Is Self-Directed Education Right for Your Child?

20 QUESTIONS FOR FAMILIES CONSIDERING THEIR EDUCATIONAL OPTIONS
WHAT YOU’RE DOING NOW

1. Is your child happy at school?

Negative statements like “I hate school,” “School is prison,” or “My favorite class is lunch” are so common we sometimes stop hearing them. But things don’t have to be that way. Most children love to learn and want to be around other children. If they regularly don’t want to go to school, are faking sick, or have significant school anxiety, their current school may not be the right educational environment.

2. How do you feel about how your child is developing?

“He’s not interested in learning anymore” or “The light is going out of her eyes” are common comments from parents. Other students internalize school expectations and become anxious, perfectionistic, or judgmental when they or others make mistakes or break rules.

3. Is your child’s current education in line with your values?

Traditional education often prioritizes test scores, grades, and knowledge in a few specific areas. These may not be the things that you as a parent truly value.
UNDERSTANDING SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING

The Alliance for Self-Directed Learning has a great introduction to what self-directed learning means.

4. Do you agree that humans are fundamentally curious and interested in learning?

Self-directed learning is based in the (research-supported) belief that humans are naturally curious and interested in learning about the world. It can be hard to “unlearn” the idea that we must be motivated from the outside.

5. Do agree that play has a major role in learning?

Playfulness is another fundamental aspect of self-directed learning. Play is increasingly recognized as the primary way that children learn. In adults, the playful state is often referred to as “flow.”

6. Are you familiar with some of the paths your child might take from self-directed learning to independent adulthood?

It can be hard for conventionally educated adults to understand how self-directed learners get into college and get jobs. Read, watch, or hear in person the stories of some adults who learned in this way. A few places to start:

- College without High School and other books by Blake Boles
- Our alumni video with graduates who went on to college
- Circle School’s study of their graduates from 1998-2015
- Peter Gray’s study of grown unschoolers
ARE YOUR CHILD’S NEEDS BEING MET?

In your child’s current school, or the educational options you’re considering:

7. Is your child able to get enough physical movement, and make decisions about other physical needs like eating, drinking, and going to the bathroom?

8. Is your child able to practice non-academic skills like conflict resolution, leadership, decision-making, creativity, and social skills?

9. Does your child have enough time to pursue interests that may not fit into the traditional academic curriculum? Are they able to learn what they want to learn?

10. Does the school you’re considering support your student’s racial and cultural background? Does it support other aspects of diversity, like the needs of LGBTQ learners?

Some common issues that lead parents to consider self-directed education are:

- Their own experiences of disliking or not being served well by school
- Feeling that school requirements like homework, standardized testing, or having to complete work in certain ways are not conducive to their child’s learning
- Students not being able to move around and having to sit in desks all day
- Students not having enough time for active play
- Bullying that isn’t being addressed well
- Limitations around how their child can handle their physical needs, like having to eat lunch at awkward times, not being able to have a snack, or not being able to use the bathroom.
- Special education agreements and accommodations that are not being followed, or students being shamed for or discouraged from using an accommodation.
EXPLORING YOUR SELF-DIRECTED OPTIONS

11. Is unschooling a good choice for your family?

Most self-directed learners are unschoolers. Unschooling does not necessarily mean having a full-time parent at home. Single parents and families with two parents working can also make it work. Here's one article on unschooling as a single parent.

12. Is there an SDE-related school or community near you?

If you think your child would thrive best being around a consistent community of other self-directed learners, there are schools and school-like settings that support SDE (including Tallgrass and other Sudbury schools). The Alliance for Self-Directed Education has a comprehensive guide to groups like this. Other lists can be found through Sudbury school websites, the Agile Learning Center network, and the Liberated Learners Centers network.

13. If you won't be involved in an SDE-related community, have you explored support and social opportunities through homeschooling groups, family and friends, the library, and other resources?

Unschooling groups and relaxed homeschooling co-ops can be found in many communities, and other resources can be adapted to fit the needs of self-directed learners. Some great places to start include Facebook groups, the ASDE forums, your local library, and your local public school (in many places, public schools must make certain classes, activities, and other resources available to students in their district even if they homeschool or attend another school).
IS YOUR CHILD READY?

Self-directed learning is how children learn before their school years, and how adults learn after their schooling ends. There is no lower limit on when a child can be involved in self-directed learning. However, in some situations, you may want to consider the following questions.

14. Is your child able to self-regulate?

Self-directed education is one of the best ways for children to learn self-regulation. For children attending an SDE center, it’s usually important that the student have achieved a certain degree of self-regulation already. For example, at Tallgrass Sudbury School, children must be able to be safe in a room without an adult present, and communicate well enough (verbally or nonverbally) to make themselves understood to people outside their family.

15. Are you able to meet your child’s needs at home, through the SDE center you’ve selected, or through your family’s resources?

For some children, the value of having certain sports programs, arts and music programs, or special education programs available in a public school may outweigh the downsides.

16. Does your child want to make a change?

While questions and concerns like “How will I learn anything?” or “How will I get into college?” are common even among children, if your child truly wants to stay in their current school or educational setting, our advice is to let them!
ARE YOU READY?

17. What hot-button issues may be challenging for you?

Most parents have some concerns around letting their children direct their own time. Think about which areas may be hard for you, and how you might handle them. Questions about some of the most common hot-button issues come up frequently in online forums about unschooling or self-directed education. Let Grow is a great practical resource for helping your child expand their independence step by step.

18. Are you ready to be open to learning that doesn’t look how you expect?

For most self-directed learners, learning does not look like traditional school. Your child may be interested in traditional academic subjects, or they may be interested in other things. They may love classes, or never want to take another class again. For self-directed learning to be successful, it’s important for the adults in the young person’s life to be ready to accept that learning happens in many different ways, some of which may be messy, challenging, or hard to explain to others.

19. Have you taken responsibility for your own learning and growth?

It’s common for adults in our culture to project their dreams onto their children. Sometimes, we even feel resentful of our children’s new freedoms. Have you always wanted to learn to play the piano or write a novel? Let your children inspire your own self-directed pursuits.

20. Do you believe in your and your child’s ability to direct their own education?

You don’t have to be a teacher to help your child in their self-directed learning journey, and your child doesn’t need to be a genius. Self-directed learning is about trusting that your child can learn what they need and find their own way, given all the resources available to them. If you’re a curious, resourceful person who is willing to support your child in experiencing the world, your child can be successful as a self-directed learner.
Visit Tallgrass Sudbury School

Are you ready to take the next step in exploring self-directed education? Please contact us to schedule a visit:

info@tallgrasssudbury.org.