

**R-E-S-P-E-C-T**  
**What Children Get in Democratic Schools**  
By Daniel Greenberg

(Published in *Mothering Magazine* No. 103 Nov/Dec 2000)

An exciting new movement is stirring the world of education--a movement that promises, at last, to make children participants in the revolutionary changes that swept the world in the late 20th century. The emergence of democratic schools all over the US, as well as in Israel, Australia, Denmark, England, and Canada, is finally bringing respect and equality to people under the age of 18, respect that is blind to race, gender, culture, or belief--the same respect that adults have struggled to win for themselves.

Sudbury Valley School in Framingham, Massachusetts--a school that I helped found in 1968--was the first fully democratic school in the US. Others have now been founded all over this country and in many other parts of the world. The schools share a deep commitment to the idea that children deserve nothing less than the full set of rights and freedoms that adults receive in our society, and that in such a setting children have the best opportunity to learn, to develop their sense of responsibility, to define their value systems, and to grow into productive, self-motivated adults.

**What Does It Mean?**

The root ideas of a democratic education are as simple as they are radical: children should be accorded the same human rights and freedoms as adults; they should be granted responsibility for the conduct of their affairs; and they should be full participants in the life of their community. Democratic schools provide an environment where children can live their formative years in exactly the same manner as they will live out their mature years--as free citizens of a society devoted to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. The world these children will inhabit as adults will be a familiar one, a world that has been part and parcel of their childhood.

Like the old colonial towns that nurtured our country's political traditions, democratic schools are self-governing. Children of all ages are entitled to participate in all decisions affecting the school, without exception. They have a full and equal vote in deciding expenditures, in hiring and firing all employees (including teachers), and in making and enforcing the rules of the community. In democratic schools, there is no residual authority vested in adults, no veto power lurking in the background.

In practice, democratic schools look more like a cross-section of real life, more like a vibrant town or village, than like traditional schools. There are no assigned groups or rooms, no specified activities or time periods, no preferred curriculum or dress code, no agenda for pressuring children into endless compromise and compliance. Here children decide for themselves how to spend their time, what to do, and when and with whom to do it.

Play is a big part of daily life, and it is the prime factor in learning. Nothing compares to play as an instrument of learning, least of all courses given by a teacher. Most of the students, especially the younger ones, are too busy playing all the time to rest or even to eat. By late afternoon, they're ready for a huge meal and a good night's sleep. They've worked long and hard.

Lessons learned here become tools for a lifetime. What is mastered is the ability to concentrate and focus attention unsparingly on the task at hand, without regard for limitations--no tiredness, no rushing, no need to abandon a hot idea in the middle to go on to something else. This "lesson" is retained for life.

**How Does It Work?**

Typically, rules are made and business is handled at a weekly School Meeting, where each student, like each staff member, has one vote. Democratic schools make rules about littering, as well as about the use of fire; they make rules that govern which rooms people can eat in, as well as which ones they can play the radio in; and, most importantly, they make rules protecting individual rights. The School Meeting debates candidates for staff, votes on them in school-wide secret balloting, and awards contracts according to needs determined by this balloting. School Meetings also approve requests from groups that want budgets or space to pursue special interests.

Anyone who thinks that young children are not wise about these matters need only attend a few such School Meetings. Kids know that it takes a commitment from their families to send them to a democratic school, and they are stern judges of what is--or is not--a necessary expense. When a rule is passed at the School Meeting, it's often after weeks of soul-searching debate.

Instead of deciding everything as a group, the School Meeting delegates some tasks to sub-groups or to people elected by them to carry out certain responsibilities. One sub-group may be composed of people interested in the school's public relations; another may take care of the school's bookkeeping. Someone may be elected to see to the grounds' maintenance, another person to keep computer records of all of the judicial activities. All of the people so elected are accountable to the School Meeting--and they are aware of this accountability at all times.

One sub-group, a judicial committee, is always set up to deal with rule infractions. Its function is to investigate written complaints about possible rule violations and to see that justice is served, while constantly being careful about due process. Rules are often broken, but the culprits are usually good-natured about both admitting what has happened and accepting the consequences. Peer justice is amazingly effective.

### **What Does It Feel Like?**

What is it like to attend a democratic school? Perhaps the best summation was given by one graduate, who said that, for him, school was just "life" for ten years. "I woke up in the morning and said, 'I'm going to school, and I'm living life. This is my life, and I'm in it.' All my learning came about without really having it set up. It sort of unfolded."

The absence of fear is what epitomizes democratic schools and makes their atmosphere so unique. At Sudbury we say, "It's one of the things you can't help noticing in the school--that little kids look adults straight in the eye." Adults aren't authority figures, and we are very proud of the beautiful results of age-mixing. It goes without saying that when you mix ages people are going to learn from each other because they have different levels of experience. That happens everywhere. The beauty of age-mixing at democratic schools is that it is without fear. Four year olds walk up to 17 year olds and have no anxiety in relating to them.

### **The Legacy of Democratic Schools**

A university researcher periodically interviewed Sudbury students over a seven-year period. The researcher noted that although parents often had reservations about sending a child to a school that does not "prepare" them for particular career goals, those who emerge from Sudbury have gotten further with these concerns than those who haven't learned self-reliance. While still in school, they seem to reach stages of maturity most people do not achieve until after they graduate from college. They don't seem to be plagued by the feelings of uncertainty, confusion, or despair that characterize so many people on the verge of assuming adult responsibilities. They examine their motives and activities thoroughly and continually, regardless of what particular thing they are doing, and they are not afraid of obstacles or failure.

### **Finding Out More**

Sudbury Valley School in Framingham, Massachusetts, the first fully democratic school, was founded in 1968. Over the years, it has produced a rich collection of literature describing its operation, including the following: the widely acclaimed *Free At Last* and *The Sudbury Valley School Experience*, which explain, among other things, how creativity and learning flourish in this environment; *Legacy of Trust*, an in-depth study of the adult lives of almost 200 of the school's former students; *Kingdom of Childhood*, a series of engaging descriptions of daily life at the school in the words of those who were students there; and other books and tapes on the philosophy and practice of democratic education.

Groups have been forming in towns and cities worldwide for the purpose of creating a democratic school alternative in their communities. Schools have been founded in Concord, Sacramento, and Santa Clara, California; Denver, Colorado; Hampton, Connecticut; Newark, Delaware; Palm Harbor, Florida; Maui, Hawaii; Chicago, Illinois; Augusta, Maine; Annapolis, Maryland; Boston, Massachusetts; Santa Fe, New Mexico; Eugene and Portland, Oregon; Harrisburg, Pennsylvania; Burlington, Vermont; Seattle, Washington; and Highland, West Virginia, in the US; as well as in Australia, Canada, Denmark, England, Israel, Japan, and New Zealand.

**FOR MORE INFORMATION**

For more information on democratic schools or to obtain a School Planning Kit, which covers the nitty-gritty details of starting and maintaining a school, write to Sudbury Valley School Press, 2 Winch Street, Framingham, MA 01701; Fax: 508-788-0674; or visit [www.sudval.org](http://www.sudval.org).

See the book *A Free Range Childhood: Self Regulation at Summerhill School* by Matthew Appleton (Foundation for Educational Renewal, 2000). Also see the following articles in past issues of *Mothering*: "Summerhill Revisited," no. 59; and "Learning Without Coercion: Sudbury Valley School," no. 58.

**Daniel Greenberg, PhD, and his wife, Hanna, also a co-founder of Sudbury Valley School, have three adult children, all of whom are Sudbury graduates. They are now happy grandparents of seven grandchildren.**