Supplement to
Learningguild Letter
*2.2009**

EDUCATING OUR CHILDREN AND OURSELVES

(1) CAN I HELP IN MY CHILDREN'S EDUCATION?

Hallo! I'm John Howes, the President of Learningguild, the educational and social movement. One of our main aims is to go on widening educational opportunity. That means extending the possibilities of learning and so of growing as a person, both for adults and for children.

In this first talk, I'm responding to the question which might be asked, sometimes anxiously, by many parents: **"Can I help in my children's education?"**

What I'll be saying is relevant to any parent who asks that question, but I have in mind especially the person ─ often but not always the father ─ who has to be away for long hours and perhaps long journeys, and gets home tired, and can have the worry that he or she is in some ways getting out of touch with his or her children.

Let me first answer our question with "**Yes!** Most certainly you can help in your children's education." The mere fact that you're willing to ask the question seriously is a great start. It shows that you care; and above all, in their upbringing and education, children need to know that at least someone, and preferably more than one person, who is close to them really does care about them.

What kinds of help can you give, supposing that you can't have as much time with the children as you'd wish? I'll divide my answer to that into two parts. The first would apply just as well if you were asking "How can I help my children to be interested and active in sport?" (and sport ought to be part of education anyway); and the second is more specifically related to the reading, writing and thinking which belong to mental development.

There used to be an Australian TV show called "Life. Be In It", which presented the character Norm, sitting heavily in front of his TV set with a can of beer in his hand. It's obvious that a Norm who said to his children "Get out there and play cricket (or footy): it's good for you!", and didn't move from the couch, wouldn't have much or any continuing influence on them.

The Dad who will help his children to develop their sporting interests, their fitness and their skill is the one who not only gets out there with them but obviously loves to do it, and wouldn't rather be doing anything else. He needn't be any kind of star; he's just got to like playing the game and to show, by example and some guidance, how to do it. Even if it's only, say, every second weekend that he can join in, his enthusiasm and his being with them in the park or the garden will be appreciated (and remembered) by the children.

That's how it is too with children's education. Now you might say to me here: "I know something about footy, but I don't know enough about education to know where to start. Don't I just have to leave it to the teachers? I'd look a fool, and mislead my kids, if I said something that turned out to be wrong."

When you help in your children's education, you don't have to think of yourself as another teacher. Basically, you're a participant, someone who's glad to join in. How do you do that?

The first point to remember is that, in education generally as in sport, children like to show what they can do, and be appreciated for it. So, above all, give your children the chance to tell you what

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** This pair of talks was originally recorded on a cassette. The text has been revised and will soon be recorded on an audio CD. I use the combination of text and sound in helping students whose first language is not English.*

they're learning at school, and what, in or out of school, they're seeing and hearing and reading; and try to see it from their point of view as something new.

Be a good listener. That's a basic principle for so many things: learning to do something difficult, understanding how your partner sees things, getting and keeping close to your children.

A good listener is patient. Let a child take his or her time to tell you about something, or to explain it, or to write or draw it. The mere fact that you're there encouraging the child to do these things means so much. And genuine patience is cheerful.

"Yes, but **when** can I do that?" Of course this question of time is often a worrying one. Let me suggest three answers. First, establish a pattern which you and your partner can follow in the evening before the children go to sleep. The hour before going to sleep should be a peaceful one, in which a parent usually does some reading to or with the child, and they can also talk about what has happened during the day. Think how much it means to a child, from younger than two to older than nine, to have those times, often sitting up in bed with the parent's arm about him or her.

Secondly, be available at odd times. I remember a time when my children used to go through their spelling lists when I was shaving ─ and before that they used to draw letters with the shaving brush on the tiles of the bathroom wall.

Finally, if you're away from home a lot, remember what it means to a child to know that when you get home you'll be glad to see or hear about something they've done while you've been away.

Just as in sport, be ready for difficulties to arise. Learning to cope with difficulties by recognising and understanding them, and working out, sometimes with others' help and encouragement, how to find a way through ─ that's fundamental in human life. Just to ask "What don't you understand?" and to persevere patiently until you can see at least where the difficulty lies is a great help.

You wouldn't, if you're fond of sport, present it to your children as something unpleasant they just have to do. So with learning. Help them to see that learning how to recognise words, or do sums, or write a sentence, is something that can give them great satisfaction ─ much more, in the end, than comes from watching a violent cartoon.

Another similarity with sport is very important. You know how some parents, when they watch their child playing sport, seem to care only that he or she should win. The poor child is being used for the sake of the parent's pride, and is getting the idea that only winning matters. That's nonsense. It's taking part, preferably with skill, but certainly with enthusiasm, that matters most. So, in our attitudes to our children's education, we need to avoid putting our children under the kind of pressure to succeed that makes them fear that if they don't do better than most other children we'll think of them as failures.

