

Unschooling: Education Outside the Box

Nancy Carter

Unschooling is a word that typically generates interest with the media. For people who question whether parents are even able to educate their own children, unschooling seems totally unacceptable. With or without the approval of the general public, though, unschooling continues to grow.

To understand unschooling, you really have to look back at the history of education and homeschooling. The standard used to be for children to be taught in the home. However, by the mid '70s, homeschooling was nearly extinct. Over 99% of school-aged children in the United States were attending institutional classroom schools. By that point, people seemed to have forgotten that children had ever been successfully educated without going to school. Slowly, though, an increasing number of parents began to recognize that they were in a battle for their children's hearts, minds, and time. They saw the control that the government had taken not only in education but in their families' lives, and these parents began again choosing to be in charge of their children's education.

A February 7, 2006, article from Focus on the Family says that approximately 150,000 American children are currently unschooled. How did they come up with that number? The actual number of unschoolers is very hard to assess. Unschooling itself is hard to define. The general philosophy of unschooling holds that children are born with an innate curiosity and desire to learn that is best served by allowing the child to select and direct his own learning. John Holt, considered the father of unschooling by many, said it like this: "children are by nature and from birth very curious about the world around them . . . much more eager to learn, and much better at learning than most of us adults." In unschooling, the parent's role is that of a facilitator who is available to provide resources and guidance.

Many people aren't sure how productive education can be when children are given that type of freedom. They picture lazy, overindulged children lacking the basic knowledge to succeed in the "real world". Perhaps the reason skeptics can't comprehend that children would actually choose to learn math, grammar, or history, however, is that their own learning was forced on them and was very dull. The fact that so many of us have that attitude shows just how our own schooling failed to teach us to love learning.

Unschooling is not "instruction free" learning. If a child wants to learn to read, an unschooling parent may offer instruction by providing help with decoding, reading to the child, and giving the child ample opportunity to encounter words. If the child is uninterested in these supports, the parent backs off until the child asks for help. The most important thing about the unschooling process is that the child is in charge of the learning, not the adult.

Unschoolers challenge parents and educators to "trust the children." Roland Legiardi-Laura, who established the Odysseus Group with John Taylor Gatto (author of *Dumbing Us Down: The Hidden Curriculum of Compulsory Schooling*), says, "Kids are not born lazy. They are inherently curious, energetic and excited about the world around them. Unschooling uses that curiosity to develop somebody who is self-reliant, a critical thinker and independent--someone who in essence creates an education, rather than someone who is given an education." This philosophy doesn't just apply to homeschoolers. Many innovative thinkers seek to transform education across the board by challenging people to question, "What is the purpose behind the school system?" Many of us would be able to identify three distinct purposes: to make good people, to make good citizens, and to make good lives by helping young people strive to be their personal best.

However, Gatto and Legiardi-Laura are creating a documentary to reveal the fourth purpose. *The Fourth Purpose: The Enigma of Public Schools* charges that the hidden purpose of public schools is to produce dependable consumers and dependent citizens who will always look for a teacher to tell them what to do in later life, even if that teacher is an ad man or television anchor. Mr. Gatto was a public school teacher in New York for 30 years. He was a former New York State Teacher of the Year and a three-time New York City Teacher of the Year. He quit teaching, however, in 1991, claiming that he was no longer willing to hurt children. Mr. Gatto says, "I dropped the idea that I was an expert, whose job it was to fill the little heads with my expertise, and began to explore how I could remove those obstacles that prevented the inherent genius of children from gathering itself."

Gatto and Legiardi-Laura aren't alone in their thinking. Albert Einstein is also quoted as saying, "It is a miracle that curiosity survives formal education." Even Anne Sullivan was suspicious of formal education, saying: "I am beginning to suspect all elaborate and special systems of education. They seem to me to be built upon the supposition that every child is a kind of idiot who must be taught to think. Whereas, if the child is left to himself, he will think more and better, if less showily. Let him go and come freely, let him touch real things and combine his impressions for himself, instead of sitting indoors at a little round table, while a sweet-voiced teacher suggests that he build a stone wall with his wooden blocks, or make a rainbow out of strips of colored paper, or plant straw trees in bead flower-pots. Such teaching fills the mind with artificial associations that must be got rid of, before the child can develop independent ideas out of actual experience."

