

Interview of James and Taylor Davis by Pam Laricchia

The following is a lightly edited transcript from Pam Laricchia's interview of my wife and I on her podcast, "[Exploring Unschooling](#)" at the beginning of 2017.

PAM: Hi everyone! I'm Pam Laricchia from livingjoyfully.ca, and today I'm here with Taylor and James Davis. Hi to you both!

BOTH: Hi Pam!

PAM: Hi! It's so nice to have you here. Just as a little bit of background, Taylor and James originally went to college to be teachers. This preponderance of homeschooling and unschooling parents who originally pursued a teaching career isn't surprising. To me, it seems to be indicative of their personal interest in children and in learning, because last week we also had a former teacher as well.

I'm really excited to chat with Taylor and James about the next steps in their journey, and where they've gone from there.

First, can you guys tell us a bit about you and your family?

JAMES: Sure. We've been married since 2008. We had our first child, Oliver, in 2010. And you mentioned that we both went to school to be teachers—that's true. I actually didn't wind up becoming a teacher. Taylor taught in an elementary school for a number of years, but for quite a while I was actually playing poker professionally, and we were traveling around and trying to figure out where we wanted to settle down and that sort of thing.

Eventually we settled down in New Jersey and bought a house and

started down a pretty traditional path, until we had our first son. (Laughs). He was our greatest teacher in so many ways. But primarily he taught us the importance of his own autonomy, and it really started getting us questioning everything.

I think both Taylor and myself, maybe more me, had a difficult time growing up and trying to fit into the molds that society had, and the presented options. When we started to see that in him, really from the time he was just a month or so old, it started really bringing up all of the hard parts about being a kid, and which parts of those we felt were kind of a necessary thing and which parts of those we could try to transcend and do better than.

So, that was really what started us, I think, on our unschooling exploration. And then we moved all over the place. We went and ran a non-profit camp that had already existed called [Vanderkamp](#), for 4 years, in upstate New York, before finally settling out here in the sea coast of New Hampshire.

PAM: That's very cool. I really love the poker player history.

JAMES: Yeah, yeah. That's a part of my unorthodox past, I guess.

PAM: It's so interesting to hear where people are coming from and the different perspectives they bring because it's just fascinating to see the wide array of places from which we can all kind of get to this point. Especially when we start to have kids, because that's when you start considering those questions, right? I always say my eldest set me off on this journey as well.

TAYLOR: Absolutely.

JAMES: Yeah, well, it's funny, for us, playing poker out of college—basically, I didn't plan to do it, I just wanted to kind of do something to fill my time until Taylor finished school, and I was going to teach too, and we were just going to settle down somewhere.

I had always been someone—well, I had a rebellious side—I always did the right thing. I got good grades in high school, got good grades in college, did things that people approve of, by and large. Our summer jobs were working at camp and working with kids.

This first time I kind of stepped off course and started doing this poker thing, I saw a lot of a lack of trust from a lot of people in my life that this was a wise decision, and a lot of people had other plans for how they thought I should be spending my time.

It was the first time—I was doing very well in my early 20's and I started thinking, "Why am I living to please other people for my whole life? This is so obviously a good force in our life, why don't people see that and why don't they trust it?" And I think that really laid a lot of the foundation for not wanting our kids to have to struggle with those same feelings.

PAM: Was that your experience too, Taylor?

TAYLOR: I think so. My experience growing up, I have fond memories of my childhood and my parents were gentle, but I definitely kind of just can feel a feeling of always wanting people to approve and wanting to make people proud. And I think I still struggle with that a lot.

And so, I think, for me, a lot of my still-current deschooling comes from that feeling and need to look like I'm doing the appropriate thing and to please people and to stay on course.

And James and I have totally not stayed on course at all, in terms of what mainstream culture tells us to do. And so, that's definitely been my experience then. Really, really trying to break away from that so that our kids don't have to feel that.

PAM: Yeah, that was a huge part of me deciding, choosing to leave my job way back when. Because that was kind of the culmination of everything that I'd been doing "right."

TAYLOR: Yeah, I remember listening to you talk about that on previous episodes. And I will add, just to get a better understanding of our family. James mentioned Oliver—he's our oldest. He's six. And then we have Ezra, who's four, and then we have August, who is 10 months old. So that kind of rounds out our family.

And we have a dog who we've had since about right after we got married.

PAM: As I mentioned earlier, and you guys talked about, you both went to college to be teachers, and now, as you talked about a little bit, you're embracing the unschooling lifestyle completely.

I was wondering if you could share with us a little bit about that experience—going to college, and what happened to change your course?

TAYLOR: Sure. So yeah, we both kind of fell into following the path to become teachers in college. I think, like you said, largely because we had both worked at summer camp for many years and really loved working with kids. And we kind of felt like, this is the next step to continuing working with kids. We liked it, we felt like we were decent at it, and so we both graduated with teaching licenses.

And recently we've reflected on what we learned in our teacher education programs, and it actually is kind of astonishing to us that nowhere along the line for either of us—and we were at different colleges—did anything about home education or self-directed education come up at all. And looking back on it, it just feels like such a huge, huge piece of the puzzle was missing.

But anyway, we took a little time after college, and then I did settle into a teaching job in New Jersey. I think I taught for four years at a private school. So, I had a little more freedom in what I did in the classroom, just because we weren't bound to some of the state regulations. **But it was actually an in-service training that I went to at work where they showed us—the person who came in to train us on various things—but anyway he showed us one of Sir Ken Robinson's videos**—and I can't remember which one it was—but anyway I came home—

JAMES: [Changing Education Paradigms](#), I think?

