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No school, no books, no teacher's dirty looks

By Traci Tamura and Thelma Gutierrez
CNN

It's a child's dream. Wake up whenever you want, with nobody telling you what to do and when to do it. And here's the kicker: No school to rush off to.

Welcome to the world of "unschooling" -- an educational movement where kids, not parents, not teachers, decide what they will learn that day.

"I don't want to sound pompous, but I think I am learning a little bit more, because I can just do everything at my own pace," said Nailah Ellis, a 10-year-old from Marietta, Georgia, who has been unschooled for most of her life.

Nailah's day starts about 11 a.m., her typical wake-up time. She studies Chinese, reading, writing, piano and martial arts. But there's no set schedule. She works on what she wants, when she wants. She'll even watch some TV -- science documentaries are a favorite -- until her day comes to an end about 2 a.m.

An extension of home-schooling, "unschooling" is when parents give their children total freedom to learn and explore whatever they choose.

According to Holt Associates, an "unschooling" advocacy group, in 2005, about 150,000 children were unschooled, about 10 percent of the estimated 1.5 million home-schooled children in the United States.

The term "unschooling" was first coined in 1977 by John Holt, an education reformer, the founder of Holt Associates and author of the book, "Teach Your Own."

Holt felt traditional home-schooling didn't go far enough. He believed parents should not duplicate schools in their homes. He favored an education more freewheeling in nature, one that depends on the child for direction

The expectation is that along the way they will get an education.

There are no mandatory books, no curriculum, no tests and no grades. Nailah's parents are in touch with the local school district and she takes the district's required tests.

While unschooling could be characterized as the ultimate indulgence by a parent, Nailah's stay-at-home mother, Barbara Ellis, doesn't see it that way.

"When you get to travel around, that's education to me. That's learning. You're doing it firsthand. You're not reading it from a book. You are not hearing it from a teacher," Ellis said.

But proponents of the public education system raise concerns on what these children may be missing from their educational experience.

"There is nothing like the texture of kids having contact with each other, making friends and relating to different adults in a school setting," said David Tokofsky, a longtime educator and member of the Los Angeles Unified School District Board of Education.

Nailah, who would be in 4th grade if she attended a regular school, seems to enjoy the "unschooled" lifestyle, even if she's a bit confused when asked what she is learning.

"I actually don't know what I'm learning," Nailah said. "I think I'm just having a good time. But I don't know that I'm learning."

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