

Chapter 22 – Unexpected Benefits of Unschooling

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Unexpected Benefits of Unschooling

by Sandra Dodd

As I write, my children are 18, 21, and 23 years old. They are in Quebec, New Mexico, and Texas. I have time to review the effects of nearly twenty years of living without school in our lives. There were some unforeseen joys, and they continue to arise.

In 1991, my firstborn child was five. His brother was three and I had just had a baby girl. My husband Keith and I started unschooling our oldest, not planning anything big or long-term. We had no fears or rancor, just thought school wouldn't be a good match for Kirby that year, with his personality.

Within months, I was confident that he wasn't going to have any problem learning if he never went to school. I had expected to see him learn the things kindergarten children learn, only in fun and creative ways. Of course, the learning happened smoothly and naturally, and didn't limit itself to anything based on age or grade level. But that's not what surprised me.

I didn't expect this to change my children's ability to make eye contact with people. It surprised me that they always had friends in such a range of ages, from younger children to young adults. Their discussions with adults were not scripted or small. They spoke directly, and kindly, with gravity or humor as the situation required.

I assumed they would be calmer and less damaged, but the extent of their self-possessed calm surpassed any imagining. They could be both sweetly childlike and truly mature all at once. It wasn't false maturity.

I didn't expect them to learn so much without me. Anyone who is involved in natural learning for any length of time can find it difficult to summarize what children have learned academically, because each child's knowledge comes from such varied sources and is fit together uniquely.

At first, though, I thought I wouldn't miss a single thing. Then I totally missed them learning Roman numerals, which they learned from the names of a series of MegaMan video games. I was jealous of that “Mega-Man” guy, at first. I felt cheated out of the fun of seeing their eyes light up. But in thinking about that feeling, I realized that if life is a busy, happy swirl, they will learn. Learning is guaranteed. The range and content will vary, but the learning

will happen.

I didn't know how much people could learn without reading. As their reading ability unfolded and grew, I learned things I never knew as a teacher, and that I wouldn't have learned as an unschooling mom had they happened to have read "early." Reading is not a prerequisite for learning. Maps can be understood without knowing many words. Movies, music, museums, and TV can fill a person with visions, knowledge, experiences and connections, regardless of whether or not the person reads.

Animals respond to people the same way whether the person can read or not. People can draw and paint whether they can read or not. Non-readers can recite poetry, act in plays, learn lyrics, rhyme, play with words, and talk about all sorts of topics at length.

When school says children who can't read can't learn, what they really mean is children who can't read can't get good grades in school. Learning is quite a different thing, as it turns out!

I didn't expect my children to be offered jobs they didn't even apply for. I know it doesn't happen with everyone, but there are other life learners, too, who have found that being around a wide range of people and being involved in a variety of activities has brought opportunities to show responsibility and helpful energy even at a young age. Each of my children had opportunities to do meaningful work in their mid-teens, at jobs in which there were things to learn.

Kirby was offered a job in a gaming store when he turned fourteen. They hired him to run the Saturday morning *Pokémon* league, and gradually increased his hours. When he was sixteen, he was legally able to open and close, so he had keys to the store. They would send him to *Magic the Gathering* tournaments to represent the shop (sell supplies) or to judge the games.

Marty, our second son, was offered a job at fifteen, helping make boots and leather bags for historical re-enactors. He worked there for over a year and learned a great deal. Part of the training was to make a pair of boots for himself and to wear them, so he knew what they felt like and what could go wrong. He still has those boots, and resoled them himself.

At fifteen and sixteen, Holly babysat the children of an unschooling mom in grad school for a while. She stayed at their home and took care of the house, kids and dogs, and took the girls places outside the house, too.

All three of my teenaged offspring subsequently had jobs they applied for: phone tech support, grocery store, flower shop, skateboard shop, pizza parlor, Persian restaurant. Having had a job before was helpful in each case. Most of those jobs lasted over a year. When they moved on, the owners were always sorry to see them go.

I didn't know that our relationships could stay so good even when they were teenagers. My original expectation was that when they were teens they would be frustrated and rebellious and wild, because I thought that was hormonally inevitable.

A side benefit of having been partners rather than adversaries was that the “normal teen behavior” turned out not to have been “natural,” and in contrast to what I was seeing in unschooled teens, it started to look like very sensible reactions to a barrage of arbitrary rules and limitations. The communications and trust continued to build within our family, rather than to erode over the years.

