

SUMMERHILL GENERAL POLICY STATEMENT

1) To provide choices and opportunities that allow children to develop at their own pace and to follow their own interests.

Summerhill does not aim to produce specific types of young people, with specific, assessed skills or knowledge, but aims to provide an environment in which children can define who they are and what they want to be.

2) To allow children to be free from compulsory or imposed assessment, allowing them to develop their own goals and sense of achievement.

Children should be free from the pressure to conform to artificial standards of success based on predominant theories of child learning and academic achievement.

3) To allow children to be completely free to play as much as they like.

Creative and imaginative play is an essential part of childhood and development. Spontaneous, natural play should not be undermined or redirected by adults into a "learning experience" for children. Play belongs to the child.

4) To allow children to experience the full range of feelings free from the judgement and intervention of an adult.

Freedom to make decisions always involves risk and requires the possibility of negative outcomes. Apparently negative consequences such as boredom, stress, anger, disappointment and failure are a necessary part of individual development.

5) To allow children to live in a community that supports them and that they are responsible for; in which they have the freedom to be themselves, and have the power to change community life, through the democratic process.

All individuals create their own set of values based on the community within which they live. Summerhill is a community which takes responsibility for itself. Problems are discussed and resolved through openness, democracy and social action. All members of the community, adults and children, irrespective of age, are equal in terms of this process.

SUMMERHILL POLICY STATEMENTS

These documents are a statement of the aims and objectives of Summerhill School.

*As an introduction, here is a chapter from the book ‘**Summerhill – a radical approach to child rearing**’ by the school’s founder, **A.S. Neill**.*

A.S. Neill is widely considered to be one of the great educators of the time. UNESCO list him as one of the 100 most influential educational thinkers and he was also listed as one of twelve greatest educators of the last millennium by a UK national broadsheet newspaper in December 1999. His writings, together with other radical thinkers of the period such as Bertrand Russell, confronted the values of the establishments for many years.

This extract from Neill’s book ‘Summerhill’ is an example of his challenging views on education and freedom for children. It is reproduced here to give some background and history to the Summerhill Policy Statements.

“I hold that the aim of life is to find happiness, which means to find interest. Education should be a preparation for life. Our culture has not been very successful. Our education, politics and economics lead to war. Our medicines have not done away with disease. Our religion has not abolished usury and robbery. The advances of the age are advances in mechanism – in communications and computers, in science and technology. New wars threaten, for the world’s social conscience is still primitive.

If we feel like questioning today, we can pose a few awkward questions. Why does man hate and kill in war when animals do not? Why does cancer increase? Why are there so many suicides? So many insane sex crimes? Why the hate that is racism? Why the need for drugs to enhance life? Why backbiting and spite? Why is sex obscene and a leering joke? Why degradation and torture? Why the continuance of religions that have long ago lost their love and hope and charity? Why, a thousand whys about our vaulted state of civilised eminence!

I ask these questions because I am by profession a teacher, one that deals with the young. I ask these questions because those so often asked by teachers are the unimportant ones, the ones about French or ancient history or what not when these subjects don’t matter a jot compared to the larger questions of life’s fulfilment – of man’s inner happiness.

How much of our education is real doing, real self-expression? Handwork is too often the making of a wooden box under the eye of an expert. Even the Montessori system, well known as a system of directed play, is an artificial way of making the child learn by doing. It has nothing creative about it. In the home the child is always being taught. In almost every home there is at least one ungrown-up grown-up who rushes to show Tommy how his new engine

works. There is always someone to lift the baby up on a chair when the baby wants to examine something on the wall. Every time we show Tommy how his engine works we are stealing from that child the joy of life – the joy of discovery – the joy of overcoming an obstacle. Worse! We make that child come to believe that he is inferior, and must depend on help.

Parents are slow in realising how unimportant the learning side of school is. Children, like adults, learn what they want to learn. All the prize-giving and marks and exams side-track proper personality development. Only pedants claim that learning from books is education.

Books are the least important apparatus in a school. All that any child needs is the three R's the rest should be tools and clay and sports and theatre and paint and freedom.

Most of the school work that adolescents do is simply a waste of time, of energy, of patience. It robs youth of its right to play and play and play: it puts old heads on young shoulders.

When I lecture to students at teacher training colleges and universities, I am often shocked at the ungrownupness of these lads and lasses stuffed with useless knowledge. They know a lot: they shine in dialectics: they can quote the classics - but in their outlook on life many of them are infants. For they have been taught to know, but have not been allowed to feel. These students are friendly, pleasant, eager, but something is lacking – the emotional factor, the power to subordinate thinking to feeling. I talk to these of a world they have missed and go on missing. Their textbooks do not deal with human character, or with love, or with freedom, or with self-determination. And so the system goes on, aiming only at standards of book learning – it goes on separating the head from the heart.