To summarize, then: participate, listen, read, chat, encourage, and don't pile on the pressure.

Now what about the process of learning itself? What, more specifically, can you do to help?

Let's first make another comparison, this time with any kind of skilled work, like that of a driver, often under difficult conditions, or of a nursing sister in an intensive care ward. On the one hand, if you do such skilled work well, there are some things you know extremely well, probably from systematic training and frequent repetition; on the other hand, you know the value of keeping your eyes open for anything new that could be worth remembering and asking about.

Enjoyment is important in education, but so is the kind of **system and repetition** that lets us remember this week what we learned last week. A lot of school education isn't very systematic these days ─ there's been a movement against system, as though system had to be mean dullness and boredom, instead of clearness and progress ─ and so there's a great need for parents to help their children consolidate what they've learnt.

The main single intellectual need of a child is to expand the range of **words** which he or she knows and understands well enough to say or read or write them correctly and use them appropriately. Obviously, then, a good teacher wants to make sure that most of the words learnt last week are remembered this week and next, and so provides frequent revision. Spelling lists, for example, help in the process of consolidation.

Let me suggest two things here. One is the playing of word games. Share a sheet of paper and ask your child questions that fit his or her stage of development: maybe "Can you write the word 'bat'?" or "What's a three-letter word starting with *w*?" or "Can you finish off a word that starts with the letters *sta*?" or "Can you say this word I've just written?" and so on. As you continue, and your child provides more of the words or questions, you'll get a better idea of the words he or she is meeting in class and in books. It means a lot to a child to be able to succeed in such games as I've been describing, and it motivates him or her to keep learning.

You may have been surprised that, when I gave some letters just now, I pronounced them *w* and *s* and *t* and *a*, and didn't give them their long names, 'double-you', 'es', 'tee' and 'ay'. It is now once again being widely recognized in the teaching of reading that the short names are much more useful to a young child, because most words are, at least in part, pronounced by putting together the basic sounds which those short names give. So, with the word 'stand', a child can say "S-t-a-n-d: stand", and later move on to 'standing', even though we say *ng* and not '*n-g*', and to 'understand', even though we pronounce the combination *e* + *r* there with the short 'er'.

I used to chant the letters to and then with my children:

a	b	c	d
e	f	g	h
	i		
j	k	l	m
n	o	p	q
	r		
s	t	u	v
w	x	y	z

Let's hear it again. Do you notice how easy that list is to remember? What are the reasons for that? First, there's a pattern to it: four letters, four and one; four, four and one; four and four. Secondly, it's been made rhythmical. Thirdly, we can write it as well as hear it, and I've written it so that its structure stands out clearly. You can chant it fairly slowly and invite young children to draw the letters in the air. For *i*, we used to say, as we drew it in the air, "Line and a **dot**!"

In such ways it becomes fun to learn and, in effect, to revise. In this kind of atmosphere, a child sees that he or she both can learn and would gain by learning, and especially by being able to read more and more. I shall never forget one of my children saying at the age of four-and-a-quarter "**I want to do learning.**"

My other suggestion is helping your child to make very clear notes, at first about words and their spelling and use, on A4 sheets which are then kept in growing sets in looseleaf books. Use lined paper (mostly), with a margin-line visible on each side, so that there are left and right margins. Draw a vertical line about 5cm from the left margin. On the left of that line goes the word that is to be remembered, with marking of places where it is easy to go wrong (*nec<u>e</u>s<u>s</u>ary*: underline the one *c* and the double *s*). On the right of it anything can be added (often from a good dictionary, such as the *Oxford Basic* …) that will help the learner to use the word well — a meaning and/or an example-sentence. A line should be left blank between one entry and another, so that they stand out clearly. Frequent revision of such notes is essential, with reading aloud on some occasions. A title I have suggested for such work is deliberately ambiguous: "Words we have got to know".

Along with this maintenance of system, repetition and revision, there should be adventurousness to look out for anything that might be of great interest to the child. Perhaps the most valuable thing here is frequent visits (say once a fortnight) to a public library. Even if your child's school has a good library, and he or she can borrow books from it, the wider range of books in the children's section of a good public library, as well as the fact that you are happy to go out with him or her to that library, helps your child to want to read widely and to learn about lots of things. Try to make sure that there is a balance of fiction and non-fiction (biography and other history, geography, science, etc.).

