John Holt. *How Children Learn.* Toronto: Pitman Publishing Corporation, 1967. Pp. 189. $4.95.

Dubbed romantic and anti-intellectual — along with Friedenberg, Goodman, Henry, and others — John Holt has been largely ignored by the established leaders in education. He is not so much interested in the formal lesson plan, the design of curricula, or in the setting of learning to the tune of administrative convenience, as he is in the process of growing-up.

In his earlier work, *How Children Fail,* Holt talked about children using their minds badly. It was suggested that a hostile society and its educational system encouraged children to act stupidly, and crippled and destroyed the processes of learning, the dignity of youth and the natural instincts for curiosity and self-realization. In schools failure was endemic; fear of failure was the threat to which children were expected to respond by increased attention to study.

How Children Learn describes children using their minds well, learning boldly and effectively. They have a style of learning that fits their condition, and which they use well until trained out of it.

Young children learn by being allowed to experiment, to try things out, and, once having mastered a skill or a situation, they must be allowed the right to change things around for the fun they get out of showing they have mastered what they set out to learn. A child may not be as good as adults at "simplifying a problem," "at figuring out how to ask questions whose answers will give him the most information," but he

> has a great advantage . . . in situations — and many, even most real life situations are like this — where there is so much seemingly senseless data that it is impossible to tell what questions to ask. He is much better at taking in this kind of data; he is better able to tolerate its confusion; and he is much better at picking out the patterns . . . Above all he is much less likely than adults to make hard and fast conclusions on the basis of too little data, or having made such conclusions, to refuse to consider any new data that does not support them. And these are the vital skills of thought which, in our hurry to get him thinking the way we do, we may very well stunt or destroy in the process of "educating" him (p. 51).

Children in schools should have more opportunity for talking together and for independent work. Where control has been tight, it wouldn't do to take the brakes off suddenly. However, freedom can be developed by offering it in small doses at the start. Eventually

> we can break out of the school lockstep and make the class-room a place where more and more independent studying, thinking, and talking go on (p. 83).

Children can teach themselves to read. The important thing is for the teacher not to appear as the expert, the know-it-all. Certainly, children do benefit from a "competence model," but sometimes a competence model can be altogether too competent, and it is as well to remember that

> Many thousands of children teach themselves to read, every year; we might do well to find out how many such children there are, and how they taught themselves (p. 91).

In the field of sports children can learn without anyone "teaching" them anything. They learn just by watching and imitating. They can learn in

art and mathematics and in other areas the same way: by watching, imitating, and being allowed to try and to ask the questions instead of the other way around. The freedom to choose how to do, or not to do at all, is all important. For the child is

> curious. He wants to make sense out of things, find out how things work, gain competence and control over himself and his environment, do what he can see other people doing. He is open, receptive, and perceptive. . . . To find out how reality works, he works on it. He is bold. He is not afraid of making mistakes. . . . He is able and willing to wait for meaning to come to him — even if it comes very slowly, . .. (pp. 184-185).

Generally there are two main reactions to what Holt suggests: (1) Isn't he asking children to discover and to re-create, all by themselves, the whole history of the human race? (2) Aren't there certain things that just have to be known by everyone, and aren't teachers there to make sure children know them? To the first, Holt replies, No; the child accepts the world as he finds it, but he should be free to explore and make sense of what he sees in his own way. His answer to the second question is that a child should be trusted to direct his own learning, for the things we most need to learn are the things we most want to learn.

Holt has set down his pastiche in simple language, in an easy, flowing style, and it is impossible to read very far without conjuring up thoughts of how it was in the days of childhood. Then there was an excitement at finding out things. Few have been able to retain this curiosity and excitement between grade one and grade twelve and beyond. Holt continually writes of understanding as the child understands, thinking as the child thinks, the better to understand how children learn. He even approaches the solving of problems in the way he thinks a child would.

Perhaps Holt is neither a romantic nor an anti-intellectual, but a kind of prophet in the "inspired teacher" sense. He is offering a way for a learner to act for himself instead of being acted upon. Children allowed to learn in their own way could, perhaps, develop into the kind of adults desperately needed for a world in turmoil. "Children," says Holt, see the world as a whole, mysterious, perhaps, but a whole none the less. They do not divide it up into airtight little categories, as we adults do."

Is this not what the world desperately needs at this time: citizens with a "world-view"?

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