

Chapter 21 – Whose Goal is it, Anyway?

Table of Contents

Previous – Section Four – Chapter 20 – “What is Unschooling?” by Earl Stevens

21

Whose Goal is it, Anyway?

by Pam Laricchia

It all started with a plant. My husband was talking about training a plant – just the right combination of water and fertilizer, the right soil and sun conditions, a bit of pruning here and there, and most likely you’ll be rewarded with a beautiful, healthy plant.

Like parenting, he theorized. You try to create the right environment for them, love them, nurture them, and you will likely be rewarded with successful young adults.

It sounded good, but I was having a hard time swallowing the word “training.” I’m not “training” them to be anything. Training sounds like you are trying to get them to meet your goals, not their own.

“But don’t you have any goals for our kids?” he asked curiously.

“No” was my short answer. But the look that flashed across his face spurred me to explain further.

“Well,” I floundered, “I want them to be happy.” And thinking quickly because that sounded so sappy – “I want them to be able to choose what they want to do in life and feel confident pursuing their goals.”

Then I had a seemingly obvious thought: “The difference between a plant and a child is free will.”

Think about it. In training a plant you are training it to your desired outcome, not the plant’s. Sure, it looks “happy” on the outside – nice green leaves and bright, colorful flowers. But if the plant had free will maybe it truly would have chosen to keep that branch you trimmed off last week.

If you try to “train” a child, even in the most loving manner and with the best of intentions, you are trying to determine their goals, their path in life; you are trying to mold what they look like on the outside. And eventually that may well backfire. It will certainly take its toll on your relationship. It also manages to subvert learning about choices and goal-setting, which is so crucial in life once a person is responsible for their own actions and future.

I couldn't get the conversation out of my mind. When most people talk about goals for their kids, they usually mean things like learning to swim, being the best hockey player on the team, or getting into college – things they believe will make their kids' lives better. But whose goal is it, really? Often parents are seeing through the distortion of their own filters, not clearly through their children's eyes. It takes work to recognize and remove these filters but I have no desire to reshape my childhood by directing theirs – the risk to our relationship is too great.

In comparison, my hopes for my children aren't about accomplishments; they are about living. But I guess I do have goals for my kids! I want them to know and understand themselves. I want them to feel confident making choices. I want them to feel comfortable learning any new skills they may need to accomplish their goals. In other words, to feel confident living a joyful life. Not happy, smiley surface joy – everyone encounters disappointment and sadness – but the deep, soulful joy of being satisfied with the direction of one's life, even with its unexpected twists and turns.

So why did I choose these goals?
And how do I help my kids reach them?

To Know and Understand Themselves

I believe a strong sense of self – a deep understanding of who they are – is essential to my children confidently finding their place in our world. If they know what makes them tick, what makes their heart sing, they will be able to search for their niche, that place where they can take great pleasure in making a contribution to society. What kinds of things do they like to do? How do they like to learn? Do they like pursuing interests surrounded by others or do they prefer a more solitary approach? Do they like their activities to be predictable, or to have a sense of adventure or an element of the unknown?

Over the years they will probably realize that for many of these traits it is not one end of the spectrum or the other; they will likely find themselves enjoying elements of both to differing degrees. What is important is that they have time to discover themselves, and to realize that they are always growing, their ideas and views changing based on new facts and experiences.

Schooled children spend most of each day learning to do what other people tell them, not to mention the plethora of after-school activities and homework that fill up the remaining hours of the day. So if they don't get the time to understand themselves and discover their dreams and passions as children, they may need to take it as young adults. How often have we heard of people in their 20s going off to "find themselves"? And they are the relatively lucky ones, the ones who decide it is important to get to know themselves before they get immersed in the next stage of life – career and family. Many others just continue

to pursue what they have been told will bring them happiness – the good job, the “perfect” family and so on.

Maybe they will manage to hang on for a couple more decades, though they may wear, as Dean Sluyter (Cinema Nirvana) puts it: “the drained, dispirited faces of silent adults – post-op cases who have already undergone the freedomectomy.” Then the next stage of life hits and they may begin to take stock of their life so far and wonder if they are truly happy. The midlife crisis hits. “Is this really what I want to do with my life?” “Am I really happy?” Divorces and drastic career changes are all part and parcel of waiting until midlife to take the time to really know and understand yourself, what makes you tick, what brings you joy.

So, my first goal is to give our children the time and space to figure out who they truly are. And then more time and space to discover how their views evolve with age and life experience. To explore what they like to do, how they like to learn, what makes them shine. And always I am near, available to chat about what’s on their mind, share my experiences or provide transportation.

I believe that giving them the time they need to understand themselves is the single most important foundation I can give them in their search for a joyful life.

To Feel Confident Making Choices

Freedom of time, so abundant in life learning, also allows our children to gain lots of experience making choices and living the outcomes. From choices as simple as what to have for breakfast, when they are tired and want to go to sleep, to bigger ones like whether to join Scouts or the local baseball league, take the time to help them figure it all out. It takes more time to give children choices – to discuss the options, the possible outcomes, time to decide which choice is best for them – than just to tell them what to do, but how else are they going to gain real experience at it? By remembering what choice you made for them last time? What will they do when they encounter a new situation and you are not right there to tell them what choice to make?