TAYLOR: Yup. And I came home—and this was after our son had been born, so I had gone back to work, our son was in daycare, which also was not going well, because he just wanted to be with me—but I came home and I showed James this video and we listened to this talk, and that sent us down the rabbit hole.

And before that, really, we were ready to send Ollie to public school, probably. **So that sent us down the rabbit hole, and we just**

started finding out more and more about unschooling and reading about different options for self-directed education. And at that point—that's when everything in our life changed. We said we need to find a way for me to be home with Oliver and that's when we moved and started running that camp in New York. So yeah, that's kind of where it all began for us.

JAMES: I think too, when you're training to become a teacher, when you're working at summer camp, working with kids is a little bit more abstract almost. Like, the kids are there and they're before you, but it's a lot easier to talk yourself into kind of these, I don't know, utilitarian or pragmatic approaches, where "this isn't going to work for everybody but it's going to work for most people. And, you know, some kids just won't conform, and that's their problem."

People don't say those things directly, but that's kind of the culture, right? And for me, though, it was like, but what if that's my kid? What if it's my personal kid that's not in the 95 or 90 or 80 or less percent that is able to conform here? It just started feeling, I don't know—the weight of it all, I think just started to feel—especially after we watched that Sir Ken Robinson video.

And I remember too, we talked and I was like, "So what are you going to do about this when you get into school? Are you going to change everything and start sparking all this creativity?" and your response was, "Well, there's not really much I can do. Every day the curriculum is planned."

TAYLOR: Yeah, it was kind of ironic that they showed us this when there wasn't much we could do.

JAMES: For sure.

PAM: I remember the same thing because I was trying to work with my kids' teachers, especially my eldest. And I went in and I talked to them—the principal invited me to one of their teachers' meetings to give a presentation on spirited kids. Because this was something that I was talking to him about—as you were talking about James—it's so interesting, because I think it's such a great point—that, as a system, they're looking at children as a group, not as individuals.

So here I was asking them to look at the individual, and they were open to it, and they all thanked me for the presentation, they thought it was wonderful. But it was the exact same thing, Taylor. They said, "But, there's nothing I can really do in the classroom."

JAMES: I think this is why it becomes so challenging. **Because when you're in those environments, they start with this one basic premise or assumption, which is that the academic takeaways are so important and so urgent that anything else is kind of window dressing on the side of it.**

So when we worked at camp, it was all about building up the individual and how can we help these people to survive better and potentially be on a track towards life-long happiness. Those were our goals. And in a school, the incentives are just different. Like, they have to get kids to read by a certain age, and get kids to understand certain math concepts before they go to high school.

And so, in that sort of like rat-race environment, it makes sense that if some kids can't figure this out in time, well, hey, the rest of these kids are going to be screwed if they can't figure it out too. And so, **I understand why they feel this urgency around the academic stuff, but for me that's just totally beside the point. When you see someone just struggling as a human being, who cares if they know fractions, right? But that's just not a conversation that they're ever ready to have.**

PAM: It's true, the way the system is designed, it's well designed to accomplish what it's trying to accomplish because it's *not* focused on the individual. Its point is all the children need to get through this system, right? That's its job. So, to most efficiently do that, that's what their goal is. It's not the individual and helping them cope with it.

JAMES: Right.

PAM: That's fascinating.

You guys have mentioned camp a couple of times and I was hoping you could tell us a bit about where you are now

with [Camp Stomping Ground](#) and what role it's played in your unschooling journeys?

JAMES: Well it's been amazing. So, we started at Vanderkamp, which I mentioned, and that was a church-owned camp that had been around for about 50 years, and they were struggling financially.

So, we came in—we were just fresh off of learning about these ideas. We had watched the Ken Robinson video, we actually watched a documentary called [Surfwise](#)—I don't know if you've ever seen that one, but it's kind of an accidental unschooling video about this doctor who just surfed with his kids for 20 years in the 70's.

TAYLOR: They travelled around.

PAM: Cool.

JAMES: It's a really good one. It's not one you would want to put on if you were trying to mainstream the ideas of unschooling necessarily because their family was a little kooky, but hey, we all are.

But anyway, we had just come off watching these, and so **our pitch to all these different camps that I applied at was, "Well, what if we come and just let kids do whatever they want? If we keep everyone safe and no one's getting injured and no one's getting abused or bullied, what if we just let them do whatever and see how it goes?"**

And most camps said no, that sounds like a really bad idea.
(Laughs.)

And there was this one camp that was open to it, and primarily because they were really struggling financially, and I think they saw our energy, and they saw that this was a new thing, and they had about a six-month runway before they were going to have to shut down this 50-year-old institution. So, they said sure, why don't you come try your crazy thing, and if it doesn't work then at least we'll have tried everything.

So, we went there, and it was interesting because Ollie at that time was still only about one year old, so we didn't really know

anything about letting kids be free. All we had ever done was work in schools or at this other much more traditional summer camp where kids had a schedule planned out for them, didn't really have any choice over how they spent their time.

And so, for us, we were very enthusiastic about the ideas of unschooling without ever having seen them in practice. But logically and emotionally they resonated with us, and certainly our goals of helping kids feel happier in the long term, and in the present.

