

## Czech Summerhill Presentation

### **Introduction.**

Introduce myself  
A.S.Neill's Grandson  
Zoe's son

time at Summerhill  
as a Pupil  
as a Teacher

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My Grandfather wrote,  
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“all crimes, all hatred, all wars can be reduced to unhappiness.”  
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He believed that a child's emotional and social development was far more important than academic achievement.

A.S.Neill founded Summerhill School in 1921 in order to prove his child rearing and educational philosophy.

Summerhill School is the oldest children's democracy in the world.

It is a self-governing, democratic community in which the adults and children have equal rights.

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This is the **Summerhill Policy Statement** -  
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1. To provide choices and opportunities that allow children to develop at their own pace and to follow their own interests.

Summerhill does not aim to produce specific types of young people, with specific, assessed skills or knowledge, but aims to provide an environment in which children can define who they are and what they want to be.  
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2. To allow children to be free from compulsory or imposed assessment, allowing them to develop their own goals and sense of achievement.

Children should be free from the pressure to conform to artificial standards of success based on predominant theories of child learning and academic achievement.

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3. To allow children to be completely free to play as much as they like.

Creative and imaginative play is an essential part of childhood and development. Spontaneous, natural play should not be undermined or redirected by adults into a “learning experience” for children. Play belongs to the child.

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4. To allow children to experience the full range of feelings free from the judgement and intervention of an adult.

Freedom to make decisions always involves risk and requires the possibility of negative outcomes. Apparently negative consequences such as boredom, stress, anger, disappointment and failure are a necessary part of individual development.

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And finally.

To allow children to live in a community that supports them and that they are responsible for; in which they have the freedom to be themselves, and have the power to change community life, through the democratic process.

All individuals create their own set of values based on the community within which they live. Summerhill is a community which takes responsibility for itself. Problems are discussed and resolved through openness, democracy and social action. All members of the community, adults and children, irrespective of age, are equal in terms of this process.

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At Summerhill children are free to do as they choose, so long as they don't infringe on other people's freedom. This is one of the foundation stones of the Summerhill philosophy.

This means you can dye your hair bright blue, wear your clothes inside out, play all day, or spend all day studying Maths.

These things are your own individual choice – they do not interfere with anybody else.

But, for example...

You cannot play your drum kit all night or pee on the dining room floor or ride other people's bicycles without permission - because these things affect other people.

The Summerhill community consists of 66 pupils including 6 day kids, these range from 6 to 17 years old. We have 14 staff and we also have 9 peripatetic teachers that come in to teach specialty subjects like; Calligraphy, Chinese, Violin, etc.

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The Summerhill community is governed by all of us at two weekly meetings where everything affecting our daily lives is discussed and decided. In these meetings everybody has an equal vote and the right to be heard.

The school Meeting discusses everyday issues and changes or makes new laws.

There is also a part of the meeting for people to bring cases against one another.

So, if I were to use your bicycle without asking – you could bring me up in the meeting and I would probably get the standard fine of 50p.

If you throw litter on the floor outside then I would bring you up in the Meeting too.

The standard fine for that is a 15 minute work fine.

Being fined is not considered to be a punishment – it is just a way for the community to show you disapproval for certain actions – to deter you from doing it again.

The fines used in our community are as diverse as the issues that are raised and we don't just rely on monetary fines.

Sometimes issues raised in the Summerhill meetings can seem somewhat petty to outsiders. Things like, somebody calling you names, riding your bicycle without asking, or refusing to get out of your bedroom when asked. In the school meetings we discuss and take these issues very seriously because firstly, to children these issues are serious. And secondly, it's very important for a child to learn about their own rights in order to understand other people's rights.

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Summerhill is known as a “free” school – but actually we have around 250 laws!

These laws govern our lives. Laws are dropped and created all the time by members of all ages. Some have a short life span and some last for years.

Being able to change our community in this way gives the kids a sense of ownership.

