

School's Out Forever

In the orchard of their home in a village near Penrith in Cumbria, eight-year-old Bethany and seven-year-old Eliza are having a great time jumping around on some enormous straw bales. Later, they might ride their bikes or climb on the henhouse roof. This activity is not just confined to weekends - the girls can play any time they like because they don't go to school. Instead, they are educated at home by their parents, Paul and Veronika Robinson. But they don't have lessons, have never used a timetable and learn only what and when they want to learn.

"I want my kids to have freedom in their childhood, not spend it in an institution," says 37-year-old Veronika, who edits and publishes an alternative-parenting magazine called the Mother. "School is all about control and following the rules. Why should they have to ask permission to go to the loo, or study history at a certain time every week? It's not natural. If they went to school, I know I'd be there every day complaining about something."

Veronika and her 56-year-old husband Paul, who works as a singer, entertainer and voice-over artist, are equal partners in the girls' upbringing. They have never experienced the daily rush to get dressed and out of the door that is common in most households

with school-aged children.

"We get up at our leisure - usually around 8.30-ish," says Veronika. "We might visit a friend, or go to the library, and on Tuesdays we shop at the market. In summer, we spend most of our time outside and the girls entertain themselves a lot. They're in tune with the seasons and they've got the whole of nature as their playground, not just a piece of Tarmac in the schoolyard."

This could all come as a bit of surprise if, like most people, your image of home education is the family gathered around the kitchen table studying for six hours a day - quite literally, school at home. But new research due to be published this spring reveals a very different picture of Britain's home educators.

"Out of 297 families who took part [in my research], 184 said that they never use a timetable," says Mike Fortune-Wood of Home Education UK, an independent online advice and information service for parents and professionals. "Ninety per cent never or rarely use textbooks, and nearly all said that happiness, contentment and self-fulfilment were more important than academic achievement."

Fortune-Wood's research also revealed that home educators come from a wide range of backgrounds - everything from airline pilots,

doctors and lawyers to families following an "alternative" lifestyle. And different families practise home education in different ways. Most of the time, Robinson leaves it up to her children to choose what to do each day and there's none of the after-school shunting from swimming lessons to gymnastics to French club that forms part of the routine for many children today.

"We don't do many organised activities," she says. "We meet up with other families to share toys and we've joined a weekly knitting circle in a local cafe. It's mostly elderly women who love us coming, and the girls now knit endless scarves and coats for our long-suffering cat! Bethany did try ballet a few years ago, but we felt it was like a factory farm, with no room for creative expression. So we stopped that and they haven't asked to do anything else."

So far, so good. But what, you might ask, are the children actually learning?

"It wasn't important to me that the girls could read by a certain age, but they both picked it up for themselves at around seven," says Robinson.

"Weighing cooking ingredients uses maths, and making a shopping list teaches them to write. We adopted five hens that turned out to be cockerels and observing them has taught the girls about survival

of the fittest and pecking orders. So much of school is totally irrelevant - I believe that children can learn far more from everyday life and the world around them."

Fortune-Wood's research supports this. Three-quarters of the parents who responded to his survey thought that literacy and numeracy ages were irrelevant in the home education context. And only 15% felt that planning what to learn was crucial. Leslie Safran, who taught her son and daughter at home, says: "I bought text books, drew up timetables, planned lessons just like a regular teacher. Then I'd find that they weren't in the mood for English one day, or we'd be distracted into doing something else, like digging up worms in the garden to find out more about them. If they're really interested in a particular subject, you can carry on all day - you don't have to stop when the bell rings."

But what about when the children grow up? Can they go to university, forge a career? The home educators' answer is they can if they want to. There are a variety of routes into higher education, but probably the most common is to join a local college. This is what Gus Harris-Reid has done. "I was educated at home all my life. I'd never had a lesson or been inside a classroom until I started GCSEs," says the 18-year-old. "I'm now studying for 4 A-levels at Exeter College. I've had no problem with the work or with fitting in, and I think I get more out of it because I've made an active choice

to be there." When asked to reflect on his experience of home education, his considered response is, "Like a permanent holiday, really!" Not a bad start for someone who plans to take a mechanical engineering degree next year