

Unsanctimonious Unschooling



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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](#).

I am an unschooler, and I am not perfect. There, I said it. My secret's out; there's no sense in pretending. And what's more? I don't even want to be.

This is a relatively new perspective for me, and one that seems to be underrepresented in the unschooling community as a whole. That's not to say that maybe some of us don't think it; but most of us don't say it out loud very often, and we certainly don't proclaim it from the rooftops (try googling "unschooling not perfect," and you'll notice there don't seem to be too many people shouting it out!).

There seems to be an awful lot of pressure on us unschoolers. We not only have to cope with most of the same challenges that "mainstream" parents face, juggling chores, errands, appointments, nap-times, arguments, our own needs (ha!), etc., but since we don't abdicate responsibility for our children's education, we willingly take on an entire additional set of challenges, and they can sometimes be overwhelming. Our lives are far outside of the "norm." We have no authority to look to for answers, and no book that tells us what to do and when. Consequently, we also bear the burden of pressure from both our critics and our peers.

There are more people that don't understand this approach than do, and it can be exhausting, always facing skepticism, criticism, and interrogation about our choices. Being on the defensive, as so many of us have sometimes found ourselves to be, gets old quick. We tend to "circle the wagons" against the people that accuse us of being idiotically naive or ruining our children's lives. I get that. We want to present the best possible picture of unschooling to people who are baffled by or critical of it. That's probably a good thing; after all, someone who's already on the attack may very well decide their critique of unschooling is correct if all we can muster is a wishy-washy, noncommittal mumbling. Put your best foot forward, and all that...

On the other hand, most of us aren't in this situation accidentally. We have read more books than you can shake the proverbial stick at; spent countless (!) hours on the Internet, gobbling up blog and forum posts, participating in group discussions and learning about everything from child development to attachment theory to various flavors of psychology; and agonized over making this decision for our families. We do this because we have a strong belief that this is the best way to raise our children. A natural outgrowth of this attitude is the desire to continually learn new things and improve our parenting approach. We're always striving to be better people, parents, and facilitators for our children. Because there is little infrastructure in our society to support unschooling, we turn to others on the same path for support. Unfortunately, that can backfire.

Because of these things, it seems apparent to me that we are often our own worst enemies. When we spend time trying to find a way to make unschooling look good to people who don't understand, we naturally focus on the good parts – how amazing our relationships with our children are, what good choices they make, how free our families are when we disconnect from the public school system. But we also tend to minimize or gloss over areas that we struggle with or don't find problematic – whether that's household cleanliness, children that really do play video games or watch TV all day, lack of access to a supportive community, etc. We tend to not be fully honest about the reality of our lives.

We also tend to hold ourselves and our peers to a very high standard indeed, perhaps too high for most of us to actually live up to. There is often placed before us a paragon of parenting perfection (to coin a phrase?) that seems, to me at least, almost unattainable. Many of the most outspoken individuals in the unschooling community are portrayed (or portray themselves) as infinitely understanding, patient, and overflowing with kindness from morning till night. We trumpet our successes to the world, and muffle the moaning of our struggles. So much of the barbed “advice” we give each other feels weighted with unspoken (or sometimes spoken) judgment for our failings and challenges, causing us to feel as though we must either don some sort of emotional armor in order to talk about our issues with others, or instead, to just keep our mouths shut and listen, while feeling that we aren't quite good enough at this whole parenting gig to meet the bar of the “good unschooler.”

While I certainly agree that striving *toward* perfection is among the worthiest of goals, I feel it's important that we remember that none of us is *actually perfect*, and that it's okay to admit that. In unschooling, as in any other endeavor, the perfect is the enemy of the good. When we feel the need to adopt a defensive stance, whether in response to critics of our lifestyle in general, or to peers that try to impose their ideas of perfection onto us, we tend to adopt a voice (and sometimes internalize it as an attitude) that is often expressed in sanctimonious language and shrouded in an air of implied superiority. I catch myself doing it sometimes. *Yuck!*

So how do we step away from this situation? I think a start would be to admit that we do struggle, and don't have everything figured out. We don't have all the answers, and sometimes our responses don't live up to our ideals. We are all real people out here, and we all have issues and problems. Things that frustrate us or *piss us off*, times when we are tired or emotional or just not in the mood to go above and beyond all our other commitments, when we get angry or yell, or want to hide away from it all, or just want to do something purely for ourselves, dammit! I know I do. And I bet you do too, whether or not you say it out loud.

My house is a mess. I'm almost always late. I swear a lot. We live in a place with very few unschool-friendly resources. We all spend a huge amount of time in front of screens. Sometimes we argue and fail at communication, even after all these years. Our lives aren't a perfect example of "successful" unschooling (whatever that even is!). *We do not have it all figured out*. And that's okay. Our lives are a work in progress.

If we want to continue on our quest to improve our parenting and unschooling, we should be willing to cop to our failings, to admit to and own both the good and not-so-good parts of our lives, in order to make improvements and adjust our courses as necessary, and develop support systems that recognize that we are all humans out here, and humans aren't perfect. Let's be kind. Let's be honest. *Let's be real*.

Anyone want to join me?