

Giving Them Space to Learn

When our children were small and we decided that they would not go to school, it seemed really important to create a space in the home where learning would happen. I knew I didn't want desks and blackboards; that definitely wasn't for us. We chose the round table in the breakfast room as the learning center, and put up cubbies for books and supplies nearby. I wish I could say that room was a place where many wonderful, happy memories were made, but I can't truthfully say that. Not surprisingly, none of us were terribly sad to see it eventually transformed into an extra bedroom so the kids could each have their own.

I'm pretty sure much more learning takes place in that space now! One of our sons has set up a music studio on one side, and the other side is lined with his collections of manga and anime. He spends many hours in his room playing his guitars, ukulele, and mandolin; he reads books and surfs YouTube for interesting videos on a wide range of subjects; he plays games on his iPod or Minecraft on his laptop. For all that, I still wouldn't call that room "the place" where learning happens. That place is inside his head.

That space is filled with a wonderful mind that is learning always and everywhere. It cannot be confined to one room, one set of activities, one list of subjects, or one time of day. Our children are always observing, and always absorbing information from all around them. I've become more interested in cultivating and protecting that interior space where learning happens.

How do we do that? Just as a desk, chair, and blackboard imply that real learning takes place in a space that looks like school, our attitudes about what our kids are learning can send a similar message. One day we may notice that our daughter is reading a book on chemistry. "How wonderful!" we gush, if only inwardly. "You see, our patience with unschooling has paid off! Now she is REALLY learning!" When one of our sons does mental math calculations

easily and accurately, we swell up with pride, but when he relates trivia about the history of Doctor Who we just wait patiently for it to be over. When our other son teaches himself guitar we're impressed enough, but should we catch him talking about a science experiment with monkeys or viewing a YouTube video on the national debt, we run for the unschooling notebook and start recording furiously. All this implies that traditional academics are what really count, and while it may not be as stifling as sitting them down at desks with textbooks, it does have a negative effect on their learning.

For one thing, all that parental pride when they voluntarily read something academic is, at least to a teenager, embarrassing. It makes them want to read chemistry at night with a flashlight, under their blanket, so they don't have to see our giddy, idiotic smiles looking down at them or be photographed "for the portfolio." Secondly, and more importantly, we run the risk of belittling their real passions and teaching them to do so, too. A person passionately dedicated to music may well want to read science sometimes, but seeing that as a glimmer of hope that they will one day become a doctor sends a terrible message.

Physically, our home is a pretty nice space in which to live and learn. Now I want to make sure that we're giving our three wonderful teenagers the mental space they need to learn and thrive, too. That is a space free from judgments about where their interests take them and what they choose to learn. A space where we are aware, but not hyper-vigilant. A place where we're available to help, but not lurking nearby like overzealous wait-staff or the academic equivalent of paparazzi ("Science moment! Hold that pose!"). As they continue to find their way forward as young adults, they need enough breathing room to explore the world without being overly conscious of our attention, while enjoying the knowledge that we are still here when they need us.