

Drew Dorsey – Living and Learning as a Father in an Unschooling Family

Being relatively new to the unschooling community (in 2008), our family is meeting new people regularly and treasuring the discovery of new friends with similar principles and lifestyles. We truly value these new acquaintances, for each time we meet a new unschooling family, they serve as another role model, sounding board and support system, for us on our own journey through this wonderful life. Often, when we observe and interact with these families and we see how happy and free their children are, it validates the decisions we have made in our own family.

As we meet and share our experiences with others, I have become quite interested in the dynamics of many unschooling families, particularly in the variety of roles that fathers take. After several discussions at get-togethers, soccer games and kitchen tables, I am surprised to hear how many fathers there are in unschooling families who do not fully support or embrace the lifestyle or decisions they have made for their own children. While the majority of families we have encountered enjoy the full support and benefits of two fully committed parents, the divisions in other families, as well as the effects of this division, are often considerable sources of stress. Some fathers do not accept the benefits of learning in freedom, while others struggle with adopting the parenting strategies fundamental to an unschooling lifestyle. As an unschooling father and a public school teacher, I wish to share my thoughts and experiences in both areas. I hope to help anyone struggling with this life changing decision, to help those reluctant fathers appreciate and celebrate the freedoms and opportunities they have given their children, and especially to encourage them to share fully in the joy this lifestyle can bring.

Quite recently, at an informal unschooling gathering, I was

introducing myself to two other fathers. In the course of the conversation, we discovered that all three of us were teachers. While the irony of three schoolteachers meeting at an unschooling event did not escape us, none of us found it altogether astonishing that we were all there. It does beg the question however, what is it about unschooling that has attracted three classroom teachers, who by all accounts love their jobs? For me, the decision was an easy one, and one based in the love and value I hold for personal freedoms and the respect for the individual. I wanted my children liberated from the intrusive and often tyrannical systems of control inherent in the school environment. I want my children to learn and live according to their own passions, desires, and timetables; not bound by what others demanded of them. The methods of control in schools are so pervasive and so entrenched in day-to-day life, that they are scarcely noticed, let alone acknowledged. As much as it might pain my wife to hear me say it, virtually none of this is ill willed. The vast majority of teachers want the best for their students, but their own personal biases as well as the logistical limitations of a large educational setting create, even unwittingly, systems of control that are detrimental to learning. First, the organizational nightmare of providing a "well rounded" education to the masses requires an almost constant flow within a school building. Time constraints limit learning experiences to about 45 minutes apiece, so that all students can have exposure to the same or similar experiences. Education delivered in such short bursts with almost constant interruptions fractures the learning in school. The bell rings despite the needs of the children. For the child who requires a few more minutes to master a new Science concept or one that might be lost in a great story, the transitions can be frustrating. They diminish the quality and enjoyment of learning.

Perhaps more damaging than the logistical control over children in schools is the individual control exercised by the teachers themselves. I believe the field of education is an attractive option for individuals who desire or need some measure of control over their environment. As much as they might enjoy children and learning, many teachers alter the learning environment according to their own needs, rather than what is best for the children. There is something very comforting in the ability to plan the day's events and to know and influence exactly what is going to happen during the day. However, while such planning and structure makes for excellent classroom management, it arrests the flexibility and

spontaneity so necessary in child development and learning.

Any parent or older sibling can attest to the fact that a child's intuitive, creative and inexhaustible mind does not abide by any rules or structure. At home, in the woods, in a classroom, or even in front of the TV, the child's mind is constantly reeling, constantly absorbing new information, and making connections. Sometimes these little adventures take minutes, sometimes hours, but the notion that a teacher can effectively plan for these connections in forty-five-minute segments is laughable. Whether children are playing dress up, identifying patterns in numbers, or following a slug in the garden, they need flexibility and freedom to explore their surroundings. Their minds and bodies have timetables all their own, and no matter how diligently a teacher plans the days events, there is no way to block schedule true learning. The brain just doesn't work that way.

More insulting to me than the structure of classroom learning is the notion that somewhere, at some point in time, some group of total strangers decided that twenty-five individuals, forced uncomfortably into the same space with me, can and should be learning the same things at the same time. According to my state mandated curriculum, my students and I are to cover six million years of history in one-hundred and eighty days. This is my charge, with little regard to whether or not there is any genuine interest in the topic, or if the information will have any meaningful impact on my students' lives outside of the classroom. At times, I feel I am the luckiest man in the world. Someone is actually willing to pay me to talk, to share stories of people and events that interest me and have shaped my life. Yet, at the same time, I understand that the hours I take to share my passion with my students comes at the expense of allowing the children the time to follow their own.