So, we went there, and it was really interesting, this kind of side-by-side look on watching Oliver grow up and also watching what happened with the kids at camp. Because at camp, kids from all different backgrounds—very diverse areas, very hard areas in Syracuse, to very rural areas in upstate New York—and what we found was when they came together they didn't want to walk all over us, they didn't want to pick on each other. They really took this freedom very seriously, and they valued it as something precious. And would oftentimes give very intentional voice to that in saying, "Wow I can't believe people here let me choose what I want to eat or what kind of footwear I should wear or what I want to wear when I go swimming."

You know, these very little things it sounds like, but they valued it so deeply. So, for us, it really strengthened our resolve to do this unschooling-based thing. Of course, eventually, the further you go down these holes, the more you learn about unschooling and letting kids be free, you want to test the boundaries even more. And eventually I think some of the things we wanted to push the boundaries on weren't of a proper comfort level for the people that actually owned the camp.

So even though the camp did very well financially—I mean we doubled enrollment in two years and almost tripled it by the time we left, just based on, frankly, word of mouth and people really resonating with the experience—the board wasn't fully bought in on a kind of an emotional level.

So, we decided we wanted to try something new. We got together with the two camp directors now for Stomping Ground—their names are Jack and Laura—two phenomenal younger folks that came and worked for me at Vanderkamp, and also agreed that we wanted to start a new thing

that would push the boundaries even further. They had a lot of time and were very willing to spearhead this new project with us, so with a couple of other cofounders we launched Stomping Ground in 2014.

Our first summer we had about 60 kids come out in a facility in New Jersey, and last summer we had almost 200 in our second summer. And our new facility is in Deposit, New York.

Basically, the idea is kids come and they're self-directed. They choose how they spend their entire day. We have pre-programmed activities that we offer, but nothing is mandatory at all. Everything is fully optional. A lot of times that looks like teenagers hanging out and being friends with each other and learning to love one another, and younger kids getting covered in shaving cream and doing all sorts of silly stuff. And it's been very well received, and we're really, really excited to see where that new community totally grounded in the ideas of unschooling can go from here.

PAM: That's awesome.

JAMES: Yeah, it's a mouthful. I can talk and talk. (Laughs.)

PAM: No! I can listen and listen, that's really fascinating. And I love that—so, most of the kids that come to camp, they're not unschooling kids, are they? They are school kids but they can transition reasonably well into this environment, and, as you said, they really feel quite respectful of it?

JAMES: It's interesting. At Vanderkamp, it was all schooled kids, for the most part. And then at Stomping Ground we have a pretty good mix. I can't give you exact numbers now, but I'd say the first summer we ran it was probably a third of them were unschooled kids. And people who traveled—we had people fly in from Arizona and Georgia—you know, unschoolers travel, they just get so excited to meet people who agree with them on things. It's so unusual, when you find something you cherish.

But now we're a little bit more geographically centered around the New York, Pennsylvania and New Jersey area. We actually get a ton of kids from the [Philly Free School](#), which is a free school in Philadelphia. And we're very tapped into the free school network in

sort of the Tri-State area.

So, it's this really interesting mix of kids who are schooled classically, unschooled completely, and people in these more free school environments. And the really neat thing is getting them all together, because then it's this open environment of sharing. Like you can see the gears turning on the people who go to traditional public school, and they're like, "Now hold on a second, you don't have any class?"

And so it's this really beautiful discussion and exploration that can happen. And also, you know, unschooled kids often times gain a stronger appreciation of what they have, too, because they make these really wonderful friends who don't have a lot of the same luxuries in terms of their time. We've seen families challenge their own schooling approaches and their own approaches to working with kids, and everything in between. It's been really, really neat to see what happens—when all these kids from all these different schooling environments and backgrounds, when they get together.

PAM: Have you seen that as well, Taylor? How that kind of community, that camping community, informed your unschooling journey?

TAYLOR: Yeah, I think so. I would say my unschooling journey has been kind of informed by a lot of different things, but the camp community at Stomping Ground has been a big part of it. Because it's really incredible to see kids show up at camp and be given such a high amount of trust by the people who are running the camp that many of them are not afforded in their daily life, and to see that really for the mostpart they are totally trustworthy.

I think that we have this tendency to—we don't trust kids in so many ways, which is where so much of the attempt to control their lives comes from. And I don't think it comes from a bad place, oftentimes it just comes from a place of truly thinking that, you know, we know better. And so seeing older children too, who haven't been trusted a lot, come to camp and be given this trust and, again, like I said, for the most part, become and be these trustworthy people, is really inspiring. It doesn't take long. They just *are* trustworthy. And seeing that in action is kind of really reassuring for our own unschooling journey, I think.

PAM: Because your kids are on the younger side, right?

TAYLOR: Right.

PAM: So, you're really just more officially getting into it now.

TAYLOR: Absolutely, yeah.

JAMES: Yeah, as far as the government's concerned, for sure.
(Laughs.)

PAM: Yeah, exactly, exactly. When you have to register.

TAYLOR: Yeah, we just had to register our oldest this year.

JAMES: You know, you mentioned too, when kids come to camp and their process of learning to embrace freedom wisely, one of the areas in particular that I find interesting is around time management.

I know this one family who is very close to us—they unschool their kids and they come out from New Hampshire to New York to bring their kids to camp. And their daughter stays up, in her own life, really late, wakes up really late, and that's kind of her cycle, and no big deal.

