

Embracing the Chaos



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"Living with Wild Abandon" is an original bi-weekly column appearing every other Tuesday at Everything-Voluntary.com, by Breezy V. Stevens. Breezy is a long-time radical unschooler, an advocate for children's rights, a crazy dog lady, a crafter in various mediums, a lover of all things tropical and beachy, and the designer of "EVC in Color". Archived columns can be found [here](#). LWA-only RSS feed available [here](#).

I remember our early days of homeschooling. It was exciting, but it was equally overwhelming: how do you pick out curriculum? How do you arrange field trips? How do you make sure you cover everything? How on earth can I possibly do this and keep up with the housework, the bills, the cooking, the errands? And the big question: What do we actually do?!?

I remember when my hubby came home from work after our "first day" of homeschooling (probably the first day of a new school year) and asked something along the lines of, "How did it go? What did you do?" I'm pretty sure I looked like a deer caught in headlights, because I know I definitely felt like one. I think I feebly showed him some papers we had printed off and filled out, and tried to fill him in on what we'd "learned" on our first day. The truth was, I'd spent a significant chunk of the day trying to juggle everyday chores, a young toddler, and this whole homeschooling thing, and I felt like maybe I was in over my head.

For quite some time, I struggled to find some sort of balance between all of my responsibilities; I mean, after all, I'd met other homeschooling moms. Some of them had many children, and some even had farm animals to care for, or ran a 4-H group on top of that. They never seemed overwhelmed. So why couldn't I figure out a way to juggle everything and maintain my sanity?

And then, one day, I went to visit a friend. She homeschooled her three children, and often had other children visiting, as well. The first thing I noticed about her house was the mess. It seemed messy to me, at least; I routinely spent much of my time trying to keep my house clean. There were toys and projects strewn around the living room and covering the table (which was made from sawhorses and an old door, and covered with a sheet). She had a giant tackboard leaned up against one wall, where the children could reach it. It held

a colorful assortment of various children's artistic endeavors. Shelves of differing sizes, ages, and degrees of stability held books, science and art supplies, bins of construction paper, popsicle sticks, building blocks, math manipulatives, etc. The children ran around crazily, as young children are wont to do, and moved from one activity to another as their desires drew them, exploring and experiencing each moment until they decided to move on to something else. It was loud, rumbunctious, and cluttered. And everyone in the house seemed *happy*.

It was a totally different environment from the one in my own home, where I'd often find myself trying to wash dishes or cook a meal, while directing my daughter which project to work on from the kitchen (and while I simultaneously tried to comfort a toddler clinging to my leg). I never felt like my attention was entirely available for my children, and yet I always felt like I "should" be concentrating equally on my regular chores. I kept finding myself thinking about the visit to my friend's house, and eventually, in lamenting tones, I mentioned it casually to my husband. I had loved the free-spirited nature of her household, but couldn't find any way to re-create it in our home. He thought about it for a bit, and suggested that maybe- just maybe- we should just try to do what she did. Maybe we should stop worrying so much about the mess, maybe we should stop worrying about paperwork and schedules and subjects, and spend some time finding our own rhythm instead. Maybe it was time to relax, forget what other people thought about the condition of our house and what we were doing all day, and just... embrace the chaos.

This revelation was at once liberating and terrifying. I'd never been a particularly tidy or organized person, but I'd bought into the idea that in order to be a responsible adult and a good parent, there were things you just *had to do*. Even though trying to match the societal norm had been exhausting, I was determined to do my best for my children. And so I'd spent years going against my own nature, struggling to keep up, and still failing to create the sort of home life I desired. Maybe my nature wasn't the problem; maybe the problem was trying to force our lifestyle into society's mold.

So we took a deep breath and made the leap. And embrace the chaos we did. I started worrying less about how many dirty dishes there were in the sink, and more about finding fun projects and activities to do with my kids. I worried less about dust bunnies and more about discovering and playing. I intentionally bought cheap thrift store furniture that could really be lived in. I stopped pretending to be afraid of dirt. I didn't care that there were paint marks on the table. Science experiments and history kits started to take up serious counter space, and ramshackle shelves filled the hallway. And the more we relaxed, the happier and more harmonious our home became.

As the children have gotten older, the nature of the chaos has changed. We've done everything from hatching butterflies and ladybugs and chickens to upcycling free materials into art projects; from target shooting with slingshots and bb guns to tearing apart a travel

trailer (reducing it to splinters) for parts, from building a cob pizza oven to butchering chickens. We've kept as pets more kinds of animals than I can currently remember. We go shopping or pick up friends at all hours and are available for last minute plans. We've had "extra children" (friends of our kids) that have lived with us. We've built, destroyed, and experimented with such an assortment of projects and ideas it's positively staggering. This spring, we're working on building a gaming computer for my son, from scratch (which is something I would never, ever have dreamed I'd be willing to try). Hell, I think there's still the remnants of an old airsoft fort (complete with old furniture) in the woods in the backyard. The projects have only gotten bigger, crazier, and messier, but we have learned not just to embrace it, but to love it. And I'm glad we made the decision when we did, when the chaos was smaller in scale and simpler to ease into.

I think that becoming more accustomed to spontaneity has broadened our ways of thinking and allowed us to become highly flexible people, and I believe it is part of an ongoing process that allows us to push limits and take risks that other people may not be comfortable taking. We are retaining our ability to reinvent ourselves, and to resist the comfort of the dull rut. We are finding ways to roll with the punches life throws at us, and consider options that seem crazy to people who are used to following the herd. I'm happy to have had the chance to model these ideas for my children.

I'm thankful that I went to my friend's house that day, and I'm grateful that I have the kind of husband that would be willing to go along with living a life so far outside the lines of "normal." And I'm very, very glad that we learned to appreciate our own unique ways of living and being in the world, instead of trying to be a typical family, keeping up with the Joneses, and everything that goes along with it. That's just not who we are. In embracing the chaos, we've embraced life, and all of the big, messy, exciting possibilities that don't fit into anyone's mold.