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Unhappy in Class, More Are Learning at Home

By JANE GROSS

In Penny Kjellberg's modest living room in Stuyvesant Town, one of her 11-year-old twins conjugates French verbs while cuddling a kitten. The book shelves sag with *The Encyclopedia of the Ancient World*, "The Complete Idiot's Guide to Understanding Einstein" and Ken Burns's videos about the Civil War. Ms. Kjellberg's other daughter devours a book about Ulysses with periodic romps outdoors when she grows antsy.

The Kjellberg twins, Caroline and Jessica, were in a highly regarded public school until two

years ago. But they were bullied, their mother said, and referred to psychiatrists when, miserable, they misbehaved in class. So Ms. Kjellberg, neither a hippie nor a fundamentalist, decided to educate them at home.

"I was always too afraid to take that giant step outside the mainstream," she said. "But now that circumstances have forced us out, our experience here on the sidelines is so good that I find it harder and harder to imagine going back."

The Kjellbergs' choice is being made by an increasing number of

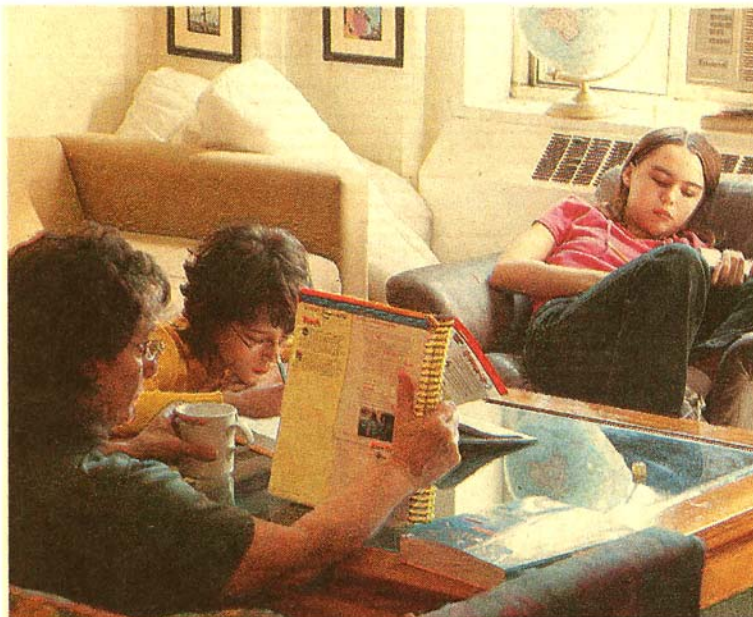
American families — at least 850,000 children nationwide are schooled at home, up from 360,000 a decade ago, according to the Education Department. In New York City, which compiled citywide statistics for the first time this year, 1,800 children are being schooled at home.

Newcomers to home schooling resist easy classification as part of the religious right or freewheeling left, who dominated the movement for decades, according to those who study the practice.

They come to home schooling fed up with the shortcomings of public education and the cost of private schools. Add to that the new nationwide standards — uniform curriculum and more testing — which some educators say penalize children with special needs, whether they are gifted, learning disabled or merely eccentric.

"It's a profound irony that the standards movement wound up alienating more parents and fueling the growth of home schooling," said Mitchell L. Stevens, an educational psychologist at New York University and author of "Kingdom of Children: Culture and Controversy in the Homeschooling Movement" (Princeton University Press, 2001).

"The presumption of home schooling is that children's distinctive needs come before the managerial needs of the schools," he said. "And, it's easier to do than it was 10 years ago, because the ideologues were so successful in making it legal and creating curricu-



Ruby Washington/The New York Times

Penny Kjellberg has taught her 11-year-old twins, Caroline, center, and Jessica, for two years at their apartment in Stuyvesant Town.

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lum tools and organizational support."

In addition to dissatisfaction with schools, Mr. Stevens and others say, social trends have fed interest in home schooling. More women are abandoning careers to stay home with their children. And many families yearn for a less frantic schedule and more time together.

"This may be a rebellion of middle-class parents in this culture," Mr. Stevens said. "We have never figured out how to solve the contradiction between work and parenting for contemporary mothers. And a highly scheduled life puts a squeeze on childhood."

Laurie Spigel, of the Riverdale section of the Bronx, chose home schooling for her 13-year-old son, Solomon, because he was overextended.

"He was taking ballet and piano and begging for flute," she said. "We'd already given up bedtime stories. He was tired all the time. We had no family life left. And all the wasted time seemed to be at school."