But, at camp, the incentives are such—because she wants to wake up and hang out with her friends—and so she just has no problem at all setting this schedule for her. And it's not like it's a job, nothing is going to be really lost if she just decides to sleep in, but now she just goes to bed when people go to bed and wakes up at seven, just like everyone else does, and hangs out. And like, the deschooling process, or whatever you want to call it—I think adjusting to having freedom, you know I think sometimes deschooling can even get a—I don't know, that sometimes leaves a sour taste in my mouth, that term.

But the idea of embracing freedom and understanding that these young adults, in many cases, they want the same things for their lives that we want from them, right? To connect with others and to accomplish things, and they have no problem doing that. Like, the incentives are powerful enough, they're more powerful than "Wake up and do your chores." It's like, "Wow, I can form connections with

people? I'll get up at seven! Who cares?"

PAM: Yeah, exactly. I mean, it's the whole thing. When you see them, when there's things they want to do, goals they have for themselves, or things they want to accomplish, and it's not even that they use formal language like that, but, this is today, this is what my options are, this is what I want to do, and they'll go off and do it, no matter what it means, right? They can make the adjustments, that, "oh, if they don't have to get up for school they'll never be able to get up for a job" Silly stuff. (Laughs.)

JAMES: Exactly.

TAYLOR: True.

PAM: Next question ...

I was wondering what you guys do, then, when you hit a rough patch and might begin to doubt unschooling once in a while?

TAYLOR: We decided I would take the lead on this one, because my doubt creeps in much more often than James's, and I think that's just more a function of my personality. I tend to be more of a worrier and a bit more anxious than him.

So, I have a list of a lot of things that I do when I begin to doubt. But I would say that I think, at least for me, my doubts started creeping in probably a bit more as our oldest kind of reached school age. And I think I thought that wouldn't happen. I had heard how that happened to people and I think I thought, "No, I would be immune from it, it's totally fine."

But as I reflect on our experiences, it definitely has happened a bit. I think, for me, the academic part of unschooling, just in terms of not choosing curriculum for your kids and requiring them to do things to learn, you know, the basics like reading and writing and math—that part comes pretty easily to me. I'm not really worried about that. I see my kids learning math just through all of the ways they choose to spend their time. Our oldest is really starting to learn to figure out words now, completely naturally, and he's finding a lot of joy. So that part isn't hard.

I think, for me, the bigger parts are just finding myself still wanting to control how my kids spend their time and thinking that they need this large variety of experiences when they may be super focused on one thing for a long period of time. So usually the first thing I do is talk to James when I'm feeling doubtful. (Laughs.)

JAMES: That's true. (Laughs.)

TAYLOR: And he's really patient and really helpful and I'm so grateful that he is so invested and believes so deeply in this, because he helps to kind of bring me back to center on it, and remind me when I'm feeling doubtful of anything, kind of remind me of the logical reasons why we're choosing this path. So, that's always really helpful, and I probably drive him a little crazy, but—

JAMES: No.

TAYLOR: (Laughs.) So, that's one of the first things I usually do.

Another thing that I do often, just to kind of re-center myself, is I'll go back to reading about people's experiences with unschooling. You know, people who are a bit further into it than me. Like, your blog is a place that I go sometimes when I feel like I'm doubting. Or I'll just, you know, go into some Facebook groups and check in on some of the threads where people are talking. Because that sometimes just encourages me.

And then I would say we are really, really lucky, and we kind of sought it out a little bit, but I don't think we knew we'd get as lucky as we did—that where we live, we have a huge handful of friends who are all unschooling with their children.

I think the local support, for me, is huge. Just spending time with our friends who are also doing the same thing with their kids—and some of them have older kids, some of them have kids the same age as our kids, and some even have younger kids—but spending time with them and just seeing kind of the relative peace in their families and seeing the way that all of our kids kind of interact with one another, and being able to be together with people who get it, and who are also giving their kids space to be exactly who they are, is really, really helpful.

Because I can find it sometimes stressful—not all the time—but sometimes stressful to be around families who have a different relationship with their kids. So, that’s really helpful, and then, you know, myself and three other moms who are all unschooling moms, we try to meet like every month or so for coffee, and kind of talk about the challenges and the things that are going well. And I find that really helpful too.

I know that there aren’t unschoolers everywhere, but I also feel like if you dig you might find some. And I just really encourage other people to see if they can find anybody in their local community because that’s been really helpful to me.

PAM: Yeah, I know, there’s a recommendation I see quite a bit when people are looking for that, is to just start something, right?

TAYLOR: Absolutely.

PAM: Sometimes you can’t see anybody out there but even if you just say, “Hey, you know, game group at our house once a month if anyone’s interested.” Just even out to a local general homeschooling list, and often you’ll find over time that it’s the unschoolers that will more consistently show up, right?

TAYLOR: Yeah, and you’ll find, if you start those things and you just start chatting with people you’ll pretty quickly figure out if there’s anybody on the same path. I really love the internet because I love that people who don’t have that in their local community can connect with other unschoolers and then, just for our family, I just feel so grateful that we have other people doing the same thing around us. That’s huge, for when I do kind of feel a little bit doubtful.

PAM: Yeah, no, I mean, the in-person community, being able to see people face-to-face sometimes is so wonderful. Because, I mean, when we first started, I didn’t know anyone in our lives or even in our community, really, that was doing it. We tried, we drove into the city and tried a couple of drop-ins, but didn’t really find any connections there.

But, like you were saying, James mentioned people flying from Arizona. We drove from Ontario down to South Carolina for our first conference, just so we could see some people face to face. It’s

nice to put faces sometimes to the people that you've been connecting with online, right?

