

During the course of a year we receive many enquiries from all over the world about our school and the philosophy behind it.

These are answers to the most often asked questions. We hope they will be useful to you. Updated January 2009

1) How do pupils fit into the outside world after what is, surely, a sheltered environment at Summerhill?

We feel that Summerhill pupils are better prepared for the outside world than most other young people. Pupils at Summerhill are used to being in control of their own lives and making decisions for themselves – just as all adults do in their daily lives. They decide what to do, when, and how to do it.

Critics say there are many things in the outside world that have to be done, such as earning a living. They believe that our pupils will find it difficult to adapt, as there is no compulsion at Summerhill. Summerhill pupils face similar situations in their everyday lives at the school all the time. There are many, many things that need to be done in order to keep the community running. If we, the members of the community do not do them, then they do not get done at all. Instead of being compelled to do things by somebody else, you have to take responsibility for yourself and the community around you. You have to be self-motivated. This is true of all of us in adult life. We have no big “teacher” standing by to tell us what to do. We have to get on and deal with things by ourselves.

At Summerhill we feel that children in other schools are being disadvantaged by the fact that they have no decision making processes to learn from, making it very difficult when they subsequently leave school and have to start living in the adult world.

The popular belief that Summerhill is a wild, unstructured society is untrue. Because of the many laws at Summerhill that govern our lives (they usually vary in number between about 150 to 230) the pupils are used to a strong framework. Living in a democratic society where grievances are aired in the school meetings gives the pupils a strong sense of justice as well as an ability to listen to, and understand, the other person’s point of view. Thus they are well prepared for interacting in the outside world. Although when they move to colleges and university, like many others, they may find some rules petty and unnecessary, they are tolerant and understanding enough to deal with it.

2) Do Summerhill pupils take exams?

Yes, we take the standard English school leaving exams, GCSEs at ordinary level, though they are not compulsory. We do not provide for “A” levels at Summerhill. Pupils wishing to take them will have to go to college afterwards.

Almost all Summerhill pupils take some exams before they leave, but some prefer not to take any at all.

3) What particular qualities do you expect Summerhill pupils to acquire?

Obviously this depends to some degree upon the personal circumstances of the child before and during their stay at the school. Some children who have come to the school

with problems are still going to have to deal with many of them into their adult lives. Summerhill has a very good record of helping such children, but it is no magic “fix” or utopian cure-all.

Qualities we typically see in Summerhill pupils are: Self-esteem, tolerance, integrity, fairness, understanding, sensitivity, compassion, assertiveness, creativity, individuality, humour, self-motivation, and common sense.

4) Why do parents send their children to Summerhill?

Most parents believe in the philosophy of the school, but we also inevitably get some pupils who have had problems at other schools and come here to get away from them.

Unfortunately many parents do not contact us until their child is having serious problems at school. Often these children will be teenagers. Our experience tells us that latecomers, though sometimes successful, can find the change too challenging and this can cause problems for themselves or for the community. At the present time we do not take pupils over the age of 12, with only rare exceptions.

5) What kinds of people send their children to Summerhill?

There is no typical Summerhill parent. People from all walks of life send their children to us. Because it is a fee paying school they are predominantly professional people, but this is not always the case. We try to keep our fees as low as possible so that more families can afford it – some manage on very low incomes.

The A.S Neill Summerhill Trust aims to provide bursaries for the school so that a greater number of families with financial limitations may apply.

6) Summerhill pupils are mostly from pretty wealthy backgrounds – could it work in an inner-city school?

It can work anywhere - all children respond to freedom and self-government. There is a lot of work being done in various quarters (see the link page) to educate the public about freer environments for children. Summerhill assists in this by inviting visitors to see the school in action as well as giving lectures and holding workshops both in UK and abroad.

The A.S Neill Summerhill Trust is funding this work as well as providing assisted places for pupils.

7) Is Summerhill suitable for all children – or do some need more structure?

All children respond to personal freedom and self-government. The only time it does not work is where there is friction between the school and the home. Children sense when their parents are not happy with them being at Summerhill.

Occasionally a child who is struggling with their own personal difficulties in life may find the freedom at Summerhill so captivating that they are unable to differentiate between freedom and licence and take responsibility for their actions. This can lead to problems with violence or bullying, creating fear in other children. It can also lead to the development of other children being impaired due to the negative influence upon them. In such cases, sadly, the child will have to go elsewhere.

8) Is bullying a problem at the school and how do you deal with it?

Obviously we have bullying at Summerhill, but anybody, staff or pupil, can bring a case against anybody else in the school meetings. Thus, we are all answerable to the whole community. Our ombudsmen and self-government meetings ensure that everybody in the school has a voice and can have conflicts resolved or perpetrators dealt with by the community. The openness of the school environment brings things to notice so bullying tends to be dealt with in the early stages.

