

Book Review: Empowered Kids, Liberated Parents: Why Children Are Healthier, Happier, and Achieve More When in Control of Their Own Lives and Educations

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Abstract

Many books on Self-Directed Education (SDE) are written for scholars and educators.

Empowered Kids, Liberated Parents takes a different approach. Written for parents, this book addresses the real questions and worries families have when considering self-directed learning.

The authors, Cassi Clausen and Aaron Browder, are founders of The Open School in California, which offers both in-person and online democratic learning programs. Throughout the book, they explore why autonomy is essential for the well-being of young people, while also acknowledging why offering that autonomy can feel challenging for parents. By examining specific fears—such as technology use, personal safety, physical activity, and social connection—the authors offer practical guidance for parents who want to step back and support young people in taking greater ownership of their own lives. Using concrete examples from their work as facilitators, the book reassures parents that environments focused on autonomy and community can help children and young people to thrive.

Keywords: Self-Directed Education; Democratic Schools; Parenting; Autonomy; Educational Alternatives; Unschooling

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Children deserve the same respect as adults and should be allowed to direct their own lives and education, to the greatest extent possible. This is the compelling thesis of a book by Cassi Clausen and Aaron Browder entitled *Empowered Kids, Liberated Parents: Why Children Are Healthier, Happier, and Achieve More When in Control of Their Own Lives and Educations*. The idea that young children should make significant decisions about how they spend their time may be considered radical. Yet in this book, Clausen and Browder argue cogently that it is risky, and often harmful, to restrict children's autonomy in the way that has come to be considered normal and necessary in modern society.

The authors are the founders of a self-directed democratic school called The Open School, which has no required curriculum, testing, or grades. Many other writers have detailed the inner workings of self-directed democratic schools and the unique experiences that children have there (Greenberg, 1995; Neill & Lamb, 1996; Rietmulder, 2019). Clausen and Browder take a different approach—their primary goal is to address the specific concerns that parents may have about releasing their children from standard routes of learning, while also providing far greater freedom than most kids enjoy.

In the first several chapters, Clausen and Browder make the case for children's autonomy. They outline six different types of autonomy, all of which are readily granted to adults but often not to children: bodily autonomy, autonomy of time, education, thought, privacy, and property. The authors examine both why parents may find it difficult to offer their children freedom in these areas, and also offer reasons why they believe these freedoms to be essential. Their arguments align with the self-determination theory developed by Ryan and Deci, which

suggests that all human beings have three innate psychological needs—competence, autonomy, and relatedness—which together enhance intrinsic motivation and individual well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

In the middle section of the book, Clausen and Browder examine specific parental fears around children having greater autonomy in their lives. Some of these topics include social pressures to have adult supervision at all times, unhealthy technology use, online victimization, kidnapping, school shootings, and lack of exercise. These are indeed topics of concern today, and addressing these fears may help parents feel confident in making changes that allow their children greater autonomy. Yet this section felt somewhat disconnected from earlier and later chapters, and would have benefitted from more direct connections with the philosophy of Self-Directed Education (SDE) and the Open School.

For example, Chapter 6, entitled “Independence and Adventure,” explores the Free Range Kids movement and the statistically disproportionate fear many parents feel in regard to kidnapping, sexual abuse, and school shootings. The authors provide evidence that the average neighborhood or school is not as dangerous as the evening news might lead us to believe, and argue that parents should not make decisions out of misplaced fear. Yet Clausen and Browder missed an opportunity to illuminate one of the strong benefits of self-directed education. In SDE environments, unlike in conventional education, children are allowed and encouraged on a daily basis to listen to their instincts and intuition—indeed, developing self-knowledge is the primary “curriculum” of self-directed education. Children learn through their daily interactions and experiences that their feelings and beliefs matter, and that they are inherently deserving of consideration and accommodation. While empowering children in this way will not prevent all of the negative experiences they may face, it certainly better prepares them to advocate for

themselves and their needs. While these and related benefits of SDE appear in later chapters, they could have been more directly linked here.

The final chapters of *Empowered Kids, Liberated Parents* are the most compelling, as the authors turn from general parenting philosophy to the specific benefits they have observed through spending time in community with children at the Open School. Clausen and Browder detail how SDE environments help children to meet all of their core needs including physiological demands (food, water, sleep, and shelter), safety, social belonging, strong self-esteem, and self-actualization. With their expanded ability to consider the whole child, and not just a narrow focus on “reaching full academic potential,” SDE facilitators are much better equipped to forge strong relationships with the children in their care. As shown through specific examples, children who are rooted in both community and autonomy are in a good position to learn academic and life skills when they are motivated to do so.

Throughout the book, Clausen and Browder challenge the idea that a good education consists primarily of academic achievement. Rather, they assert that the primary goal of parents, teachers, and schools should be to provide children with opportunities to practice and build character strengths. Self-directed democratic environments help children learn how to participate in a democratic, information-age society. In contrast, top-down school models are based on outdated, Industrial Age social structures and values. While their arguments are well supported, more vignettes from The Open School would have been a beneficial addition that would help parents to conceptualize how SDE works in practice. There is a long tradition of giving life to the theory of self-directed education through personal stories (Boles, 2020; Greenberg, 1995; Mercogliano, 1998; Neill & Lamb, 1996; Rietmulder, 2019).

This work fills an important gap in the literature on self-directed education, in that it is one of only a few publications that are addressed directly to parents, and it covers a broad range of topics that parents are most concerned about when considering a self-directed approach. Overall, *Empowered Kids, Liberated Parents* is a thought-provoking yet accessible book that will be a valuable resource for parents and anyone who is starting to explore self-directed education.

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<https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.55.1.68>

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