The Summerhill community and meetings are not looked at as educational experiences. We just run and live our lives together in this manner and by doing so learn essential life skills. We learn:

respect, tolerance, compromise, communication, negotiation and assuming responsibility for yourself and others. And the very best part about it is, you learn these all-important skills without even thinking about it. They just become part of everyday life.

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A very important aspect of the Summerhill community and meetings is that children feel safe and in control of their lives. This is especially important when considering bullying.

Around the world today there is an increasing problem of physical, mental and cyber bullying.

When cases of bullying come to the meeting they tend to be what we would call cases of petty harassment – name - calling etc. These types of cases are dealt with very quickly and efficiently. Typically the case is discussed by the members of the community and some sort of fine might be imposed for example a tea biscuit fine or a work or monetary fine - it all depends on the seriousness of the case.

Bullying in any form is totally unacceptable at Summerhill and because the children are empowered with the right to bring cases to the meeting about anything they want it means that bullying never develops into a serious problem.

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As well as the two weekly meetings, we also have two staff meetings per week. These are also run in a democratic manner.

In the staff meetings we discuss; the creation and updating of policies, staff time off and houseparents cover and we go over the application forms of prospective pupils. We also discuss and write reports about the social and academic development of each child. The staff meetings are great opportunities to share information about each child and how they are getting along at Summerhill. We

use this information for our own future reference and also for Ofsted inspections.

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Ok, so I'm now going to move onto the most controversial aspect of Summerhill School.

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**Non-Compulsory lessons**

For outsiders probably the most shocking thing about Summerhill is the fact that the children do not have to attend class.

All children at Summerhill have the complete freedom to choose whether or not to go to lessons. This means, a child could spend their whole time at Summerhill without entering a single classroom.

Of course this does not happen because children are natural learners.

Conventional educational systems rely on teaching the child, while we believe the child has to take responsibility for their own learning.

Timetabled and structured lessons are available to all children at Summerhill but the child makes their own choice whether to attend or not.

At Summerhill, most pupils take GCSEs before they leave.

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Assessment at Summerhill is done in a very relaxed and “Family Observation” like manner and because we don’t have any academic expectations for the pupils, assessment is used purely for the benefit of the student and teacher to gauge how the student is progressing.

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So what happens to Summerhill pupils when they leave having had non-compulsory lessons?

Most children when they leave Summerhill go on to study for appropriate qualifications at Colleges of Higher Education. Some go on to University, and some do not.

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Sometimes adults new to our school find it difficult to accept that children can make decisions about their own lives, which us teachers or even parents may not agree with. It can be very hard to watch a child who is obviously, for example talented in music, turn away from that and spend their time developing other skills instead.

Each person has to decide what interests them and what career path to choose.

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All the academic learning in the world will not enable us as human beings to relate to our loved ones, rear a happy family, or be a contented person if our emotional needs have not been fulfilled. Schools need to be focusing on children's emotional development because first we need to learn to function as human beings.

Unfortunately our present schooling systems do not allow for this. We are so intent upon cramming information into children's heads that we have forgotten the most important aspect – the emotions. If we are to live peacefully and happily with our fellow humans – then first we must learn the most valuable skills, the life skills of communication, compassion, respect, responsibility and equality. Then we can worry about whether we should become politicians, or lawyers or writers or artists.

Learning is a natural part of our lives. Left to ourselves some among us will develop into brain surgeons or mathematicians while some of us will prefer to grow fruit or build furniture. We all have different aspirations and needs, which must be reflected in our educational systems.

The way to learn about ourselves is through freedom to make our own choices and our own mistakes. Children are capable of making decisions and can learn invaluable lessons from it. They need time to play and be happy in an environment which offers them this freedom.

At Summerhill we believe strongly that happiness and emotional well-being must come first, then we are free to follow our chosen paths in life.

Summerhill has proven over the last 94 years that children can be trusted to make decisions about their own lives. And when given that freedom will become well-balanced, happy individuals that are self-confident, enthusiastic, and maintain a life-long love of learning.

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My grand-father wrote:

“I would rather Summerhill produced a happy street sweeper than a neurotic Prime Minister” and Summerhill today echoes that sentiment.