My state, for example, has deemed it necessary for all sixth grade students to understand the significance of the Ziggurat. Again, while the topic is interesting and compelling to me, we all understand that my students will get along just wonderfully in life if they never hear the term again. In fact, most people reading this book are living lives full of meaning and joy and have never used the word 'Ziggurat' even once. Nevertheless, my state demands that my students take time and energy to learn this bit of trivia. What better use could my students make of their precious resources if they were focused on subjects of true interest and importance to

them as individuals?

To combat resentment and foster interest in the curriculum content, hordes of bright and creative teachers go to great lengths to present the material in “real world” scenarios. While these projects might be innovative and demonstrate how the information could be useful in the future, they are, nevertheless contrived. They may motivate students to spend more time and energy studying topics they did not themselves select, but they do not address the simple fact that these children are, at any age, *living* in the “real world.” These children need and appreciate information that helps them make their lives more fulfilling and meaningful. No humans, not even the little ones, need to be coerced into learning; it is as natural for us as breathing, we just need to make sure the learning happens in the right context.

Unschooling children have the freedom to seek out and explore information of genuine interest and meaning to their own particular circumstances. No effort is necessary to make learning appear interesting or important, because the learner directs her own experiences, coming to terms with her world according to her own developmental pace and personal goals. Learning is not interrupted because the bell rings and it is time to move quickly to the next subject. Learners have the freedom to spend the day exhausting the wonders of a mud puddle, or the flexibility to leave it and return to it when the need or desire returns. All learning is intrinsically important, because it is inspired by the individual. All learning is enjoyable, because it takes place within the context of the learner’s daily life. To me, the beauty of unschooling is that it gives children the freedom and flexibility to chase the unbridled whims of the mind, to learn *anything* and *everything*.

To the parent who has difficulty seeing the value or wisdom of this freedom of learning, I suggest looking inward. We have not stopped learning because we left grade school. We set goals, seek resources, and give ourselves the opportunity and time we need to learn, practice, and perform the skills we want or need to know to make our lives better. We don’t restrict ourselves to read news magazines or practice the piano in 30 minute increments, but rather, we participate, learn and grow when the interest, mindset and temperament are ready. If our own learning is made more enjoyable and our understanding more complete when accomplished on

our own terms, then why shouldn't we give all of our children the same opportunities for success, especially when their natural curiosities combined with modern resources can create limitless learning opportunities?

If looking inward does not help, try listening to the children. Like any loving parent, I talk about my children often, and inevitably, the subject of unschooling and our family's learning philosophy is raised each year. After the initial questions such as "Is that even legal?" and "Do you give your kids homework assignments too?" the conversation often takes a far more thoughtful turn. Most of my students (ages 11-13) tell me that they don't think it is "fair" that they are forced to spend so many hours at school when they could be pursuing other interests. Few even know that their attendance in school is even a choice. They feel slighted by the fact that such an important life decision was made for them, without their knowledge or input. When I ask them what they would be doing if they were not sitting in my Ancient History class, their responses are always creative, passionate expressions of themselves as individuals and participants on the world stage. These are not kids who would be watching endless reruns of bad cartoons and power-eating junk food, at least not for long. Given the freedom and resources they deserve, these conscientious, creative, and spirited individuals want to create opportunities to make their world a better place.

It is true; school is not "fair" to kids. The controlling nature of the environment and the lack of respect and responsibility given to children for their own learning are just some of the reasons why. As a teacher, even one who truly loves his job as I do, a critical look at learning in schools and contrasting this knowledge with what research shows about the brain, learning, and development, can only lead to an unpleasant conclusion. Traditional classrooms are simply not effective, enjoyable, or authentic learning environments for children. It is unfortunate that more people do not see the risks lurking there or that more people do not take advantage of more natural learning philosophies and practices. However, despite my experiences in the schools as a student and as a teacher, it is as a father that I see the greatest benefit of an unschooling lifestyle for my children and my family.

Unschooling is as much a parenting strategy as it is an educational philosophy. This cannot be overstated, and yet, even as I know and

understand how closely parenting and learning are interrelated, it is the parenting aspects of unschooling that continue to give me struggles during our adventures as a family. I know schools intimately, their limitations and shortcomings. I have had 30+ years of experience with them. Parenting, however, is still relatively new. I know what kind of parent I want to be and I know what I want for my children, but the conventional wisdom and standards of parenting stand in direct opposition to what I want for my family and myself. Abandoning the traditional roles and expectations of parenthood has been difficult at times, but it is essential for unschooling to be truly successful, and for the health and well-being of the family.