The ability to connect online is awesome, and that's how I found out about homeschooling and unschooling in the first place, and I could learn so much about it. I remember that first year, too, every morning, just getting up early before the kids were up, to check the email groups, to check the forums and kind of get my brain settled, get my little fix for the morning, just that deep breath of the, "Ahh, there are people doing this and that's awesome." And then the kids were up and we'd have a great day.

TAYLOR: Yeah, I think that's huge. And, actually, you kind of made me think of another little kind of strategy that I've been trying lately. And sometimes I'm better about it than others, but, **when I feel myself kind of going through a patch where I'm feeling doubtful or worried about something in particular, I find little quotes and things that I read in books and on forums and blogs and I'll just try to kind of pick one and focus on it. Like you said, my kind of fuel for the day.**

And I think for me, a lot lately, and you talk about this a lot and it really resonates with me, is just thinking about kind of what's happening when I'm living in a place of fear. And that, for me, is just, you know, James has helped me to see, and also listening to you and reading other things that, **every minute that I spend living in that place of fear about whatever hypothetical thing I'm worried about might happen in the future, it's just eating away at my time right now with my kids and with my family.**

And I'm really by no means good at this yet, but that's kind of what I'm working on remembering. And I've been reading Teresa Graham Brett's book [Parenting for Social Change](#), and this one quote that I picked out had just really resonated with me. I read it the other night—she just says, "When we control others and operate out of fear, we're less connected and less respectful and love is diminished."

And that, for me, really resonated, because I keep coming back to the idea that if I'm connected to my kids, really and truly connected, then I really feel like most other things just really

won't matter as much. And so just kind of trying to have those little mantras and quotes to inspire me has been somewhat helpful.

PAM: I love when you were talking about focusing on that connection because that's one thing that really helped for me a lot, was, when I noticed that I was spinning, was to say, "Okay, just go focus on the kids for a while." And inevitably I would just say, "Okay, let that spin in the background," and I would go and play, literally play, with the kids.

Because building that connection back up again, you know, it was amazing when I actually spent more connected time with them, how easily the fear dropped away. Because all of a sudden you can see it—it was all right there in front of you, again, because when that connection got strong, you could see what they were doing, you could just see their enthusiasm for life and it's like, "Wow, this is the point." Right? And then everything else would kind of drain away. That's cool.

TAYLOR: Yeah, it's so true, too. **I know too, like, my oldest especially, he's just so perceptive, and I think that he can really sense when I'm spinning, because he can feel me kind of going in to my own space and maybe pulling away a little bit because I'm living in, you know, some place of fear. Or I try to convince him to, you know, spend his time doing something else, or pull him away from what he's really into, and I think that really chips away at, kind of, my credibility with him, and he then starts coming to me less with things he's excited about, or he's not as likely to share what he's doing with me.**

So I try to remember that, and when I can kind of cut that off and just, like you said, and I think I probably got this encouragement from listening to you, just go and be with them. You know, it doesn't take long to pull him back and he gets excited again. But he's a good mirror, I guess.

PAM: Oh, yeah, that's a good way to put it.

JAMES: Yeah, I think it's true, too, like when we really think about what our goals are for our relationships with our kids, because I think a lot of adults operate under the illusion that they can actually control the kids. That they can exert control, I mean even in the short term, but, in the long term in particular.

Because sometimes I think, "Hmm, I wonder if it would be more useful if the kids would be developing X skill, instead of, you know, playing video games," for instance. But then I think, "Well, they're still going to learn it at the pace they want to learn it, unless we really go whole hog in the other direction." And we're definitely not going to do that.

And so, given that they're going to learn at their own pace, well what do I actually have control over? Really what I have control over are my actions, and to a lesser extent how they perceive me.

If they perceive me as trustworthy and as someone who is enjoyable to be around, maybe they'll pick up on my values when it comes to how important reading is or whatever else. And then maybe they won't, but, at some point in their life, I assume that they're going to want to learn the skills that are important to them, and that will probably happen regardless of how much or little I pressure them.

If that's going to happen anyway, if it winds up being important, then why would I choose to strain our relationship just to create something that will probably happen anyway? It doesn't really seem worth it. So, choosing connection in those moments, it's much easier when I can kind of logic myself out of the instinctive fear that comes with kids being a little different than I remember them when I was a kid.

PAM: That's such a great point. And I love that, because, thinking of it maybe as influence, we choose our actions. On one hand you can say, "Okay, well I'm going to act this way because then maybe my kids will pick up on it." But, then you realize those are the actions I would choose as a person anyway, because that's who I am. And then you can realize, "I'm just going to be me, and we're all going to live together."

And then, over the years, you see the values that they pick up, and you realize, "Oh, I wasn't even trying to do that. I was trying to fully be myself." And it's so beautiful when you see them doing the same thing, you know? We learn so much from them, too, when they do it, don't we?

TAYLOR: It's kind of a funny little story just about that Pam, just in terms of them kind of just living with us being authentically

ourselves and picking up on things. Our oldest really wanted to make sure that he brushes his teeth every day, because, we just talked about James has some cavities, and whatever. So, we just talked about how it's important to take care of our teeth, and he really wanted to remember.

And he's asking, "How can I make sure I remember to brush my teeth because I don't usually do it right when I wake up?" And then he kind of just caught on to the idea, or I think James has used it in other places, that sometimes James sets timers or alarms on his phone to remind himself to do things. So, he started asking us to set a timer for 1:00 so he could remember to go brush his teeth, totally on his own. And then I showed him how to do it on his own iPad. Now he's been setting his timer, and he'll hop up from whatever he's doing and go brush his teeth.

