

Otherwise

The membership magazine of Education Otherwise

Features, interviews, reports,
Activities and tips

#1: Autumn 2018



Profile: Iris Harrison

Education Otherwise founder member Iris Harrison helped blaze a trail for today's home educators, but at what cost?

Workwise

When family breakdown turned Emma's comfortable life upside down, HE put her back in control of both family and working life.

Toolkit Essentials

Nurturing Natures: '.... there's just so much here that touches on issues relevant to home education'.

Otherwise



FOREWORD

Welcome to the first issue of the new-look Education Otherwise membership magazine. Its digital format means that we can leave behind the limitations of the old print newsletter and fill this new version with longer, more informative articles exploring all aspects of HE and family life. But don't worry, we haven't abandoned the 'news' aspect of the old print newsletter—time-sensitive items will continue to be distributed as irregular email bulletins whenever the occasion arises.

In this inaugural 'taster' issue we introduce our new regular features, and let you know how you can contribute your own ideas and articles—and at this turning point in EO's history, with a change to CIO status just around the corner, it's also fitting that we take a look back to the 1970s and EO's origins, with the amazing story of Iris Harrison's long battle to educate her children in the way she knew was best for them. It's easy to forget how much was accomplished by these early HE pioneers, and to underestimate how easily we could slip back to those dark times if we don't remain vigilant.

Sarah Willans, Publications Secretary

EDITORIAL POLICY

Submission does not guarantee publication. EO reserves the right to edit or reject contributions in line with editorial policy.

PLEASE NOTE:

We publish either the full name or first name and Town or County of adult EO member contributors. If you wish you may use a pseudonym, but we still need your full name and address for administrative purposes.

CHILDREN'S CONTRIBUTIONS :

We publish first name and age – but again, we also need family name and contact details (of parent). We do not print anonymously submitted contributions.

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Young EO



We have a Weekend Box to give away in each issue to the young writer whose work appears on this page!

Choose between Bumper Boxes (Arts & Crafts, Cooking and more!) or Science Boxes (4 activities).

www.weekendboxclub.com

Your Letters

Your news, views, HE tips and stories

GET IN TOUCH

Is there something you'd like to share with other EO members? Do you have feedback on what you've read here? Are you itching to raise an issue or add your voice to the debate around HE and family life? This page is for you.

Please email your letter (up to around 250 words) to us at eonl@educationotherwise.org, with 'Your Letters' in the subject line. Don't forget to include your surname and address, and if possible your EO membership number, so that we can verify your membership: these details won't appear on the page, but we can't publish letters that arrive without them.

SEEKING CONNECTIONS

After many happy years of home education my children went to school, and to cut a long story short we are home educating again. Teacher shortages and absences meant few lessons and so much television watching during the school day that now we have the whole day to learn in, rather than evenings and weekends, we regret leaving home education in the first place.

Now we have returned, things have moved on and many groups and families use Facebook to connect with. We aren't on Facebook, so I am writing to the newsletter to see if there are any families in the Beccles, Bungay or surrounding area who would like to get in touch with a view to an occasional meet up. We originally went to a group in Lowestoft which no longer runs, but I wondered if any groups have filled this



place?

My daughter would like to meet some other home educated girls. She is 13yrs old, she plays several instruments, loves horses, animals, art and crafts. It would be great to hear from anyone nearby who would like to meet up. Finally, there was a home educated family we knew years ago who may or may not have moved to Canada: Hannah Prettyman, mum to Josie and Josh? I would love to hear from them. It's good to be back!

Hilary

If you'd like to contact Hilary, please email eonl@educationotherwise.org and we'll pass your message on

BOOKREVIEWERS NEEDED

We're looking for avid readers of any age who would like to review books for Otherwise magazine, everything from novels to how-to books, children's stories to parenting manuals.

To join the panel, just send 250 words on yourself and the kind of books you love to read to eonl@educationotherwise.org. We'll provide review guidelines, and when a book comes in that matches your interests we'll send it out to you for review. Once reviewed, it's yours to keep.

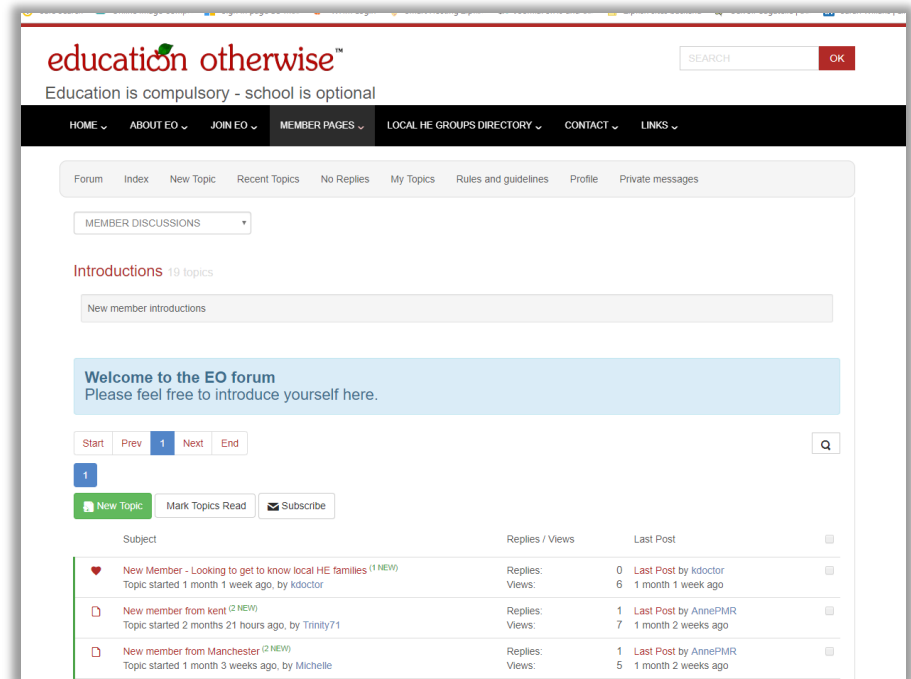


Fed up with Facebook? Try the EO forum!