It is time that we were challenging the school's notion of work. It is taken for granted that every child should learn mathematics, history, geography, science, a little art and certainly literature. It is time we realised that the average young child is not much interested in any of these subjects.

I prove this with every new pupil. When told that the school is free, every new pupil cries, "Hurrah! You won't catch me going to lessons!"

I am not decrying learning. But learning should come after play. And learning should not deliberately seasoned with play to make it palatable. Learning is important – but not to everyone. Nijinsky could not pass his school exams in St. Petersburg, and he could not enter the State Ballet without passing those exams. He simply could not learn school subjects – his mind was elsewhere. They faked an exam for him, giving him the answers with the papers – so a biography says. What a loss to the world if Nijinsky had really to pass those exams!

Creators learn what they want to learn in order to have the tolls that their originality and genius demand. We do not know how much creation is killed in the classroom with its emphasis on learning.

I have seen a girl weep nightly over her geometry. Her mother wanted her to go to university, but the girl's whole soul was artistic.

The notion that unless a child is learning something the child is wasting his time is nothing less than a curse – a curse that blinds thousands of teachers and most schools inspectors.

Classroom walls and the National Curriculum narrow the teacher's outlook, and prevent him from seeing the true essentials of education. His work deals with the part of the child that is above the neck and perforce, the emotional, vital part of the child is foreign territory to him.

Indifferent scholars who, under discipline, scrape through college or university and become unimaginative teachers, mediocre doctors and incompetent lawyers would possibly be good mechanics or excellent bricklayers or first rate policemen.

I would rather Summerhill produce a happy street sweeper than a neurotic prime minister.

In all countries, capitalist, socialist or communist, elaborate schools are built to educate the young. But all the wonderful labs and workshops do nothing to help Jane or Peter or Ivan surmount the emotional damage and the social evils bred by the pressure on him from his parents, his schoolteachers and the pressure of the coercive quality of our civilisation.

The function of the child is to live his own life, not the life that his anxious parents think he should live, nor a life according to the purpose of the educator who thinks he knows best. All this interference and guidance on the part of adults only produces a generation of robots.

We set out to make a school in which we should allow children freedom to be themselves. In order to do this we had to renounce all discipline, all direction, all suggestion, all moral training, all religious instruction. We have been called brave, but it did not require courage. All it required was what we had – a complete belief in the child as a good, not an evil, being. Since 1921 this belief in the goodness of the child has never wavered: it rather has become a final faith.

A. S. Neill MA, Hon MEd, Hon Dr. of Laws, Hon Doc.

SPS01

Summerhill General Policy Statement (Community life)

This document arose from the need to define certain practices which are necessary parts of the Summerhill philosophy, but which are considered contrary to traditional childcare customs outside the school.

One of the unique and valuable experiences, which Summerhill offers its students is living as equal members in a democratic community. This includes staff, pupils, boys and girls. The Summerhill experience enables pupils to grow in a family environment; free from the usual social prejudices found in most other schools. The result of this is that throughout the school there is a marked confidence and friendship between the sexes, and between all age groups.



Freedom for the individual is considered of primary importance at Summerhill. There is a clear definition between “Freedom” and “Licence”. Members of the community are free to do as they like, provided it does not interfere with the freedom of somebody else. Thus, you can wear what you like (or nothing at all if you want to!), eat what you like, attend lessons if you like – but you cannot play your drum kit at three in the morning or pee on the lounge floor. The school laws (usually about two hundred!) protect individuals and also protect the welfare of the school, the property, the school’s reputation etc.

Self-government at Summerhill covers all areas of everyday life at the school. It does not cover:

- © Staffing
- © Pupil intake and expulsion
- © Finances
- © A few safety issues – e.g. no BB guns allowed, no alcohol.

Community members may bring up businesses pertaining to any of the above in the school meetings for discussion. Changes will frequently be implemented following such discussion. The community has occasionally carried motions in the meeting which demanded the expulsion of a particular child or staff, even though it is up to the Principal to implement such an action. This event would be taken very seriously and the Principal would take the community’s opinions into full account over the matter.

Any member of the community, pupil or staff, has the right to charge another or bring up a business in the General Meeting, or call a Special Meeting about anything they wish to. Thus both pupils and staff are answerable to the whole community. Nobody in the school is exempt

from this, and no subject is beyond the community's discussion. There is an appeal process available in all Meetings.