In a library a child will often choose his or her own books to borrow, though some suggestion, guidance and encouragement is useful. You could buy a well-chosen book as a present from time to time; one place in Melbourne to find something good is the children's literature section at Dymock's in Collins Street.

I didn't grow up in a wealthy home, and I was the first in my family to go to university. Three things that especially helped me as a boy growing up in England in the nineteen-forties were first that

my parents used to read to me; secondly that, through a friend at the publishers Nisbet, my father used to obtain really good school books, from which I'd learn first stories and then history and geography, and of course all the time English; and thirdly that, when I was in the early years of secondary school, before we migrated to Australia, I used to call in at the Wembley public library in north-west London and browse and borrow.

It's true that we did have at home an encyclopaedia of nine volumes, and I used to like looking up places and people in it. But I would not give it the same importance as the three things I've mentioned. To buy or borrow, and read, many different things, suitable to different stages in the child's development, is better than relying on the fact that there's an encyclopaedia in the house, useful though that may often be.

You may be surprised that I haven't talked about radio (which also influenced me a lot as a child), or television, or the internet. Of course it's worth looking out for good programmes which you can watch together and talk about afterwards, with some explanation; but education is not the same as entertainment, because education requires that we look at or hear some things over and over again, so that our minds grow by mastering them and being able to use them. Talking with his or her parents, and then wide reading and frequent writing, will normally do more for a child's active mental development than radio or television, or video games. Carefully chosen CDs, videos and DVDs can be very helpful.

Most certainly, any parent can help in his or her children's education, and it's immensely valuable to do so. Above all you can show that you're glad to learn and glad to spend time and effort with the children. Let's say it again: participate, listen, read, chat, encourage, and don't pile on the pressure. Then, in particular, you can help them by word-games in which you join, and by offering some ways of being systematic, so that there's continual remembering rather than continual forgetting; and you can go with them to libraries, and buy them carefully chosen books and other items, so that they'll want to be able to learn more and more for themselves.

(2) "CAN I EDUCATE MYSELF?"

In this second talk, I shall be thinking of education as something we may want for ourselves and not only for any children we may have. The question I'm taking up is "**Can I educate myself?**"

Let's see first why people might ask that question, and what the range of education is (and eventually say what exactly we might best mean by this word 'educate'). Then I'll give two answers to our question, one in the form '**Yes, but …**', and the other in the form '**Yes, if …**'.

Someone who asks "Can I educate myself?" considers that he or she needs something that we call education, but wonders whether in order to get it you have to go to a school or a university or a class or series of classes. Can you do it yourself? Can you find out for yourself what you need to know and understand? Can you give yourself the training you need? And, especially if you're in a new country and need to learn its main language, how do you get the confidence to proceed?

These questions may arise because, on the one hand, a person feels dissatisfied with his or her own level of understanding or ability, and yet, on the other, he or she is very busy, perhaps in a demanding job or looking after young children or both, and couldn't get to classes. Or perhaps the person has been to some classes and felt frustrated because they didn't seem right for him or her, or because of inability to express clearly what he or she meant.

Sometimes a person's own schooling has been very unsatisfactory, or apparently unrelated to what he or she would like to do now; and sometimes people feel that their minds have gone stiff or rusty and they can't follow or remember what's said to them. They can see that they need some mental equipment, but are not sure what, or how to get it. Perhaps they walk into a public library and feel frustrated. "Where do I start? Can I do something about learning for myself what I'd like to learn? But what exactly is it that I need?"

Let's take up that last question in connection with asking what educating is. We'll begin from an old idea which is obviously of great importance. It's expressed in English by the phrase 'the three Rs', because there's a *r* ("ruh") at or near the beginning of the words *reading* and *writing* and *arithmetic*.

Although we begin our learning as babies through our senses, and then learn to listen and talk, as well as to feel and think, a new stage comes when we begin to learn to read and write and count and do sums. We move into a wider mental world, and we have a greater need than before of explanations.

Let's think about an intelligent child of 11, who is English-speaking and lives in an English-speaking country, and has been well educated at the primary stage, usually in the age-range 5-11. Such a child can be expected to be able to read much of most English-language newspapers, though not knowing some of the words; to write an interesting description of some person or place or journey or process; and to perform various arithmetical operations, some mentally and some on paper.

English-speaking people in Australia commonly don't realize how difficult, and how lonely and frustrating, is the situation of those many adults who, through inadequate primary training or because English is not their first language and they have had little help in learning it, are not at a stage level with the one that the child here described has reached.