Facebook hasn't had a great press recently. What with concerns over tax avoidance, hacked accounts, stolen data, fake news, and bullying and personal abuse on a hitherto unimagined scale, it's no wonder that many users are jumping ship.

But leaving Facebook - or simply not opening an account in the first place - has its downsides, and this is particularly true for home educators wishing to keep in touch with local events. For loosely organised groups with several administrators, running a Facebook page is a good deal easier than establishing a website, and it's free. Consequently, many local groups are coordinated entirely through their Facebook pages, where members can quickly see what's happening, post their own news, and respond to others' posts. The EO Helpline frequently fields enquiries from home educators who are not on Facebook and struggling to make contact with others in their area, and it's not unusual for us to post to our own Facebook page on their behalf. It's simply the quickest way of getting the information they need.

So if you have an aversion to Facebook but still want to keep in touch with other home educators, what can you do? For Education Otherwise members, there's an easy alternative: the EO Member Forum. It's part of EO's own website and accessed with the same login as the member area, you post under your username rather than your real name, it's open only to EO members and, because it belongs to the



Need help? webmaster@educationotherwise.org

charity, it's run for the members' benefit and not for profit, - so there's no advertising, no fake news, and bullying and abuse are not tolerated.

The forum is relatively new, and at the moment it's underused—so to get the ball rolling, we'd like to encourage all our members to visit and make an introductory post there. One of the biggest benefits of joining an organisation like EO is that you become part of a community where you can exchange information and support with others in the same situation and explore the issues around home education. The EO forum provides a meeting place for all members, not just those who are active on social media—and more than that, an active forum enables EO's trustees to keep a finger on the pulse of the charity and seek members' opinions on future plans and proposals. To take your place in our HE community, here's what you need to do:

1. Log in to the EO website at the

bottom of the home page.

2. Under 'Member Pages' in the top or footer menu, choose 'Member forum',
3. Click/tap the category heading 'Introductions'.
4. Click /tap the green 'New topic' button.
5. Enter a subject for your post (e.g., 'New member from Kent'), and type in your introductory message.
6. Click or tap 'Submit'.

That's it. Whenever someone replies, you'll receive an automated email notification.

And while you're there, take a few moments to look around. There are dedicated forum areas for many different discussion topics, and for EO business and news about legislation and consultations. There's also a private messaging system so that you can communicate with individual members.

See you there!

Workwise

Combining HE with paid work—Emma White

I never wanted to home educate my boys. Never. That was absolutely, totally and utterly the last thing I would have considered. Unthinkable. My boys were set to go to good schools with good teachers and then on to top universities with top careers. At least that was what I'd planned. Only it was all taken away from me – my hopes and dreams; my normal – when my eldest son was just 13.

I didn't see it coming. We had everything. Lovely homes in the countryside and London, a private island, three boys in good private schools and a life full of exciting travel and rosy promise but then in early 2014 disaster struck and within a year my partner disappeared taking my eldest son with him, leaving me and my two youngest penniless and with nowhere to live. Yes, it really happened, I found myself staring into an abyss having lost everything I'd ever owned. It was hard to see any positives at this particular time; indeed there were none. Thirteen court hearings followed in my attempt to salvage something for the boys and me, but all was in vain. Emotionally I'd taken a battering. I'd lost contact with my eldest son who was living somewhere in Indonesia, I'd no idea where, and through it all I had to give my two younger sons some sort of security – home education emerged as a safe and solid option. An option



where I would be in control.

Although our lives had been good, excellent in fact and full of privilege, it was all underpinned by a tendency to change plans at a whim, and my boys had already been educated in three countries at a total of six different schools (not my choice) between them, so securing a court order to restore equilibrium was supported by the Royal Courts of Justice and in September 2015 I started on our journey of home education.

The funny thing was, I never expected it to last for long. Throughout those early days I kept expecting some sort of divine intervention would set us back on course and we would resurface, back

where we were. But three years later we stand here with six GCSEs behind us and a newly found business established on the disaster of it all. There are more GCSEs ahead and A Levels, and a plan to expand the business – what a difference three years can make!

Fortune has a tendency to act in peculiar ways and my story is proof of that in abundance. There was nothing fortunate at the start of it but from the ashes of disaster, as they say, grow the roses of success.

When I first came to home education I was terrified. Because I was locked in endless court battles and hopeful for a school-based solution, I didn't do much planning. In retrospect

that wasn't a problem because my boys were in year eight and year six so time was on our side and our focus, if any, was on winning places at good secondary schools for that moment when the mayhem would cease and peace return. But it didn't. We worked hard but we lacked direction and my mind was in chaos. Total chaos. At this point I'd not had contact with my eldest son for a year, he was now 14, and I was emotionally broken. Still, through our home endeavours both younger boys won places at Lancaster Royal Grammar School, which was at least a measure of where we were heading on the attainment scale, but we had nowhere to live locally (I'd been hoping we would) and I have to confess they were probably still running on 'old fuel' from excellent old schools—so little credit to me.

I remember the low point well. I was living in rented housing association accommodation—we had been evicted two days before Christmas Eve—and heading out one evening for a takeaway, when I couldn't walk any further. I simply crouched down on a shop front and burst into tears. I sat there for what seemed ages before I found the resolve to carry on, and I had to make sure I returned looking like nothing had happened. I couldn't lose face before my boys, couldn't show them that I was worried sick, because for some reason they had blind faith in me. I was their leader and I had to carry on. The whole realisation of the ordeal ahead in getting my boys through the enormity of their GCSEs seemed utterly overwhelming; the responsibility, the volume of work, the unavoidable fact that their future lay in my hands.

At this point I had no expectations of home education, just confusion, and I was embracing it all as a compromise at

a low point in my life. If questioned on home education, I'd have said it was the preserve of the super clever or those who were gifted at sport for whom school took a backseat role, or perhaps travellers or oligarchs. I was none of them. But that moment outside the takeaway, that low point, steeled my resolve. If this was our future I had to make the best of it, had to be proactive and take charge of the journey—and in doing so, learn absolutely everything I needed to know to find a way forward.

