

Thomas Knapp – News Analyst

News Analyst, Florida, USA

My wife and I didn't intend to become unschoolers. From our kids' birth, we began investigating more formal homeschooling options, but both boys wanted to attend government ("public") school, and we allowed both of them to give it a try. It was a disaster.

In fairness, part of that may have been due to the particular public school system in our area, which was in complete shambles and which recently lost its accreditation and had to send all its students off to other districts.

Our oldest son loved school. He did well academically, he liked his teachers, and he was selected for the "gifted program." But over time, he frankly felt less and less physically safe. As one of only a handful of white students in a school that was almost entirely black, he found himself frequently picked on and challenged to fights. It wasn't about race *per se*. In large group situations, *any* kid who's "different" gets singled out. We switched him to an arts-oriented charter school. He enjoyed that, too, but his total commute (at ten years old, using public transit alone, by the way—free range kid!) was nearly two hours and he often received at least two hours' worth of homework. It wore him out, as his entire day consisted of school, getting to and from school, and working on school assignments.

Our younger son had discipline problems. For this, I am not going to lay the entire blame on the school, as he was and is something of a hellion. But the school does deserve part of it. I spent ten years in the Marine Corps, and that life was much less regimented than life at public school. Line up for the bathroom. No talking in line. No talking at lunch. Ten minutes of recess per day (when I was a kid, it was closer to 45 minutes split over three breaks) ... oh, and no running. And this was first grade!

So we switched to homeschooling of the sort that mimics the public school paradigm: So many hours a week “in class,” a set curriculum, keeping of logs per requirements in our state (Missouri, which we’ve since moved away from), discrete lessons in discrete areas.

It worked out... sort of. They learned the material that we presented to them. They completed the assignments that we set them to. They did well on the tests designed to measure their progress.

But they were bored stiff, even though I tried to juggle the curriculum to match up with their interests. They resisted the regimentation ... and I didn’t blame them!

Both of them were reading well before their “formal educations” began, having learned on their own with occasional help from Mom and Dad on how to sound out words and what the harder words meant.

Both of them had already achieved a basic grounding in math—arithmetic, simple algebra, a little geometry—by age 10 or so.

Both of them had a healthy interest in science and the arts.

Both of them paid attention to current events and would dig into history on their own, using Wikipedia and other online resources, to understand and intelligently discuss those events.

And the whole time, a quote from David Friedman kept coming back to mind: “We concluded that the proper approach for our children was unschooling, which I like to describe as throwing books at them and seeing which ones stick. Leave them free to learn what they want, while providing suggestions—which they are free to ignore—and support.”

By the time they were 12 and 10 respectively, we had segued naturally into unschooling. The difference was dramatic and demonstrated to us that kids will learn and learn and learn... if their parents and the state will just get the hell out of the way and *let them*.

We make suggestions. We pose problems. We recommend books. We watch out of the corners of our eyes to make sure they’re always doing *something*.

And they are always doing something.

They read even more on their own now than they did when we were assigning the reading.

They always have projects going—art projects, costume-for-play projects, film projects (we spent weeks on stop-motion animation), computer game coding projects—and those projects almost always present fairly advanced math problems that they either solve on their own or bring to us for assistance. They're 16 and 14 now. I don't know that they would ace a college-level trigonometry test, but they'd recognize the problems and have some idea as to how to solve those problems.

On any given day, we can count on a long discussion of science and “social studies,” grounded in current events. And we're no longer surprised when one of them hits us with a fact we hadn't known ourselves concerning ancient Egypt, Napoleon's France, World War II, gender roles in the 21st century, or which company is acquiring which competitor this week.

Above and beyond “doing something,” they are enjoying their teen years instead of dreading the daily trudge to the bus stop for seven hours locked up in the combination of prison and day care center that most kids call “school.”

Our oldest is boning up for his GED test. We expect him to pass it easily on his first attempt and he's been checking out the class catalog from our local community college. Similarly, we think our youngest will “graduate” at 17 or 18, at least as prepared as his publicly educated peers, for life in the real world.

Is unschooling for everyone? I can't say. Perhaps some kids want or need more regimentation than unschooling usually implies. I do know that it's worked for us, if the measure of “working” is that our kids are happy, healthy, literate, numerate and socially engaged.