

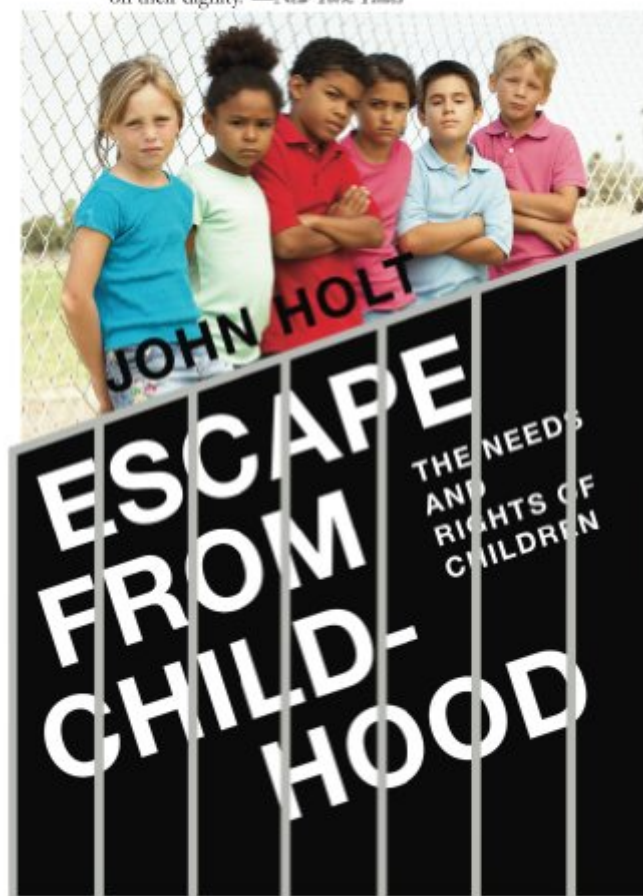


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# Escape From Childhood: The Needs And Rights Of Children

"Astonishingly cogent. John Holt's book is touching in its beautiful respect for children and its insistence on their dignity."—*New York Times*



## Synopsis

“We, in modern-day America, underestimate children’s abilities to make reasonable judgments far more than have any other people at any other place or time in history. In the name of protecting children we hurt them, sometimes viciously. As Holt shows brilliantly, children need the same rights to advance their own interests and protect themselves as we grant to adults.” —Peter Gray, author of *Free to Learn: Why Unleashing the Instinct to Play Will Make Our Children Happier, More Self-Reliant, and Better Students for Life* “With his usual profound interest in observing children in the world, Holt presents a series of arguments about the nature of childhood that any serious educator or parent should thoughtfully explore.” —Kirsten Olson, author of *Wounded By School and Schools As Colonizers* “For the sake of our young people, I humbly recommend that if you have read it, it’s time to re-read it; if you have not, it’s now time. The urgency is that we desperately need a more gentle, loving, and friendly world for our young people and there is no better inspiration than Holt’s *Escape From Childhood* to spur us to action.” —Carlo Ricci, Professor of Education and author of *The Willed Curriculum, Unschooling, and Self-Direction* This is a reprint of John Holt’s controversial book about not just the rights of children, but how adults and children can live and learn together more enjoyably and transparently by rethinking their relationships. Under the guise of care and protection, children are kept in the walled garden of childhood, outside the world of human experience, for longer periods than ever before in human history. But for many children and parents, the walled garden of childhood is more like a prison, where authorities compel and limit personal actions. What if children the right to do, in general, what any adult may legally do? The reader who dares to confront such a question will discover new family relationships, not based on parental control, but on the joy of shared experience and responsibilities. John Holt (1923–1985) was the bestselling author of *How Children Fail*, *How Children Learn*, *Learning All the Time*, *Teach Your Own*, and six other books about education. He was an important figure in the school reform movement of the 1960s and a key figure in the homeschooling movement of the 1980s. You can learn more about his work at <http://www.johnholtgws.com>.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

I've read a few of John Holt's books (How Children Fail (Classics in Child Development), How Children Learn (Classics in Child Development), The Underachieving School), and to my mind, Escape from Childhood is the most philosophically 'meaty' of them. Here, John Holt provides a fairly developed (and he admits where it is not) vision of what children's rights should be in a free society. Unlike most of his other books, this one does not simply focus on Holt's arguments against compulsory schooling, but gives a more comprehensive argument about children's rights. The first half of the book more or less contains an overall message and argument that we should not think of children as 'cute little innocents' who NEED protection as children. We laugh when children do something immature (where we wouldn't laugh had an adult done it), do not often let them fail (as a learning process), and, sometimes without knowing it, force them into dependence on us. Holt's message is not that we should NOT protect children, or that we should let them simply do as they'd like without interference; rather, he believes that that we should protect them when they'd like to be protected, offer advice in a way that leaves them free to reject it if they'd like, and be very cautious that we do not coerce children in a way that highlights our need for them to be children (under our control) rather than aiding with the child's independence. The second half of the book - I think, the more substantive half - enumerates and defends ten rights Holt believes children should have in a free society. They are: 1. The right to equal treatment at the hands of the law 2. The right to vote, and take full part in political affairs 3. The right to be legally responsible for one's life and acts 4. The right to work, for money 5. The right to privacy 6. The right to financial independence and

