

# The Sudbury Valley School Experience

*Third Edition*

*with photographs by Michael Greenberg,  
Andrew Brilliant and Carol Palmer*

Sudbury Valley School Press  
2 Winch Street  
Framingham, MA 01701

# Contents

Introduction	1
Back to Basics	6
What Children Don't Learn at SVS	17
How and What Do Children Learn at SVS?	21
What do Students Choose?	38
A New Look at Learning	41
On the Nature of Sports at SVS and the Limitations of Language in Describing SVS to the World	62
Reverence for all Life	69
Learning to Trust Oneself	72
The Little Girl Who Taught Me a Big Lesson	78
The Art of Doing Nothing	81
Wrong Questions, Wrong Answers	87
Do People Learn From Courses?	90
A Moment of Insight	100
When does a Person Make Good Use of His Time?	103
Doing "Nothing" at School: A Lesson from History	113
Snapshots	119
Sudbury Valley's Secret Weapon: Allowing People of Different Ages to Mix Freely at School	121

The Beech Tree	137
How the School is Governed; Who Cares?	140
When You Think of the School Meeting, What Passes Through Your Mind?	146
Five Myths about Democracy	149
Subtleties of a Democratic School	158
The Silent Factor	178
Teaching Justice through Experience	182
SVS Glimpses	186
On Law and Order	190
"When You Were Young"; A True Story	203
To Thyself Be True	206
A School for Today	209

## Introduction

The time was 1967. A small group of parents living in the Greater Framingham area had been hunting all over the country for a school that met our requirements. We had travelled far and wide, visited and read about all sorts of places — and had come up empty-handed.

The main thing we all had in common was a deep conviction that the existing educational system would do our children irreparable harm. We felt we *had* to do whatever was necessary to provide the kind of environment we wished our children to have.

So it was that Sudbury Valley School was founded in 1968.

The starting point for all our thinking was the apparently revolutionary idea that a child is a *person*, worthy of full respect as a human being. These are simple words with devastatingly complex consequences, chief of which is that the child's agenda for its own life is as important as anyone else's agenda — parents, family, friends, or even the community. In the school we wanted for our children, their inner

needs would have to be given priority in their education at every point.

As a practical matter, this meant that all of our children's activities at school would have to be launched on their own initiative. There could be no externally imposed curriculum, no arbitrary requirements dictating what they should do with themselves. The school had to be a nurturing environment in which the children themselves choose what they wish to do and schedule their time.

Personal respect also had to be the foundation of our children's process of socialization. This led us directly to the concept of democracy as an institutional imperative. Democracy alone is built on the solid foundation of equal respect for all members of the community, and for their ideas and hopes. And so it became a cornerstone of our philosophy to give everyone at school, without exception, a full and equal voice in running the school.

An interesting feature of this respect, when extended to all members of the school community, had to do with out attitude toward parents. So many educators viewed parents as a nuisance at best, a downright menace at worst. This did not seem right to us, mostly because we were founding a school primarily *as* parents! Any way we looked at it, parents definitely had a place in children's education. From the beginning, we held to this belief, and structured the school accordingly.

This book is a collection of selected essays and short pieces written about the school over the years. They were chosen for their relevance to the current school scene, and for their ability to convey an understanding of what Sudbury Valley School is all about.

The book was put together in response to a need, frequently stated by visitors, prospective enrollees, and educators. We have often been asked for more background material on various aspects of the school. Although the material was available, it was scattered through dozens of publications, most of them issues of our Newsletter, which is published approximately eight times a year. Some minor editorial changes have been made in transcribing these writings from their original sources, in order to make the material more readable and consistent with current school usage.