I didn't know they would be so compassionate and courageous. Partly, they weren't taught to be cold and mean by school prejudices, cliques, bullies, and impatient teachers. Looking back at my own childhood, the things I regret having done were nearly always instigated by a friend in school. And I was a pretty strong-willed kid.

Partly, they have had a gentle life, and harshness surprised them when they saw it.

I've heard stories from all of them, and sometimes seen myself, that they would physically and verbally assist other children who were afraid or feeling embarrassed. It happened in homes, parks, fast-food playgrounds, and as they got older it happened at campouts, and parties, and walking around in public.

Marty broke off a friendship when he was nine, because he didn't like the way the friend treated the younger brother when Marty was visiting. Marty played with the younger brother too, and wanted to include him, but it just made the older boy even more cruel to his brother. As a younger brother himself, Marty was unwillingly to be a catalyst for the situation, and stopped visiting.

Some of the stories involved asking an adult to act differently. That felt very brave to me, because of the way I grew up. But my children saw it as assisting another child, not as “talking back” to or challenging an adult. I was impressed at what seemed like courage to me but was normal behavior for them.

I didn't expect to like to lose arguments. I enjoy it when my kids win an argument with me or Keith. We've laughed about that later when we're alone. Keith used to be bothered by it when they were little. At first, he was surprised each time he saw them arguing, thinking they should be more respectful of my stated opinions or suggestions. I told him I figured if they could win arguments with me, they'd do okay for themselves out in the world. That made sense to him, so he started willingly engaging them in “yeah, but...” kinds of discussions, and as time passed we all got better at it and clearer about our priorities. We knew each other better, too, and had more knowledge of and respect for the intellectual abilities of everyone in the family.

I didn't know I would be so accepting of kids saying "no." We have a large, funky piece of furniture Keith built years ago – a corner shelf with three electrical outlets built in. It needed to be moved, and we were considering taking it to the dump.

As I was unloading my sewing supplies and cloth from that onto a new shelf, I became nostalgic. It's big and bulky, but it used to be our stereo shelf, and held the turntable and speakers and tapes. And it would hold Marty's TV and Playstation, I thought. And Marty had been talking about getting an old couch out of his room.

We asked Marty if he wanted it. He did.

"Now?"

"Not right now."

Oh. He can take it in a few days.

Marty had good reasons to wait and we were just as calm with a kid saying "wait" as we would've been with one of us saying it to the other adult partner.

I think most parents would have said, "No, we're doing it now; stop what you're doing, cancel your plans for tomorrow, it's our house..." and by all that the furniture would've been imbued with sorrow and frustration. The parents would have thought less of the kid, the kid thought less of the parents, and so in on several directions. But we really listened to Marty. We knew him well enough to know he was making a thoughtful, honest decision. It's hard not to respect that.

I didn't expect it to make things so sweet between me and Keith. Partly Keith is just a nice guy, but principles that applied to the kids applied to the adults, too, and we all experienced and shared more patience and understanding.

Being compassionate about kids' changes helped us respond to our own and each others' needs and changes.

The first time Kirby saw me, the day he was born, he gave me a look Keith had been giving me for eight years already, that I used to interpret as "a dirty look." After I saw it on Kirby, I stopped thinking it was mean and personal when I saw it on my husband. It was a thoughtful look.

The more I got to know Marty, the more I saw his genetic similarities to his dad, and because I was sympathetic to those traits in Marty which had bothered me in Keith, I became more sympathetic and understanding of Keith. Also, because Marty and Keith were so similar, I started seeing how different Keith might have been if his parents hadn't been less strict and more attentive.

Keith and I have been together for thirty-two years and married for twenty-six years. One of the things that strengthened our relationship was the personal satisfaction of seeing that together we had brought up some really great kids, by being steadfast and courageous even though friends and relatives sometimes thought we had no idea what we were doing and should put those kids in school.

I didn't expect unschooling to make the grocery store so fun. When I had babies and toddlers, the store was like a museum. We could go slowly and look at things we didn't even intend to buy. We would weigh things, just to use the scales. Sometimes I took two carts - one for the baby and the groceries, and one for the younger kids. I would push one and pull the other, and we would talk, plan the day, and tell stories.

When Holly was fourteen or so, a grocery store just a few hundred yards out our back gate had a grand opening. I didn't know there would be a ribbon-cutting, or we would have gone a little bit earlier. We did see the giant scissors and the leftover ribbon, and the podium where the speech had been made. She was the only teen there, as it was a weekday morning.

