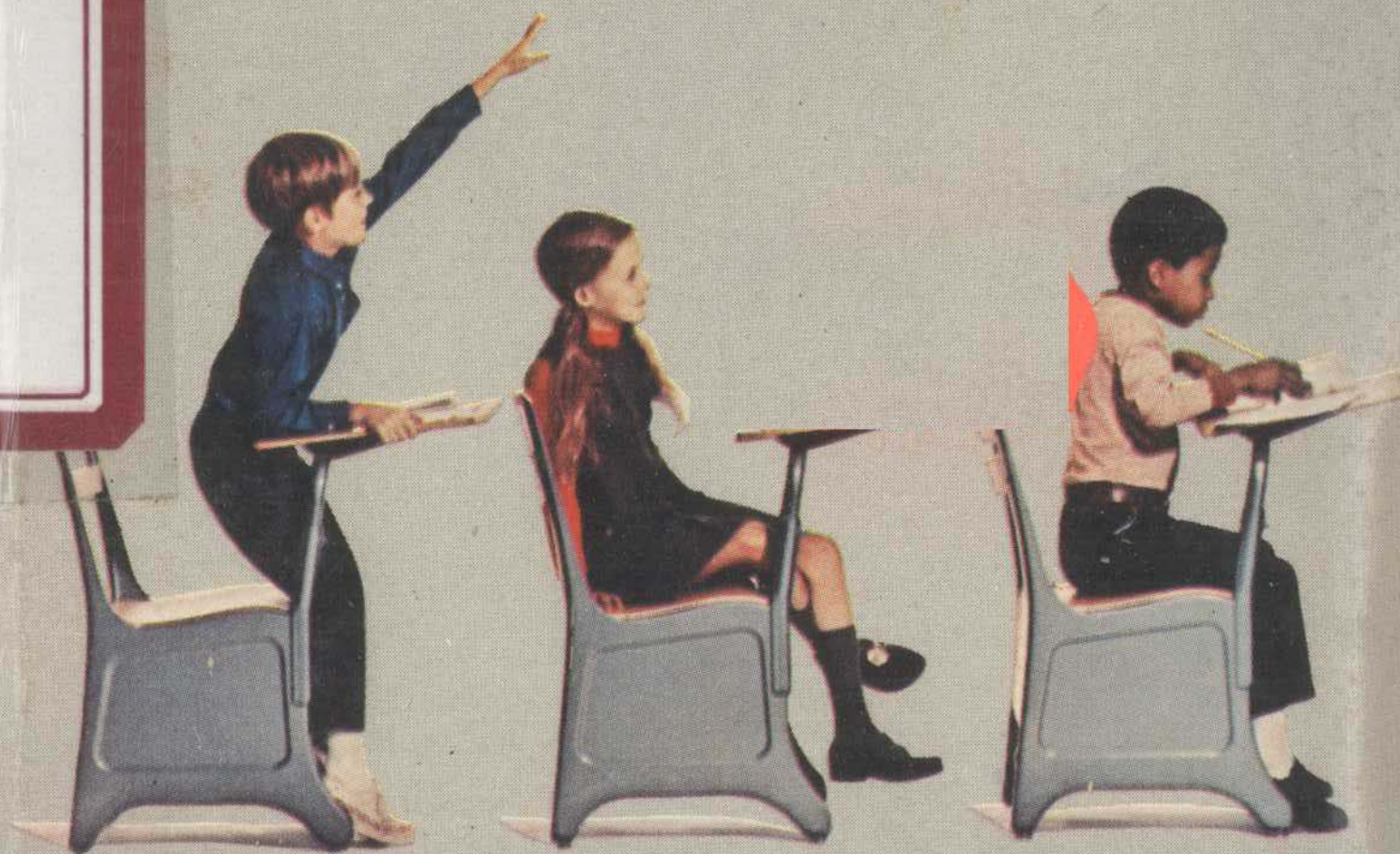


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The best-selling book that tells why bright children do badly in school. "Has already become a classic!" —*St. Louis Post-Dispatch*

HOW CHILDREN FAIL

by **JOHN HOLT**



Do You Know:

Your children's most enduring lesson in school is that their primary task is to please the teacher and avoid embarrassment?

