

Educational Philosophies, England & Wales

The law in England and Wales pertaining to home education, or education otherwise than at school, is contained in section 7 of the 1996 Education Act. 'The parent of every child of compulsory school age shall cause him to receive efficient full-time education suitable to his age ability and aptitude and to any special needs he may have either by regular attendance at school or otherwise.'

Home educating families do not have to follow a curriculum, work for a 'school day' or provide 'school at home' conditions. Home educated young people are not required by law to study for formal qualifications, though some families choose to do so. If your child is currently on a school roll as a registered pupil and you wish to take him/her out of school in order to educate at home, then there are legal steps which you must follow: See our information sheets on 'Deregistration' and 'Home Education & Local Authorities' for further details.

What is an 'Ed. Phil.'?

An educational philosophy is an overview of your beliefs and values. Some people also use the term 'educational philosophy' to include a report about the educational provision they are making for their child, including examples of how these beliefs and values are translated into action; others use the expression just to mean the short statement of their beliefs. The law says that 'the State shall respect the right of parents to ensure such education and teaching in conformity with their own religious and philosophical convictions'.

An educational philosophy is a way to demonstrate that you are causing your child to receive efficient education as required by law. Government Guidelines on Home Education in England state: 'The responsibility for a child's education rests with his or her parents. An "efficient" and "suitable" education is not defined in the Education Act 1996 but "efficient" has been broadly described in case law as an education that 'achieves that which it sets out to achieve' (p. 5)

The Welsh Guidelines ask for 'an indication that parents have thought through their reasons for home educating and what they hope to achieve' (section 4.1) For this reason it is worth describing what you are setting out to achieve, because you will be judged efficient if you achieve your aims. This is what is meant by an 'educational philosophy', which sets out your beliefs and values and states what you want for your child as he/she grows up.

Your 'statement of values' can be as long or as short as you want. Some people want to write pages and pages and others find that what they believe and what they are trying to achieve can be summed up in a couple of paragraphs. You are likely to go into greater depth with your report, giving examples of how your philosophy works in practice and what sort of resources you are using.

How do you write an Ed. Phil.?

There are no hard and fast rules for writing an educational philosophy. The rationale for using the formula belief statement + resources + report is that in theory this gives all the information that a reasonable local authority or court would need in order to see whether it appears that your children are receiving efficient full-time education suitable to their age, aptitude and ability:

- It sets out the beliefs by which you live, thereby asserting your right to educate your children in accordance with your religious or philosophical convictions.

- It says what you want for your children, which means that your educational provision can be judged efficient because it is achieving what it sets out to achieve.
- It gives further information about what you are providing for your children's education, and gives a picture of how your home education works in practice.

You don't have to be 'philosophical'. The Human Rights Act 1998 quotes Article 2 of the First Protocol to the European Convention on Human Rights, as follows: 'No person shall be denied the right to education. In the exercise of any functions which it assumes in relation to education and to teaching, the State shall respect the right of parents to ensure such education and teaching in conformity with their own religious and philosophical convictions.'

Case law

There is an important case in European Law, *Campbell and Cosans*, where 'education in accordance with the parents' philosophical convictions' is defined as convictions being 'akin to the term 'beliefs' (in the French text: 'convictions') and denoting views that 'attain a certain level of cogency, seriousness, cohesion and importance.' 'Philosophical convictions' were further defined in the same judgement as convictions 'worthy of respect in a democratic society'. This is understood to mean that your 'philosophy' is something which you take seriously. The State respects your right to educate your child according to your beliefs, as long as this does not deny your child an education. It is important to realise that 'education' is nowhere defined in law.

What if the LA isn't satisfied?

Sometimes the local authority tells the parent that it is not satisfied with an educational philosophy. This could happen because there is a misunderstanding about what is meant by a philosophy. The problem may be rectified by supplying information in three distinct categories (the belief statement, the list of resources and the report) and showing how they are interconnected. Sadly, in other cases the local authority may not at first realise that there are many valid ways for the home educating family to supply information about the educational provision, and may even try to insist that the law requires access to the child - which at present is not the case unless there are specific and serious safeguarding concerns.

The Government's Home Education Guidelines for England state: 'If they choose not to meet [with the local authority], parents may be asked to provide evidence that they are providing a suitable education. If a local authority asks parents for information they are under no duty to comply although it would be sensible for them to do so. Parents might prefer, for example, to write a report, provide samples of work, have their educational provision endorsed by a third party (such as an independent home tutor) or provide evidence in some other appropriate form.'

You need to stay calm and establish exactly what the local authority perceives to be the problem. One way you can do this is to write to the authority and ask them to be more precise about what they mean when they say your educational philosophy isn't 'enough'. You could also ask someone else, e.g. a friend, the Education Otherwise Helpline or an internet support list, how they would interpret the statement from the local authority. It can be helpful to get more eyes looking over an official letter, because in the heat of the moment it is possible to jump to a conclusion or to misinterpret a loosely worded letter.

But in other cases the authority may have accepted entirely the principle of supplying information in written form, but still have unanswered questions in their mind. Typical reservations we meet time and time again from the LA tend to be along the following lines: 'if you don't make the child do something, how will he ever learn?' ; 'if the education is 'child-led', you might end up missing out whole areas of the curriculum - so do you have a plan for this'; 'is there a system for assessing and reviewing the child's

progress and if not, why not?'; 'we can't see anything here about the child's career ambitions and aspirations and how the parents plan to facilitate them'.

