

Unschooling Isn't All About the Kids



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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](#).

Spend some time surfing around the Internet, and you’ll come across scads of articles, blog posts, and community discussions about how unschooling is sure to turn out smart, well-adjusted kids who are ready to go out and make their way in the real world, because they’ve never been sequestered away from it.

An oft-repeated phrase goes something like this: “Kids will follow your example, not your advice.” In other words, if you model certain attitudes and behavior patterns, especially if you do it cheerfully and with kindness and compassion, kids will be sure to emulate your example.

When I read things like these, I like to imagine they are followed by a tiny asterisk, with a warning – something along the lines of a disclaimer you might see on a weight-loss product or a nutritional supplement. You know the ones I mean, the ones that say things like:

* Results not typical; individual results may vary.

Or even, to borrow a common car sales disclaimer-cum-popular Internet acronym:

* YMMV (your mileage may vary).

Because the thing is, at the risk of sounding corny as hell, kids are people too. Real, actual people, with their own completely unique personalities. And so are their parents. Every one of us has our faults, weaknesses, histories, biases, and quirks. We will fail in our parenting endeavors sometimes, and kids may pick up ways of thinking and behaving that we’re not entirely enthusiastic about (yes, even unschooling families encounter these challenges!). You know, because they’re their own people, with their own paths to walk, which may or may not parallel ours. How then, can we possibly guess what any child will grow into or whether or not our parental methods will yield the desired results? I’m not at all sure that

we actually can, despite the vast quantities of inspirational materials that claim the contrary. And I'm not totally sure we would all even want to.

You know the old adage: you can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink.

So, if that's true, I hear you ask, what should we do? If we can't really be sure that the endless amounts of time, energy, and love we put into raising our kiddos with an unschooling lifestyle will result in compassionate, productive, or even happy adults (there are NO guarantees in life, and unschoolers are not exempt to this fact), what's the point? Doesn't that defeat the purpose? Why even bother?

My answer? Because it turns out it's not just about the kids.

I don't mean to suggest that the kids aren't an important part of unschooling – arguably the most important part – but unschooling brings benefits that extend far beyond just our children's education, and can in fact be a transformative process for the adults in their lives as well. In my family, the adults have benefited just as much as the children, as we learn to shed our conditioning and find new ways of engaging with the world. We can regain our ability to see our personal potential, and learn to open our minds to ideas we might otherwise discount. If we're lucky, our attitude toward children will become contagious, and will help encourage others we come into contact with to re-think their ways of being with the children in their own lives as well.

I've noticed that it doesn't feel very good to be disrespectful and mean-spirited to our children. Acting in ways that disconnect us from our own instincts diminishes our joy in parenting, and decreases our capacity for patience during times of struggle. Concentrating on relationships is rarely wasted. Being present, attentive, and loving is still our best chance at creating and maintaining strong relationships with our children. Parenting in a manner that brings us joy and delight allows us to fully enjoy their childhoods, and discarding the authoritarian power struggle model of parenting transforms everyday experiences into opportunities for engagement. Parenting with joyfulness and a sense of wonder is much easier when we see ourselves as our children's partners, instead of their keepers, and happy parent-partners have an outlook that is contagious. If you want to be a happy, connected parent, start by embracing parenting techniques that connect you to your own happiness. Be a little bit selfish; cultivating your own happiness and enthusiasm will leave you with more to share with your children.

Unschooling as a concept can be expanded to include your community as well, and by extension, the wider world. The more families that reject the coercive schooling model, the more free children will be engaging with the rest of the community. The more we interact with people unfamiliar with this lifestyle, the more normative unschooling will become, as more and more people realize that schools are unnecessary and that living in the real world

is the best way to learn to live in the real world. If there is enough interest and demand, supporting infrastructure can be created. The more that people become comfortable with freedom, and the more they get used to seeing children treated as small people, with the same capabilities and rights as adults, the more these ideas and practices will spread. Unschooling indeed has the potential to reshape our society.

The real question isn't whether unschooling "works" to instill in children qualities or habits that will result in "successful" adults (whatever that even means). No parenting style is a surefire way to ensure a predictable outcome. Instead of focusing on the adults that children will become (which we are truly powerless to control or predict), let's focus on connectedness and joy in the experience. Let's leave ourselves and our children plenty of room to grow, expand, and change. Let's find ways of exploring and enjoying the world, together, and let's realize that it's not just our kids' experiences of this part of life that is important. We're living our lives too, and our experiences matter and bear influence on both our children and the other people around us. We can never know what the future may hold for either ourselves or our children, or where, good or bad, either of our paths may lead. We can hope to make a positive contribution to our children's lives, but we can never really know for sure. We can make the choice to embrace joy in our journey together, and increase the amount of happiness in the world. How will it work out in the end? Your guess is as good as mine, but given the choice, I'll choose happiness as a journey rather than as a destination, and see where it leads.

Can you imagine what it would be like to live in a world full of happy people? Personally, I think following your bliss, engaging with your loved ones and passions and enjoying the moment is one of the best things you could model. Will it create kids who grow up to follow in your footsteps? Potentially. Then again, maybe not.

YMMV. And that's the way it should be.