When we speak of an educated person, however, we have in mind someone who has gone through secondary and tertiary stages as well as primary. Notice that I'm talking about **stages**, and not schools and universities. In the second stage, people learn, or ought to learn, more about how to use the main language of their society — so as to be able, for example, to write a letter to a newspaper — and they should be reading some of the best literature written in that language. Often (in fact not often enough) they learn another language. I was very fortunate to start on both Latin and French at the age of 11. They find out quite a lot about how human societies have come to take their present form, studying history and geography, and perhaps politics and economics. They get more training in arithmetic, and learn to do geometry and algebra; and they learn something about science, its methods and its results. In addition, they should be developing some manual and artistic abilities and engaging in some sports that they enjoy. There'll be some specializing, so that at the end of the secondary stage the student knows quite a lot about some areas and has some quite advanced skills. Moreover, in a good secondary education, much less common now in this respect in Victoria than it was from about 1943 to 1983 when in Years 11 and 12 we did "Clear Thinking", he or she will have learnt to think clearly, and so be able to recognise good and bad arguments.

At the tertiary stage, people ought to be meeting books, theories and problems of some complexity, and learning to think critically about different views and to formulate and test ideas for themselves.

Now let's be quite clear that there's nothing automatic about this process, that it can go wrong in many ways, that teachers and schools and universities can be seriously defective, and that people can derive (or fail to derive) very many different kinds and amounts of benefit. But in these paragraphs about primary, secondary and tertiary stages I have described the education many people know they have not had, or have not had in English, and would like to have, though they sometimes despair of getting it.

So our question "Can I educate myself?" amounts to this. **Can I, without a teacher, enable myself to acquire the various kinds of knowledge, understanding, skill and other mental development which have just been described?** Educating a person, we may say, is helping him or her to acquire knowledge, understanding, skill and such other mental development as the following: appreciation, critical judgment, balance, perspective, imagination, creativity, and a growing devotion to truth and fairness.

Our question requires what is called a qualified answer, not a simple 'Yes' or 'No'. My answer, as I have said, is in two parts, one in the form '**Yes, but …**' and the other in the form **'Yes, if …**'.

Why 'Yes, but …', and not 'No'? It **is** possible to educate yourself, if you know how to read, without having someone to guide you and answer your questions. People can make remarkable progress just by carefully chosen reading and sensible note-making. **But** it is very difficult to avoid waste of time and frustration if you don't have a competent guide. It's like being in a strange city:

you could find your own way around, and you want to do some exploring for yourself, but it's so helpful to be guided, especially at first, by a person, a book, a booklet, a map.

So my first answer is: **"Yes, you can to a very large extent educate yourself, but you'll probably do so very much more effectively if you have some guidance on how to go about it.**"

Find someone, then, who can give you personal guidance: someone who not only knows a lot about the subject you want to study and how to study it, but will also find out where you are and give you advice on where and how to go from there, and make detailed and constructive comments on your progress.

Notice that word 'how'. Students very often need help on how to work effectively ─ how, for example, to determine from the wording of a topic exactly what they are being asked to do, and to divide their report or essay into sections accordingly; and they need that guidance whether they are in a class or not, and some of it is best given individually, in relation both to tasks they are attempting and to ones they have recently attempted.

How do you obtain such individual guidance? Because so much education is geared to classes, it isn't easy for many people to find someone who will guide them personally. One of our main aims in the movement Learningguild is to make such individual guidance widely available, as the blue slip on our teaching shows.

Suppose, then, that you have obtained such guidance: can you then educate yourself? Now my answer takes the form **'Yes, if …**'. It would be foolish of me to give you the impression that any kind of worthwhile education is easy and can occur without perseverance and patience. It would be like saying that you could expect to become proficient in a sport such as cricket or football or athletics without a serious programme of training, one which would sometimes involve failure, disappointment, weariness and near-exhaustion.

My second answer is "**Yes, you can educate yourself, provided you have some guidance, if you are willing to develop certain habits.**"

What are these habits? I'll go through seven of them which are especially important.

First, we need to make it a habit to **aim at understanding**. Education is not just a matter of getting to know a large number of names, or words, or opinions, or even facts. "The learning of many things does not educate the mind", said the early Greek thinker Heraclitus around 500 B.C. Aim to find out explanations of things, answers to the questions 'How?' and 'Why?'.

Understanding requires that we ask questions until we are satisfied. So, secondly, we need to **keep on asking questions**, and to think of our work as very largely an endeavour to find answers to them. Your guide's main role may be to offer some questions and to suggest where and how you can seek answers to them. But then gradually you should be becoming more skilled at asking and answering questions for yourself.

