world examples straight from his classroom. Since the book is made up of memos he wrote while teaching, it really is exactly what he is doing--good and bad--as opposed to teaching books where it is just someone saying what they believe is good for a classroom. This set up also made it easy to pick up the book any time and just read a little or not even the whole thing.

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## **JP says**

John Holt summarizes perfectly the problem with contemporary education: it emphasizes right answers rather than learning, production rather than thinking. Read this book to understand this problem and its results, as seen through his experience as a collaborative teacher and thoughtful observer. The rewards for "right answers" over thinking even persists at higher education levels. "What would happen at Harvard or Yale if a prof gave a surprise test in March on work covered in October? Everyone knows what would happen; that's why they don't do it." (p. 232)[return][return]He advocates for schooling at home (and in the world) as the best method of education. "People teaching their children at home consistently do a good job because they have the time - and the desire - to know their children, their interest, the signs by which they show and express their feelings." (p. 36) Four key principles: 1. Children do not need to be "taught" in order to learn, and they often learn best when not taught, 2. Children are very interested in the adult world, 3. Children learn best when the subject is "embedded in the context of real life," 4. "Children learn best when their learning is connected with an immediate and serious purpose." [return][return]Holt blames the current system, pointing out that if a system consistently fails, the problem is with it, not its inputs or participants. In the summary section, he forcefully points out the negative effects of the current system - low self-esteem, ignorance about how to learn, and a mind trained not to want to do so.

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