Perhaps the best way to open the book is with an excerpt from a recent school catalog. Entitled "A Typical Day...A Typical Year", it says:

*Even after reading and hearing about the school, and often even after visiting, many people still wonder and ask what a "typical day" is like at school, both for students and for staff. It often comes as a surprise that we have so much trouble responding to such a question.*

*Our problem is twofold: first, people at school are so different from each other, that no two of them ever do the same thing, at least not for long. Second, there is such total freedom to use time that each person often varies his activities from day to day, or week to week, or month to month.*

*The variety is truly amazing — until you realize that in the world outside of schools, chances are that any group of people not pre-selected will show just as many differences. At Sudbury Valley, we see just about everything. One person will settle into a perfectly predictable pattern for months on end, always*

*doing the same things in the same sequence at the same times — and then suddenly change to another predictable pattern. Another person will, at totally unpredictable times, be doing something else each time. Another person will go on a series of short term binges — a few intensive weeks (or months) of this, followed by a few intensive weeks (or months) of that.*

*Some people play all day. Some people talk all day. Some people paint or study or cook all day. Some people do a little of each of these things, according to some schedule they have for themselves. Some come early and leave early, some come late and leave late. One week you are likely to find many people at school by opening time, and a bustling school soon after. The next week the school may be quiet until mid-morning.*

*Time assumes a different aspect at Sudbury Valley. Here there are no bells, no periods, no terms, no grades, no "freshman," no "sophomores," no "juniors," no "seniors"; no "preschoolers," no "post-graduates." Time belongs to each student in a very personal sense. Each student learns to understand and work with his own unique internal rhythm, pace, and speed. No one is a fast learner, no one a slow learner. All have in common the quest for a personal identity that is whole, and individual, and that, once found, makes all reference to time seem trivial.*

And that is the heart of the matter. By combining absolute respect for self with a deep sense of community, Sudbury Valley has put into practice

ideals we have long struggled for. It is the stuff our dreams were made of, brought to life.

The Sudbury Valley School Press

## Back to Basics

Daniel Greenberg

Why go to school?

For people who like to think through the important questions in life for themselves, Sudbury Valley stands as a challenge to the accepted answers.

### Intellectual basics

The first phrase that pops into everyone's mind is: "We go to school to learn." That's the intellectual goal. It comes before all the others. So much so, that "getting an education" has come to mean "learning" — a bit narrow, to be sure, but it gets the priorities clear.

Then why don't people learn more in schools today? Why all the complaints? Why the seemingly limitless expenditures just to tread water, let alone to progress?

The answer is embarrassingly simple. Schools today are institutions in which "learning" is taken to mean "being taught." You want people to learn? Teach them! You want them to learn more? Teach them more! And more! Work them harder. Drill them longer.

But learning is a process you do, not a process that is done to you! That is true of everyone. It's basic.

What makes people learn? Funny anyone should ask. Over two thousand years ago, Aristotle started his most important book with the universally accepted answer: "Human beings are naturally curious." Descartes put it slightly differently, also at the beginning of his major work: "I think, therefore I am." Learning, thinking, actively using your mind — it's the essence of being human. It's natural.

More so even than the great drives — hunger, thirst, sex. When you're engrossed in something — the key word is "engrossed" — you forget about all the other drives until they overwhelm you. Even rats do that, as was shown a long time ago.

Who would think of forcing people to eat, or drink, or have sex? (Of course, I'm not talking about people who have a specific disability that affects their drives; nor is anything I am writing here about education meant to apply to people who have specific mental impairments, which may need to be dealt with in special, clinical ways.) No one sticks people's faces in bowls of food, every hour on the hour, to be sure they'll eat; no one closets people with mates, eight periods a day, to make sure they'll couple.

Does that sound ridiculous? How much more ridiculous is it, then, to try to force people to do that which above all else comes most naturally to them! And everyone knows just how widespread this overpowering curiosity is. All books on childrearing go to great lengths to instruct parents on how to keep their little children out of things — especially once they are mobile. We don't stand around pushing our one year olds to explore. On the contrary, we tear our hair out as they tear our house apart, we seek ways to

harness them, imprison them in playpens. And the older they get, the more "mischief" they get into. Did you ever deal with a ten year old? A teenager?

People go to school to learn. To learn, they must be left alone and given time. When they need help, it should be given, if we want the learning to proceed at its own natural pace. But make no mistake: if a person is determined to learn, they will overcome every obstacle and learn in spite of everything. So you don't have to help; help just makes the process a little quicker. Overcoming obstacles is one of the main activities of learning. It does no harm to leave a few.

