

Free Expression and Family Structure: How Education Encourages Freedom of Thought, Choice, and Speech

What makes a worldview? How do we learn what is tolerable or intolerable; what should be accepted or challenged? My first answers were born out of my parents' free expression to think, choose, and speak the rules of my childhood. As I grew, so did my capacity for independent thought, and I found that these rules no longer aligned with my best interest. This disconnect between my well-being and the psychological predisposition to assimilate into my family's belief system led me to a choice: To adhere to what I'd always known at the cost of my own free expression, or to confront my fundamental worldviews and forge my own. No matter who you are, emerging adulthood is a treacherous opportunity to examine what you've been taught about the world and how you belong within it; to decide what to take and what to discard as you build your own meanings through boundaries, education, and personal reflection. This autonomy is the very essence of free expression, and freedom of expression must begin with freedom of thought.

Like most kids, my earliest choices were made for me, and I know my parents meant well. I was sent to public school until halfway through fifth-grade, which allowed bright-colored classrooms to determine my educational expectations and daily routines. I felt secure in this until one of my caregivers became gripped with suspicion that the government was using public education to brainwash our generation. I was immediately withdrawn from school, and the next time I saw a classroom would be the summer I turned eighteen, when I hastily enrolled in community college courses without knowing the term *syllabus*.

At age ten, library access became my lifeline. My family was eligible to register as homeschoolers with the state Division of Non-Public Education, where the promise of homeschool rapidly morphed into no-school because they are essentially the same on paper. Dysfunction at home inundated my primal understanding of safety as I completed household

breadwinning tasks without receiving substantial academic instruction. I coped by borrowing stacks of library books that introduced me to perspectives that challenged the confinements of my family's philosophical infrastructures. It was literature that first suggested their mutability in my own life even while I lacked meaningful control over the quality or content of my upbringing. What I could control regardless of what went on around me, reading taught me, were my thoughts.

While limited life experiences, freedoms, and the adolescent brain renders us vulnerable to harm and neglect, the law presumes that each minor will be protected by a sound-minded family unit. According to the law, families “possess what a child lacks in maturity, experience, and capacity for judgment required for making life's difficult decisions.”¹ This is what allowed my family to choose my home-education. The credence that each family can possess the maturity, experience, and capacity for judgment that a child lacks, and will thus use those capacities to protect the child, is a stark plausibility in comparison to this multifaceted issue. One that, I believe, ultimately positions society for multigenerational suffering but can be remedied by access to books.

More than anything else, what I understand from my time without school is something that the law disagrees with. It is legally “assumed that natural bonds of affection ordinarily lead parents to act in the best interests of their children.”² This utopian assumption that love always spearheads parental decision making is ultimately what dictated my choice: I could be severed from education, or I could be severed from my family. As a child, I knew my parents loved me and tried their best for me. As an adult, I now recognize the depths of that truth while

¹“The First Amendment in Schools: Resource Guide: Parents' Rights.” *National Coalition Against Censorship*, 2021. ncaac.org/the-first-amendment-in-schools-resource-guide-parents-rights.

²“Parham v. J.R. Case Brief for Law School”. *LexisNexis*, 2023. lexisnexis.com/community/casebrief/p/casebrief-parham-v-j-r

acknowledging its failure to align with my best interests. It is vital to understand that the choice to redefine normal doesn't erase our psychological and loving ties to what once was; it only sets a boundary to keep it in the past, to not let it perpetuate our right to freedom of thought, speech, or expression in any miraculous facet.

I chose education, and with that came my own freedom of expression to think, choose, and speak the rules of my adulthood. I believe that free expression requires a compassion-driven understanding of the truth and the curiosity to strive for a future that expands beyond it. We can build this by immersing our minds in diverse perspectives, and reading should be our most accessible tool. Even if your story is not like mine, we all come from somewhere having learned something about our world and our rights that perhaps we will decide to leave in the past. It is through this lens that free expression can be reclaimed, and although I do not have the whole answer, I can tell you what I know: We are entitled to a rich, explorative inner voice simply because we are alive. On this journey, books are our empathetic companions. They bridge the gap between your worldview and mine, allowing us to examine multiple contradicting truths in the confines of our own souls.

This is the essence of autonomy, of learning, of freedom. Books provide escapism from reality to create space for internal shifts in thinking. They give us power to step back and decide what feels the most true, the most suitable for our own unfolding lives despite where we have been or what we have or haven't learned. Books build buoyancy; they keep our souls afloat until we can climb out of desolate places one thought and one book at a time until we arrive at something freer, someday soon, with love and appreciation for the journey.