How did I do it? Well I read every syllabus from every exam board, I joined countless Facebook groups and I asked hundreds of questions. I picked the brains of my Local Education Authority representatives (I had three in total with my regular moves) and through it all a plan emerged. Fortunately my children were on side and willing; they simply wanted to do it, and I was lucky enough that friends and family supported me through the wilderness of homelessness and destitution. My boys never licked their wounds and bemoaned their misfortune and the loss of their father and brother, and I'm immensely proud of them for how they took it all on the chin and worked through with astonishing focus. Oddly, they look back at those dark days as a sort of epiphany, a day they finally felt safe, and I think that has a lot to do with it. I might have been crying with silent desperation deep inside, but the choices were mine and mine alone and they knew that I would never let them down.

Right now it is incredible to think that my youngest will finish his clutch of GCSE exams long before year 11, and that isn't because I deem it to be a race—absolutely not, it is just the way

it has worked out; some subjects take more learning than others and our objective has been, and always will be, long term, deeply held knowledge, but the driving force has largely been dodging through the mine field of exam changes, somersaulting through the new 9-1 grades, and making sure we choose—as best we can—exams where we have the chance to practise past papers. If I'm boring (and I hope I'm not) it is because I now live and breathe our education. I made a promise to stop thinking about it over the summer holidays, but I've found myself reading books which sit on the cusp of our studies: *The Roses Of No Man's Land* by Lynn MacDonald, a portrayal of the role of women in the First World War and a book on Weimar, both subjects link to our GCSE history studies, and a biography of Alan Turing. My mind is newly alert and focused.

I have spent hours poring over every syllabus, weighing up our options, and now there is light at the end of the tunnel as the odd university prospectus arrives in the post. Yes, we plan ahead. But the actual work? How do I know how good we are? The fact is, I don't. I have nothing to measure our own progress against, no barometer to say 'yes' we are doing ok. Nothing. This has been especially tough with subjects such as English Language, English Literature and History; subjects where answers can be subjective and a child's response is open to interpretation. In fairness, and most reassuringly, many teacher blogs on Facebook would suggest that even those who are qualified to teach are facing the same dilemma where a syllabus has changed and a new exam format been introduced.

Our subjects are all heavyweight – English Language, English Literature, Maths, French, History, Geography,

Physics, Chemistry, Biology, Psychology and Astronomy. Home education and all the subjects we cover have become so entrenched in our day to day conversation that I doubt for a minute they will be forgetting it all the moment they leave the exam room – that’s not us! Oh no, we take our subjects far beyond the classroom and live and breathe what we learn over lunch and dinner. I remember when I used to return from school and my mother would ask, ‘What did you do today?’ and I’d say, ‘I can’t remember’ – and I meant it, I really couldn’t, but I still ended up at Durham University studying English Language and Medieval Literature. How different are my kids, and it is because we are all in it together, it is what we do.

So is this normal? Yes, I think it is for many home-educating families. I’m not alone in believing that when a child is exempted from the cynicism of modern school society they become very individualistic. They develop their interests without one cautious eye glancing in the rear view mirror to see if their passions meet with peer group approval. My youngest carries his love for all things science before him and is already deliberating between a career as an astrophysicist or a micro-biologist. The middle one wants to study Law with French Law. And will they make it? I see no reason why not. My job has been to offer guided learning, inspire interest and plot out options. Come September, whilst we round the home turn on the GCSEs front, my 15 year old (year 11) will make an early start on his A levels: History, French and English Literature, and we will spend time in France so he can gain work experience with a *notaire*.

It isn’t easy. I spend five hours every

day teaching and the boys do two hours of homework every evening. I work hard reading around what we are doing and sourcing materials to help us, but one tiny bit of advice, given to me by the head mistress of my boys first school, still rings in my ears: “in your position, you just need to stay one step ahead, only one step”. And I do, at least I try to, in every subject from Chemistry and Physics to English Literature. I’ve probably become monumentally dull as I lie awake at night reminding myself to set an essay question on the relationship between Mrs Birling and her children, or trying to remember the difference between covalent and ionic bonding, recall the teachings of Doppler, and

What has shocked me is that quite often children are being taught the wrong syllabus right up to the dying days before the exam

the wonders of Red Shift and Blue Shift – the list is endless.

Throughout the past three years I have survived largely due to the grace and favour of friends who have kept our heads above water, but knowing that charity can’t last forever I was keen to establish a business that would give me the freedom to home educate and grow towards being self sufficient, so earlier this year I launched Mark My Papers. As a home educator unable to afford regular tutoring, I was always very aware that I lacked the expert opinion of a teaching professional, so Mark My Papers was developed exactly to fill that gap. I spent six months scoping out the concept before taking tentative steps towards a launch. It is all too easy to wish an idea

into being and then to bend research to galvanise hopes and dreams rather than face the truth, but Mark My Papers shone out as an answer to a problem that has confounded many.

So what does it do? Mark My Papers allows home-educated children to have their work assessed, or rather marked, by a professional teacher. From an early onslaught of GCSE and International GCSE papers came requests to accommodate Key Stage Three and A levels, so with the entire remit of secondary education, all mainstream subjects, covered, the next stop has been to bring together twenty teaching professionals of the highest order who cater solely for Key Stage Two.

Initial contact with the Elective Home Education Departments of the LEAs has received a hugely positive response, and the general consensus is that Mark My Papers can bridge the gap between school and ‘responsible’, conventional home education.

The objective with Mark My Papers is to use leading schools and private tutors to mark and grade past papers and individual pieces of work, giving full feedback where required. But Mark My Papers isn’t exclusive to Home Educated children: all pupils can send in their work for a second opinion. It is like having anonymous tutors who have between them experience of all the exam boards, Edexcel, AQA, OCR and CAIE. It’s tutoring without the regular cost perhaps, and it has no doubt given a lifeline to home educating parents who stumble in the dark towards public exams.

What has shocked me is that quite often children are being taught the wrong syllabus right up to the dying

days before the exam actually takes place, and this is quite understandable right now as the exam system seems to be in permanent chaos, with syllabus changes and the introduction of the new 9-1 grading. We have children who have read the wrong books for English Literature or been unaware of changes to a science syllabus. But it is hardly surprising because home education comes with immense responsibility, and at first it seems like a minefield of what you can and can't do and what is out of date and what is current. For younger children it is a question of knowing that you are laying the early foundations properly – perhaps the hardest part of all, and this is the area where Mark My Papers can make a huge difference.

