

## The Goal of Unschooling

"What do you do for summer vacation?" people ask me, "Do your kids get a break from unschooling?"

I tell them that we've tried.

"At the beginning of each summer," the story goes, "we tell the children that homeschool is out for the year. They are not to learn anything new until September."

(We do do this. It's a family joke. The children chortle at us. For about two weeks afterwards, they taunt us with "I'm learning! Come and stop me!" and we all have a good laugh over the silliness of thinking that learning can exist in a box.)

"But they absolutely refuse to stop learning!" the story continues, "So we have to keep on homeschooling right until September. What can we do? We could take their books away, but we can't keep them from learning. So they continue to homeschool all year long."

This story provides a better illustration of unschooling than all of the definitions, slogans, and mini-lectures I've devised for the purpose.

Unschooling, also called "child-led learning," "interest-initiated learning," "learning by living," "natural learning," "family and community based education," and a whole host of other equally unsatisfying terms, is an educational philosophy that is hard to pin down.

Unschooling begins with the child and the child's natural thirst to learn everything about the world around her. When the child is learning to walk, we don't ask ourselves how we can teach her to form her steps properly. Instead, we marvel at the inner drive that makes her pit herself, repeatedly, against gravity. She keeps at it until she learns to walk, and then, without a pause, she starts running.

For my children, other forms of learning follow the same pattern. The child decides to learn to read or do math. She then becomes a sort of unstoppable learning machine.

Unschooling at its best is like watching a child learn to walk. The child works tirelessly at the task at hand and the parents have to run to keep up.

Although toddlers learn to walk pretty much on their own initiative, any toddler-chasing parent will tell you that they're working hard, too. The parent needs to provide a safe and challenging environment for the toddler. The parent needs to keep an eye on the child, to monitor the child's safety, needs, and emotional state.

A good unschooling parent is mostly invisible, but that does not mean that she is absent. The unschooling parent creates an environment where children can teach themselves. She provides materials, monitoring the children to make sure that the materials are appropriate. The unschooling parent provides an example, guiding her children by the way she lives. The unschooling parent provides opportunities to try new things. She provides support, encouragement, and inspiration. She is available but not intrusive.

Unschooling parents give children the chance to solve problems for themselves first. Unschooling children learn to plan and execute their own projects. They learn to take responsibility for their own educations, to prepare themselves for the challenges that lie ahead in life.

In our family, our children follow their bliss -- most of the time. They study what they love. They learn by doing. They also pitch in on family chores and help with the business of life. They make commitments in the community and follow through on them.

The goal of unschooling is to produce lifelong, self-directed learners.

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