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## *What Does Unschooling Mean to Me?*

The answer to this question has evolved over the years we've been unschooling. When we first started in 2002, unschooling meant a great way for my kids to learn.

When I discovered homeschooling and invited my kids to leave school I did a lot of reading and thinking about my own school experiences, contemplating my work experiences and how they related to what I learned in school. I pondered how I best learn new things, how I learned things out-of-school differently than in school, and considered how much I remembered of the things I've learned on my own and the things I've been taught. And I did a lot of observing my children in action.

When I thought about learning in general I came to make a clear distinction between things that were memorized and things that were learned. I came to see real learning as stuff that was understood and remembered. Understanding meant it connected to my existing life experiences and made sense to me in the bigger picture. I realized that I learned best when I had personal reasons for pursuing the knowledge, when I was interested in the topic itself, or when it was a skill I wanted to master to use in pursuit of a particular goal. I noticed I learned best when I enjoyed the act of learning, or at least was self-motivated enough to push through the challenges. If not, I shut down in frustration and any learning in that moment was stymied. I best remembered my newfound knowledge when I applied it in my life immediately - that made the learning connections stronger, more meaningful, and more lasting.

Taking my experiences in how I learned best and holding them up against the school environment and its curriculum-driven nature, I saw some serious disconnect. Growing up, times were rare when my interests coincided with the curriculum. Rarer still were the times when I could immediately apply the things I'd been taught to my day-to-day life; much more often I was told I'd use it "someday". Many learning connections I'd made soon atrophied from disuse.

The overarching theme that children go to school, segregated by age and isolated in special buildings, to learn how to live in the real world once they graduate, looks quite artificial viewed from my adult perspective. What if my children could live and learn in the real world right now, instead of vicariously through worksheets that ask how much money would you have left if you had \$10 and you spent \$3.50 on a toy? Learning through real experiences, going to real stores with real money instead of practicing with play money and play stores set up in school to simulate real life. Hiking in real parks, looking for signs of wildlife or watching beavers build a dam, instead of looking at pictures in textbooks. Figuring out how to measure and map out their room to see if the new bed they want now fits with their other furniture, not when the curriculum says it's time for say, a unit on calculating area. Immersing themselves in learning a song on the keyboard while they are interested and motivated, instead of having to stop at the sound of a bell and move on to something else. One of the best things about learning through unschooling is being able to follow the child's interests, giving the child the freedom to learn when their interest and engagement is piqued, for as long as they are interested, and in the manner they prefer.

Without the end goal of graduation or the restrictive timeline of curricula learning is seen as a lifelong endeavour, something you do when information or a skill is needed or wanted, not because you happen to be in grade 10. If a person hasn't yet encountered a need for a particular piece of information or a specific skill while living their life then it's not something they've needed to know. Maybe they will encounter it next month, maybe next year, maybe next decade. Whenever they do they can learn it. If they are living their life and they never come across a need for nor develop an interest in figuring out long division or the exports of

Peru, then there was no real need in their life to invest time and effort in learning either one. And those who were taught one or both of these pieces of information in school, if they didn't use them as part of their lives, do they still remember them today? Was it really learned or merely memorized?

Yes, there is a common, or basic, set of skills and knowledge in our society, but these will definitely be encountered by living in our society. The basic skills to function in the real world are learned by unschoolers precisely because they are living in the real world every day, not ensconced in a separate building and sorted by age; not told "Learn this now because someday this will be important." Unschoolers wait for "someday" to arrive and the learning follows. As Carlo mentioned, we live in a literate and numerate society, words and patterns and numbers are part of our lives and without the shame and fear of failing to learn these skills on someone else's timetable, they are picked up and assimilated along the way. If any particular skill is not a person's strength, which will be true whether or not they went to school, without the stigma of "failing" an unschooler will be more apt to move through these challenges gracefully and find helpful ways to adapt.

With unschooling, learning is not focused on the skills as it is in school (learning to read, to write, to calculate, and to memorize) but on pursuing personal goals and interests and the needed information and skills are picked up along the way. Learning has real meaning and connection to their lives in that moment so it is understood in a way that a random piece of information presented by someone else is not. And because that learning is strongly connected to a real and immediate use for that information or skill, it's much more likely to be remembered. Unschooling is a great way to learn.

Over months of observing my children learning as they went about living their lives, pursuing their passions and interests, I began to see that not only were they learning the more typically academic information and skills, they were also learning more about themselves as their interests and explorations grew and morphed and shrank and branched out. I saw them delve into their environment at home - playing in messy rooms, creating in tidy rooms, projects left out just in case they wanted to go back to them, furniture re-arranged for comfort or fun. I've watched as they explored their personal needs - staying up late or getting up early in pursuit of their interest, choosing what and when to eat and noticing how they felt after, learning how to handle and express anger and frustration most effectively for them, eventually learning how to address situations before they become frustrating. What unschooling meant to me grew to encompass not just academic-type learning, but learning life skills as well.

One of the important skills that wasn't on my radar when they first left school was the ability to analyze situations and make choices. Unschooling gives them the time, freedom, and supportive environment to analyze and discuss situations as they arise, from arguments with friends, to whether to quit an ongoing activity, to the various ways available to pursue an interest. We have discussed countless situations over the years, parents and kids all sharing their questions, their concerns, and their experience as it relates to the situation at hand, with the child choosing their path forward in the end. And from there they see how it plays out and adjust accordingly, incorporating that experience into future choices. This is an incredibly important skill and one that will serve them well throughout their lives.

I came to realize that the time and freedom to explore their own needs and choices would be severely curtailed by a school schedule. It made sense to me that young adults who've spent their lives following others' schedules and rules often needed to take time away to decompress, to "find themselves". I can plainly see that my kids are spending their childhood doing just that.

Unschooling gives my children the time and freedom to explore and discover themselves, their interests, and their needs, as well as develop the skills to express them. They get lots of experience in examining situations and making choices as they are growing up, putting them in a great position from which to transition into adulthood. They already understand themselves, what makes them tick, how they learn best, and this self-knowledge helps them as they explore the kinds of jobs or careers, and life, that may best suit them.

Once I was comfortable with how much my kids were learning through exploring their interests and passions and how well they were learning about living and about themselves, I stepped back and looked at our lives as a whole. Another revelation struck me: I was amazed at how great our relationships were, how

supportive and loving. As siblings they were not constantly putting each other down, and often were downright supportive of each other; as teens they were not trying to escape from us, their parents, but going out into the world confidently, exploring their own goals. By choosing not to live by arbitrary rules we worked together and figured out ways for our family to live together peacefully, analyzing challenges as they arose and finding ways through them that were agreeable to everyone involved. And, like life, these tools for living together consensually evolve with us, they aren't stagnant and restricting.

I've come to appreciate that what unschooling means to me has evolved beyond a great way for my children to gain knowledge and skills and support a life-long love of learning. It has grown beyond a great way to learn about themselves and how to get along in the world. In the end it reaches beyond childhood to support and nurture our life-long relationships; relationships that will last far beyond my children's compulsory-school years. Unschooling means building an amazing, joyful, and interesting life together.