



**Home Education Network**

**Newsletter**

*Spring Issue - 2019*



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## HEN NCB 2019

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# Chairperson's Letter

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## IT'S TIME TO VOLUNTEER! HEN NEEDS YOU!

BY NATACHA WEADICK

As we approach the AGM at the Gathering, it's time to put a call out for volunteers for the NCB. For those of you who don't know, HEN has an organising committee called the NCB (National Coordinating Body). The NCB consists of volunteer HEN members who fulfil the various roles so that HEN functions. HEN can only run if its members volunteer for these positions. Our current Membership Officer won't be returning next year and if we have no Membership Officer, there won't be a HEN. It's as simple as that. Some of us have continued to volunteer year after year because these positions won't be otherwise filled but, at this stage, we need new blood. We always think someone else will volunteer but it doesn't always happen so if you can, please step up and volunteer. It would be such a shame if this great organisation that offered so much support and encouragement to home educating families for 20 years now were to cease to exist.

The officer roles that will become vacant come June are **Membership Officer, Email Officer, Website Officer, Newsletter Officer, Gathering Organiser** and **Chairperson**. Obviously, you can volunteer for any role and when voting takes place, if there is more than one person volunteering for a role, HEN members will vote for who they want in that position. A full list of roles is below.

If you are interested in a particular role, feel free to contact me at [nweadick@gmail.com](mailto:nweadick@gmail.com) and I can give you more details. Our Secretary, Brendan Spelman, will be organising voting for officers in the weeks before the AGM when you can have your opportunity to vote.

I'd like to thank our current officers for their work this year and for some of them, over the years.

### **HEN NCB Officer roles**

Chairperson\*

Secretary

Treasurer

Membership Officer\*

Contact Officer

PRO

Newsletter Editor\*

Email Officer\*

Website Officer\*

Gathering Officer\*

Tusla Liaison Officer

**\*Roles that will become vacant in June**

# Essay

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## CONTEXT IN LEARNING

BY IAN WILDE

Last summer, I was on my way to King's Lynn from Manchester in the car. My wife Belinda had been using a satnav on her phone, as we don't have one in the car. Then the charge on her phone went down. Shortly afterwards, we crossed the River Trent, my favourite river, as I spent a lot of happy hours in my teens fishing it. Having lived in Ireland and rarely gone back to England for the past 30 years, it was like seeing an old friend, and I wanted to stop off and walk along the banks. We were near Newark-On-Trent and Belinda, very patiently acceded to my request for a stop. The only trouble is, we didn't have a map and we didn't know where we were going. By following signs we got close to Newark's centre, but then couldn't find the river. We tried to follow a man with a rod and reels, but instead got lost down a maze of back streets and ended up next to an abbatoir!

"Ask somebody for directions," said Belinda.

So I did. Even though I have a quite normal and manly aversion to this. I kerb crawled a suitably local-looking man and worried him by winding down the window.

"Excuse me. We're trying to get to the River Trent, could you point us in the right direction please."

The man was most helpful.

"Carry on along this road. Get to the end there's a T junction. Go left. Through two sets of lights till you get to a mini roundabout. Take the 3<sup>rd</sup> exit off that and....."

After he finished, I thanked him profusely, wound up the window and continued on my merry way.

"Did you get all that?" asked Belinda.

"Er...no. Just the first sentence. I think we go down here to a T-junction and turn right.

"*Left.*" She said. "I'm sure he said left."

"Did he?"

“Weren’t you listening?”

“Well yes, but...well, at least you know where we’re going.”

“I don’t. I thought you were getting the directions so I switched off.”

“Alright then. We’ll ask someone else.”

We didn’t fare much better with the next person, though both of us were trying our hardest to pay attention. It was just too much information.