But if you bother the person, if you insist the person stop his or her own natural learning and do instead what *you* want, between 9:00 AM and 9:50, and between 10:00 AM and 10:50 and so forth, not only won't the person learn what s/he has a passion to learn, but s/he will also hate you, hate what you are forcing upon them, and lose all taste for learning, at least temporarily.

Every time you think of a class in one of those schools out there, just imagine the teacher was forcing spinach and milk and carrots and sprouts (all those good things) down each student's throat with a giant ramrod.

Sudbury Valley leaves its students be. Period. No maybes. No exceptions. We help if we can when we are asked. We never get in the way. People come here primarily to learn. And that's what they all do, every day, all day.

### **Vocational basics**

The nitty-gritty of going to school always comes up next, after "learning." When it comes right down to it, most people don't really give a damn what or how

much they or their children learn at school, as long as they are able to have a successful career — to get a good job. That means money, status, advancement. The better the job you get, the better was the school you went to.

That's why Phillips Andover, or Harvard, rank so highly. Harvard grads start out way up the ladder in every profession. They are grateful, and when they grow up, they perpetuate this by bestowing the best they have to offer on the new Harvard grads they hire; and by giving big donations to Harvard. So it goes for Yale, Dartmouth and all the others.

So what kind of a school is most likely today, at the end of the twentieth century, to prepare a student best for a good career?

We don't really have to struggle with the answer. Everyone is writing about it. This is the post industrial age. The age of information. The age of services. The age of imagination, creativity, and entrepreneurialism. The future belongs to people who can stretch their minds to handle, mold, shape, organize, play with new material, old material, new ideas, old ideas, new facts, old facts.

These kind of activities don't take place in the average school even on an extra-curricular basis. Let alone all day.

At Sudbury Valley, these activities are, in a sense, the whole curriculum.

Does it sound far-fetched? Perhaps to an untrained ear. But history and experience are on our side. How else to explain that fact that all our graduates, barring none, who wish to go on to college and graduate school, always get in, usually to the schools of first choice? With no transcripts, no records, no reports, no oral or written school recommendations. What do

college admissions officers see in these students? Why do they accept them — often, grab them? Why do these trained administrators, wallowing in 'A' averages, glowing letters from teachers, high SAT scores — why do they take Sudbury Valley grads?

Of course you know the answer, even if it is hard to admit; it runs so against the grain. These trained professionals saw in our students bright, alert, confident, creative spirits. The dream of every advanced school.

The record speaks for itself. Our students are in a huge array of professions (or schools, in the case of more recent graduates) and vocations. They are doctors, dancers, musicians, businessmen, artists, scientists, writers, auto mechanics, carpenters . . . No need to go on. You can meet them if you wish.

If a person came to me today and said, simply: "To what school should I send my child if I want to be assured that she will get the best opportunity for career advancement in the field of her choice?" I would answer without the least hesitation, "The best in the country for that purpose is Sudbury Valley." Alas, at present it is the *only* type of school in the country that does the job, with an eye to the future.

As far as vocations are concerned, Sudbury Valley has encountered Future Shock head on and overcome it. No longer is there any need to be mired in the past.

### Moral basics

Now we come to a touchy subject. Schools should produce good people. That's as broad a platitude as — mother and apple pie. Obviously, we don't want schools to produce bad people.

How to produce good people? There's the rub. I daresay no one really knows the answer, at least from

what I see around me. But at least we know something about the subject. We know, and have (once again) known from ancient times, the absolutely essential ingredient for moral action; the ingredient without which action is at best amoral, at worst, immoral.

The ingredient is *personal responsibility*.

All ethical behavior presupposes it. To be ethical you must be capable of choosing a path and accepting full responsibility for the choice, and for the consequences. You cannot claim to be a passive instrument of fate, of God, of other men, of *force majeure*; such a claim instantly renders all distinctions between good and evil pointless and empty. The clay that has been fashioned into the most beautiful pot in the world can lay no claim to virtue.

Ethics begins from the proposition that a human being is responsible for his or her acts. This is a given. Schools cannot change this, or diminish it. Schools can, however, either acknowledge it or deny it.

