

It's Time to Unschool the Unschooling Movement!



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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](#).

Well, that’s it. I’ve sworn off online unschooling groups again. It’s happened before, for precisely the same reasons. Every couple of years I get it in my head that perhaps things have improved in those circles, but it always degenerates quickly. As long as one follows precisely the prescribed unschooling format, things seem to go along swimmingly. But if you ever find yourself in any kind of struggle, beware.

It usually starts out with a whole boatload of people telling you that you’re not providing enough love, understanding, compassion, freedom, etc., or that you’re otherwise lacking in parental capability. You’ll be told over and over again that if you just “stick to the principles,” everything WILL work out. If it isn’t working for you, you’re not doing it correctly, or you’re not doing it hard enough (or both). There’s usually a mildly patronizing tone, as though you are being patted on the head like a cute but stupid puppy, as you’re reassured that once you’ve had more experience, things will be better (aww, poor little noob!). If you, like myself, are silly enough to assert that it’s not always so simple, that all circumstances and families are different, and that there is not in fact one perfect formula that works for everyone (or if anyone else is ballsy enough to chime in and suggest something similar), all hell will start to break loose, and the discussion often quickly devolves into scolding, censorship, and even outright attacks on the person who came looking for help.

I find this simultaneously heartbreaking and interesting.

Heartbreaking, because to me it seems glaringly obvious that when someone comes to you seeking help and advice, they are probably in dire need of the much touted love, compassion, and understanding. And, you know, maybe a bit of help, for good measure? Perhaps even a suggestion that -gasp!- doesn’t involve making the person feel guilty that no matter how much heart and soul they’ve poured into it, their best just isn’t good

enough? If it weren't so sad, it would actually be kind of amusing: for a group of people who pride themselves on living "outside the box," there are some pretty strict rules in unschooling circles. For a group of people who generally emphasize acceptance and celebrate diversity, we can be astonishingly narrow-minded. A common theme that is reprised in peaceful parenting and unschooling circles is that it is counterproductive to make kids feel bad in order to try to get them to behave better. Now, I know what you're thinking, because I am too: why, pray tell, does this cease to apply to other adults? My advice? If you ask for input on an online unschooling forum, please be advised that it would be best to first don your sturdiest flame-proof suit. (Time and frustration-saving hint: if you encounter any sort of difficulty in your unschooling journey, it's your fault. Try harder.)

Interesting, because I can't help but wonder, why is this the state of things? Is it because most of us have spent the majority of our existence being told, in both overt and subtle ways, to seek the "right" answers? Is it possible that we're not even aware of our own assumptions? We ourselves are a product of our culture: conventional parenting, social norms, public school. When we start to break out of the mental mold we've been raised in, we start to look around for better ways of doing things. Many of us may try different educational techniques and methods with our kids, as our understanding of their needs evolves. When we find unschooling, it can feel like we've finally found it. The One Thing that will Fix Everything. It makes sense, in theory, but when we seize on any one method and follow it rigidly, we forget something very important: every family, every child, and every situation is different. Standardizing our parenting approach or reading from a "script" of strict unschooling principles is not always equal to the endless complexities of everyday life. To expect, or to insist that others should expect that there is an educational or parenting equation, a formula for child rearing, that when consistently applied, will work at all times for all children in all families is, in reality, a bit facile. My experience certainly suggests otherwise. And you know what? I'm not the only one who's noticed this. But this is a Big Secret in the unschooling world. If you dare to suggest in most public unschooling forums that, for example, talking and asking children politely sometimes isn't enough to fix a problem, you will be shamed. If you hint that perhaps there just isn't a clear-cut solution, and that no matter how much love and trust there is between two people, sometimes people behave and treat each other poorly, you will be asked to shut up. If you actually have the guts to say, hey, this was my experience, and the only thing that helped was to draw a line or create a boundary, you will be criticized, and even potentially asked to leave. There just is not room in most corners of this community to discuss what you're supposed to do when you've tried everything, given it all you've got and more, and it's just not working. The worst part is hearing from people that will send you a personal message and tell you their story. They are often too afraid to speak up anymore.

Maybe some part of it is due to the fact that unschooling is starting to gain more and more mainstream attention? There are more and more people out there, acting as voices of a

sort for the rest of us, and more and more attention is being paid to unschooling as a viable educational alternative (or not). Those of us who believe it's the best way to raise our kids, naturally want to show its best face. We want everyone to see just how amazing things can be when you step outside the conventional paradigm. But in our haste to polish our delivery for public consumption, what are we glossing over?

I think this does a grave disservice to the potential of unschooling itself, and creates disillusioned and burned-out parents. I think it puts pressure, even if unintentionally, on children to prove our methods right. The thing that I have realized, after 12 years in the trenches, is something I should have kept in mind all along: you simply can't ever control how another human being develops. You can influence, you can guide, and the parenting style you choose will most likely contribute to the shaping of your children's personalities. But in the end, the choice is theirs. Some children, perhaps even most children, will embrace the freedom and opportunities that the unschooling lifestyle offers. Some will live harmoniously with their families, with open communication and mutual respect. People who have this experience seem to believe that all children will respond in this way. But I am here to tell you that some will not. I am not the only one who has found this. But- and this is a big but- as hard as it may be for some of us to swallow, after spending years believing it like gospel, this is as it should be. After all, expecting kids to conform to a nonconformist lifestyle is pretty ridiculous, don't you think? The value of freedom should not rest in its ability to produce always-moral, judicious people. Unschooling must ultimately place value on the freedom to quit, to fail, to make poor choices, even to reject the unschooling lifestyle and mindset completely, or else it was never be freedom at all.

I think that, in order for unschooling to thrive into the future, instead of fizzling out before it really gets going, we need to do something really, really important: we need to embrace honesty. We need to work toward creating a culture around unschooling that doesn't shame people for struggling or scold them for disagreeing. We need to be willing to have frank and open discussions about our obstacles, and we need safe circumstances in which to do so. We need to be brave enough to admit that due to the diversity of the human experience, there will likely never be One Right Way to do this or anything else. If instead we continue to emphasize orthodoxy and dogma, not only will the larger movement tend to stagnate, but innovation into new and improved ways of living with our children will be largely stifled.

It's time to apply unschooling principles not just to children, but to the way we think about and relate to the unschooling community as a whole; in other words, it's time to unschool the unschooling movement. It's time to realize that "living outside the box" isn't enough. We need to realize there is no box at all, just people, struggling to find the best possible way to live our lives.