We eventually got to the centre and the River Trent and very beautiful it was. We walked along the river path and it was worth the trouble we’d gone to to get such a fine amble beside one of England’s most beguiling rivers. Returning to the car, we pootled on towards King’s Lynn and as I drove, I found myself bothered by the incidents with directions. I had always felt that in learning something, it is very important to *need* to know the information or it won’t be retained. When I was learning piano, I didn’t get very far when I was learning *Three Blind Mice* and *Home on the Range* at a music school, I started really getting somewhere when I bought the music of Chopin and Rachmaninov and applied my fingers to it. Because I really wanted to play that music. I really *really* wanted to play a Chopin etude. Consequently, my progress was rapid. Now, lost in Newark, I’d really wanted to know the way to the Trent and couldn’t hold the first sentence of the directions in my head. Granted, my brains are not the sharp grappling hook of yesteryear, but I still felt that three sentences ought not to have been beyond me.

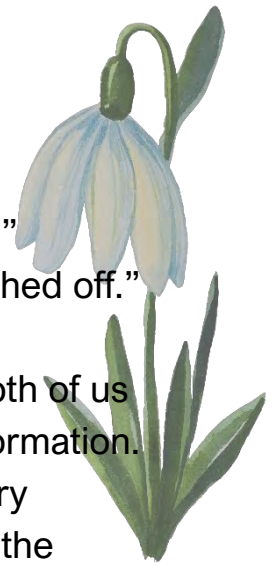
I had previously written in another essay on learning, that much of the teaching that goes on in schools is like people giving directions to a place you don’t want to go. If the man I’d stopped had said to me,

“Sorry, no, I don’t know the way to the Trent, but I can tell you how to get to a really nice pine forest in Scotland 300 miles north of here.”

I wouldn’t have listened to the first sentence of directions. In fact, most school teaching is not even that, it is a person stopping you in the road on your way to King’s Lynn, knocking on your window and when you wind it down saying.

“I just want to give you directions to a really interesting place in Wales.”

“I was just going to king’s Lynn.”



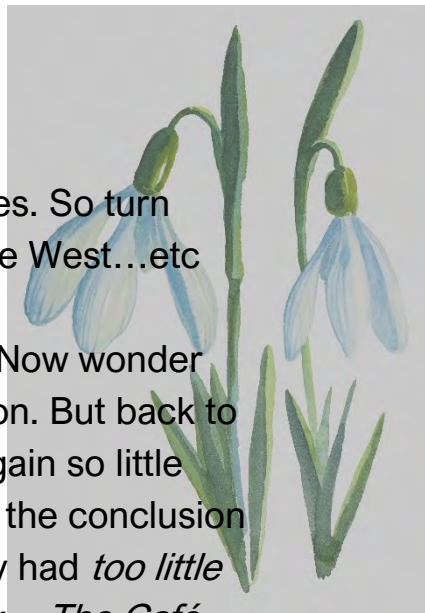
“Well you can’t. You have to go to this place in Wales. So turn around, take the next left off the roundabout and head due West...etc etc.”

The unwanted directions go on for about 11 years. Now wonder people come out of school without much sense of direction. But back to the River Trent. Why did the directions I actually wanted gain so little traction in my brain? And in thinking about this, I came to the conclusion that the directions were still too meaningless for me. They had *too little context*. I happen to like a fairly famous restaurant in Cork – *The Café Paradiso*. It’s on Washington Street. And if I was giving somebody directions to the place, they would find it relatively easy to follow my directions if they already had some experience of Cork. *Some context*. If my lost and hungry acquaintance was standing outside the school of music, I would say:

“Go left, along the quay – don’t go over the little bridge to the right, bear left down towards the Quay Co-op. Straight on at the lights. You’ll get to another set near the Crawford Art School. Bear right there. Along the road. Turn left at a T-junction, there’s a multi-story car park on your left. St Finbarrs. Carry on to the next set of lights. That’s Washington Street. And the Café Paradiso is a little way down that road if you go left.”

Now to anybody from Cork, or who knows Cork, the above directions will mean something and they will be able to visualise the journey and end up close to the Café Paradiso if they don’t know where it is. To somebody who doesn’t know Cork, they may not even have read to the end of the directions. It’s just gobbledegook. There is no context for the mind to cling on to. This uncontextualised knowledge will slip and slide out of the brain, because there’s nothing to hold it. Like trying to climb a cliff with no handholds.