Unfortunately, virtually all schools today choose in fact to deny that students are personally responsible for their acts, even while the leaders of these schools pay lip service to the concept. The denial is threefold: schools do not permit students to choose their course of action fully; they do not permit students to embark on the course, once chosen; and they do not permit students to suffer the consequences of the course, once taken. Freedom of choice, freedom of action, freedom to bear the results of action — these are the three great freedoms that constitute personal responsibility.

It is no news that schools restrict, as a matter of fundamental policy, the freedoms of choice and action. But does it surprise you that schools restrict freedom to bear the consequences of one's actions? It shouldn't. It has become a tenet of modern education that the



psyche of a student suffers harm to the extent that it is buffeted by the twin evils of adversity and failure. "Success breeds success" is the password today; encouragement, letting a person down easy, avoiding disappointing setbacks, the list goes on.

Small wonder that our schools are not noted for their ethical training. They excuse their failure by saying that moral education belongs in the home. To be sure, it does. But does that exclude it from school?

Back to basics. At Sudbury Valley, the three freedoms flourish. The buck stops with each person. Responsibility is universal, ever present, real. If you have any doubts, come and look at the school. Watch the students in action. Study the judicial system. Attend a graduation, where a student must convince an assemblage of peers that s/he is ready to be responsible for himself or herself in the community at large, just as the person has been at school.

Does Sudbury Valley produce good people? I think it does. And bad people too. But the good and the bad have exercised personal responsibility for their actions at all times, and they realize that they are fully accountable for their deeds. That's what sets Sudbury Valley apart.

### **Social basics**

Some time ago it became fashionable to ask our schools to look after the social acclimatization of students. Teach them to get along. Rid our society of social misfits by nipping the problem in the bud, at school. Ambitious? Perhaps. But oh, how many people have struggled with reports from school about their own — or their child's — social adaptations, or lack of them! Strange, isn't it, how badly people sometimes screw up what they do? I mean, trying to

socialize people is hard enough; but the schools seem almost methodically to have created ways of defeating this goal.

Take age segregation, for starters. What genius looked around and got the idea that it was meaningful to divide people sharply by age? Does such division take place naturally anywhere? In industry, do all twenty-one year old laborers work separately from twenty years olds or twenty-three year olds? In business, are there separate rooms for thirty year old executives and thirty-one year old executives? Do two year olds stay apart from one year olds and three year olds in the playgrounds? Where, where on earth was this idea conceived? Is anything more socially damaging than segregating children by year for fourteen — often eighteen — years.

Or take frequent segregation by sex, even in coed schools, for varieties of activities.

Or the vast chasm between children and adults — have you ever observed how universal it is for children not to look adults in the eye?

And now let's peek into the social situation created for children within their own age group. If the schools make it almost impossible for a twelve year old to relate in a normal human fashion to eleven year olds, thirteen year olds, adults, etc., what about other twelve year olds?

No such luck. The primary, almost exclusive mode of relationship fostered by schools among children in the same class is — competition! Cut-throat competition. The pecking order is the all-in-all. Who is better than whom, who smarter, faster, taller, handsomer — and, of course, who is worse, stupider, slower, shorter, uglier.

If ever a system was designed effectively to produce competitive, obnoxious, insecure, paranoid, social misfits, the prevailing schools have managed it.

Back to basics.

In the real world, the most important social attribute for a stable, healthy society is cooperation. In the real world, the most important form of competition is against oneself, against goals set for and by a person for that person's own achievement. In the real world, interpersonal competition for its own sake is widely recognized as pointless and destructive — yes, even in large corporations and in sports.

In the real world, and in Sudbury Valley, which is a school for the real world.

### **Political basics**

We take it for granted that schools should foster good citizenship. Universal education in this country in particular always kept one eye sharply focused on the goal of making good Americans out of us all.

We all know what America stands for. The guiding principles were clearly laid down by our founding fathers, and steadily elaborated ever since.

This country is a democratic republic. No king, no royalty, no nobility, no inherent hierarchy, no dictator. A government of the people, by the people, for the people. In matters political, majority rule. No taxation without representation.

This country is a nation of laws. No arbitrary authority, no capricious government now giving, now taking. Due process.

This country is a people with rights. Inherent rights. Rights so dear to us that our forefathers refused to ratify the constitution without a Bill of Rights added in writing, immediately.