Even the seemingly best teachers are easily tricked, and willingly trick themselves, into thinking that true education is going on?

The "mumbler," the "daydreamer," the "answer-grabber," the "eager failure," are just a few of the typical students who have evolved successful and ultimately destructive ways of getting through the school day.

From a young teacher's years of personal classroom experience and observation working with supposedly "bright" students in "above-average" schools has come a telling diagnosis of the mind-crippling malaise of current educational methods—and an urgent prescription for cure.

HOW CHILDREN FAIL

THE TEACHER

From children's eyes and ears, from their
school, from their parents, from the
teacher and a good environment.

Even the strongest of teachers do not
teach, and without their thoughtful
and thinking that the education is going

on.

The "manner" of the "day" is not the
answer-giver, the "other" is not the
key to the physical and mental domain
involved, successful and ultimate domain
is ways of getting through the school

day.

From a young teacher's years of personal
experience, from observation
and with inquisitively bright students
in government schools, the teacher
is often the one who is responsible for
the lack of current educational methods and
an urgent question for our

HOW CHILDREN

LEARN

John Holt

HOW
CHILDREN
FAIL

Introduction by
Allan Fromme, Ph.D.

A DELL BOOK

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Introduction

The following are the first few pages of the manuscript. The text is very faint and difficult to read, but appears to be a historical or philosophical treatise. It begins with a discussion of the nature of the universe and the human condition. The author seems to be exploring the relationship between the individual and the community, and the role of the state in maintaining order and justice. The text is written in a formal, scholarly style, characteristic of the 17th or 18th century. The handwriting is somewhat irregular, and there are some ink blots and stains throughout the page, which may be due to the age of the document or the quality of the ink used. The overall tone is serious and contemplative, suggesting a deep engagement with the subject matter. The text continues for several more pages, but the content becomes increasingly illegible due to fading and the quality of the scan. The final sentence of the page reads: "I have written these few lines in haste, and I am sure that I have not done justice to the subject. I leave it to the reader to judge for himself."

Two Views on Education

“The purpose of a liberal arts education is to expand to the limit the individual’s capacity, and desire, for self-education, for seeking and finding meaning, truth, and enjoyment in everything he does.”

—A. WHITNEY GRISWOLD

“Why does a teaching machine insure thorough understanding?”

Because the subject is broken down into small units that are easy for the student to handle and because questions are asked in a way that insures that the student gets the right answers almost all the time.

What is the ‘right answer’ habit?

A sense of accomplishment and confidence that the student acquires by moving successfully (getting right answers) through a programmed course of study at his own rate.”

—FROM THE PROSPECTUS OF THE
HONOR TEACHING MACHINE

"If we taught children to speak, they'd never learn."

—WILLIAM HULL

"Think things, not words."

—O. W. HOLMES, JR.

It is better to speak than to be silent.

Think twice, act once.

Introduction

Civilized life places us in a great variety of relationships with people. We buy from some and sell to others; play with some, fight with others. We know people as friends, relatives, policemen. One person is our doctor, another an uncle, a teacher, wife, father, daughter. Some of these relationships are formal, structured, definitive; others are loose, ill-defined, spontaneous. Some are superficial and thin, others involve our deepest feelings.

Contemporary psychological thought has come to stress the importance of exploring and understanding these relationships. The basic quality of our emotional maturity, we now realize, is largely the result of the events shaping the history of one of these relationships: that between parent and child. Defined almost as a testing ground for our personal adjustment, the marital relationship has become another major area of study.

Another relationship of great importance to the growth of the individual—and of even greater importance to the good of society—still cries out for study but remains generally neglected. Despite the fact that millions of children and thousands of adults are daily pressed into a student-teacher

relationship, we know very little about their interactions and the influences they have on each other. Of course, there is a great deal of material available on learning theory and general educational practice, but none of this tells us what actually happens when a teacher asks a child a question in the classroom.