It's kind of like a small little story but something that he didn't need to be pressured into or anything. He just kind of picked up on it by being around other people who have responsibilities that they need to take care of.

PAM: I love that story. That's perfect. He's like, "I'm trying to figure out a way to do this." Right? And he saw the kind of tools that he sees you guys using, and he's going to try that out, and that's awesome. (Laughs.)

TAYLOR: Yeah, it's kind of just fun to see those ideas develop.

PAM: Yeah, to see those things in action for yourself with your own kids, right? That just helps understand, just seeing it in your own life, seeing those ideas in practice.

TAYLOR: Absolutely.

PAM: Now James, you wrote [a great article](#) that was published in the December issue of [Tipping Points](#), which is the online magazine for the new [Alliance for Self-Directed Education](#). I really loved it.

Something that jumped out at me was, sometimes when

people are first learning about unschooling, I know it can seem—and it did to me—it can seem like almost a perfect life for children, right? But I really loved how you described the life of a real unschooling child.

I'm going to just share a little quote.

JAMES: Oh, thank you.

PAM: You wrote,

“Our kids still make mistakes, but we help them work through their mistakes without shame. Our kids sometimes have regrets but they don't resent us for causing them to miss out on the things that are important to them. Our kids sometimes get angry, but it usually comes from frustrating moments while doing things that are important to them, rather than getting angry because we are a barrier between them and their goals.”

Now, I loved all three of those points—that was awesome—but I really loved that you brought up regrets, because I think regrets kind of get the same bad rap that mistakes do. I know, as parents, we can get caught up in wanting our kids not to make mistakes, not to have any regrets, to have this perfect childhood.

I think sometimes it's easier for parents to realize how worrying about mistakes can get in the way, but I know regrets can be harder to frame, because if we see our kid regret something, some choice that they made, we can feel bad and think, “Oh, you know, that was a failure on my part. I maybe should have insisted harder that they do or not do whatever it is that they are regretting in that moment.” But, really, it's just more learning for the child, isn't it? I don't think that regrets are really a failure on our part, now, unless we are specifically withholding information or something to influence that choice in the first place. You know, always that caveat.

But if we're working with them and we have a conversation and they make a choice and then later they regret it, that's really just learning and part of navigating life, isn't it?

JAMES: I think so, I mean, we developed this actually at camp,

because, one of the things that was unusual about camp when we first put it into place was we actually got rid of some of the rules around physical safety, and that's not a popular thing to go and share with your board, right? When you're like, "I have some ways we can make camp less physically safe." (Laughs.)

PAM: (Laughs.)

JAMES: But the point behind it all was that, in a lot of ways, there were these really, in my mind, low-stakes rules that people have, to avoid low-stakes pains.

Like, a classic one that many, many camps share, that I think most people don't even know, is that most camps don't allow you to wear open-toed shoes or go barefoot at camp, right? This started, some study was published, I can't even remember, what, 70's or 80's or something, that basically said, and in the "No, duh" category, that when kids wear open-toed shoes or go barefoot, they hurt their feet more. This is obvious, I think, but what nobody ever discussed was whether or not they get injured.

So we sort of developed this lens to see what we allow the kids at camp to do in the hurt-but-not-injured lens. So, if a kid's going to make basically a small mistake that leads to a temporary pain, we just let him make it.

So sometimes it would look like staying up really late. Sometimes teenagers in particular might stay up until 4 a.m. at camp, and I would share this with other camp directors and they would say, "Well, then what happened though? You let them stay up until four, weren't they exhausted the next day?" And I'd say, "Yeah. (Laughs.) They were." And they'd say, "Well, right...," but they'd never get to the next point, because to them it's like so obviously wrong to stay up late and be tired the next day, that they don't actually think about what the real consequences of that are.

Because I'll tell you what, most of the people—and then I would always poll, when I do public speaking in the camp world, I poll people, "Well, who here has stayed up too late before?"—and every single person raises their hand. And I'd say, "Well, who here really regretted it afterwards?" and so few people actually wind up regretting that quote-unquote "mistake" that it actually doesn't seem to feel like much of a mistake at all.

And now sometimes, like I stayed up too late in college a handful of times and missed a class, and occasionally regretted it. But now, in my adult life, I pretty much stay up as late as I want every night and still have to wake up at the same times, and I've learned to manage it, right? Because in reality, staying up too late is not that big a deal. We all figure it out eventually, most of us. And sometimes we regret it, but by and large we figure it out.

And I think kids are really the same way. And you can shield kids from these small mistakes, right? Like, maybe you can shield them from having a friendship that might not work out very well, if you notice like teenagers in particular, another friend is toxic, say. Or you can shield them from maybe a bad romantic relationship—usually you can't, but you can try or at least try to discourage them from it. But for the most part kids are going to pursue the paths that they want, and sometimes they'll regret their decisions and sometimes they won't.

But what I've found, and for my own personal life growing up, is that if someone is making a decision and they know someone else doesn't approve of it, and they're going to make it anyway, then when they feel regret, they don't ever want to talk to the person who tried to dissuade them from it, right? They feel ashamed. They feel like they don't want to hear the implied "I told you so." They don't want to hear any of that nonsense. What they want is comfort. And so, it hits you coming and going. There's shame on the front side because you're expressing a lack of trust for their choice, and then when it actually doesn't work out then they think you're going to be condescending toward them, basically. And none of those are beneficial to my mind.