Since Summerhill was established in 1921 it has been the policy to allow the younger children in the 'San' and 'Cottage' to share mixed sex accommodation, just as they would within their own families. This lays the foundation for a more natural relationship between the sexes which will last throughout their school years, and on into adult life. The 'House' rooms and above are single sex, but in a mixed sex corridor. The 'Shacks' are single sex buildings but for over-spill we occasionally mix them. The 'Carriages' have single rooms but the sexes are mixed within their buildings. Staff accommodation may be situated within the children's sleeping areas, regardless of sex. Any conflicts, which arise within these areas, are resolved through ombudsmen or the school meeting.

All toilet and washing areas in the school can be used by either sex, or by staff. Rules covering this subject are open to change in the General Meeting. If one sex or age group in the school want to be exempt from sharing, then it can be passed by democratic vote. There have been several occasions in the past when certain groups have carried proposals excluding other groups from the use of their toilet area.

When camping in the grounds people share a mixed sex sleeping area.

In Summerhill we would not necessarily expect to maintain the same standard of painting, decoration and furnishing as in the home or possibly other schools because of the freedom which children have to play in the buildings. The community particularly values this freedom. Any breakages are brought to the school meeting with the damages generally being paid by the Individual.

Summerhill has a different attitude towards physical contact and friendships between staff and pupils to that of other schools. Hugging, sitting on laps and other physical displays of affection are an accepted and much valued part of community life.

Summerhill pupils have freedom to take part in what may be considered by some as risky pastimes, such as climbing trees, building dens, racing on bicycles, etc.

The school has many safety laws such as a ban on younger children having knives or matches, no climbing on roofs, only supervised use of the swimming pool, no swinging off the Big Beech tree rope if it is dark or wet, etc. The school meetings are, in themselves, a constant risk assessment by both adults and children.

Some risk taking, both emotional and physical, is considered an important part of discovering one's own, and other people's boundaries.

The school offers open internet access under the supervision of the meeting. There are laws that are policed by the whole community to protect the individual. (See *Summerhill School: Internet Policy Statement*.)

Summerhill is a place where children can be left alone. Staff are available and supportive when children want to talk, but they will not pursue children and offer assistance unless this is an action decided in a staff meeting. The staff at Summerhill are practical care-workers – they are not counsellors, social workers, or agony aunts. Although we believe that children should be responsible for finding their own answers whenever possible, the adults at Summerhill are sensitive and responsive to the children's needs. (See section 4 – *General Policy Statement*)

Summerhill is a non-religious community. It does not preach for, or against, any religion. Important values such as tolerance, understanding, compassion etc are learned through living as equal members of a self-governing community.

The school policy is to be supportive and to offer advice and information about sex and sexuality whenever it is needed.

The school aims for children to feel comfortable and supported so that if sexual problems arise, they will be able to talk openly to the adults and seek help.

Parents may be informed if we have concerns, though we will try to comply with a child's wish for confidentiality when possible.

The school rules regarding smoking are made in the General Meeting. They apply to adults and pupils.

There is no restriction on the use of language at Summerhill, though swearing outside the school is prohibited. Of course, this, like all other issues, can be changed in the General Meeting by majority vote.

Bullying is dealt with by the school meeting. Ombudsmen are available instantly to mediate and provide support between meetings. Special Meetings can always be called.

The freedom to attend lessons or otherwise is genuine. There are no hidden pressures from the adults in the community. There are always times during the course of their stay at Summerhill when students will be non-attenders. This depends very much on their experiences in other schools prior to joining Summerhill. If staff have concerns about the motives for not attending (possible classroom phobia, shyness, etc) the child will remain on the Special Attention list for regular monitoring, and will be offered support. However,

non-attendance of classes on its own would not be considered a problem but more often a sign that emotional development is following the usual route. (See *General Policy Statement*) We recognise that some children have special needs and we provide appropriately for them.

Summerhill does not send school reports to parents. If they are needed for College entrance etc. they can be sent upon request, with the pupil's consent. The Principal will answer any queries about general welfare, or particular worries which parents may have, but the children's lives at school are considered their own business – to share, or not with their parents as they wish. The pupils at Summerhill value this aspect most highly, it gives them a feeling of responsibility to themselves and of independence. (See policy on *assessment, record-keeping and report writing*)



Summerhill recognises that its approach is unusual and that some people may look upon it with disapproval. However, these things are part of the philosophy of freedom and self-government, which is considered essential to the development of the pupil's emotional well being.

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