What *does* the child hear when he is called on? What does he feel? What does he think? What are his fantasies and wishes? What does he try to do? What kinds of habits is he developing? What effect does he have on the teacher? What does the teacher think and feel and do as he awaits the answer? Does he understand the meaning of the child's answer or see it merely as right or wrong? Does his relationship with the child have the intimacy ideally necessary for intellectual growth or is it a dull, contractual one which fosters *non-learning* as much as it does learning?

Naturally, we cannot expect teachers all to be clinical psychologists. But neither do we expect husbands, wives, or parents to have doctoral degrees in marriage and family life. We expect them to be sensitive human beings who will make an effort to perceive many things in their relationship for the purpose of getting the most out of it. Teachers can be no more successful in the classroom than they can be in their marriages without this quality of sensitivity. The reason for this is that there is as much *intellectual* intimacy in the teaching-learning relationship as there is *emotional* intimacy in the husband-wife relationship.

Not every teacher is able or even willing to accept a relationship of such intimacy. Nor, for that matter, is every student. It would be reasonable,

however, to expect the teacher to make a greater effort than the student does to promote interaction between them. But how? What can the teacher really do?

We cannot legislate sensitivity and intimacy into existence. We can define curriculum and theorize about motivation, but we cannot promote perception by command. Only by specific, concrete examples can we encourage teachers to learn *to see* their pupils, not their subject matter. Only by showing again and again what the *child* in the classroom is doing can we come to understand how he learns and how he fails to learn.

Failure in a success-oriented culture is hard to take. We are failing and our children are failing in our schools at an alarming rate. Even children who achieve enviable grades are failing to learn much of what we hope to teach them: abstraction, curiosity, and, most of all, appreciation. The subject matter of a course is frequently little more than merely a vehicle for the achievement of these educational goals—yet, all too often, the subject matter becomes an end in itself.

A teacher can perceive this only if he gets inside the mind of his pupil. John Holt has the rare capacity to do this, and, fortunately for us, he loses none of its richness and vividness when telling us about his work. For him, everyday teaching is what it should be: a process of mutual discovery, interaction, and exploration of the self as well as of another person and a subject matter. It is intensely alive, aware, sensitive. Mr. Holt has given us a book which should be immensely helpful. It is not like the performance of a musical virtuoso to which we listen appreciatively without any expectation

that we can play as well. Mr. Holt's virtuosity as a teacher is laid before us in terms of insights we all can use; we are stimulated to use them as rapidly as we glean them from each page of his text.

Allan Fromme, PH.D.

Foreword

Most children in school fail.

For a great many, this failure is avowed and absolute. Close to forty percent of those who begin high school, drop out before they finish. For college, the figure is one in three.

Many others fail in fact if not in name. They complete their schooling only because we have agreed to push them up through the grades and out of the schools, whether they know anything or not. There are many more such children than we think. If we "raise our standards" much higher, as some would have us do, we will find out very soon just how many there are. Our classrooms will bulge with kids who can't pass the test to get into the next class.

But there is a more important sense in which almost all children fail: Except for a handful, who may or may not be good students, they fail to develop more than a tiny part of the tremendous capacity for learning, understanding, and creating with which they were born and of which they made full use during the first two or three years of their lives.

Why do they fail?

They fail because they are afraid, bored, and confused.

They are afraid, above all else, of failing, of disappointing or displeasing the many anxious adults around them, whose limitless hopes and expectations for them hang over their heads like a cloud.

They are bored because the things they are given and told to do in school are so trivial, so dull, and make such limited and narrow demands on the wide spectrum of their intelligence, capabilities, and talents.

They are confused because most of the torrent of words that pours over them in school makes little or no sense. It often flatly contradicts other things they have been told, and hardly ever has any relation to what they really know—to the rough model of reality that they carry around in their minds.

How does this mass failure take place? What really goes on in the classroom? What are these children who fail doing? What goes on in their heads? Why don't they make use of more of their capacity?

This book is the rough and partial record of a search for answers to these questions. It began as a series of memos written in the evenings to my colleague and friend Bill Hull, whose fifth grade class I observed and taught in during the day. Later these memos were sent to other interested teachers and parents. A small number of these memos make up this book. They have not been much rewritten, but they have been edited and rearranged under four major topics: Strategy; Fear and Failure; Real Learning; and How Schools Fail. *Strategy* deals with the ways in which