I encounter this problem a good deal when I am teaching students. I am often aware that what I am talking about to them, has very little meaning. (I teach drama and improvisational devising.) Especially to those who have done little theatrical work. No matter how ‘well’ I ‘explain’ things, the students often have great difficulty in learning what I am trying to put across. I don’t think I’m a particularly awful teacher. I have a



reasonable degree of lucidity. It's just that they don't have very much experience of what I'm talking about, and even if they're very *very* interested in impro or whatever else I'm talking about, it will go slithering in one ear and out of another, unless there is some context to hold it.

When I chat to Belinda, who is my co-partner on the course, about aspects of theatre, improvisation, or subtextual work on script, she understands immediately what I mean – something that is clear by the way she is able to engage meaningfully in what I am saying. But she has years and years of experience in the theatre (with me!) and so has a great deal of contextualised information to help her relate to what I'm talking about. Second years on the course always say they understand the processes we are engaged in better than in their first year, because they have a year's worth of experience, that is a good foundation of the sort of context I am talking about. They have improvised with me for a year. Performed an improvised show that they devised with me. When we start a second year and a second improvised play, my words make a lot more sense. They still need to want to do it. They can't learn about improvised theatre if they are only really interested in scriptwork.

And this got me to thinking about context and children learning things. If a child is approached with something they don't want to do, say maths or geography or reading before they have much experience of these adult beloved activities, they might very well be lacking two important things necessary to take them in. Firstly appetite for the subject or activity. They just might not see why it is more important to go to the destination of reading rather than the destination of playing on a trampoline. Until they do, trying to get them to read is likely to lead to a lot of anxiety and upset and aversion to reading. If I want to go to King's Lynn but I'm forced to go to Cardiff, chances are I won't be giving Cardiff much of a chance when I get there. *If* I get there. Chances are, Cardiff in this learning to read analogy will give me dyslexia or ADHD. But even if a child is in a place where they want to read, or do Geography or Maths instead of jump on a trampoline, they will need some context for it to make much sense. For the information to go in and stay in and become owned. In the case of reading, they may first need a good deal of exposure to the existence of words in the world around them. On cereal



packets, or signs, or on video games, or on a mug or t-shirt. And they don't need these things pointed out to them as if they are stupid. They may very well need experience of seeing other people reading a newspaper or book as a commonplace action. No point in doing an alphabet out of nowhere with them. What is that? That's a pine forest in Scotland when they want to see the Trent. When they start to get interested in learning to read, context begins to happen of itself.

“What does it say on that mug?” is something a child might want to know of a mug they get for their birthday that says ‘Happy Birthday’ on it. But the very question suggests they know that writing *means* something, and that they have worked this out. You can't do this contextual meaning work for children. Because it probably won't mean much to them if you try. It may just be another tiresome adult lecture. But if a child has worked out enough contextually to know the mug says something, they might be ready to approach alphabets and so forth, if they ask for help with reading.

I'm not saying here, it is never worth taking a child, or any other person on a trip to a place they've never been – either metaphorically or in reality. An outing to Fota Wildlife Park, might (probably will, if done in a non-pedagogical way) end up as useful context for something. But I am saying, that in learning, desire for knowledge, whilst essential, is sometimes not quite enough. Giving children lots of free time without educational chores is a great way for them to stock up on context. As context grows quickly in the realm of everyday life experience and barely at all in formalised schoolwork.





## Q&A

### Profiles in Courageous Home Ed

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This spring:

**Kevin O'Kelly**

*How many and what ages are your children?*

I have one daughter and she's 7¼ ( ¼ and ½ are very important! )

*How long have you been home educating?*

8 years – didn't wait till she was born! We started with getting ourselves ready, providing a good environment, playing music and talking to her. How much she got out of that is debatable, but now she loves music and we were better prepared for her arrival.

My wife, Úna, and I decided that she would go out to work and provide for us, while I would be a full-time Dad with only occasional part-time work. So being a home-maker and educator takes almost all my time. Although I do miss some aspects of my old work, mostly the friendships, I find this to more enjoyable than any of my other jobs.

*Can you describe your family's home ed approach?*

Eclectic. We add in lots of approaches to a primarily unschooling base. We provide the environment, and some of the challenges and then try to keep up with the questions. We do have formal lessons in Music and in Drama as they require skills and environments that we don't have.