Knowing all this, we would expect — nay, insist (one would think) — that the schools, in training their students to contribute productively to the political stability and growth of America, would —

- be democratic and non-autocratic;
- be governed by clear rules and due process;
- be guardians of individual rights of students.

A student growing up in schools having these features would be ready to move right into society at large.

But the schools, in fact, are distinguished by the total absence of each of the three cardinal American values listed.

They are autocratic — all of them, even "progressive" schools.

They are lacking in clear guidelines and totally innocent of due process as it applies to alleged disrupters.

They do not recognize the rights of minors.

All except Sudbury Valley, which was founded on these three principles.

I think it is safe to say that the individual liberties so cherished by our ancestors and by each succeeding generation will never be really secure until our youth, throughout the crucial formative years of their minds and spirits, are nurtured in a school environment that embodies these basic American truths.

### **Back to basics**

So you see, Sudbury Valley was started in 1968 by people who thought very hard about schools, about what schools should be and should do, about what education is all about in America today.

We went back to basics. And we stayed there. And we jealously guarded these basics against any attempts

to compromise them. As we and our successors shall surely continue to stand guard.

Intellectual creativity, professional excellence, personal responsibility, social toleration, political liberty — all these are the finest creations of the human spirit. They are delicate blossoms that require constant care.

All of us who are associated with Sudbury Valley are proud to contribute to this care.

## *What Children Don't Learn at SVS*

*Hanna Greenberg*

Sometimes I wonder at our courage. For it does take courage to believe that children who are allowed to spend their school days without the guidance of a prescribed curriculum will in the end be ready to enter the adult world, function in it, and succeed. The truth is that while I have always understood the shortcomings of the prevalent educational system, and felt that SVS would succeed where others failed, I often don't quite know exactly how we achieve our success. Not that this lack of knowledge disturbs me. After all, at the heart of our method is the assumption that one person cannot know what is best for another, so it follows that the children will find their way on their own without our intervention, and often without our comprehending how they did it. Nevertheless, it is sometimes possible to gain insight into the way things work around here, and thus gain more confidence in what we are doing.

Let me give an example.

One of the most striking aspects of the school is the way children play here. Visitors are amazed to see that the school permits the children to play all day, week in

week out, starting in the Fall through the Winter and into the Spring, year after year. They wonder at the "country-club atmosphere," or at the "all-day recess." But that is not what is really striking about the play at SVS. What is essentially unique is the utter seriousness, the concentration, even the passion with which the children pursue their play. For years I thought nothing of it. I attributed this to human nature, to the fact that all of us, children and adults, pursue our hobbies in this manner. It was also obvious to me that activities which we dislike doing, but which we must be engaged in out of a sense of duty, most of us do in a lackluster way, with no enthusiasm, with minimal output of feeling and imagination, with a lack of joy and, in general, in a manner calculated to conserve our energy by avoiding work as much as possible. We all know this and have always known this.

One day, however, I noticed some specific kids whom I have watched play for six years, or even longer, suddenly (that's how it seemed to me) latch on to some work with the same dedication that they applied to their play. This got me to watch other children, and I discovered this to be the case with almost all of the people who have grown up at SVS. They show a remarkable lack of skill in the art of dodging and shirking. They seem to have transferred their mode of behavior in play or fun activities to *all* their activities. When questioned, they often admit to lack of interest in certain activities they pursue because they feel they must, either to learn skills such as math or spelling, or whatever. In other instances, they take on jobs that are boring when they need to earn money and no better jobs are available. Most of the time, they still apply themselves with energy and concentration to

whatever they do. They persevere at their work, take on responsibilities and are esteemed by their employers. They are also diligent and intelligent students.

Many learned papers have been written about the connection between children's games and learning. What strikes me as interesting is how children's play at SVS is related to what they *do not* learn here. They do not have to learn to adapt to activities that they do not initiate. They are innocent of the techniques that every child uses sooner or later in the average school throughout the world. Children who are forced to listen to teachings that don't answer their quests, who are forced to study material that does not seem relevant to them, who are grouped together by others who don't even know them and are forced to learn together whether they are ready or not, all use similar methods of coping. I do not have to enumerate them; every reader knows some from personal experience. Slowly the spark of life is diminished, the bright eyes dim, the questions are left unasked and the life force is wasted on coping with a suffocating environment. Bad work habits are internalized, character traits are formed that later require much effort to undo. When liberation arrives at graduation from high school it is often too late. Many persons find it hard to get enthusiastic, to galvanize their energy for work, to apply their imagination, to be creative in solving problems.

