

Playground bullies and prom-night jitters. Lunchroom hijinks and locker room humiliations. The necessary stuff of cherished school memories, or traumas best left behind in the hallways of high school? Or maybe something else entirely. Maybe they are completely irrelevant to a happy and fulfilling life.

That's what Ben Kniaz, a 20-year-old American college student now studying in Italy, would say. Kniaz missed out on all that because he was educated entirely at home and says he didn't miss a thing. "It was more that I was spared a lot of the stuff that goes on in high school," Kniaz says from Rome. "I felt pretty turned off by some of what I'd see."

People say you need to experience it to deal with it later, but you can just miss out on it and deal with it when you're more mature. I got to focus on the things I wanted to do and liked to do," Kniaz says. Kniaz's gratitude for being spared some of the more dangerous and corrupting influences of school life may be why anywhere from 850,000 to more than a million children are being home-educated in the United States now.

Legal in all 50 states since the 1980s, home-educating has often been criticized as a paranoid practice of right-wing religious fanatics that stunts children's emotional growth. But as that first generation of home-educators settles into young adulthood, the criticism is proving unfounded. If anything, some experts say, the home-educators are proving to be better prepared for adulthood than their traditionally schooled peers.

Self-Reliant and Focused

Many home-educated young adults say that being freed from the rigidity and conformity of high school allowed them to explore their individuality, creativity and independence. "My parents felt that elementary school was traumatic for an intelligent child and that in high school, you don't really learn anything," explains Aletheia Price, a 19-year-old sophomore at Thomas Aquinas College in Orange County, Calif., who was educated entirely at home until age 15.

"I think a lot of this stuff [about high school] is mythology, that maybe we've got a whole lot of falsehoods associated with schooling," says J. Gary Knowles, a University of Toronto researcher who has extensively interviewed adults who were home-educated. "We have all these weird rites of passage that are deemed important and many are quite dysfunctional."

Knowles has found home-educated children to be more self-reliant and focused.

They're able to move into adulthood with a much better sense of self and have a very good sense as to what they want to do," he said.

If he has any concerns, they are about socialization. Children schooled within a rigid social view may not be well equipped to live in a diverse culture, he says.

They may have had very little exposure to the cultural complexities of society, to a range of ideas," Knowles says. "I'm very concerned about families with very narrow views on what is appropriate preparation for citizenship. Overall, though, Knowles has found home-educated adults to be no more or less engaged socially or politically than those with traditional educations.

Branching Out

To get past the socialization issue, many home-educating families join with home-educating groups in their area or turn to town athletic programs, scouting and other youth groups. "Your peers are not the people the same age as you, they are people who share your interests," insists Patrick Farenga, a consultant with Holt Associates, a home-educating advocacy group. Or as Knowles put it: "Where did we ever get the idea that 2,000 13-year-olds were the ideal people with which to socialize other 13-year-olds?"

Curiously absent from home-educators as a group is something many presumed to be a part of every childhood — youthful angst and alienation. The burning desire to isolate and separate themselves from their parents just doesn't seem to be there, researchers say. Kniaz, for example, recalls fondly enjoying two-hour conversations with his father every night, and both he and Price describe close, honest relationships with their parents and siblings.

"Alienation between generations is a product of schooling," says Knowles.

There's no reason for teen-agers to be alienated. Kniaz said his parents gave him choices, so he never felt under their thumb. "I always felt that I was in charge of my life with my parents guiding me," he says. "I never felt anything was being hammered down my throat."

That problem was sort of solved itself because [my parents] turned me loose when I was 16," says Price, who began taking college courses and studying her self-designed curriculum at the library at that age. "I was out of the house all day."

Price's initiative is not uncommon. Many home-educated teens supplement their education with community college classes, taking over the direction of their

education much earlier than other kids their age. Whether that is good or bad remains a subject of debate.

Knowles has expressed concern that home-educated kids are pushed too hard to achieve, and that some are finding themselves in college much too early. Price and Kniaz, both of whom attend a traditional university, said dorm life, and the behavior of some of their classmates and roommates, was jarring at first. Once over that, though, the home-educators seem to have the discipline and maturity to quickly develop college-level study habits. They are not as easily distracted and are already accustomed to taking responsibility for their themselves.

I“wouldn t say home-educated children are always better educated, but they are definitely better equipped to learn, Knowles says. Both Kniaz and Price credit their parents for creating a successful, creative, and positive home-educating experience.