



The human curriculum

Flexible and creative curriculums that prioritise holistic learning over exam results are gaining popularity. Here, parents and educators share their experiences. Words: Anna Paul

Once considered radical, alternative schools that favour inclusive, experiential approaches over rote learning can equip children with the skills they need in a fast-changing world. From child-led learning to virtual environments, families now have more choices than

ever when it comes to education. Because as the saying goes — no two children are the same.

A hands-on education

One of the more established models is Steiner Waldorf education, centred on experiential, interdisciplinary, playful and creative learning. Based

on the ideas of Austrian philosopher Rudolf Steiner, the schools aim to teach children how to think, not just what to remember. "In a system increasingly focused on testing and screens, parents choose Waldorf education as an alternative that creates deeper learning, creativity, play and human connection,"

explains Fran Russell, executive director of Waldorf UK.

While Waldorf differs from conventional schooling, many others offer formal qualifications in later years, including the state-funded Steiner Academy Hereford, a top-performing school in its region for maths and English GCSE results. Part of Waldorf's appeal is that it considers how children develop at different ages. Social entrepreneur Hollie de Cruz, whose three children attend Waldorf schools, values how they "celebrate the whole child, educating through the head, hands and heart".

Hollie initially enrolled her eldest child into mainstream education and her second in a Waldorf school. "The contrast in their school-starting experiences was profound," she shares. "One was rushed into formal learning before he was ready, and one got to enjoy his first 'school' experiences without surrendering the joyful, hands-on and imaginative world of play and early childhood."

She noticed her older child's experience was far less carefree than his sibling's, who spent the day "painting, milling flour to make bread with, and singing seasonal rhymes". Hollie soon moved him to a Waldorf school, a choice she wishes she'd made sooner.

A school for modern families

Not all alternative options stray from structured study and formal assessment, and schools like the Minerva Virtual Academy (MVA) deliver the national curriculum through a virtual, flexible model that's accredited by the Department for Education and Ofsted.

"I founded MVA to build the kind of school modern families actually need," explains Hugh Viney, founder and CEO. "Our flipped learning model gives students autonomy while maintaining structure and high expectations."

Students study 60% of the material independently via a virtual platform before applying their knowledge in live, teacher-led sessions. "This builds confidence, critical thinking and self-management, without the stress of rigid timetables or crowded classrooms," says Hugh.

This model is particularly popular with families who require specialist, flexible support, like athletes or SEND students. "MVA felt like the right step for a young person becoming more independent. It also aligned with our family life, as we work across London, Italy and Austria," explains Marco Poletto, whose 15-year-old son Giacomo is a track cyclist. "MVA allows him to be both a student and an athlete."

The natural classroom

For families seeking an alternative within the state system, Forest Schools offer another option. Focused on hands-on, child-led outdoor learning, they can exist as standalone schools, but also within the curriculum of some mainstream settings.

"Forest School is an approach that supports children to direct their own learning through creative and risky play in the natural environment," explains Dr Janine Coates, senior lecturer in qualitative research methods at Loughborough University. Dr Coates's research has shown they can "help children build emotional resilience as well as a strong sense of personal, social and environmental responsibility".

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