

Self-Directed Education

What is it? How does it work?

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Self-Directed Education (SDE) refers to the concept and practice of children and teens being in charge of their own education.

Education ≠ Schooling

In SDE, education is not equated with schooling. Rather, it is seen and understood more broadly as **the process of acquiring knowledge, values, and skills that are conducive to a satisfying and meaningful life**. As such, education is a natural, everywhere, all-the-time, developmental process that begins at birth and continues throughout life.

When children are allowed to direct their own activities, based on their authentic interests and natural inclinations, they learn what they need to, when they are the most receptive and motivated. Such learning may involve great effort — trial and error, searching for answers, seeking helpers, and asking questions endlessly — yet it *feels* effortless to the learner, who is energized by the natural educative drives of **curiosity, playfulness, and sociability**.

This is how children learn their language and culture before they are “school age” and also how most informal learning occurs for adults. In SDE, there are no arbitrary ages during which this natural process must be forcibly replaced with a teacher-directed curriculum imposed in a school context that is separated from real life.

Self-directed children frequently learn to **read, write, and calculate** *informally* — without being taught or consciously intending to learn anything — when these skills are needed for their self-chosen activities. And being self-directed, they can opt for formal learning when it suits them.

Evolved for SDE

Often the activity of self-directed learners is more aptly described as **play**, which nature and evolution have selected as one of the most efficient ways for animals (especially mammals) to learn and develop their capacities.

When children are not being directed by others, their natural **curiosity** leads them to explore their environment and, in their play, to emulate the behavior of their elders. They are especially drawn to explore the tools and skills that seem to *empower* their role models.

When children are immersed in a culture of partnership — where connection and cooperation replace control and domination — their innate **sociality** leads them to engage and play with others in ways that develop their social intelligence and collaborative skills.

Since the dawn of humanity, children in hunter-gatherer bands have educated themselves in this way, acquiring vast bodies of knowledge without the need for anything like today’s standard schooling and teaching methods.

Genetically, children born today are nearly identical to their hunter-gatherer ancestors, so they come equipped with the same drives and ability to direct their own education.

Optimizing Conditions

Evolutionary psychologist Peter Gray has identified six conditions that optimize SDE, based on observations of children in hunter-gatherer cultures as well as children in modern alternative schools (and “home schools”) designed to support SDE:

1. **The clear understanding that children are responsible for their own education.** This is not to say that they make a conscious decision to self-educate. Rather, the responsibility arises from children’s natural desire for autonomy and self-empowerment, in the absence of any adults imposing an educational agenda.
2. **Unlimited opportunity for children to play, explore, and pursue their own interests.** This includes freedom to determine when, where, how, and with whom they engage — with minimal adult supervision, oversight, and structuring of the activities.
3. **Opportunity to play with the tools of the culture.** For hunter-gatherer children, such tools may include bows and arrows, digging sticks, and drums; for modern children, the tools include books, computers, cooking apparatus, bicycles, etc.
4. **Access to a variety of caring adults who are helpers, not judges.** Young people feel more at ease and free to seek support from helpful adults who are not focused on evaluating, testing, grading, praising or criticizing. Such adults avoid offering the kind of unsolicited “help” that carries implied

judgments, but they do provide support when children request it.

5. **Free age mixing among children and adolescents.** In conventional schools, age segregation generates unnatural levels of competition and often undermines the development of cooperative social skills. Easy access to older and younger children allows for the spontaneous formation of mentoring relationships that support the maturation of both mentor *and* mentee.
6. **Immersion in a healthy community with egalitarian values.** When children are taken seriously, when their needs and desires are respected and they can truly participate in community decision-making, then they learn to take responsibility not only for themselves but for the community as well.

These six conditions — almost entirely absent from conventional schools — can be deliberately created by parents and educators who understand nature’s design for Self-Directed Education.

SDE Support Structures

Today we are seeing a resurgence of school alternatives that support SDE. These include...

- **SDE-aligned Schools** — sometimes called “democratic” or “free” schools, the students in these schools are allowed to exercise as much freedom as possible, within the limits of the law and each school’s collectively created norms and rules. The students decide when, how, where, why, and with whom they engage in activities and play. In these schools, staff

members are available to provide support when the students request it, and this support may or may not include formal teaching.

- **Self-Directed Homeschooling** — Often called “unschooling,” this approach is similar to attending an SDE-aligned school except that there isn’t a school environment separated from the rest of life. Rather, it’s understood that learning happens everywhere and all the time. Unschooling parents spend less time teaching their kids and more time facilitating their self-chosen activities — providing access to enriching resources and experiences, at home and beyond.
- **SDE Support Centers and Co-ops** — These are often similar to SDE-aligned schools, but they are not schools in the legal sense. In this scenario, parents usually comply with compulsory education laws by registering their children as homeschoolers, and they join co-ops or learning centers to gain access to resources and experiences that would be difficult for the parents provide on their own, especially social connections.

SDE is Consensual

In practice, self-directed learners may prefer to acquire certain skills and knowledge through formal “educational” activities, such as taking classes that are directed by teachers, or using textbooks or a curriculum. But *self-directed* means that these learners are **free to withdraw** from any class or activity that isn’t working for them. SDE facilitators and parents don’t pressure young people to learn, formally or otherwise. They trust and support the natural SDE process.

Surveys of adults who directed their own education through childhood and adolescence have indicated that they usually go on to lead fulfilling lives and are able to succeed in college and/or their chosen careers. And their careers are often based on interests and passions they discovered and developed through the process of Self-Directed Education.

Choosing SDE in Portland

With hundreds of unschooling families and a growing number of SDE communities (schools, centers, co-ops, and support groups), the Portland metropolitan area is a great place for families to choose the path of Self-Directed Education.

Interested parents and other SDE advocates are invited to contact **Portland Self-Directed Education** for support and information about opportunities to advance the SDE movement in Portland:

www.portlandsde.com
info@portlandsde.com

Learn More About SDE

Visit the Alliance for Self-Directed Education (ASDE) website:

www.self-directed.org

Watch YouTube videos of Peter Gray’s presentations about SDE:

bit.ly/peter-gray-videos