The History of Unschooling

John Holt was actually the first person to use the term unschooling in 1977 in his newsletter, *Growing Without Schooling*. However, at that time he used the word unschooling to refer to people simply taking their children out of school. Holt had worked in the school system for many years and felt that it was so fundamentally flawed that the best thing parents could do was to remove their children from the traditional

school setting. Holt didn't want to parents to just re-create school at home with their children, though. He believed that children did not need to be coerced into learning; they would learn naturally if given the freedom to follow their own interests and a rich assortment of resources. This line of thought became known as unschooling.

Styles Within the Spectrum

Unschooling is now known by many different names and crosses a broad spectrum of styles. Organic learning, natural learning, real life learning, delight directed, relaxed, and child led learning are just some of the phrases that you'll hear in conjunction with unschooling. On one end of the spectrum would be the pure unschooler--totally child-led, viewing learning as a natural part of life without any adult-imposed "lessons," schedules, or timelines. On that end of the spectrum, the child learns what he wants, when he wants, and how he wants. While that might sound almost dangerous, some children thrive and learn well in that setting. Galileo once commented, "You cannot teach a person anything; you can only help him find it within himself."

On the other end of the spectrum is the delight-directed approach, by which the child's interests are used to direct the lessons. Dr. Raymond and (the late) Dorothy Moore, who are often considered the grandparents of homeschooling, advocate the use of delayed academics and a delight-directed approach. Dr. Moore explains, "Warm responsiveness and doing things together with your children are the best way to ensure that your child will be cognitively mature at age 12." They believe that if parents will relax, pay close attention to the needs and interests of their child, allow them to mature at their own rate, work alongside them, and focus on non-academic learning opportunities at least as much as book learning, their child will succeed. They emphasize that if a child learns to be diligent at a young age, that diligence will carry over to their academic performance as they mature.

Mary Hood has been touted by some as "the Christian John Holt." She is better known as the Relaxed Homeschooler, though. To her, relaxed homeschooling isn't a method or a philosophy. It is simply a mindset. It's the idea that you are a family, not a school. She reminds parents that they don't need to set up a school; instead they need to set up a lifestyle of learning. She says to pull out the books and educational materials from the closet and encourage the children to pursue goals, enjoy learning, and share their discoveries with others in the family. Her goals for her family include supporting everyone's natural love of learning rather than beating facts into their heads.

Can Unschoolers Get Into College?

Skeptics want to know if unschoolers can get into college and how they perform once they get there. Alison McKee began unschooling her two children over 20 years ago, and from their family's experiences wrote the book *From Homeschool to College and Work: Turning Your Homeschooled Experiences into College and Job Portfolios*. In her book

she shares how they documented their learning, created transcripts, and succeeded in getting into college. While statistics for unschoolers in college may be hard to come by, from coast to coast and border to border, homeschooled students in the United States surpass the national averages on both of the major college entrance tests, the SAT, and the ACT (Washington Times, 2000a). In fact Jon Reider, Stanford University Admissions official, was quoted in Clowes 2000 as saying, "Home schoolers bring certain skills-- motivation, curiosity, the capacity to be responsible for their education, that high schools don't induce very well."

And that curiosity is what unschoolers have nurtured and allowed to guide their children's education from their earliest ages. Unschooling. It certainly isn't for everyone, but it challenges us to take our thoughts about education out of the box.

Helpful Websites

Unschooling.com--www.unschooling.com

John Holt & Growing Without Schooling--www.holtgws.com

John Taylor Gatto--www.johntaylorgatto.com

The Moore Foundation--www.moorefoundation.com

Family Unschoolers Network--www.unschooling.org

Real life learning & Delight Directed learning--www.homeschooloasis.com

Unschooling High School & College by Allison McKee--
www.homeschool.com/advisors/McKee/default.asp

—

Biographical Information

Copyright, 2009. All rights reserved by author below. Content provided by The Old Schoolhouse® Magazine, LLC.

Nancy Carter is happy to call herself a relaxed homeschooler. After years of teaching in the public school system, she cherishes being able to learn together with her own children. She and her husband Tony have three sons and are learning all kinds of new things together on their farm. You can read more of her family's Lessons Learned on the Farm at www.HomeschoolBlogger.com/tn3jcarter or you can email her at tn3jcarter@wildblue.net.