So yeah, I wouldn't let my kid walk out in traffic because they wanted to, or play with boiling water when they're two, but I would let them stay up late or be in a friendship that I was worried about or whatever, because they'll regret it and then we'll talk about it, because we're best friends, you know? That feels okay to me.

PAM: And without that experience, how are they going to really figure it out for themselves, right?

JAMES: One hundred percent. **That's another thing I always try to**

drive home with parents who are concerned, because it's like, "Well what if my kid comes to camp and does something that they regret because they're given this extra freedom?" And I say, "Well, what's your plan for when they're 18? Or 22?"

Because when I got to college, I'll tell you, a lot of people, myself included, with this new-found freedom, never having taken it for a test drive before, used it really irresponsibly, right?
(Laughs.)

PAM: Oh, yes. Absolutely. My first-year roommate was gone by December, and she was an honour student coming in, because she just had no idea how to use that freedom. Wow.

JAMES: Yeah, and I mean, we see this biologically, like our bodies when they're young were designed to take our lumps and heal more quickly, you know, and we can learn languages more quickly when we're young.

I think we can also learn how to use freedom more easily when we're young. And by the time you've developed these habits of being told what to do and having your life planned for you, those are hard to break in adulthood, and many people, I think, not only do they have trouble breaking them, they just find new proxies for authorities, whether it's their boss or whomever—sometimes, you know, a significant other, or some other dangerous sort of power over relationship—and they either wind up being really unhappy or unsatisfied or it just doesn't work. So yeah, I'm happy to let kids make those mistakes.

PAM: Plus, when they're older, too, not only do they have to try and figure out finally what works for them, they also have that voice in their head, then, right? That they have to work past. Versus just, you know, try to figure out what works for them, they have to figure out, "Well, this works for me, and why does it not match that?" and "Do I have to feel bad about that?" And, you know, it's just a lot more voices in their head to work through than if they get to start fresh.

JAMES: Oh yeah, I never want my kids to be sitting there making a decision in adulthood, and if it's something that they feel strongly about, worry like, "Well is my dad going to be disappointed if I choose this?" Like, man, that just is, like, my

worst nightmare as a parent. I want to work hard to avoid it, you know?

PAM: Yup. Yup.

You guys also mentioned to me that you're both self-employed and you spend about an equal amount of time with your kids. I love hearing how families are putting that all together, so I would love to hear how you guys got to that point.

TAYLOR: Sure. James, I'll start and then just jump in if I'm missing anything important.

JAMES: Yeah, you got it.

TAYLOR: I think that it's been kind of a flow evolution for us. It's been a lot of like single changes that have kind of led up to where we are now.

I think that the first change for us was when James was playing poker and I was teaching and Oliver was a baby and me going back to work just wasn't working for him. So, that was the first change, right? It was: Taylor needs to stop working and James's work needs to be super reliable to support us. And that's when we kind of sold our home in New Jersey and moved to Vanderkamp.

We moved pretty far away. It kind of felt a little bit risky, but it really felt like it's what our family needed. So, we did that. And James was working a lot of hours and I was very intense, you know, all hands-on with kids, because we had Ezra two years after Oliver was born, so we had two really little ones.

And then, when Ezra was an older baby, I became certified to be a birth doula, and that's the work that I started to pursue. So, I did what I could while we were at camp. James was always really supportive. And then when we had kind of outgrown our role there at camp and we moved to New Hampshire, we just tried to structure our time—and James can talk a little bit more about this better maybe, but—we tried to structure our time in a way that we both had time to pursue the work that we wanted to do, and then the other time was spent largely with the kids.

I don't know, James, maybe you could say a little bit about—you know, it looks a little different now, since we now have another baby. I've drastically scaled back on my work, just because he's little and he needs me. But I think that just being willing to try different arrangements of things, and also recognizing that I feel grateful that we're in a position that I can scale back on my work right now and we're okay. So, that's been kind of helpful.

JAMES: I think the major component that came for us—and I think you summed it up pretty well, T—is at some point we decided, **I think basically when we decided we wanted to pursue unschooling six years ago, when our first child couldn't even talk yet, was that this was going to be a non-negotiable for us.**

And we've talked at length, seeing and encountering people who will say, "Well that sounds great but it wouldn't work for our family." And I'll start by saying, "It wouldn't have worked for our family if we had prioritized other things."

You know, in our house that we owned we had an expensive mortgage, for us, at the time, and we weren't really equipped to be a single income family, and so we just changed everything. First, we went to camp because we could live on-site and make not-very-much money but have only one person working and have our housing taken care of. And we were lucky to be able to get that role, but it's something that we gave up a lot to do. I mean, we took a six-figure loss on the first house that we sold; it was a hard decision to make. And even when we were at camp we wouldn't have left camp, I think, until we had the pieces in place to continue to make it work.

I think for us that mindset shift from "it would be nice if we could do this" to "we're just going to do this" was what really made the difference.

So, while we were at camp, we both started to try to launch these side businesses. You know, me in two different spaces in terms of online businesses, and some consulting work, and Taylor with her doula work and also an online business, an online community called [The New Mama Project](#), which she maybe doesn't want to brag about on the podcast, but is very cool. (Laughs.)

TAYLOR: Thanks.

JAMES: No problem. But I think that between the two of us we just knew we had to make it work somehow. So, since we knew we had to make it work somehow, we would do things, like, I'd work an 8 hour day at camp and come home and we would play with the kids and then we would both write at night time after Ollie was asleep.