I believe that most fathers who struggle with unschooling understand, to some degree, the educational benefits of learning in freedom, but have difficulty adapting to the family dynamics characteristic of an unschooling home. Ensuring that our children were free to learn and develop on their own terms meant that we as parents had to give up many of the practices that we previously held as "good parenting" skills. Most notably, we wanted to give up the control parents levy as authority figures in favor of a relationship where every individual makes his or her own decisions. At times, this has been perfectly natural and effortless, but at others, it has been a challenge. As a parent, I cannot let a challenge stop me from doing what I know is best for my family. I need to give up control over my children and provide them with the knowledge and support they need to develop the skills necessary to make responsible decisions in their lives.

For example, our children do not have a "bed time." When we have all had enough of the day, we go upstairs and go to sleep. They are also free to eat what ever and when ever they choose, and although they like junk food way more than I do, they are relatively healthy eaters. They often don't want what I have cooked for dinner, but I don't take it personally. I believe that if everyone is getting what they need, what difference should it make to me that they don't eat from the same pan, or that the kids are up a little later some nights? Children can and should make their own decisions about when they need sleep, what to eat, what to wear, and how to spend their time. Learning to make these decisions fosters independence, personal responsibility, and self-respect. Although I offer my advice and present the consequences as clearly as possible, the decisions are theirs to make.

Letting go of the traditional “because I said so” role of parenting is not something everyone is comfortable doing. To some degree we all want our kids to listen and respond to us because we are the “grown ups”. However, it is far more important that our children see us as a guide, a resource, or a mentor. A bond with a child based on mutual respect and support is natural, healthy, and stronger than any based on fear or dominion. Respect that is steeped in fear is not freely given, nor is it genuine.

On a practical level, having children making decisions for themselves reduces many of the stressors that put parents and children at odds with each other. We have all seen or participated in the needless power struggles that erupt between children and their parents. If it happens in public, these clashes can be embarrassing as well as infuriating, which just adds to the stress and negativity of the situation. Many parents believe that exercising control over their children will help them avoid these conflicts, but doing so often *creates* them. And, whether done kindly or not, exercising this control has the same limiting effects on the growth and development of the child that the teacher has in the classroom.

If we want our children to grow as strong, independent and resourceful individuals we must be willing to let our kids *live* as freely as they *learn*. The bottom line is that a child’s body is his own. If your son does not want to take a bath tonight, who cares? It might seem like fun tomorrow, it might even become part of some great pirate adventure. At some point in his life he is going to be clean again. Why let trivial matters detract from your relationship with your child?

The starkest difference I can see between our family and others is the amount of time my wife and I spend with our children, and how we view that time. Jean is with our three, lively children 24 hours a day. That can be a long time for any group of people to be together, but we *enjoy* our children. I would trade roles with her in a heartbeat, but I know that although she has the greatest job on earth, it is also the most challenging.

My day is quite different. I see myself as having two full time jobs. The moment I pull in the driveway, my second job starts and it does not end until we are all in bed. My time is entirely and happily given over to my children and their terrific adventures. On

any given day, I can come home to a sword fight, a puppet show, kids clamoring to go out and play on the trampoline, kids crying on the living room floor or creating a fortress with every sheet in the house. I have come home to new pets, have been immediately shuffled out the door for picnics, and have heard at least a million times "Dad! Look at this!" My point is that as an unschooling dad, there is little or no down time. In order to give my kids the freedom and opportunities for learning that I want them to have, I need to try to be there for them, totally, enthusiastically and each and every time. Living life according to a child's whims is demanding both physically and mentally, and I believe this constant demand on parents' resources is one of the most common factors that divide parents in unschooling families. Imagine though, the confidence and self-concept a child develops who has faith in their parents' love, respect, and support in *anything* and *everything* they attempt.

The concepts and practices of unschooling as an educational philosophy and as a parenting philosophy are inseparable. I believe that fathers struggling with the unschooling lifestyle are likely out of step with one or the other. Some fathers may find it easier to see the benefits and possibilities of one aspect of this model, but a conscientious effort to embrace both philosophies, to provide our children with freedom, resources, opportunities, and unconditional love and support, will create limitless potential. The unschooled lifestyle, under the guidance and mentorship of caring, compassionate adults, cultivates the whole child, fostering strong family bonds, self-confidence, and self-respect. Because unschooled children *live* life rather than prepare for it, they are practiced and capable of meeting the challenges life has in store, and isn't that what all Dads want for their children?