The uptake has been astonishing. Setting up a business whilst home educating has its challenges, but the key to success has been my personal time management. We start early at 8am and do school work until 1pm covering nine lessons, and from then on my time is spent nurturing my business. The boys settle down to two hours of homework, and I disappear into my study until the early hours of the evening. And often late at night when I can't sleep!

I've been lucky in many ways that my past working life has set me up well for where I am now. My background has mainly been marketing and public relations in start up businesses all over the world, from insurance to oil exploration in East Timor and Falklands tourism. I've learnt to prepare things from the ground up and seen companies develop from vague concept to an AIM listed company with a market cap of £1,000,000,000, so I always believed that the impossible was possible. But Mark My Papers is different. For me it ignites a real

passion, because I now totally believe in home education and feel there is bridge to be built between schools and responsible, conventional home schooling. It brings a lifeline to parents who need the occasional support of professionals to reassure them that they are on track. I started it because it is what I needed and I deemed that if I needed it there must be others in the same position. Everyone has their own story, own reasons for arriving at their

because they play to your desires. I've done it before. I worked long and hard on an internet project that was simply too clever for its own good, and although I hoped it would work, the truth was that users only utilised 1% of its capacity, rendering the other 99% pointless – and expensive.

Yes, it has been tough, unspeakably tough, but the immediate problem of not knowing where we would live and how I would solve the issue of surviving



decision to home educate, but it is never a small undertaking nor a decision made lightly and the workload is colossal. I hope we can take away some of the stress I endured.

So I take my hat off to home educating mums. I say mums, but there are dads too, though from my experience most of those who cross my path are mums. I think we are heroes. And if there are any other home educating parents wanting to combine work with home education, I would advise them to think carefully about time management and do lots of research. New businesses survive because they satisfy a need rather than

called for immense pragmatism—education was incredibly important to me, so it wasn't a time for being maudlin. My boys had won places to Marlborough and Shrewsbury so I simply couldn't let them down. Home education offered us a lifeline and an element of control, and a focus through the madness. And I think that is how many of us find ourselves home educating—through adversity. And if I had the chance now to send them to those leading public schools, I'd probably decline—and oddly enough, they would too. They have become educationally submersed, and that's the way we like it.

So what lies ahead for Mark My Papers? Interestingly, schools are seeing the benefit of ‘farming out’ their marking of mock exams, and there has been increased interest from America too. From the very beginning Mark My Papers was embraced by ex-pats studying towards GCSEs, International GCSEs and A levels all over the world, but the concept has crept into other educational systems and development in those areas is on the agenda for 2019.

And what about my eldest son? He will be 18 in October and it’s been four years now. I think about him all day. Every single day, all day long. Every step I’ve taken along this traumatic journey has been underpinned by the haunting tragedy of a fractured family, and I hope one day I can rebuild that most important relationship. I look back over those last four years with horror. I had a hole blown in the side of my life, but from the ashes of disaster, as they say, I hope I have sown some future roses of success.

Exam update

The good news is my boys got great results. Ossie (would be Year 10) got English Language Grade 8 (A), French A*, Geography A* and Psychology A. His brother, just 13 (would be Year 8) just did Geography - Grade A. They've worked very hard but without tutors and just had the odd paper marked.*

Emma adds that all of Mark My Papers’ home educated students got a Grade 6(B) or better in all of their papers.

Tell us your story

Have you found a way to combine home educating your children with paid work? Whether you work for others or run your own business, we’d love to hear about it.



Please send your story to eonl@educationotherwise.org.

We’re looking for pieces between 500 and 3,000 words in length (if yours is a bit longer, send it anyway—we can edit for length if necessary), and ideally accompanied by some photos or illustrations, though we can source these if you don’t have anything suitable.

No time to write it yourself?

We can interview you via email instead.

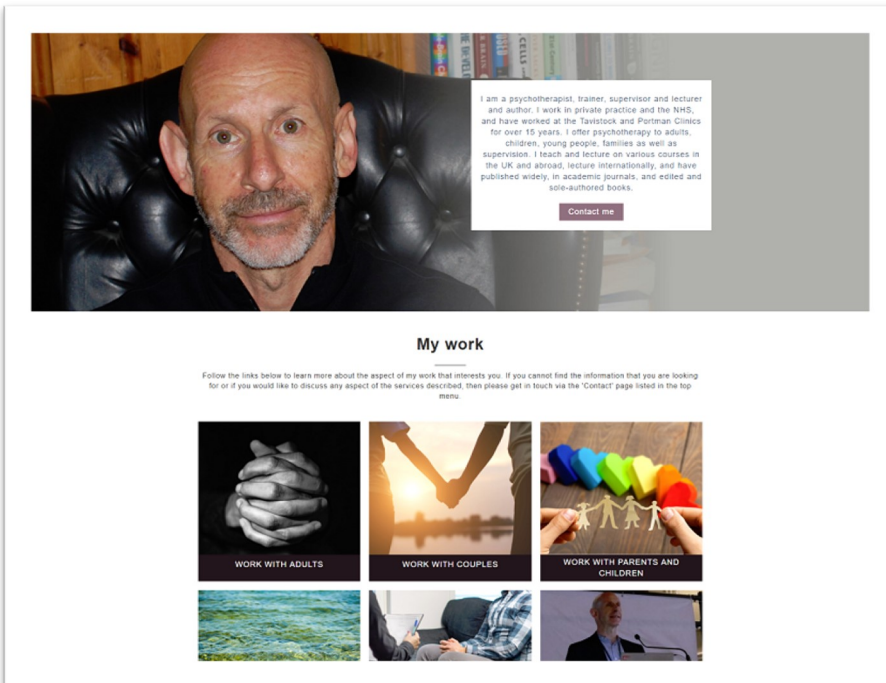
Just get in touch on eonl@educationotherwise.org to let us know you’re interested, and we’ll explain the process.

