

What is Unschooling? I Don't Know (and You Don't Either)



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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](#).

It’s easy for people who have been raised in hierarchical households and who have grown up in an authoritarian educational system to want to pin things down and fit them into tidy boxes. Our whole young lives were spent being taught, overtly or covertly, that for every question, there is an authority we should look to for answers; and because unschooling can seem especially foreign, we may feel as though we are in over our heads, especially in the beginning. And so we often do what we’ve always been told to do: ask an expert. But is there such a thing as an unschooling expert? To answer that question, it may be helpful to examine our ideas about the nature of unschooling itself.

So what exactly IS unschooling? Truthfully, this is a question that I can’t entirely answer (and neither can you!). In its most basic form, unschooling is simply child-led, interest-based education outside a school setting. But in practice, it takes many forms. Some people only unschool certain (or most) subjects; some unschool all academics, but in other ways function in much the same manner as most other families; and some of us are ‘radical’ or ‘whole-life’ unschoolers. I’m sure there are people in other places on the spectrum as well. I’ve even heard of unschoolers who attend conventional school, using it as just one tool among many in their kit; and some of us may move along this continuum as our lives or circumstances change, or as our families adapt and grow.

All of these people may refer to themselves as unschoolers, though our ways of living and learning may be radically divergent from one another. We all think we’re doing it the “right” way. And you know what? We probably are. Like any diverse group, it can be tempting for us to argue amongst ourselves about which is the “best” way to unschool. There are some of us, who, having lived this way for many years, feel as though we’ve achieved a level of wisdom that entitles us to make judgments about someone else’s application of the unschooling philosophy. In certain circles, if you fail to toe a particular

line, or dare to disagree with one of the self-appointed gurus, you risk being told that what you're doing is NOT unschooling, or that you're a "bad" unschooler. Some of the higher-profile types seem to imply that unschooling is like following a recipe, as though the process should be identical for each child, and following it precisely guarantees an always harmonious home and a flawless outcome. Guess what? They're wrong. They're wrong because no two children (or families!) are ever exactly alike. If a cookie-cutter system is inappropriate in a school setting, it's even more inappropriate outside it.

And therein lies the beauty of unschooling. For some people, this might seem terrifying. How can there be no one who can tell me how to do this thing? What happens if I do something wrong? How will I know if I'm doing things the right way? While others can support, encourage, and advise you, in the end, it's all on you, baby. That's a big scary load of responsibility right there. But you know what? You got this. You've been doing this since your wee ones were born, and I'd bet you're getting pretty good at it by now. If you've been learning to listen to your instincts and respond to your children's needs, you're halfway there already. Nothing actually *changes*, at all, when they turn 5 years old. Sure, it's scary, to realize that you will have to rely on your own instincts and observation instead of on some expert's opinion. After all, most of us were raised to believe that that sort of behavior was irresponsible, if not downright dangerous. But really, it's kind of exciting, too. VERY exciting, once you start to realize the freedom and potential that lie ahead.

What will you do with this newfound freedom? That depends on who you are, and where on the unschooling spectrum you fall. Because of this, unschooling will look different in my house than it will in yours, and it will look different in your house than it will in anyone else's. And that's exactly as it should be. The most positive benefit of school-free liberty is the ability to truly pursue your family's interests, in whatever manner best suits your individual needs and tastes. If what you're doing is different than what anybody else is doing, GOOD! Your family is a collection of unique individuals, and their requirements will never look exactly like anyone else's.

Our family's approach has changed many times over the years, as our knowledge base and confidence have grown, and as the interests and needs of various family members have evolved: when we were first starting out, I felt the need to have a bit of structure and concrete "work," and these took the form of different themes (somewhat like a loosely constructed unit study). We would "study" Egyptian mythology, for example, or dinosaurs, and within that framework, we would scour the internet, check out library books, seek out magazines, buy art supplies, and follow someone else's instructions. This stage didn't last long (my daughter was clearly bored with this approach). It didn't take us long to learn to follow our own urgings, and soon our house was filled with various books, DVDs, science kits, art and craft supplies, math manipulatives (mostly wishful thinking with a heaping helping of strewing on my part) and many, many different animal keeping projects. We

would read aloud for hours, or hatch butterflies, or play with electronics kits, or any of a thousand various things we could think of. We did some field trips over the years, and tried out a few classes and camps; but structured activities, with all their rules and authoritarian adults, weren't generally a good match for our family. As the kids got older, they had less interest in doing pre-packaged projects with mom and started to move into their own activities.

At this point, my oldest (18) has moved out, and my youngest (13) spends most of his time on various computer projects: learning to map for and mod different games, assembling a machine from scratch, and so on. We've decided to start a whole new adventure, and are preparing for a move from a house with an acre and a half and a garden in rural Alaska, to something smaller and urban on Oahu, close to the bustle of Honolulu. We won't technically even be homeschooling anymore. Hawaii has a much stricter education law than Alaska, so we'll be enrolling our son with an unschooling-friendly private school, which will change little if anything in our day-to-day lives, but will protect us from being harassed by school officials. And through it all, despite the changes in activity or structure, despite anyone else's opinion of what we're doing at any given time, we always have been and always will be unschoolers.

In my view, unschooling is the belief that children are best able to fully develop in a healthy, self-actuated manner only when they are free from the dictates of others. If you allow someone else to decide what that looks like, haven't you already lost an integral part of that freedom?