Libraries are such a favourite with us that we even visit them on holidays – their provision for children is so much better than it used to be.



Meeting up with HEN groups, some weekly and some monthly, with occasional links with other groups is a real key for us.

*How did you come across home ed as a way of life?*

I've been an educator for 40 years, in secondary schools, in third level colleges and mostly in adult education. It seemed like the best thing to do to give my own daughter the benefit of what I have learned, and especially to tailor her education to her needs and interests on a minute to minute basis. I believe that every person arrives here with their own individual sense of purpose for their life, and that standard based education doesn't readily accommodate to that. The big educational institutions (and I've spent most of my life in them) are very much better than the huge gap that came before them. Schools are also much better than they were – but even with the best will and the best training the teachers are so overloaded that it's not realistic to expect them to provide the sort of tailored education that seems best to me.

*What part of Ireland do you live in?*

Co Wicklow.

*Do you find it to be an easy or a difficult place to be home educating?*

It's great. The garden of Ireland is a wonderful place to live and learn. We have easy access to the libraries and museums, theatres (especially the Ark) and all the benefits of Dublin, but with a great view, a big garden and walks in nature all around. We're surrounded by resources, opportunities and a terrific Home Ed community.

*What inspires you through the difficult times?*

Seeing her gradually becoming herself, full of joy, of music, of compassion, of exploration, determination, etc... She herself is the inspiration.





*What is the best part of what you do?*

Seeing her grow. Although we have our fair share of challenges, I really like the person she's becoming, caring, kind and talented. I also feels really good to be providing as best I can for what she's currently developing.

*What is the most challenging?*

Dealing with new emotions – anger, resentment, anxiety etc are not always easy to understand and deal with, especially when there are others involved. Handling conflict creatively is a current hot topic. The balance of allowing space and time for feeling while dealing with behavioural challenges is not easy to find.

At the moment she's understanding new things rapidly, but not understanding that developing *skills* takes practice – so practice is avoided. "It's too boring!" (I'd hoped we'd get to the teens before that set in.) Meanwhile writing is progressing very slowly, but piano is doing moderately well.

*What do your children think of their home ed lives?*

I took her away from her Lego construction to ask her.

"It's Amazing! I love to do Lego, most people don't get to do as much Lego as I do. And I get to see my friends often."

If we'd just been swimming, she'd have been enthusing about that instead. She doesn't understand why her school-going friends have to learn things they're not interested in, or why they're not learning first aid and cooking because they're so important. She's happy with real life and learning by doing.



## Out & About

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Kate and Gil with the crosses they made in Bríde Solas to celebrate St. Brigid's day!



The O'Kelly's keeping us all informed!



Tadhg practicing for his Quidditch Tournament!



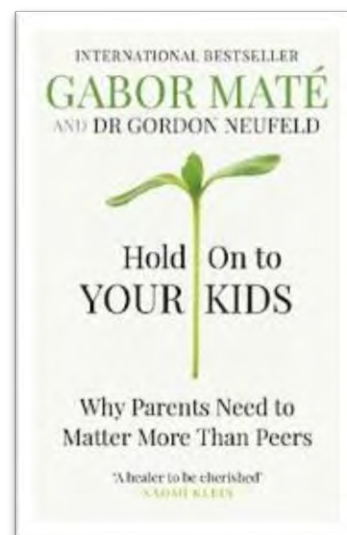
## Book Review

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### HOLD ON TO YOUR KIDS

Review by  
KELLY LANE

Of all the books that I read as a young mother in my early twenties, this one stuck with me the most. *Hold On To Your Kids: Why Parents Need to Matter More Than Peers* by Gordon Neufeld and Gabor Maté was an absolute revelation to me at the beginning of my parenting journey, and has informed my home ed methods and mothering ever since.



Neufeld unflinchingly examines the entire paradigm of children and their need for peers, how our culture buys into this idea of peer orientation, and where that idea came from in the first place. He uses examples of many cultures to illustrate his ideas and reflects on his own personal journey throughout. I actually think that not since John Bowlby has there been such a comprehensive and honest look at attachment in our lives (but that may be entering fangirl territory!)