There was live music (classical guitarist doing some local music, and some jazz and pop too). There was a big "congratulations" cake. There were flowers being handed out. The store was perfect. Everything was amazingly arranged, and when I told the manager how beautiful the produce was and that I thought nobody would buy any today because nobody would want to mess it up, he laughed and admitted it was pretty wonderful. He said it took eight people to do that, and even the green beans were laid in individually. I was talking about the peppers, which were clearly laid in as people do mortarless stonework, taking the shape of each pepper into consideration.

Everyone was being nice to everyone else even though it was crowded and the carts were nearly all being used. The kids we saw besides Holly were very young. Strangers were cooing over babies, and oohing over the beauty of the inner remodeling done on that old building. Flagstone columns. Mexican tile. It was as exciting a trip to a grocery store as I will ever hope for.

Holly went to the store hungry, and of all the foods in the world she could bring back for breakfast she wanted microwaveable pizza. Although I tried to talk her into fresh orange sweet rolls or donuts from the new bakery, she said (in front of two older women who were listening to the whole conversation), "No, I don't want anything sweet. I just want the pizza."

I didn't expect to see school so differently. "School is what you make of it," they used to say. I can see some possibilities in that, but school is only so soft, and only so safe. What I made of it, when I was a kid, was a contest. I usually won easily. I didn't expect my ongoing

review of school to make me wish I had not walked through those races. I wish other kids had won more. Part of that is free-floating guilt and shame. My success created someone else's failure, because schools are competitive in many different ways.

I didn't expect unschooling to create a shameless life, but one day I said to Holly, jokingly, "Aren't you ashamed?" As verbal as she is, that was a new word to her. She didn't know what "ashamed" meant. She was twelve or thirteen.

When I was young, people used to say, "You should be ashamed" to each other, and to me, and around me. And I was ashamed - I just hadn't found the reason for it yet. Shame is like an indwelling virus that surfaces when we're weak, once it's in there.

I didn't know that people could grow up without having a wad of shame inside them, waiting to surface. Then I saw my children grow up, whole and strong and not ashamed.

I didn't expect this to improve my relationships with pets. I noticed one morning that I was really patient with my irritating cat. We've long been sweeter with our current dog than we ever were with a dog before, and somewhat the cats too, but usually I hiss at the cat to get away from me when he gets in my face early in the morning and this morning I told myself that the cat can't open a can, and he's excited that I'm awake, and the dog probably ate their canned food, so I just very calmly followed him in there and fed him and he was very happy. I doubt it's my last frontier; it's just a recent frontier.

We leave food down for our dog. A favorite neighbor dog used to come in and have some. When a friend house-sat for us, she was surprised that our dog and cats didn't mind her dog eating from their dishes. Usually, her dog is fed separately, and finishes it all immediately. Ours know there will be some more later, so they only eat when they're hungry.

I didn't know it would affect the way I care for my yard. I successfully grew moonflowers, which bloomed at night. Many sources recommended nicking the seeds. I soaked them instead, and they sprouted and grew beautifully. Nicking the seeds sounded like something very likely to go against Nature. How did I know which part of the seed was cuttable? My boys weren't circumcised, and I didn't nick my seeds.

A good analogy for helping children grow in their own ways is the growth of trees from seed. An apple seed cannot grow an oak tree. Each seed has within it all it needs to know what kind of roots and leaves it will make. What young trees need is good soil, enough water, and protection from damage.

We have trees I planted from seed. They're as tall as my house. I would not have thought I would have the patience for that, but something changed. I decided all I would do would be to collect the seeds, one day when we were at a homeschool gathering at a park. Then I

thought I would just see if they would sprout. Some did.

I wondered what the baby trees would look like. They grew. I transplanted them into the yard after a couple of years, accepting that they might perish. They lived.

I was a little surprised to find out how much of unschooling is doing, rather than just not doing. Unschoolers are not sitting in the back corner of the homeschooling world doing nothing. We're doing something profound and direct.

Unschoolers have experiences other homeschoolers don't have. Unschoolers know things that teachers cannot learn in or around school.

Unschoolers who start early enough can have relationships with their children for which there are hardly any words.

I have no sons- or daughters-in-law yet. I have no grandchildren. I'm not through learning how my children's lives will turn out. At some point, I won't be there to witness it anymore, but I'm happier with the outcome than I ever imagined I could have been when we started.

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