9) Do you have problems with alcohol / drugs?

Drugs and alcohol are not allowed in the school. Obviously there are occasions when an older child tries experimenting with alcohol or smoking cannabis. If pupils are caught drinking or smoking dope they will be sent home for a period and this will generally be sufficient. Because they have such a strong feeling for the school it is rare for a pupil to persist.

Neither drugs nor alcohol ever reach “problem” proportions. However, in these seemingly enlightened times occasionally a pupil will be persistent. In such a case it would be appropriate for them to decide whether Summerhill is really where they want to be, and perhaps move on to a more adult environment.

10) How do you recruit staff?

We usually advertise in the newspapers, either the ‘Guardian’ or the TES, though recently we have used this website. Our recruitment process is pretty conventional although the interview is casual and friendly. We do all the standard UK checks (CRB) against sexual offenders.

11) What qualities do you look for in staff?

First and foremost an ability to do the job. Although independent schools do not have to employ qualified teachers, the job is so specialised these days that we rarely take teachers who are not qualified, though it has to be said that some of our best teachers have been unqualified. We look for somebody who will be adaptable, genuinely interested in the school philosophy, and is a nice person.

Unfortunately, we cannot employ people from outside the European Union without a work permit – and obtaining one of these is like extracting hen’s teeth!

12) How much are parents involved in the school?

There is no involvement with parents at Summerhill. They are able to visit during term time on a limited basis and there is a newsletter sent to parents each holidays. We do not send school reports unless required for college entrances, etc and then only with the child’s permission.

In spite of this many parents become good friends and participate from a distance with their approval and anything helpful they can offer. We also have a really nice summer half-term weekend when parents are invited to come and stay for a few days and relax and join in. The philosophy of the school is to encourage children to live their own lives, and make their own decisions. The children value their independence and the vast majority prefer parents not to be a part of it at school.

13) Do the children have homework?

As classes are optional it is a completely different situation to conventional schools. Pupils have homework when studying for exams, but this is mutually agreed between teacher and pupil.

14) Why aren't the pupils responsible for the cleaning and cooking at Summerhill?

Summerhill cannot afford to let hygiene slip so we prefer to keep the school up to standard by employing cleaning staff. This cuts out any adult-child conflict over an issue that would be on going and unproductive. The older children with individual bedrooms are responsible for their own washing and cleaning, and the whole community has to take care of keeping the school grounds tidy. This usually involves a "litter pick-up" every once in a while. There is a 'Health & safety' committee to ensure that standards of reasonable hygiene and safety are maintained, they visit all rooms (including staff who live in areas adjoining the children) a few times each term.

Most children enjoy doing some cooking – but having to feed over 100 people every day for the whole year is a different kettle of fish! We also have to comply with Health & Hygiene rules, which make it impossible for the children to cook for the whole school.

We employ a team of professional chefs to look after the catering. However, there are many opportunities for the children to get involved in cooking: cookery classes, kitchen helping, bar committee, school café etc.

15) What is your relationship like with the local community?

Many local people are very proud to have Summerhill as a neighbour. During the court case against the government in 2000 we received a great deal of encouragement from Leiston people, including the local Town Council who wrote a letter of support to the Department of Education.

Of course some people are suspicious and some are hostile, but usually this is because they have not taken the time to find out about Summerhill's methods.

16) Do you have day pupils?

Yes, we have several. Most have moved here specifically to be near the school. Occasionally parents of younger children move here for the first few terms so that the child can start off as a 'day child'.

17) Nowadays many people consider it bad parenting to send children to boarding school – how does Summerhill justify this?

Ask the children! Summerhill pupils are not forced to be here – they choose to be. Ex-Summerhillians all agree that being away from home was a really positive and important thing for them.

Summerhill is nothing like a "boarding school" in the traditional sense. It is somewhere between tribe and family, a sociable, child-centred environment where the adults are friends and where you can play all day if you want to. It is an enrichment of family life, something extra that you can't get at home – lots of brothers and sisters, aunts, uncles and friends.

Some people say they will miss their children's childhood if they send them to Summerhill. My answer is that childhood is for the child, not for the parents. It can take

courage to give your children the independence they need, especially if this means they will leave home. But Summerhill parents will agree that you don't "lose" your child, you gain a special friendship with them that lasts a lifetime.

18) At what age do you first accept pupils?

Day pupils can come at five years, though this would depend upon how many younger ones we already have. Some children are very happy to board at about seven years, others need more time and come later.

19) Do you ever expel pupils?

Occasionally, but not in the usual sense of being expelled for doing something "naughty". In Summerhill someone will only be asked to leave if their general attitude shows that they are not really interested in staying.