One way of supporting home education in the UK is to support fellow home educators’ businesses, and if you run your own business this is the perfect opportunity to let other members know you’re there—but remember that the article is mainly about you and the challenges you faced in setting up your business alongside home education: if the piece slides too far into ‘advertorial’ territory we’ll either reject it or reduce the advertising content before publishing.

Toolkit Essentials

EO members on their favourite HE resource

Nurturing Natures website



Like most supporters of home education, I'm often challenged to justify my views. Child psychotherapist Graham Music's website has provided me with some great ammunition!

Music's blog is a digest of child psychology research, and although recent additions are thin on the ground there's a treasure trove of past posts to delve into. With accessibly written posts like 'The lost joys of playing and just being' and 'Raising driven immoral kids?', there's just so much here that touches on issues relevant to home education. And the site also features video and radio interviews and talks on related subjects, with Music himself and other key figures in the field.

All of this material has much to

interest any parent, but for HE families in particular there's a good deal of authoritative, well-referenced material here that can be used to support the arguments in favour of home education.

'I have so often been impressed by children educated outside of the school system...' Graham Music

Music is a leading child and adolescent psychotherapist who works and teaches at the internationally renowned Tavistock Clinic in London. His clinical work there is primarily with issues of trauma and the effect of maltreatment on children, as well as on the families and other adults in the lives of such children. Much of his work is relevant to families struggling with the effects

of bullying or a traumatic school experience.

If your appetite is whetted by the website, Music's book *Nurturing Natures: Attachment and Children's Emotional, Sociocultural and Brain Development* could well be worth a read. It's not cheap at a slightly eyewatering £26, but your local library may be able to get hold of a copy for you. It covers both recent and classical research from areas such as attachment theory, neuroscience and developmental psychology, in 'an accessible enjoyable text which always keeps in mind children recognisable to academics, practitioners and parents'.

Given Graham Music's expertise in the world of child development, it's good to know that he's strongly pro HE. When I contacted him to ask whether *Nurturing Natures* was suitable for lay readers (it is) and mentioned that I was writing this piece for an HE publication, he replied: 'I have so often been impressed by children educated outside of the school system, who so often evince a deep ease and confidence, as well as maturity, and who show deep capacities for learning, stemming from a curiosity and a trust that their own passions and interests can be followed, and will lead to somewhere fascinating and important.' Exactly.

Graham Music's website and blog: www.nurturingnatures.co.uk

Sarah Willans home educated her youngest child during his secondary years, and is an EO Trustee. She lives in South Wales.

Profile—Iris Harrison

If you were old enough in the 1970s to take notice of the news, you may well remember the Harrison family, whose battle against their LEA for the right to home educate their children became a *cause célèbre* and introduced many people in the UK to a totally new concept—that education could take place otherwise than at school. As one of the founder members of Education Otherwise, Iris now holds an honorary, lifetime membership, and continues to support the charity and its members at every opportunity. The story of her long fight begins here, and will conclude in the Winter issue.

In the long, hot summer of 1976, Iris Harrison was taking a break from the long drive from Scotland to Worcestershire, when an advertisement in the Observer caught her eye. Placed by Stan Windass, it invited anyone interested in home-based education to get in touch with a view to establishing the informal network that was to become Education Otherwise.

Eight years earlier, Iris and her husband Geoff had taken the decision to withdraw from school their then five-year-old daughter Wendy, the oldest of their four children, and educate her at home—an almost unheard-of action at that time. By 1976 their relationship with the Local Authority had completely broken down, and they were battling through the courts for their right to educate their children as they saw fit.

They hadn't made their decision lightly. Wendy's brief school experience had changed her from a normal, happy little girl to a distressed and uncontrollable creature, resembling at times—as Iris later recounted in court—'a wild animal'. And there was worse to come.

'After six weeks at school she was lying in bed with me one morning and I was talking to her and was shocked that she did not respond. I was lying next to my child who was now totally deaf and unable to hear the slightest noise. She would run away in the middle of the night, wet her bed and destroy anything belonging to me. It was the darkest

nightmare imaginable.'

In an effort to identify a trigger for Wendy's most severe episodes, Iris started to keep a diary. 'I was able to link her extremes of deafness to reading lessons being taken by an auxiliary teacher and sometimes with the head teacher.' This rang alarm bells for Iris. She had herself always had difficulty with spelling, and had found two years into her marriage that her husband Geoff, a gentle and intelligent man who could repair or rebuild any piece of machinery no matter how unfamiliar, was unable to write. Could it be that their daughter also had difficulty deciphering text—and if so, could this be the cause of her problems at school?

Today, a child with such difficulties would be referred for testing, but although dyslexia had first been recognised—as 'word blindness'—in the late 19th century, in the late 60s and 70s it was still poorly understood and dismissed by some authorities as imaginary. The condition was not officially recognised by the British Government until the late 1980s, and dedicated support for dyslexic children would not be made available in state schools until the 1990s. At this time, a child who could not read or write was likely to be considered either 'educationally subnormal' or just plain lazy.

Desperate to find answers to five-year-old Wendy's problems, Iris took her daughter to an E.N.T consultant, who wanted to admit her to hospital

immediately and operate for her deafness. Considering her problem to be a result of stress, Iris refused the treatment. An approach to the school yielded no useful result. 'I visited the headmaster asking if he would make an appointment for me to see someone in the Child Guidance Department. He laughed and called them "head shrinkers" saying they could do no good. He could not see that we had a problem, as at school, she was a model pupil.'

After twelve weeks of misery, Wendy's parents took her out of school and attempted to undo the damage done to her there. 'She needed to go into an imaginary world of dressing up with her siblings and living in a make-believe world,' says Iris. 'Whilst she was at school her bedroom became chaotic and I made no comment on this. On her own volition her first task (after withdrawal from school) was to reorganise her bedroom to its usual orderly state. This indicated to me that she was, once again, gaining control of her own life.'