And it was really tiring, and it's not when you're at your creative best, or whatever, and we just knew it had to happen, so we did it. I don't know. It's weird to think about now because now it's our life and it feels easy because it's comfortable, but it wasn't for a while. And we also just knew we had to do it. So, we just kept doing it.

That sounds weird now, but... (Laughs.)

PAM: No, I love the way you spoke of it as, this was your priority. This is now what's a given in our life, and now let's figure out how to make that work.

TAYLOR: Right, yeah.

JAMES: It wasn't going to be something that we brushed aside. For some people, it's like the difference between brushing your teeth and exercising, right? Most people don't say, "Well I'm too busy to brush my teeth. I just can't get around to it. Therefore, I don't."

They say, "Well, I brush my teeth twice a day," or whatever, and that's just a non-negotiable part of their life. But they make excuses as to why they can't get to the gym. And we didn't want our unschooling journey to be the gym. We wanted it to be just something that happens because that's mandatory in our life.

PAM: And everything else was up for grabs, right? Like, the house was an optional thing—

TAYLOR: Totally.

PAM: You made this the one thing, and then everything else was optional that you could play with and see how that might fit, right?

TAYLOR: Yeah and I think we stay really mindful that, over time, the way that our day-to-day life looks is going to shift and

evolve. You know, based on our kids ages and needs, and based on what's earning us the money that we need to support ourselves.

I think even the day-to-day breakdown of who's spending time working and who's spending time more focused on the kids, you know, it's changed so much in the past two years between moving to our new home and having a baby. And so, I think just realizing and being okay with things looking different from year to year, and always being willing to kind of throw it out there, you know, "Is this still working? Do we need to juggle some things around?" has been really helpful.

We've even had conversations, since we both do kind of run our own businesses, and James earns most of our money, what if something went wrong with his business? We've even thrown out all sorts of things that we would do, keeping in mind that the kids would just stay home with us and we would just figure it out. That's the primary thing that would not change.

PAM: Yeah, that's brilliant. I love that idea of just being creative, and even having the little "what if" conversations, especially now when there's no pressure because it hasn't actually happened. That's when you can be more creative, right? You can think of all these different ways that you might address those kinds of things. That's really cool. I love that idea.

JAMES: Oh, thanks.

PAM: I want to thank you guys so very much for taking the time to speak with me. I had so much fun!

TAYLOR: Thank you so much Pam. I loved it too, and just thank you so much for all that you do. I've pretty religiously listened to, I think, all your episodes except your most recent one so far, and...

PAM: Oh my goodness!

TAYLOR: It's just one of the things that really helps me kind of continue in my process of deschooling. So, thanks for all the time you put in to it.

JAMES: Yeah, and I'll add too, that as I walk the dog in the morning, and I have a silly habit where I listen to podcasts on my

cell phone, and they blast out loud for everyone to hear, and Taylor's worried that everyone's going to think I'm weird but I just don't like headphones.

But whenever I walk in and your podcast is playing, Pam, Taylor's eyes light up. She says, "You're listening to the latest unschooling podcast? We can talk about it!" (Laughs.) We really do adore the show, and thank you so much for everything.

PAM: Oh, thank you so much guys. That's awesome! And I really loved all the stuff you guys had to share. It's so fascinating to get a little glimpse into your lives. Thanks very much for taking the time. I know it was a challenge—you've got all those kids to manage—that's not really the right word—

TAYLOR: We know what you mean.

PAM: Yes—that exciting time.

TAYLOR: It was an honour. Thank you so much.

PAM: Thank you, guys. And before we go, where's the best place for people to connect with you guys online?

JAMES: Oh sure, yeah. Well, you can go to CampStompingGround.com—you can learn about our camp there. We're also Camp Stomping Ground on [Facebook](#), or [Twitter](#), or really anywhere. [Instagram](#) as well. You can say hi. We always love to talk and interact with more families, even in different places, if camp isn't a realistic thing for you now.

We love to connect and spread the word about other people who are doing the same thing that we are, even if it's in a little bit of a different context. So, you can email me, James at [campstompingground dot com](mailto:campstompingground.com), and I can talk to you about that. Or you can just go to the Facebook page and say hi, because we're always interacting and sharing stories and connecting with other folks in the unschooling movement at large. So, that's the best place for me.

TAYLOR: And then I'll just add, I kind of do a lot of cataloging of our family's daily life on Instagram, just for our own sake, saving photos, but also I love to connect with other unschooling families on there. My account's private, but if unschooling families request

me, I'll add them. So that's [tcomaites](#) and Pam, I can send that to you.

PAM: Oh, awesome. That's great. I will definitely be sure to follow you. And I had a lot of fun on the Camp Stomping Ground website; they have some great videos there. It's really fun.

JAMES: Yeah, Jack and Laura are really talented. The way they make it all work—because Camp Stomping Ground's still mostly a very expensive hobby for all of us—the way they make it work is they produce these amazing graphically recorded videos, in the style of that Ken Robinson video, actually.

And they do it for all sorts of people. Peter Gray's a supporter of camp, and some other people, like Lenore Skenazy—these folks have helped us get our camp off the ground and we have sweet videos of them talking and us drawing—Laura drawing, I should say—so check those out too, yeah.

PAM: That's great. Thanks so much guys!

JAMES: Thanks, Pam. See you around.

TAYLOR: Okay, thanks Pam.

PAM: Bye!