

What is Unschooling?

Guest post by Nicole Olson.

Asking, “What is unschooling?” is a little bit like asking, “What is love?” or “What is happiness?”. It means different things to different people. But within its broad framework, there are some fairly consistent themes and basic beliefs that most unschoolers embrace.

What is unschooling...

Belief #1: Children are hard-wired to learn.

By nature, children are curious and passionate about exploring. In *The Magic Years*, author Selma Fraiberg uses the term, “infant scientists”. Children are constantly exploring their world, testing their discoveries, and drawing conclusions. Play is a primary vehicle for these explorations, not only in the early years, but for older children as well.

Belief #2: When one is interested in something, learning takes place.

Think about what you’ve learned in your adulthood. What do you know a lot about? Most likely it’s the stuff you’ve stumbled across that really interests you. My husband developed celiac disease, and needed a gluten-free diet. I wanted to understand his condition, and support his dietary changes. Because of my interest, I soaked up information about the topic in every way I could. I read about it, talked to others with the condition, found cookbooks, watched videos, etc. It did not feel like a chore. It was fascinating. And I didn’t need anyone assigning me texts, asking me to write essays, or drilling me with quizzes in order to motivate me to acquire the information.

Belief #3: Learning is a side effect of playing, pursuing interests, and developing passions.

Learning is not the goal itself; it is a by-product. For example, a toddler gains a large vocabulary so that she can better be understood by those around her. She does not wake up one morning thinking, “Gee, I’d really love to know at least 500 words by the time I’m three. I’d better get busy!” The vocabulary is a means to an end: being able to communicate efficiently. Reading is another example. No one learns to read simply for bragging rights (Learn to read: check! Done with the written word!). No, we learn to read because it is a means to an end, whether that end be enjoying a good story or being able to figure out which button to click in order to print. Reading allows us access to information, which in turn allows us to pursue our interests more efficiently.

Belief #4: Parents are not teachers

A child may learn something from – or in spite of – the adults in his world, but learning is centered within the child himself. Learning is not the result of teaching; therefore parents

should not focus on being teachers. Instead, the parent's role is to closely connect with the child, noting his/her interests and then providing opportunities for the child to pursue that interest. This does not mean designing an integrated unit on spiders for a kid who's into bugs (let's count the legs, let's learn how to spell spider, let's read a book about them!). Instead, the parent brings as much as possible into the child's world to support that child's passion – however long-lasting or brief it may be. This may mean borrowing books and videos, setting out a magnifying glass, or capturing that hairy guy on the ceiling in a glass jar instead of squishing it...get the idea?

Unschooling was first coined by author John Holt back in the 1970's. It was meant to connote an alternative to schooling, just as Sprite soda was the “un-cola” – an alternative to Coke or Pepsi. There are dozens of other phrases used to describe this type of homeschooling, and each one focuses on a certain aspect of it. Here are some examples: delight-driven learning, child-led learning, interest-led learning, fun-schooling, life-experience learning, relaxed homeschooling, child-centered learning, passion-driven learning

And finally, my own description: Unschooling is a child-led, adult supported, passion-based way of life.