She had already given up on public school. A first-tier private school was so intense that "fourth grade felt like high school." So she chose home schooling, as she had for Solomon's brother Kalman, now in college.

Julia Attaway of Washington Heights made the home-schooling decision because the first of her four children was reading chapter books and counting to 100 by seven before kindergarten. "This is a very intense kid," Ms. Attaway said. "She dives into something until she has a sense of completion. It was so obvious that school was not going to work."

The Kjellbergs, Spigels and Attaways fit the profile of home-schooling families from a 1999 survey by the National Center for Education Statistics, considered the only authoritative snapshot of home schooling. Nationwide, a majority of home-schooled children come from white, two-parent, one-income families with three or more children.

The top three motivations for home schooling in the survey were the prospect of a better education (49 percent), religious beliefs (38 percent) and a poor learning environment in the schools (26 percent).

Home schooling is legal in all 50 states, although there are widely different regulations. New Jersey, for instance, requires virtually no oversight. In New York, parents must notify their school district, file an instructional plan and quarterly reports and submit to annual assessments, alternating between standardized tests and portfolios.

The success of home schooling is hard to determine. Some Ivy League admissions officers say home-



Ruby Washington/The New York Times

Julia Attaway and her children, from left, Mary, 4; John, 7; Maggie, 2; and Elizabeth, 9, during a recent lesson in Japanese screen art in their Washington Heights home. Citywide, 1,800 children are being schooled at home.

schooled children have high SAT scores and adjust well to the demands of college. These admission officers also are impressed by accounts of prodigious accomplishments: A family with three home-schooled children at Harvard. A youth with a best-selling novel. First, second and third second place in the 2000 National Spelling Bee.

But Clive R. Belfield, associate director of the National Center for the

On the rise: A tailored curriculum for the student, and more family time for all.

Study of Privatization in Education at Columbia Teachers College, urges caution. The only published study comparing test scores, on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills, shows home-schoolers scoring in the 70th to 80th percentile; no reliable data exists for the SAT's because of shifting definitions of home schooling. And Dr. Belfield notes that any test score comparison may pit the cream of home schoolers against average students.

"It is possible some of them are fantastically educated and some are not, and all we're seeing in the data is the fantastically educated," he said. In the debate about home school-

ing, socialization is more of an issue than achievement. Dr. Belfield said there was no research in this area but much anecdotal evidence that home-schooled children had plenty of social contact, benefited from being outside the dog-eat-dog world of school and were kinder to one another as a result.

Most worrisome, Dr. Belfield said, is the occasional child-abuse case, like the one in New Jersey in which four home-schooled children were said to have been starved by their adoptive parents. Having children show up at a public place — like school — is one way to see that that type of mistreatment does not happen, he said.

Without hewing to a public school curriculum, responsible and resourceful parents can cobble together teaching materials that cover all the bases. In New York, they start with a great library system, where families can order online something as esoteric as Aboriginal dance videos, as Mrs. Attaway did. They were delivered to her local branch.

The newest resource for home schoolers on a tight budget is the Internet. "You can Google a third-grade English lesson plan, a ninth-grade chemistry textbook and an 11th-grade study guide to Hamlet," Ms. Spigel said. "It's all there for the cost of an AOL account."

New York City home-schoolers rave about the educational and cultural institutions here, many free and just a subway ride away. "This city is a cornucopia of opportunity,"

Ms. Kjellberg said, adding that even costly extras do not approach two \$25,000 private school tuitions. "Home schooling is a misnomer, because we're hardly ever at home."

Caroline and Jessica take French classes at a Midtown language school that charges half its hourly rate of \$30 because home schoolers come at off-peak hours. They are on a track team with a coach hired from the Road Runners Club.

Solomon takes jazz, tap and ballet and has an internship in marine biology at the Hudson River Project. When the Attaway children study the ancient Code of Hammurabi or the breeding of silkworms, they visit the Museum of Natural History or the Japan Society.

Following New York State's rules demands careful record-keeping. But Ms. Spigel welcomes it. "The reporting keeps me focused on milestones," she said. "I have the information for college transcripts. And the boys learn about being organized."

Her current method is a week-at-a-glance calendar, with Solomon's subjects listed on the left side and the days of the week across the top. Both mother and son notice a row of empty spaces and adjust accordingly, she said. "There's all this extra science," one or the other will say. "What happened to social studies?"

"Solomon and I put these squares on the page together," Ms. Spigel said. "This is a team effort. We both make it happen. We both find a way to make it work."