It is not compulsory to write an educational philosophy. A major reason for the recommendation of educational philosophies is that they comply with the law as far as information about educational provision is concerned without impinging on areas which the family may not wish to share with the authority, such as access to the child or samples of written work. However we are aware that some families prefer to provide information in an alternative form, and Government Guidelines for both England and Wales stress that it is the parents' legal right to do so.

We also know that some families put together photographs or a scrapbook of what the children have been doing during the year in place of a written report, and that this record is made available for the local authority if there are any questions or doubts about the educational provision being made for the children.

There are three Parts to an Educational Philosophy:

- Belief Statement
- List of Resources
- How you are putting your beliefs

You can take the Belief Statement in isolation as your educational philosophy, or you can take all three parts and call this your educational philosophy. You can also take the list of resources and examples of how you put your beliefs into practice and call that your 'report.' To an extent these terms are interchangeable. Your local authority may be more likely to use the term 'report' or 'annual report.'

Belief Statement

First you need to set out the values that are important to you and your family. These could refer to the value you place on family life or to a belief that children in school are denied a childhood; you could emphasise your belief that child's academic potential can only be met by education outside the system; or focus on your child's special educational needs or disabilities, which you believe can only be met in a small, personalised, familiar setting. The important thing is that your educational provision must be 'efficient', and therefore you need to be able to tie in what you say you believe and value with your outline of what is happening in practice. The other major factor to bear in mind is that all sorts of families home educate for all kinds of reasons. You may start your home education journey believing that you have to provide school at home, but later you may learn that this is not what the law says. You can continue to do so if you wish, but it is not a legal obligation to replicate school and you risk tying yourself in knots if you make promises about this to a third party at the local authority. You are 'efficient' if you achieve what you set out to achieve, so you need to think hard about what you actually want and how you might go about achieving your goals.

For example, if you believe in accelerated learning and home educate so that your child is ahead of peers at school, then it might reasonably be expected that you will need an in-depth knowledge of the standards expected in schools and a breakdown of the different key stages of the National Curriculum in order to achieve your goals. If you are home educating for a short time but you fully intend for your child to be reintegrated into the school system, then it might reasonably be expected that you will want to know what children in school are doing.

If you are home educating because of your child's special needs, then it might be beneficial to set out what YOUR aims are, as opposed to any learning objectives or targets set out in a Statement of Special Educational Needs.

Some families opt for home education because they reject the values of mass schooling. In this case it would be reasonable to expect that the family attaches a high value to individual self-expression and self-motivation. This is sometimes called 'autonomous education'. Families who approach home education from this perspective are sometimes doubtful that the local authority will understand this approach, but in our experience the authorities are becoming increasingly familiar with the concept.

Some home educating families choose to subscribe to a theory or to follow a programme or curriculum, and these families will need to show how they implement the theory in practice. Other families choose home education for religious reasons. Remember that the local authority may not be interested in the reasons for your rejection of the state sector as much as in how you engage with your child and the business of providing an education within your family.

Bullying

Sadly, it is common for families to begin home education after children have been bullied at school. It may be viewed as a 'negative' reason for home education, and it is important to demonstrate that your family is able and willing to undertake home education and that you are looking forward rather than dwelling on the injustices and problems of the past. As we have said above, please remember that the local authority may not be interested in the reasons for your rejection of the state sector as much as in finding out how you engage with your child and the day to day business of providing an education within your family.

However, your local authority should be aware that the after-effects of bullying can last for years and that your family's immediate priority may be to rebuild self-confidence, emotional wellbeing and resilience. In addition, some children who have been bullied at school are only gradually able to integrate and socialise with their peers, and the law supports the family acting in accordance with its beliefs in this area.

Resources

It is useful to give information about the resources you are currently using or planning to use in the course of providing home-based education. This does not mean that you have to buy expensive equipment or a packaged curriculum, or pay for private tutors. Home educators tend to be resourceful and innovative. In this section you might wish to include the following:

- interested, supportive adults who facilitate the child's learning and discovery
- access to public libraries and to school libraries, where the local authority permits this
- access to the internet, either at home or in libraries
- contact with other home educating families, locally or via membership of a national support organisation such as Education Otherwise, or use of internet support lists to share educational ideas, benefit from the experience of others and to provide socialisation opportunities
- opportunities for trips and outings, to stimulate or to follow up the child's interest in a particular subject
- access to materials for reading and writing, which may include personal computers

This is not an exhaustive list, but it may help to give you an idea of the kind of thing that counts as an educational resource. You do not have to be an expert in a particular subject or be a qualified teacher in order to facilitate your child's interest and provide a personalised education tailored to his or her needs. With home-based education, the family often learns together.

Report

It is worthwhile giving examples of how your home education works in practice. Some families choose to send in an educational philosophy and report in place of a face-to-face meeting. Some families like to keep a diary, notes or photographs of what they are doing, e.g. on a weekly basis. Others use blogs. Some

families keep samples of their children's work, or evidence of educational projects or trips. In other cases, families will note which books the children are reading or which films they are watching and discussing, or which are their favourite websites.

None of this information has to be shown directly to the local authority unless the family is comfortable with doing so, but it can nevertheless be useful to keep a record for yourself, particularly when you first start home educating. You may feel that you are not achieving very much, but reviewing your notes or photographs will give you confidence that you are on the right track and also provide you with the information you need to be able to assess what is working well and which areas might need some adjustment.

Changing approach over time: we often see families who begin home educating for one reason, and then find that their values have evolved. Nothing has to be set in stone. Over time, the autonomous family may become more geared towards gaining external qualifications, while the structured family who began with 'school at home' may tend more towards self-expression, or may value 'life skills' or vocational experience over traditional academic qualifications.

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