Occasionally a child who is struggling with their own personal difficulties in life may find the freedom at Summerhill so captivating that they are unable to differentiate between freedom and licence and take responsibility for their actions. This can lead to problems with violence or bullying, creating fear in other children. It can also lead to the development of other children being impaired due to the negative influence upon them. In such cases, sadly, the child will have to go elsewhere.

20) What do Summerhill pupils do after leaving?

When children leave Summerhill most go on to study for appropriate qualifications (A-level, BTEC, GNVQ) at Colleges of Higher Education. Some will go to university, some will not – it is a case of personal choice. Because of the unconventional schooling they have had they tend to look at it with a balanced view, not just thinking that "you have to go to university to get anywhere". They know that it is not the only answer to happiness in life!

Their careers are very varied. We have artists, doctors, lawyers, teachers, university professors, carpenters, scientists, musicians, chefs, actors, gardeners, farmers, newspaper reporters, filmmakers, technicians, photographers, dancers, computer programmers, writers, illustrators, carers for the handicapped, and entrepreneurs. . . .

21) What is the school's attitude to sex?

Under British law it is illegal for children to have sex under the age of 16. In line with many other establishments that deal with teenagers in a real-life setting, we are supportive – providing them with information and advice wherever possible. We are proud of the fact that our children are unafraid to approach us to discuss anything. To our knowledge there has never been a pregnancy.

22) Can I work at Summerhill?

If you are legally able to work in UK, have the skills for the job offered, are prepared to live on a very small wage, and are enthusiastic, humorous, hardworking and adaptable – you could be just what we are looking for!

23) May I visit the school?

Yes, we have visitor's days during all three terms of the year. We have a visitor's committee to look after them. Obviously we get a great many so we prefer them not to stay longer than a day. Contact the school office for details. (Address at the end).

24) How can I obtain books by A.S.Neill?

Most of Neill's books are out of print in UK now. Some copies of Neill's early books can be found in second-hand bookshops. We occasionally have one or two spare copies at the school, which are for sale. The web site www.abebooks.com is very useful.

A new book was published early summer of 2006. 'Summerhill & A.S.Neill', edited by Mark Vaughan OBE with chapters by A.S.Neill, Zoë Neill Readhead, Professor Ian Stronach and Tim Brighouse. Published by the Open University Press. It is obtainable from our website.

25) How many pupils are there at Summerhill?

In 1995 we were 68, in 1998 we were only 61, in June 2001- 75, in November 2002 – 94, in January 2006 – 80, January 2009 - 71

26) What nationalities?

English, German, French, Spanish, Dutch, Swiss, Israeli, American, Korean, Taiwanese, Japanese, Brazilian.

27) How many staff?

There are three full-time house parents at the moment and 8 full-time teachers for Class 1(6-10), Class 2(10-12), Maths, Science, English, Languages, English as an Additional Language, Woodwork and Art. There are part-time teachers for Japanese, Chinese, Music (drums, piano, guitar, singing, violin), Music Technology, recording, DJing.

All full-time staff live on the 12-acre school site, either in single rooms alongside the children or in caravans. When the Houseparents take time off they are covered by the teachers. The full-time staff meet several times a week to discuss any issues which arise.

We also have a team of "day" staff, including teachers, cleaning staff, chefs, etc.

28) What subjects do you offer?

Subjects offered at the moment are:

Science - Biology, Physics, Chemistry

Maths

English

German, Spanish, French, Japanese, Chinese

Woodwork

Art, Photography

Drama

History

Geography

Music technology, DJ work, Studio Sessions

Information Technology

swimming in our own outdoor pool and at the Leiston leisure centre

A range of activities including crafts, life drawing, sports- tennis, football, basketball, volleyball, table tennis-, writing for the school newspaper and games in the cafe.

Music – piano, singing, drums, guitar, violin, saxophone.

Various sports (by arrangement)

There is an outdoor swimming pool, a well equipped computer study room, games field, skateboard ramps, tennis court, theatre, music rooms.

29) How do I enrol my child in the school?

We take pupils at all three terms of the year. You must write to the school office (address below) to obtain details of fees etc. The next step is a visit, preferably with your child.

30) I cannot afford the school fees – are there any funds available to help?

Unfortunately the school has no bursary fund to assist with fees. We receive no help financially from outside the school and must rely entirely upon our fees, which are among the lowest in the country. There are various charities that support some of our pupils. We have the names of them but it is also worth Googling and doing your own research

The A.S Neill Summerhill Trust is able to provide some bursaries. Details available on the website or by contacting the school office.

31) How has the school changed since Neill was alive?

The philosophy of the school has not changed at all. Although many exterior things have changed, it is comforting to see how the atmosphere and general feel of the place have remained the same over the years. Obviously as a living community there are constant small changes going on. Summerhill is like the sea – there is constant movement. The tides may change, but the sea remains the same.