responsibility<sup>7</sup>. The right to direct and manage one's own education.<sup>8</sup> The right to travel, to live away from home, to choose or make one's own home.<sup>9</sup> The right to receive from the state whatever minimum income it may guarantee to adults citizens.<sup>10</sup> The right to make and enter into quasi-familial relationships outside one's immediate family-*ie*.<sup>11</sup> The right to do, in general, what any adult may legally do. Holt, contra some defenders of children's rights, does not anticipate that all children will desire all of these rights. If a child doesn't want to vote (as he figures most children won't), travel, establish alternative living arrangements, or receive a basic income from the government, they shouldn't have to (in the same way adults who do not want to publish or write choose not to exercise their freedom of press). And Holt does not assert these rights simply against governments (that the state may not abridge the right to travel, etc), but, when necessary, against parents (Holt is aware that children often need protection from parental pressures not to exercise certain rights). So, as an example, Holt defends the right of a child to determine how, by whom, and for how long, they will receive education. Holt deals with the "but won't children just choose not to go to school" objection by suggesting that while it is possible, it is more likely that children will simply choose to learn things they want to learn, rather than things detached government experts believe they should learn. To the "school is a sanctuary from nasty real life that all children should have" objection by noting that we often falsely assume that schools are often quite as nasty as "the world." To the "but won't this result in parents forcing their children to work rather than go to school?" objection, Holt reminds us that if each child has the option of receiving a guaranteed basic income, they can choose to leave, not work, and go to school if they'd like. Also, Holt -even though very fuzzy in detail - believes that governments could devise laws to protect children from this sort of parental coercion (in the same ways that there are laws against adults forcing other adults into labor). Holt is particularly concerned with the importance of exit rights for children's (and others') freedom. Simply put, I am most free when I can exit particular social arrangements and replace them with another viable option, and am not free when I am not free to exit. Going to school is fine, but forcing students into school - let alone a particular school - leaves the child absolutely unfree and slave to others' decisions. As Holt writes fairly early in the book (talking about our tendency to force care upon children), "No one can truly say 'Yes' to something, be it an experience or another person's offer to live, if he cannot truly say 'No.'" Hence, the proposal to guarantee a government-provided basic income to children who choose this option; rights to travel, find a new home, etc, become somewhat more difficult when the child can only do these by risking their only source of support, the parents. Unfortunately, the book and Holt's ideas are still a bit fuzzy. First, there is very little evidence of any kind on whether children can intelligently use freedoms like these;

evidence is highly anecdotal starting with something like "An eight year old friend of mine in Boston..." So, some readers will rightly be concerned that giving five year olds the right to use drugs (a right that has serious consequences at FIRST misuse), can only be done if we have reason to assume that children will be somewhat responsible. Second, there are questions about whether parents must fund some of these rights: to have the right to choose their own education or travel, does that mean that parents must pay the cost of it, or must this be taken from the probably limited basic income the state provides? Third, Holt's ambivalence about the state and its role leads to a very inconclusive argument at times. He does not want the state to administer schools, but does want them both to provide the funding for, and regulate, private schools, only to ruminate on the likely possibility that the state will abuse this regulatory role, using it to limit educational choice and up tuition costs. To Holt's credit, he does admit that his vision of children's rights is somewhat preliminary, a suggestion to get a conversation going rather than a complete, exhaustive, vision. And it certainly is the former. If anything, this book is a great read because it allows us to contemplate (and see a possibly heretofore-not-entertained rationale for) children's rights in a free society. Disagree with Holt, and you will have a lot to chew on here, allowing you to better think through your disagreements. Agree with Holt, and you will have some thinking to do in order to fill in details that Holt himself leaves incomplete. Either way, Holt gives us a lot to chew on.

This book is fascinating and a passionate argument for the human rights of children, our blind spot. Childhood is not magic; unless you have parents who treat you as an equal and tell you the truth, parents who lead by example instead of ruling with punishment, unnatural consequences and harsh discipline. Children have needs and rights, it's about time we started listening to the experts on being children, children themselves. Children are not treated as full humans, childhood doesn't cover up this fact, it makes it even clearer.

Very nice and thought provoking read, and the authors deep respect for children clearly shines through. The text is incoherent in places which seems to be the result of bad scanning and a lack of editing, and that is why i give it only 4 stars.

John Holt is a thought provoking and challenging writer. His thesis here is kind of a mess, but anyone working in education, in particular primary/secondary would do well to read this, if only to have to articulate a clear, thoughtful rejection of the work.

If every parent read John Holt's works, many millions of children would get to have the freedom they deserve, to follow their own passions, to dream their dreams, to live. We would stop locking our kids up in buildings all day every day, pressuring them to be robots. We would stop drugging them. We would start to respect them again. "Schools" as we have them arranged on a mass scale are just jails, it was true when Holt first published, and it is so much worse now. FREE THE CHILDREN.

This book has really blown me away, causing me to re-think what it means to be a child, what childhood is like from the perspective of the child, and how adults treat children. Excellent, excellent book. I especially love chapter 24: The Right To Control One's Learning. The whole book is great though.

Very important book for me.

Even before I read this book, I had made many of the conclusions the author makes. Any parent who wants his/her children to be responsible adults should read this book, too.

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