After their experience with Wendy, Iris and Geoff determined not to risk sending their three younger children, Alice, George and Nicholas, to school, and the family embarked upon a programme of home education tailored to the children's needs and abilities. But pressure from the Local Education Authority was mounting, and eventually, after some years of skirmishes, the family was visited by an Education Welfare Officer threatening a School Attendance Order. He cited

concerns of 'social isolation' and promised all the help that was needed for the children in school. Wendy wanted to return, though to a different school where she could be with her friends. Alice and George, now of school age though with no experience of school, also wanted to go.

On the first day George returned home at lunchtime saying "I don't trust them. I am not going back". He never returned. Within a week Wendy was again running away from school. Iris recalls wandering the streets looking for her with her then two-month-old baby, Nicholas, in her arms, while Geoff was summoned home to help in the search. Alice became withdrawn, and on her return from school each day would go immediately to her bed and lie staring at the ceiling, refusing to speak.

'I was called in to the Head Teacher's office one day. When we first met she had been critical that our children never received imposed discipline at home. Now here she was apologising to me for her previous attitude, saying she and the other teachers discussed the girls in a staff meeting and each agreed that the girls were the most co-operative children in the school. Yet at home they had become such changed, unhappy children. Alice's main complaint was that the teachers did not trust her. Why did she have to ask permission to go to the toilet, have another piece of writing paper, and go to another part of the classroom?'

By now Iris, up night and day feeding a demanding baby while coping with her two distressed little girls, was exhausted, but luck intervened in the shape of the chickenpox virus. Both girls caught it, necessitating a break

from school. Then, one wintry afternoon, Iris and a doctor friend were painting calamine lotion onto the girls' spots in front of the log fire when a visitor arrived at the door. It was an Education Welfare Officer bearing a notice that, unless the girls were in school the very next morning, spots or no spots, a School Attendance Order would follow immediately.

Iris obtained a medical certificate stating that the girls should not return to school because of the danger of infecting other children with chickenpox and at the same time asked the family's GP to make an appointment with the Child Guidance Clinic. The earliest available

His reply remains branded into her psyche: 'Wanda will be taken from you, together with your other children'

appointment at the clinic was in three weeks' time. Iris was desperate, and a friend, seeing her despair and without her knowledge, rang the Samaritans for advice. As a result, Iris received an unexpected call from an Educational Psychiatrist, who made an appointment to see her.

'I saw him alone. He listened to me then asked me two questions, one about my sex life, and the second, my opinion on extramarital sex. There were no questions asked of the children, whom he never met. He said that with their background it would be impossible for them to cope in a normal school suggesting that they go to a Steiner School.'

Three weeks later the psychiatrist called Iris saying that he had a place for

Wendy in a school for emotionally disturbed children. Iris asked, 'But what happens if I refuse to send her?' His reply remains branded into her psyche: 'Wendy will be taken from you, together with your other children.'

'I was still breastfeeding Nicholas. The possible loss of my children took me into pain and panic that words can never describe. Within an hour, out of the blue, my parents arrived. Mother calmed me down, suggesting we keep this threat at bay until we sort out our next step. And so I agreed that Wendy would go to this school provided that I was with her, and this we did for several weeks while my parents looked after the rest of the family.'

It had become apparent to Iris and Geoff that if they were to stay together as a family they would have to leave their home in Cheltenham. As they made arrangements to let their house and sell Geoff's business, a friend offered them the use of a croft on a peninsular on Scoraig, Wester Ross. Reached via a narrow pathway over the mountains and a three-mile trip by boat across the loch, here was a place where they felt their family could stay safely together.

So the family left behind Cheltenham, their much-loved home, and their extended family, and moved to Scotland. After a few weeks in a bothy next door to their friend's croft, they moved to another empty croft some distance away. 'It had thin polythene over most of the windows as the glass had broken. This flapped noisily in the wind. It had a corrugated tin roof, and to get drinking water Geoff walked two miles along the mountain path to a cascading mountain water course. He later dug a water

catchment up in the mountain and piped water through a hose pipe. For light we burnt candles and an oil lamp, and cooked and boiled our water on a tiny Calor gas cooker.'

Here, at last, Iris felt safe with her children—but life was hard. 'Caring for four children in such primitive conditions stretched the imagination. We had only the money from selling our piano and a few other possessions and dare not cash our family allowance or a cheque for fear of being traced. The washing, hung on the line to dry, would often be blown out into the loch by the winds. Within weeks most of the nappies and much clothing had gone. Buying food was a major problem and we ended up looking for everything that would keep and buying it in huge quantities, such as a crate of dried bananas, a sack each of porridge oats and flour, a gallon of golden syrup, and so on.'

As winter closed in, living on the peninsular became harder still. 'For a while all of us could walk in crocodile fashion to Tom's croft to fetch milk. As time went on the children and I found it hard to cope with the gale force winds. I had lost so much body weight, and for much of the time I stayed in the croft. Geoff would go early in the morning across the loch with Tom to do our family shopping, travel eighty miles to Inverness, returning when it was dark. I was instructed to light an oil lamp in the croft window to give them the direction for the return crossing. I felt very lonely and the huge sense of being safe with the children was soon forgotten and I wanted to return south.'

After almost a year of these increasingly difficult conditions, a letter arrived from the tenant in Iris and

Geoff's Cheltenham house, telling them of a structural problem with its foundations. They planned to drive south and return later return to the croft on completion of the house repairs. Back in Cheltenham and reunited with their extended family, they realised that they couldn't return to the croft. A friend offered them temporary accommodation over their shop, and a search began for an isolated property closer to home. A chance enquiry at an estate agent's office led them to a property in Worcestershire.

'As soon as we entered the track

'The child we had lost had been returned to us and I was prepared to go to the ends of the earth to protect her.'

leading to the property I knew this was to be the home for us. We had few possessions to move into the house, with just a mattress and chair each, Geoff's loom and my spinning wheel. We had no beds, and for some time all the family slept on mattresses on the floor in the same bedroom, as the children needed the security of us all being together. Each time there was a wind the window catches quickly loosened and they blew open, flapping backwards and forwards. We shared the house with mice and rats, yet for all that we were happy, hidden away yet able to visit family and friends whenever we wanted.'