One of the most valuable things I took away from this book (other than renewed confidence in what we were doing as a home educating family) was the context it gave to my own fractured teen years. When viewed through the lenses of Neufeld and Maté's research, the toxic patterns and painful experiences I had with my parents, as well as the intense relationships I had with my peers, came into sharp focus. (I remember, just days after finishing the book, walking through a grocery store in Canada with a childhood friend of mine and feeling that harsh twist of waking-up-to-something in my stomach. A simple comment in passing from her—a gigantic collapse in my world view for me.)

I found it agonising and terrifying to shift my paradigm, but I know as a home educator, it's necessary for growth. I feel it is so important to find good, solid information, compiled by people who do not back away from hard truths. For me, *Hold On To Your Kids* is definitely one of those kinds of books.

## Notices

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### **HEN Gathering 2019, Thursday 13th - Sunday 16th June Drewstown House, County Meath**

We are delighted to announce HEN 1019 Gathering will be at Drewstown House again this year.

This year, we look forward to bringing Learning with Nature Experiences to the gathering, with activities that inspire children and adults to connect to nature all around us. Drewstown House offers such a wonderful opportunity to be in and learn with nature.

We are also looking forward to the inspiring History Alive Workshops, and the much in demand Musical and Rhythm get togethers and the super Talent Show. Time to get practicing!

We are also delighted to offer several talks and workshops: Dr. Naoisé O Reilly, on personality and expression in Education, and also home ed members on many topics of interest, including Playful Parenting, Restorative Practices and Juggling, amongst others.

Also, on offer is a space for a Home Ed Panel. The idea of a Home Ed panel is to offer home educators a 15-minute opportunity to share how they learn and educate, and to have questions and answers after. We hope this format of sharing skills will help newcomers and those of us at it a while to see the diversity of approaches available.

Also, we have a Creativity Hub for children or families to share their passion with others, be that crazy science, or hair beading, or crating, or whatever passion the children might like to share.

We are also arranging daily meet-ups for new or interested families, to have an opportunity to ask questions about TUSLA registration or any other Home Ed matters.

Also, we hope the wonderful regular activities will emerge this year also: Yoga, Giant Bubbles, Treasure Hunts, Orienteering, Table Quiz, Tie-dying and more!

Please let us know if you wish you facilitate these again this year, bringing your skills and interests to make the Gathering as enjoyable and rich as it always is.

The smooth flow of HEN Gathering relies on Volunteers' input, from being at the welcome desk, to helping with the recycling, to many other activities. Please contact us and put your name forward for a few hours of fun work!

What this space for more updates, on activities and schedules.

Application forms are available for downloading from the HEN website, also from the Facebook group HEN Gathering 2019, which you can request to join.

This is a discount of 20%, on accommodation, for registration forms and payment received by the 6th of April.

Like previous years, the last day for registration of 31st of May 2019, after which we will not take further applications.



## HEN RENEWAL INFORMATION

Thank you for all the queries and to the families who have already renewed their membership

It's been a very busy 2 years with regards to membership with an unprecedented number of new members. Renewal fees were waived in 2018 to celebrate our new website. January and February are the busiest 2 months for new members, so membership was extended until 31st March 2019. Therefore, the new membership year starts in April. Anyone who joined from April 2018 can remain members (this is to allow everyone at least 12 months membership, gathering discount, ample opportunity to contribute to the newsletters, access funding etc).

So, if you joined prior to April 2018, this is a gentle reminder that your membership is now due for renewal. We will be sending an email reminder.

Details on renewal are available on <http://www.henireland.org> - Join us and just click renew in the form please.

To those who have paid by standing order, we have a record of those payments in 2018, so no renewal fee is necessary until April 2020. If you wish to continue to pay by Standing Order, please update the dates with your bank.

Thank for your continued participation and support in providing a voice for Home Education.

Best wishes,

Michelle  
(HEN Membership Officer)

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For newsletter submissions, please send your bits to: [submissionshen@gmail.com](mailto:submissionshen@gmail.com)

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