

No Matter What You Hear About it, Unschooling is Not All Unicorns and Rainbows



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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](#).

There’s been a lot of upheaval in my family over the past few months, and this column is somewhat painful for me to write. Nevertheless, I think it’s important that unschoolers share their experiences, both positive and negative, in order that others know that it is normal if things are not magically perfect and all their problems are not automatically fixed and difficulties avoided by unschooling. We face many of the same struggles as other families, but have to find creative ways to solve problems, while eschewing force or coercion. Sometimes the most positive approach, difficult though it may be, is learning to change our attitudes and expectations.

We have, as a species, mostly strayed quite a distance from human evolutionary needs when it comes to childrearing, often with some very troubling results. Some of us, having watched our infants become toddlers and our toddlers become young children, and witnessing the amazing power of small people to explore and learn about our world, find that as ‘school age’ approaches, we have very grave doubts about the necessity of packing kids off to an institution to spend their days being told what to learn, when, and how. Some of those, who just can’t quite comprehend what magic occurs at the age of five and turns kids from high adventurers, apparently quite suddenly, into apathetic layabouts who must be forced continue their explorations, decide that we will try to find a more suitable way for our children to grow to adulthood.

Some of us manage to table our doubts for a bit – after all, **everyone knows** that school is a modern miracle, responsible for lifting people from poverty, encouraging the development of higher thought, and is absolutely the only way to create healthy, well-rounded citizens, right? Besides, who wants to deal with the nightmare of curriculum, paperwork, schedules, and all that extra work piled on top of everything else on our never-

ending lists of things to do? Imagine the untold horrors of trying to teach a child to read, for goodness' sakes! Surely the whole thing is best left to professionals! So we tuck our doubts away, decide that this is the best route, and send them off. But the doubts remain, in the backs of our minds, often mingling with our own unhappy memories of school days, and as we watch the excited sparkle in our child's eyes dim as enthusiasm turns to resignation, we realize the terrible error we've made, and remove them from the halls of institutionalized learning, vowing to find a healthier way for them to grow.

However we come to the journey of unschooling, we have generally rejected the educational *status quo*. We look for better ways of living and learning with our children, and we realize that they are more likely to turn into well-adjusted adults if we treat them with respect, take them seriously, facilitate their interests, talk to them with honesty, and do our best to help them retain their autonomy. But because there is such a huge disconnect between our modern culture and our evolutionary nature, this is a pioneering path that we walk, and there are times that we can feel alone and unsure about our choices. So we gobble up books about child psychology and development, about education, about attachment – anything that seems like it might be pertinent and useful to us. We also seek out people, via homeschool groups, email lists, online forums, and wherever else we can find someone who shares our views. We talk and discuss ideas, encourage each other, share triumphs and information, and give support when someone's struggling. But the common thread here is that we are, all of us, trying to create a new and improved way for children to become adults in our society.

Because we are re-inventing the proverbial educational wheel, we have to rely fairly heavily on trial and error. Theory is one thing; practice is something else altogether, and sometimes we have to try out different ways of putting theory into practice until we fine-tune our methods and find precisely what works within our own households. Those who have walked ahead of us are eager to share what they've discovered, but they are few, and each family's experience is unique. One could accurately observe that unschooling is one grand experiment.

As a culture, we don't yet have enough experience to be sure what the results of our experiment will be; there are simply not enough people who have grown up in unschooling homes for us to draw firm conclusions about outcomes. We take what we know of theory, use what we've learned, and follow our instincts to guess how our grown children might turn out. There are a lot of things that we, in our naivete, assume, and not all of these things always turn out to be true. We see the possibilities, and we imagine how wonderful things can be; and we feel pressure from those who don't quite understand what we're attempting to do, which causes us to feel defensive. As a result, there are many claims made that my years as an unschooling parent don't necessarily affirm as ultimate truth.

I've heard it repeated often that among other things, keeping children out of school will

ensure that siblings will learn to get along; that children will learn to read prolifically and with great enjoyment; that they will establish a balanced way of eating and sleeping; that they will naturally regulate their time watching television or playing video games; that they will joyfully participate in the care and upkeep of the house, including cleaning and possibly even cooking; that they will enjoy trying new things; that they will learn to be kind, understanding, patient and respectful; that they will even, I've heard it claimed, listen to your counsel, and generally share your values.

But what happens when none of these things turn out to be true? What if, having lived their childhoods completely unschooled and without coercion, our children grow up and wish they'd been raised as 'normal' children? What if they reject every value we have attempted to pass on to them, and go on to make decisions that we strongly disagree with, or even think are wrong, or damaging? Can we say that unschooling has failed, or that it is a worthless lifestyle? I don't believe so, but my experience has led me through quite a struggle to make this judgment.

Something that people on this journey seem to either commonly forget, or else intentionally gloss over, is that every single child is a unique individual. You wouldn't think that we'd forget it, being as it is a foundational part of the reasoning behind unschooling itself. The things that are commonly claimed seem to imply that although every child is different, is interested in different things, and progresses at their own pace, they will all develop in more or less the same fundamental ways. Perhaps this is based on our desire to match learning environments to evolutionary needs, thereby assuming fulfillment of common evolutionary traits, but it fails to take into consideration that we live in a world that is far from our native habitat, and doesn't admit that we don't, in all honesty, have any idea what the end result of combining natural education with modern society will be. It is impossible to predict ahead of time how any one child, regardless of educational experience, will turn out. We would do well, however, to remember that especially as a result of the way they've been raised, every single one will turn out differently, with a strong sense of self, and an uncommon ability to think outside the usual confines. Sometimes, their opinions may vary greatly from our own, and their experiences (due, undoubtedly, in part, to the fact that we are all imperfect parents) will inform their decisions going forward, and may cause them to make different decisions than we would wish for them to make. Sometimes they may decide to follow paths that break our hearts.

It can be easy in this situation to decide that raising our children in freedom has not in fact been worth the cost, in terms of time, emotional and financial investment, and frequently, lost relationships with friends and/or loved ones, who have decided that we have forsaken all reason, and chosen not to be part of our, or our children's, lives. I have spent more time than I care to think about deep in the grip of despair, and I won't claim to be completely settled emotionally, but I have finally come to the decision that my time, energy, and love

were not in fact wasted, even though things have turned out in many ways, very, very far from the way I'd imagined or hoped. In the end, though, the choices my children make as adults are not my fault, nor my responsibility, and their destiny is their own. My hope is only that they will find the paths that lead them to being the happiest, most joyous and fulfilled versions of themselves, even if their paths lead them through places I'd rather they never had to go, and where I'm not entirely comfortable joining them.

I don't regret for a moment pouring my heart and soul into raising my children the way I have, and my enthusiasm for raising children in this manner is not dimmed. But I think we owe it to ourselves and to them to be open-minded and realistic with our expectations, and realize the possibility that their future lives may be very, very different than anything we could ever imagine. The best we can do is the best we can do, and I don't believe that allowing children to grow in freedom and to determine their own destinies is ever wasted, no matter the outcome. Give them your best, and hope for the best. The rest is outside your control, as it truly should be.

While those of you with younger children find your own rhythm and truth, grow and learn and improve on the practices of those who have gone ahead, and dream the about the amazing adventures you will no doubt experience, I'll be out here, walking ahead, sharing what I learn, and watching in curiosity and hope to see how things turn out. And my journey is far from over.