

Will We Become Education Refugees?

Note: *This is a translation of an article by André Stern that was [originally posted](#) on the French language edition of the Huffington Post.*

My son, my child,

The day you were born, you brought me into the world. There you were, lying on your side, calm and astonished, discovering our binary world—you who had known only prenatal homogeneity, where there is neither heat nor cold, neither hunger nor thirst—and you planted your wide open eyes in mine and made me pass, at once, from dispensable to indispensable. Indispensable for you, for your future, for your security.

You grew at your own pace, going through all sorts of stages, learning to walk and talk without being taught these things, simply because others around you were doing them, and because that is your disposition. Children become how we see them. Children become how they see us. Two facts we should meditate on.

I am your father. I am 49 years old. I have never been to school. For several decades, I have been writing books, traveling the world, invited to prestigious places in order to talk, together with recognized speakers, about childhood, trust and freedom. I started working with all kinds of scientists, transported by the observation of such a beautiful convergence, all fields leading to the same conclusion: children, in a state of trust, are giants.

On a daily basis, in my work with education professionals, with parents, with young people and children, I try to bring back this trust; I do my part of the work necessary for its return, on your behalf.

You carry within you, like me, traces of your ancestors' history. My childhood was marked by the image of my father, age 9, abandoning his pedal car forever in the yard of the house where he had grown up to get into a car and, with his parents, flee Nazism. Your grandfather, now 96 years old, is one of the most renowned educators of our time. He and his wife, my mother, spent 70 years observing the development of thousands of children. My parents' approach, which is the opposite of all extremism, radicalism and separatism, generates an unshakeable confidence in childhood and a reinforced conviction of the respect we owe it.

Your first real anxieties, you experienced them this year, because of the coronavirus. The barrier gestures, the masks, the confinement—which deprived you of your friends, your grandparents, your habits and your desire to go out into the world to meet others. But we know that this anguish will pass, that it will come to an end, even if the date is not yet known.

But then, on Friday, October 2, 2020, the dark Friday for Freedom of Education, arrived, through the mouth of our president, in the form of an “I have made the decision,” news that, since then, has caused you much greater, much more lasting anxiety. A strong threat that, if materialized, will leave us without any chance of “returning to normal.” It disturbs your sleep; it deprives you of the daily peace and quiet that should have remained without an expiration

date. And you are not the only one who is upset by this: we, your parents, your little brother, your grandparents, your aunts, your uncles, your friends. Everyone shares this concern.

You are afraid, and that fear comes to you through those who are supposed to protect you: our government authorities. You are afraid that because of a unilateral decision, you will have to leave your homeland, your world, your friends, tomorrow, next year, to flee a country that deprives you—and your family—of a freedom you are not willing to give up.

I must tell you, my son, that there are no small or great freedoms. A freedom is like the life vest you know you have under your seat in an airplane. Even if the probability of having to use it is close to zero, we would not accept being deprived of it.

What you feel, what you wish to say, what I wish to communicate is also, and perhaps above all, addressed to all those who do not yet know that they are directly concerned by this questioning of a fundamental right, even if they have made a different choice from ours.

The freedom to practice home education can suddenly become topical for anyone. A different child, a changing situation: it happens to everyone. If the room for maneuver is reduced to a trickle, our entire freedom is compromised.

If we have to leave our country because of our educational choices—even though those choices are in perfect accord with the well-being of our children and with the “French republican values,” an accord duly controlled by the state itself—then it is the end of freedom, equality and sisterhood-brotherhood that France hold so dear and that you, my son, so ardently defend.

If there is a problem, we must solve it together. And not cut and run without taking into account the lives of those involved. You don’t amputate a leg for a thorn in the foot. Let’s work together to find solutions that will benefit everyone.

Because no, my son, your parents are not against school. Your mom and my own parents have been fulfilled and happy students, and to this day they have no quarrel with school or the education system. So it is neither out of spite nor out of a desire to spare our children from what would have been a bad personal experience that we have made the decision not to send you and your little brother to school.

Not against school. But for something. To respect children’s natural rhythms. So many things now go against the great human rhythms! An example among others is the attempt to make mathematics enter a brain that is not ready for it. The Polish neurobiologist Marek Kaczmarzyk clearly highlights the fact that, with few exceptions, our mathematical brain does not start working until the age of 10, and that any forced encounter with mathematics before this age leads to the feeling of incapacity, of personal and lasting invalidity developed by many children, for the simple reason that they tackle a subject before they have the appropriate tool to understand it.

We want to continue to have the right, in our country, if we make the decision and take the responsibility for it, not to confront our children with mathematics before their brains are ready.

Because we must not forget that the vast majority of those who practice home education, of which we are a part, are anything but separatists or clandestine: we do not hide, we declare our mode of instruction and are controlled every year by the Ministry Of Education and by Municipal Services. Far from being marginalized, far from being “outside the system,” we are one of the facets of its plurality.

The many prejudices and misunderstandings about home education originate from its very name, when it is assimilated to “homeschooling.” Not going to school should never mean staying at home. Home limits us to our parents’ ideas, fears and knowledge. On the contrary, not going to school gives us the freedom to devote ourselves to the spontaneous disposition that all children carry within them: that of going out into the wide world. With its diversities and its solidarities. For which children are made, for which they have an unlimited appetite, aware that we are complementary and that together we are much more competent and stronger than isolated. I see you, my son, changing the lives of those you meet, as they change yours.

My son, I also want to reassure you. To bring hope and, above all, trust: we live in a state of law. All this is still only a project, carried by people who want to do well. The hope remains that your voice will be heard and that the project will be changed. It is this hope that led me to write to you.

Your Daddy who loves you.

—André Stern,
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About the Author

André Stern, 49 years old, son of the researcher and pedagogue Arno Stern, never went to school. Married, father of two children who do not go to school, international lecturer and author, among others, of the books ... *and I Never Went to School* as well as *Jouer* and *Tous Enthousiastes*.

Director of the Arno Stern Institute, working on scientific convergence regarding childhood, he is one of the protagonists in *Alphabet*, the film by Austrian filmmaker Erwin Wagenhofer.

His work in the media, his activities as a lecturer at universities, among education professionals and the general public, respond to a growing interest on the part of all those who, from near and far, live and work with children.

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