Children are born with all these qualities that we all value and reward in adults. Tragically, our schools educate our young people to lose them. At SVS we never do *teach* kids how to work hard, how to be creative, how to think for themselves. What we do is not rob them of what they knew when they were very

young. We let them be, and they do the rest exquisitely all by themselves.



## *How and What Do Children Learn at SVS?*

*Daniel Greenberg*

No question is raised more often about Sudbury Valley School. Somehow it's easy to accept the fact that the school is a house, or that there are no classrooms. Everybody knows that some of the best progressive schools have moved around the furniture and tried to make things a little less formal, so the fact that there aren't formal study rooms may seem a little peculiar, but it's not that bizarre. What is strange indeed is that nobody seems to be "doing" anything. The school seems to be in perpetual recess.

A little historical perspective can help in grappling with this question. Before we started the school, every discussion of our educational philosophy was a presentation of a hypothetical idea. We would go before a group and say this, that, and the other thing, and people would listen skeptically and present us with one unanswerable objection: "It won't work!" What could we say? That it *will* work? We were sure that it would work, but we couldn't say it *did* work.

We know now that it does work. The problem we have now is one not of proving that it will work, but of trying somehow to explain *why* it works when it feels

like it shouldn't. That's a very different problem, a nice kind of problem.

We've had a great many graduates since 1970, and others who left for one reason or another without graduating, so we have a lot of experience with students who have been here and then gone on to the "outside world." They're in the professions, in the arts, in business; they've gone to colleges and to trade schools. Everyone who wanted to go to college got into college. Most got into the college of their first choice. People would ask, "How are you going to get them into college? They have no grades, no recommendations." It's totally against our principles to write recommendations. The college admissions applications ask for an evaluation of the students: what percentile of the class are they in, what their personal characteristics are — pages and pages to fill out about the student's character, performance, and abilities and so forth. Initially people would say, "If you don't fill that out, how is the student ever going to get into college?" We've never filled one out in all the years. We have a form letter which explains the school and our philosophy and why we don't fill out the forms. Basically we say, "You people in the admissions office are going to have to look at this student and figure out for yourselves whether he or she is somebody who ought to go to your school. We're not going to do the work for you."

As it turned out, what we predicted actually happened. Admissions people in colleges are jaded. They get a thousand applications, and every one of them is the same. There is hardly a student who has applied to college who isn't "the best," or who doesn't have twenty letters of recommendation from twenty different teachers who say, "Johnny is absolutely the

finest student I've ever had in my twenty years of teaching." What is one to do? So the admissions people sit there, day in and day out, looking through all kinds of garbage, and then all of a sudden somebody applies who has none of these papers. The applicant says, "I want to come here. I know I'm the right person for your school, and I know why I want to be here." And the admissions people can hardly believe their ears. Usually, the better the school, the better the chances are of getting in.

That's just one experience we've had with our graduates. There are a lot of things we can say now. For example, we have never had a case of dyslexia. You read that 10-15% of the population have dyslexia. But we haven't had one such instance. It could be an accident. The students who attended SVS might just happen not to be in that 10-15%. But it doesn't work that way. There's no pre-selection of non-dyslexic people in this place. We haven't had dyslexia because we haven't brought it about.

What we have had is children who have started reading at a very wide range of ages. We've had some who started at four or five (that's what everybody likes to hear) and we've had others who started at nine, ten, even later. When you look at a person who isn't reading at the age of eight, you know that person in a standard school setting would be put in a remedial reading class and subjected to enormous pressures. But if you stay your course, as we have stayed our course over the years, and you leave that person alone and let them develop at their own pace, the "miracle" always seems to happen. By the time they leave, you wouldn't know the difference between those who started reading at four and those who started at eleven.