In this new, relaxed atmosphere, Wendy was able at last to face the trauma of her school experiences. 'She still became very disturbed when I spoke of books and would not allow

me to read aloud to her. But this suddenly changed. One night she came into my bed—being a mattress on the floor—in the early hours of the morning. We talked together of her birth and early childhood with no motive in mind, and reached the stage of her going to school. I just said to her that I felt she had not been ready to leave me, and she went into uncontrollable tears. She cried through the night and this went on for most of the next day and began again the following night. The following morning, she came to me saying, "I suddenly stopped crying and there are no more tears inside me now". For the first time since she first went to school she had come to me with such warmth and affection. This was an enormous breakthrough. Gradually I could bring books back into her life again. The child we had lost had been returned to us and I was prepared to go to the ends of the earth to protect her.'

The family's newfound happiness was soon disturbed, however, by a visit from a Miss Richardson, the Deputy Principal Education Advisor from the Local Education Authority. A local person had reported the family for not sending their children to school.

'I had enrolled the children with the Parents National Education Union, who did correspondence courses for children, and at the time of Miss Richardson's arrival I was unpacking a large selection of books. Books were piled on the floor around both of us. Whilst we talked Wendy burst into the room, very excited, saying, "Mum I've just worked out how much a day it costs me to feed all my budgies". If it had been planned, it could not have been better.' But it became apparent from the conversation that followed

that Miss Richardson saw these things as totally unconnected with education. Iris asked if she had any advice regarding Wendy's literacy, and her answer was "Mrs Harrison, there are a lot of large towns in this county and there are children in Worcestershire with worse problems than this", and so her request for help was dismissed.

Nevertheless, Miss Richardson was very impressed with George's weaving, which he'd learned from his father, and gave Iris the impression that she was generally happy with the children's activities—but thereafter she visited frequently, always accompanied by a colleague, and became, in Iris's words, 'very intrusive and aggressive'. On one occasion Wendy was asked to read aloud to the visitors, which caused her great distress. Following that visit, Wendy was unable to read even the words she had successfully learned to recognise, and could no longer copy text in her own hand. On another visit, Miss Richardson informed Iris that if her children went into a local school they would have no additional help, as the county could not afford to fund it

The LEA began to press the family for more and more detail about their educational provision, writing to Iris and Geoff through their solicitor with requests for dates—and even the time of day—on which certain topics had been delivered and resources used. But Iris realised that the correspondence course she'd subscribed to was unsuitable for her family. 'Learning Latin at seven years old when you were finding the English language perplexing added to the stress of the children, and also I did not see this as suitable education for children to face a rapidly changing world. I hoped it would be a tool to keep the LEA off our back.'

Still desperate to help her children progress with their literacy, and without any specialist help from the LA, Iris was delighted when a friend offered to help out as a casual tutor to the children. Within a few weeks she had produced some test papers for the children to work through, and as a result announced that they were all dyslexic. Iris had no idea where to turn for help. 'I sat and pondered what to do and suddenly it came to me. I phoned the American Embassy and spoke to a Mrs Smith. I asked her, "If you have one of your nationals phone you saying their children are dyslexic, what do you say to them?"

Mrs Smith put Iris in touch with Aston University, where the children were given an appointment two days later to see Dr Margaret Newton, a leading dyslexia researcher. Tests revealed that the children were all dyslexic, and George and Nicholas profoundly so. Iris was told that they may never learn to read, and if they did it would certainly not be before reaching adulthood. Later that day, after their return home, Iris found Wendy lying down by the river crying. 'Mum,' she sobbed. 'To think that it is not my fault after all.'

The family now understood the root cause of their children's problems, but despite this the LEA visits continued, and Wendy in particular became very distressed by the frequent unannounced intrusions. Then the family received a notice of intention from the L.E.A., 'to take formal action to ensure that your children do not suffer what could prove to be a lasting handicap through failure to attend a school or to receive a fully programmed education other than at school'. Wendy was not emotionally ready for the family to face

this, and believed the solution for her was to try boarding school. The family visited Kilquhanity House School in Scotland, sister school to the famously progressive Summerhill, and the practical, workshop-based education available there appealed to Wendy. However, in order to get a grant from the LEA to attend Kilquhanity, she would have to be assessed by the LEA's consultant Child Psychiatrist.

The funding was approved, but the consultant was far from helpful. 'After assessing Wendy, he told me he considered her problems to be due to poor parenting. He considered it would be impossible to give all four of my children the attention they needed.' I told him that during their early years I had living-in help and enormous support from my parents. The next reason he gave was, "Then it is because your husband is too military". The idea that calm, gentle Geoff could be described in this way was patently ridiculous, says Iris. 'For instance, when weaving on his twelve-shaft loom the children would sit underneath and run cars up and down the treadles as he wove. The concentration he needed was enormous, yet the children playing did not disturb him.'

So, at the age of ten, Wendy left home for boarding school in Scotland. She was desperately homesick but flourished in Kilquhanity's creative atmosphere. There were just forty-two pupils at the school, ranging from eight to eighteen years, and it prided itself on the important place given to the arts in its curriculum. Iris knew that this would be an environment where Wendy could excel, far away from the pressures of the LEA, and hoped that in this accepting environment she might even become literate.

A year later, Alice, then herself ten years old, followed Wendy to Kilquhanity – however, she didn't fit into the life there in the same way that Wendy had – and by this time some difficulties were also emerging for Wendy. Though she loved the practical, workshop-based education she received there, her literacy had not progressed. She longed to write home and receive letters from her family, but could do so only with the help of her teacher or younger sister. She found this humiliating, and her homesickness increased.

Back home, the head of the LEA Home Tutor Department had telephoned Iris to say that her boss, a Mr Blundell, had announced that 'If it is the last thing I do I shall have those children in school in Worcestershire'. She tried to persuade Iris to accept a home tutor for George, then aged nine. Iris asked for the background of the proposed tutor but was told that she had no right to ask; on further enquiry, she found that she was a local farmer's wife, trained in domestic science and a very strict disciplinarian. She refused the offer. A few weeks later, another tutor arrived at the door unannounced, saying that the LEA Home Tutor Department had employed her to teach George. George refused help from her and Iris asked her to leave.