Thirdly, we have to **be systematic** in our recording of our questions and our search for answers to them, and in our choice of books and areas to work on. First, you can develop for yourself what I call SQR pages: the letters stand for 'Subjects', 'Questions' and 'Reminders'. Give one or more A4 sheets a heading at the top right for the area of your enquiry: let's say "Asylum-seekers and refugees in Australia". In a wide left-hand margin put one or two **subjects**: these will be fairly broad (but not too broad), such as "The political parties' policies concerning asylum-seekers". Then, in the central section of the page, taking up most of the space, write in your **questions**, as you think of them, e.g. "What changes have been made under Labor to the policy followed by the previous government?" Have a margin at the right where you can give yourself **reminders** ─ notes to look up some further book or to come back to some aspect of a question.

The abilities to understand and devise specific questions within a subject, and to focus on a particular question (whether given to you or devised by yourself) and to think and write with constant relevance to that question, are vital for fruitful study. Many students fail to do well because they do not develop them.

Much of your note-making can be in relation to your questions. Head a page with one of your questions in the top right-hand corner. Sometimes, however, you'll want to make quite extensive notes from a particular book. In that case, put the names of the author and the book as a heading. In every case, keep your pages in a folder or (often better) a

looseleaf book, so that you can readily add further pages in the appropriate place. You can make your own looseleaf books with system rings, A4 sheets and covers cut from manila folders. Whenever you make notes, remember that they need to be clear to you when you return to them.

I've said that a student needs to be systematic in choosing books and areas to work on. Key ideas here are those of sequential study and of revision. You need to study a subject in an appropriate sequence, with the more elementary work first so that on its basis you can understand what is more difficult. So a student whose first language is not English can use the *Oxford Basic English Dictionary* in the work we call SSC (Sentences to Study and Change), but also go from my booklet *Learningguild Notes on English I* to my book *Making up Sentences* and its six spoken CDs, and then to the Penguin Reference book *The Complete Plain Words*, originally by Sir Ernest Gowers.

Fourthly, we need to **work in relation to aims, with some set times and at odd times**. Notice the order in which I've said that. First we need aims: we need to be clear about what we have to do, or are intending to do, in a particular year or month or week or day. Often we do not know how long some task is going to take, but often, too, it helps to have a specific goal, e.g., to read this book, or write this essay, this week. To get the best out of ourselves in relation to such tasks and goals, we need some set times — times when, if at all possible, we shall do what I call deskwork — **and** an eagerness to use many odd times, e.g., when we are washing dishes, to do some thinking or revising (or listening to spoken CDs!). It's a great help if your set times can be when you're fresh: I've found it makes a big difference to my work to get some writing done, whenever practicable, in half an hour or more before breakfast, and then to continue for a couple of hours until 11. Another person, in a full-time job, might find that a pre-breakfast hour is better than an hour at night when he or she is tired.

My fifth theme is that the student needs to **be eager to analyse**. Analysis is the division of something, in our thought about it, into its several parts. Very frequently we need to ask "What are the parts of this whole?" and often to add "In what order do they occur, and why?" It can be very valuable to set out a consecutive analysis of an important chapter, or article, giving a brief heading to each part you yourself identify, and noting in brackets its opening words, with a page-reference.

Sixthly, we have to **be critical**: that is, to examine statements that we hear or read to see how far we have sufficient reason to agree with them, and to seek to improve our own work until it is as good, in content, reasoning and expression, as we can possibly make it. (Notice that, though the content varies, proficiency and alacrity in reasoning and expression are always important. The repeatable examination Learningguild offers each March and September is the best way I know of stimulating, testing and giving credit for those qualities.)

Seventhly and finally, I come to something which the self-educating student can easily leave out of account: **be co-operative**. Look for other people who already share, or might come to share, your enthusiasm for the area you're in. It makes a great different if you can talk about what you've discovered with some fellow-student, so that he or she can learn from you and you from him or her. It may even be possible for you and three or four others to form a group, perhaps a Learningguild group, where you can share your questions and discoveries more widely. To have a talk to give, or a short contribution to discussion, or an article or note to write for something such as our magazine *Learningguild Letter*, gives you a goal to work towards, and the satisfaction that others are going to recognize, and probably benefit from, work that you have done.

In summary, then, in this second half of my second talk, I have said that, with some guidance from a competent person, you **can** educate yourself, if you take seriously the need to

aim at understanding,
keep on asking questions,
be systematic,
work in relation to aims,
with some set times and at odd times,
be eager to analyse,
be critical, and
be co-operative.

Why not give it a try? You are most welcome to consult us in Learningguild about it, and, if you have not yet done so, to join us. You can telephone me at (03) 9380 5892. We should be glad to hear about your self-education and the benefits it brings you.

Learningguild
March 2010

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