Many of us grew up that way: Our well-intentioned parents telling us what to do instead of discussing our options and ultimately letting us decide – without the guilt trip if we chose a different path. Then we may remember the heady but scary feeling of first being on our own – free to choose what to eat, what to do, to stay up all night – our time truly our own for the first time. But at that point we had moved out and had to figure it out all on our own. Which choices were truly best for us? Which were we making in reaction to our parents? Which were we making just to get along with our friends? And even with the voices in our heads (and maybe as a result of them), it took quite a while – a lot longer for some.

I don’t want to be that nagging voice in my child’s head as she gets older. I want to spend

time with her now helping her analyze situations, possible options, likely outcomes. And supporting her decision, helping her figure out how to make choices, not what choices to make. Then when she's older that voice in her head can be her own. Though I won't mind if she occasionally hears my loving reminders that she knows what's best for her, that I trust her.

And on the other side of this coin: Children who have the freedom to try on different hats, pursue different goals and activities, and discard them when they no longer make sense, do not feel like a failure when choosing to drop something. They see it as another experience from which to learn a bit about something and a lot about themselves. This is a much better attitude than the child who is forced to stay, being told to "suck it up" and "stick it out", who feels powerless and resentful - but the lesson is learned. As an adult this child is more likely, for example, to stay in an unhappy career so as not to look or feel like a failure, though he will definitely feel trapped - not the joyful life I hope for my children.

"What work have I got to do, then?" said Will, but went on at once, "No, on second thought, don't tell me. I shall decide what I do. If you say my work is fighting, or healing, or exploring, or whatever you might say, I'll always be thinking about it. And if I do end up doing that, I'll be resentful because it'll feel as if I didn't have a choice, and if I don't do it, I'll feel guilty because I should. Whatever I do, I will choose it, no one else."

"Then you have already taken the first steps towards wisdom," said Zaphania.

This quote from *The Amber Spyglass* by Philip Pullman sums up human nature so succinctly, and describes what life learning parents are trying to do - give their children the freedom to determine their own life's journey. And through each choice made and outcome lived, our children gain experience with making choices and in turn learn a bit more about themselves. In this way my first two goals are inextricably linked, but I believe each is important enough to stand on its own.

To Feel Comfortable Learning New Skills

And my last goal is for them to feel comfortable learning new skills. It is in this area that they pick up the day-to-day skills they need to achieve their goals in life. They want to accomplish something and they are motivated to learn whatever is needed to get them there. Here they also encounter the more academic skills like reading, math and writing.

And here's another big difference between life learning and school - in school the focus is on the skills: Learning to read is in itself a goal, learning the times tables, learning the capital cities. But stuck within the confines of the school's four walls, kids find it hard to understand why they might want to learn many of these things. Those subjects are completely disconnected from the kids' goals. In school they are disconnected from life. And without the connection to real-life goals, learning these skills is all the more difficult. "Why do I need to know this?" is a common refrain, and for good reason. They need something to connect it to, some way for it to make sense in their world and with that gain understanding and real learning.

So at our house, the goal is not learning to read. But if the goal is to immerse yourself in the world of Harry Potter, you'll likely learn a lot about reading along the way. We don't have learning percentages as a goal. But if the goal is to make a well-rounded party that can defeat the final boss in your video game, an understanding of percentages and data management is pretty crucial. This learning is really incidental to the goal - just stepping stones, something to figure out along the way - but it is real learning; it makes sense in their world and has a purpose. And they truly enjoy it because it helps them accomplish their goal. Learning is fun!

I have heard people exclaim, "But what if they don't encounter a skill that they really need to know?" To which I say, "Then obviously they truly don't need it; it really wasn't necessary - yet. Or maybe ever." Without the timeline and curricula of schools there is no "start" and "end" to learning. Learning is really a byproduct of pursuing goals and interests in life - and that is a lifelong thing. There is nothing wrong with not encountering a need to learn some algebra until the age of 25. If that's when they find a use for it, that's when they can learn it! And it will make sense and be remembered because there is a real-life reason for it. Even in school, if there's no real need for a skill in a student's life (long division? historical dates? the periodic table?) they will most likely memorize it for the test and within a few weeks it is forgotten. It is questionable whether or not they actually learned or understood it at all.

So how do I help my children feel comfortable learning new things? Basically the same way I help them learn about themselves: By being there to talk to and bounce ideas off of, by sharing what I know (maybe pointing out new connections they may not have yet noticed), by helping them gather more information if they want it and by providing any "stuff" to help them pursue their interests further.

With my goal of helping my children as they learn the skills they need to pursue their goals, they are gaining experience and learning how to learn. I can't predict what they may want to learn some day, but lots of experience in figuring out how to gather information and piece it together will help them build their unique view of the world over their lifetime. It's not about telling them what to learn, but helping them figure out how to learn. As futurist

Alvin Toffler put it: “The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, un-learn and relearn.”

Looking at my kids today, I tell myself that they are already living joyful lives! They do understand themselves, they are confident making their own choices (just try to convince them otherwise!) and I see them learning new things every day in pursuit of their interests and goals. Maybe my real job is to keep that spirit alive as they get older, to keep their authentic self shining brightly by protecting them from or countering those who would toss well-meaning (in their view) handfuls of sand on their soul.

It seems to me that extending life learning principles beyond academic bounds and living these goals with my children gives them a much more useful outlook on life - and a lot more self-knowledge and life skills to start with - than the one offered by school and traditional parenting practices. One that has a better chance of bringing them a joyful life. And that was my goal from the beginning.

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Next - Section Four - Chapter 22 - “Unexpected Benefits of Unschooling” by Sandra Dodd