Then, out of the blue one Friday afternoon, the LEA's Education Psychiatrist, Dr Marti,n phoned to tell Iris that he had found the right school for George, and that she was to expect a taxi to arrive the following Monday morning to take him there. On asking what school he was proposing, Iris was told that it was a school for educationally subnormal children eighteen miles from their home. 'I told

him not to waste the taxi driver's time coming here,' she says, 'as I considered that the term "educationally subnormal" told me more about the person who had assessed my son than about George.'

At this point, what Iris describes as 'a welcome breath of enlightenment' came into the family's lives. Ray Leach was a ex-headteacher who later took a diploma in Child Psychology at Birmingham University, and then



Iris and Geoff Harrison, pictured in the 1970s.

worked as an Advisory and Remedial Teacher in the Child Guidance Service of a large West Midland Education Authority. Eight years later, at the time the Harrison family met him, he was half way through a Master's Degree course. He asked to use the family as part of his research programme, and visited Kilquhanity House School with Iris in the course of his research.

'During the visit I told the headmaster that George was still unable to read. His response was, "By the time he gets here you will have got him reading", as if I could turn a knob or put down a switch in George for this to happen. I had deep respect for Ray

and discussed with him my shock at the lack of understanding of this headteacher.' Ray felt that the progress George had made in home education could be wiped out if he attended the school, and all the effort he had put into working out his own way to read and write could be lost. Iris knew he was right, and during her next telephone call with Wendy and Alice she broke the news that their brother would not be joining them at Kilquhanity

Their response was immediate. The girls felt that if the school wasn't right for George, it wasn't right for them, and a few days later they returned home for good.

The family was overjoyed to be back together, but inevitably the withdrawal of the older children from school brought the LEA back into their lives with a vengeance. 'All the family sat together one afternoon to discuss whether we had all grown confident and able enough to face the Authority as a group, knowing that this would possibly involve a school attendance order and inevitable court cases. The family agreed in unison that we could face this together. I then wrote to the

Authority telling them that Geoff and I had decided to take the responsibility for the education of our children, exercising our rights under the 1944 Education Act to provide for their education otherwise than at school. ‘

As expected, Miss Richardson and a colleague started visiting the Harrison family’s home unannounced. ‘They were not impressed with George’s ability to mend clocks, which he had done since the age of seven, nor that when a part was broken he would either remove it from another old clock or make the part with the help of a friend. We were told, “If we are to be satisfied then we insist on formal teaching, with written work to show results in literacy and numeracy.” Before leaving they asked for evidence of Wendy’s writing, to be given to the County Education Committee. Wendy had recently begun to learn italic writing, and one of her practice pieces, beautifully presented and decorated, was given to them. The piece chosen by Wendy to give to the Education Committee was: *The Open Mind. Neither despise or oppose what thou dost not understand.*

Iris made an appointment to discuss the education of her children with Mr Thompson, a representative of the LA, accompanied by Ray Leach. Ray explained his background as an advisor in a Child Guidance Clinic and attempted to describe the damage that can be caused by working in a traditional way with dyslexic children. Mr Thompson claimed that Ray was a journalist and asked him to leave. Following this meeting, there were two more visits from Miss Richardson, but by this time Iris had realised that trying to communicate with the LA was a complete waste of time, and she told them that it would be better for a court to make a decision regarding the

education of her children. Thus began a legal process that would drag on for almost a decade

Some names have been changed to protect the privacy of the individuals and families concerned.

In the Winter issue, the Harrisons’ fight continues through the Magistrates’ and Crown Courts to the European Court of Human Rights.

If you are moved by Iris’s story, why not respond via the ‘Your Letters’ page?

SUBMISSIONS

We welcome feature proposals and submissions of all kinds from EO members young and old, including factual articles, opinion pieces, short stories, flash fiction, poetry, photos, visual art and illustration.

- **Text items:**
please submit via email, as a Word or RTF document or in the body of the message.
- **Graphic items:**
please submit as email attachments or (for larger files) via a file transfer utility like Dropbox. If you’re not sure how to do this, please email us for help.

In particular, we are looking for:

- resource recommendations for the ‘Toolkit Essentials’ series,
- your best responses for ‘They Say/You Say’,
- stories for the ‘Workwise’ slot, and of course
- submissions to the ‘Your Letters’ page.

All correspondence to:

eonl@educationotherwise.org

They Say/You Say

Your answers to those HE cliches

Most of us are accustomed to hearing a range of familiar comments and questions whenever we're introduced as home educators: 'But surely that's illegal!', 'Are you a qualified teacher, then?', and of course that perennial favourite, 'But what about socialisation?'

In *They Say/You Say* we'll publish a roundup of EO members' and others' favourite replies to a different HE question or comment in each issue.

We're interested in all your responses, from serious to facetious, informative to exasperated, and everything in between. Please send them to eonl@educationotherwise.org, along with the name you'd like us to credit your answer to, and we'll publish a roundup of our favourites in each issue. Please also include your real name and address: they won't appear on the page, but we can't publish submissions that arrive without them.

We asked on the EO Facebook group for members' most frequently heard, memorable, or just plain perplexing questions and comments, and as our *They Say* for the Winter Issue we've chosen the most often reported by far:

'No school today, then?'

Send us your replies by December 15th. We're looking forward to reading them!



Look out for these 'They Says' In future issues:

'How do they manage without friends?'

'How will you ever learn your times tables?'

'But what about GCSEs?'

'You're brave. I wouldn't want to spend that long with my child.'

'You'll be getting tutors in then.'

'But you won't get to see them on sports day and in school plays!'

'Don't you need to be qualified for that?'

'And when do you know if home education has failed?'

'What makes you think your children are so special?'

Heard better? Send them to us at
eonl@educationotherwise.org

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Education Otherwise is a membership organisation, which provides support and information for families whose children are being educated outside school, and for those who wish to uphold the freedom of families to take direct responsibility for the education of their children.

Our principal aims are to:

- encourage learning outside the school system;
- reaffirm that parents have primary responsibility for their children's education and that they have the right to exercise this responsibility by educating them out of school;
- establish the primary right of children to have full consideration given to their wishes and feelings about their education;
- promote knowledge, understanding and acceptance of education otherwise than at school in the world at large.

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