32) Neill used to give therapy sessions to some pupils, known as PLs – do you still provide “private lessons”?

Long ago Neill discovered that those children who did not come to him for therapy were being cured as well. He concluded that it was the experience of Summerhill that cured people, not his PLs – so he gave them up! We do not have formal PLs at Summerhill though if there are concerns about a particular pupil an adult will undertake to talk to them if they are agreeable.

33) Are there any other schools like Summerhill?

There are many schools around the world. They are almost all day schools. The UK has Sands, a school in Devon, which was created and is run by students, parents and teachers. It is a secondary school but also has a primary sister.

In USA there is a large democratic school movement, the largest school, ‘Sudbury Valley School’ is over 26 years old and has many followers using the SVS methods.

The democratic school movement is thriving world-wide. In Israel there is ‘Hadera’ school, which has several subsidiaries and over two hundred pupils. Australia, New Zealand, Japan, Thailand, Costa Rica, Brazil, Germany, France, Spain, Korea and many more countries also have free schools.

A book about various free schools is published by Libertarian Education. “Real Education” by David Gribble. £8.95

AERO – The Alternative Education Resource Organisation has information useful to anybody looking at alternative education. It also has information about IDEC (International Democratic Education Conference) which is held each year at a different venue.

<http://www.edrev.org>

Another Free school network is:

www.idenetwork.org

Any other schools who would like us to post information about them – please contact

Zoë@summerhillschool.co.uk

34) Self-government and democracy.

We are a self-governing community, which means that the whole group makes all the decisions regarding our daily lives in the school. The business side, the hiring and firing of staff, intake of pupils etc are not the responsibility of the community although input is always available and welcome.

Our school decision-making process is democratic. Each adult and child has an equal vote. Thus the youngest child has the same voting power as the head. Not only do the children have equal power in the school meetings; they also vastly outnumber the adults.

If children from most standard families suddenly had self-government it could be hard for them to settle and manage their lives successfully. One has to learn to be an effective decision maker, and, like everything else, it doesn't come naturally without some experience.

New children at Summerhill join a mature working unit of self-government with many years of experience behind it. They learn as part of the unit about democracy, their own rights, and those of other people. But most of all they learn about responsibility to themselves and to others.

Children in mainstream schools seldom have a chance to make important decisions or take real responsibility. Adults decide everything they do. This can breed frustration and rebellion, or it can intensify fear and insecurity.

In Summerhill, because of the freedom they have, most of the older pupils are already socially responsible and are used to thinking about the needs of the group rather than their own. This does not mean that we never have disputes or disagreements - one of the important things we have learned here is that the needs of children and adults can be very different indeed! What is important is that we all recognise these differences and try to negotiate a mutually agreeable solution to any problem, instead of the adults just making up the rules to suit themselves.

A typical Meeting case may be this one as we had a while ago. The older children in the school wanted to have no bedtimes and proposed that they could stay up as late as they liked provided that they stick to the silence hour, which is 10.30pm. There was a long discussion about it as many people had things to say on the subject. Some were worried about the possible noise, others about lack of sleep. Eventually the vote was taken and it was carried that they try it for one week, to see if it would work. After a few

days, there was a Special Meeting because somebody had been woken up several times in the night. The community decided that they had lost their chance and should have a bedtime back again.

Occasionally it is carried that most of the school laws are dropped. Obviously it can be a bit disruptive when this happens but it is a good learning experience and always sorts itself out quickly. What better way to learn to be a law-abiding citizen than to try living without laws?

We believe in freedom but not licence. This means that you are free to do as you like - but you must not interfere with somebody else's freedom. You are free to go to lessons, or stay away, because that is your own personal business, but you cannot play your drum kit at four in the morning because it would keep other people awake. Within this structure we probably have more laws than any other school in the country - they vary from between 150 - 250! Many laws are seasonal and are changed or abolished when not needed. Others carry on year after year. Here is a random selection of them:

- ☐ You must have a working front and back brake on your bike.
- ☐ You can't ride little kids bikes -even with permission.
- ☐ There are no bedtimes on the first night of term for shack and Carriage kids but silence hour is as usual. House, Cottage and San go to bed at the Beddie's Officers discretion.
- ☐ You can't climb the Big Beech when it's dark or wet.
- ☐ No wheels allowed inside buildings.
- ☐ New children and staff cannot be on committees in their first term.

We hold school meetings four days of the week. Chairing the meeting is a difficult task. Although nobody is exactly unruly, it is demanding to keep up to 70 or so people of different ages sitting quietly for up to an hour at a time. The Chairperson has ULTIMATE power! If you make noise you can be fined, moved or thrown out altogether. It a strangely formal occasion and visitors have often remarked that it is more orderly than the English House of Commons!

We hope that these answers have been helpful. If you have further questions do feel free to email or telephone Zoë

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