

How to Unschool

Written by Pam Sorooshian.

- 1. Give your love generously and criticism sparingly.** Be your children's partner. Support them and respect them. Never belittle them or their interests, no matter how superficial, unimportant, or even misguided their interests may seem to you. Be a guide, not a dictator. Shine a light ahead for them, and lend them a hand, but don't drag or push them. You will sometimes despair when your vision of what your child ought to be bangs up against the reality that they are their own person. But that same reality can also give you great joy if you learn not to cling to your own preconceived notions and expectations.
- 2. Provide a rich environment.** Unschooled children who grow up in a stimulating and enriched environment surrounded by family and friends who are generally interested and interesting, will learn all kinds of things and repeatedly surprise you with what they know. If they are supported in following their own passions, they will build strengths upon strengths and excel in their own ways whether that is academic, artistic, athletic, interpersonal, or whichever direction that particular child develops. One thing leads to another. A passion for playing in the dirt at six can become a passion for protecting the natural environment at 16 and a career as a forest ranger as an adult. You just never know where those childhood interests will eventually lead. Be careful not to squash them; instead, nurture them.
- 3. Bring the world to your children and your children to the world.** Revel in what brings you together as a family. Watch TV and movies and listen to music and the radio. Laugh together, cry together, be shocked together. Analyze and critique and think together about what you experience. Notice what your child loves and offer more of it, not less. What is it about particular shows that engage your child – build on that. Don't operate out of fear. Think for yourself and about your own real child. Don't be swayed by pseudo studies done on school children.
- 4. Surround your child with text of all kinds and he/she will learn to read.** Read to them, read in front of them, help them, don't push them. Children allowed to learn on their own timetable do learn to read at widely divergent times – there is no right time for all children. Some learn to read at three years old and others at 12 or even older. It doesn't matter. Children who are not yet reading are still learning – support their learning in their own way. Pushing children to try to learn to read before they are developmentally ready is probably a major cause of long-term antipathy toward reading, at best, and reading disabilities, at worst.
- 5. It doesn't matter when something is learned.** It is perfectly all right for a person to learn all about dinosaurs when they are 40; they don't have to learn it when they are 9. It

is perfectly all right to learn to do long division at 16 – they do not have to learn that at 9, either. It does not get more difficult to learn most things later; it gets easier.

6. Don't worry about how fast or slow they are learning. Don't test them to see if they are "up to speed." If you nurture them in a supportive environment, your children will grow and learn at their own speed, and you can trust in that process. They are like seeds planted in good earth, watered and fertilized. You don't keep digging up the seeds to see if the roots are growing – that disrupts the natural growing process. Trust your children in the same way you trust seeds to sprout and seedlings to develop into strong and healthy plants.

7. Think about what is *really* important and keep that always in the forefront of your interactions with your children. What values do you hope to pass on to them? You can't pass on something you don't exemplify yourself. Treat them the way you want them to treat others. Do you want respect? Be respectful. Do you want responsibility from them? Be responsible. Think of how you look to them, from their perspective. Do you order them around? Is that respectful? Do you say, "I'll be just a minute" and then take 20 more minutes talking to a friend while the children wait? Is that responsible? Focus more on your own behavior than on theirs. It'll pay off bigger.

8. Let kids learn. Don't protect them or control them so much that they don't get needed experience. But, don't use the excuse of "natural consequences" to teach them a lesson. Instead, exemplify kindness and consideration. If you see a toy left lying in the driveway, don't leave it there to be run over, pick it up and set it aside because that is the kind and considerate thing to do and because kindness and consideration are values you want to pass on to your kids. Natural consequences will happen; they are inevitable. But it isn't "natural" anymore if you could have prevented it, but chose not to do so.

9. We can't always fix everything for our kids or save them from every hurt. It can be a delicate balancing act – when should we intervene, when should we stay out of the way? Empathy goes a long, long way and may often be all your child needs or wants. Be available to offer more, but let your child be your guide. Maybe your child wants guidance, ideas, support, or intervention. Maybe not. Sometimes the best thing you can offer is distraction.

10. Be sensitive to your child's interest level. Don't push activities that your child isn't interested in pursuing. Don't let *your* interests dictate your child's opportunities. If your child wants a pet, be realistic and don't demand promises that the child will take sole care for it. Plan to care for it yourself when the interest wanes. Do it cheerfully. Model the joy of caring for animals. Model kindness and helpfulness. Help a child by organizing their toys so they are easy to care for. Plan to care for them yourself much of the time, but invite your child's help in ways that are appealing. If *you* act like you hate organizing and

cleaning, why would your child want to do it? Always openly enjoy the results of caring for your possessions – take note of the extra space to play in, the ease of finding things you want, how nice it is to reach into a cupboard and find clean dishes. Enjoy housework together and don't make it a battle.

11. Don't pass on your own fears and hates about learning anything. If you hate or fear math, keep it to yourself. Act like it is the most fun thing in the world. Cuddle up and do math in the same way you cuddle up and read together. Play games, make it fun. If you can't keep your own negativity at bay, at least try to do no harm by staying out of it.

12. Don't try to "make kids think." They *will* think; you don't have to make them. Don't use every opportunity to force them to learn something. They *will* learn something at every opportunity, you don't have to force it. Don't answer a question by telling them to "look it up" or by asking them another question. If you know the answer, give it. If you don't, then help them find it. Speculating about an answer often leads to a good conversation. If your child stops seeing you as helpful when they have questions, they'll stop coming to you with their questions. Is that what you really want?

13. When you offer a child choices, be sure they are real choices. Offer them choices as often as you can. Try to limit the "have to's" as much as you can. Frequently ask yourself, "Is this really a "have to" situation or can we find some choices here?"

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