

Curious and Engaged by Pam Laricchia

Our conventional society honours learning deeply, yet its definition has steadily narrowed over the years to checking off curriculum expectations and awarding graduation certificates. Does this restrictive view do learning justice? What if real learning is bigger than that? Join Pam as she widens the view on learning, moving beyond curriculum to curiosity, beyond graduation to lifelong learning.

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Today I'd like to talk with you about learning. That's often where our journey to homeschooling and unschooling starts, isn't it? And that's natural—conventionally, school is where children go to learn, so one of the first questions that comes to mind when thinking about not sending our children to school is “how will they learn instead?”

Our society honours learning deeply, yet its definition has steadily narrowed over the years to checking off curriculum expectations and awarding graduation certificates. Does this restrictive view do learning justice? To explore this, let's crack open our ideas about learning. Let's pull them apart and see what lovely stuff we find inside, the stuff that really makes learning tick. To do that, let's tackle the question, “How do people, and that includes children, learn?”

In my mind, there are main three characteristics of real and effective learning, learning that is understood and remembered:

1. one is engagement, which is the act of exploring and playing with an idea, topic, or skill;
2. the second is motivation, which is about staying engaged in their exploration, even through challenges; and
3. and the third characteristic is thinking, which is about creativity and analysis, and is key to the bigger picture understanding of how the idea, topic, or skill fits into their world.

When these three characteristics are at play, learning thrives.

What I want to do this morning is dive into each of them and explore what they look like through the lenses of both the conventional education system and unschooling. From there we'll talk about the day-to-day ways we can live this learning lifestyle with our children, and then we'll contemplate what it looks like in the bigger picture.

So let's get started. The first characteristic of effective learning I want to talk about is engagement. Engagement is all about being genuinely curious and actively exploring whatever has caught your interest. When your mind is engaged in an activity, it is making observations, analyzing options, making connections, and figuring things out. In other words, learning.

Through the lens of school, what does engagement look like? Well, first off, the subjects covered are pre-determined and outlined in curriculum documents. Then in each classroom, it's the teacher's job is to teach these subjects to their students—i.e. engage them in learning—as well as perform testing to prove their students have learned. At first glance it seems like a pretty reasonable approach: define the knowledge and skills that children should learn to function successfully in society as adults, then teach it to them. The education system is designed to cost effectively teach a set of information and skills, to a large group of children, within a finite stretch of compulsory school years. Within that mandate, an individual child's learning is *not* the foremost goal.

What about outside school? There's a John Holt quote from his book *How Children Learn* that cuts to the heart of it: "Fish swim, birds fly; man thinks and learns." With this he was speaking to the very nature of being human. Learning is an entirely natural human instinct, evident from the moment we're born. From the youngest age, all children are driven to explore the world around them and learn how it works. Parents marvel at their single-minded determination: their obvious joy when they finally figure out how to communicate that they want something; the countless times they'll try to pick up that Cheerio; the tenacity with which they practice standing up and taking those first few steps.

That insatiable curiosity to engage with life does not fade with age unless the adults in the child's life work pretty hard to temper it. But that they often do—apparently there's a UCLA study that found the average toddler hears the word "no" over 400 times a day. Man, the average toddler is determined!

Why do many parents, often unthinkingly, discourage their child's curiosity and exploration?

- It's time-consuming: even one typically adorned room can keep a toddler busy for ages, needing supervision all the while;
- It can be boring: what's in the cupboard, what's behind the curtain, what does this toy taste like—the parent already knows the answers so they'd rather just tell the kid than wait for them to figure it out on their own.

- It's dangerous: they don't want to spend their time standing by the stairs spotting their toddler, or catching them at the bottom of the slide over and over and over, or watching closely to make sure they don't find the chemicals stored on the bottom shelf of the cupboard.

An emphatic "no" will suffice in all those cases. And it's so much easier!

Once a child reaches school age and enters the education system, teachers are tasked with channeling what curiosity is left down the curriculum path. Good teachers try valiantly to catch their students' attention, to engage them and spark learning by relating it to their real lives, with pop-culture-decorated worksheets, and field trips into the real world, and simulated activities like pretend money, prearranged experiments, mock trials, and a model UN. But the disconnect soon becomes obvious to the students. It's that fundamental separation of the curriculum from life that makes creating engagement so difficult.

The curriculum path also restricts a teacher's freedom to dive more deeply into topics their students are actually curious about: "you'll cover that next year." Or to stray very far beyond the course outline: "you can look that up at home." Yet the students' definition of learning quickly becomes inextricably linked with school hours as parents tell them, "your job is to go to school to learn." With this narrow and rigid definition of learning being hammered home constantly, many students become deeply resistant to learning outside of school. Their curiosity becomes a faded echo of their toddler years. And without curiosity, without engagement, not a lot of quality learning is happening.

But what if a child's curiosity isn't constantly stifled?

One of the refreshing traits of unschooling children is their enthusiasm for life. They are free to explore their environment because the adults in their lives aren't constantly trying to dampen or redirect their enthusiasm. In an unschooling family it's that curiosity that drives learning, instead of a curriculum. Yet that can be hard to envision for most adults because our image of learning still looks so much like school. What does life with inquisitive and engaged children look like?

It can look like large cardboard boxes lined up, enough for everyone, with the child up front wearing a train engineer's cap as they travel from imaginary place to imaginary place, you lifting the littlest one in and out, in and out. A tower of blocks stands in the corner as a destination, a pile of stuffed animals tag along as traveling companions, and the couch is an island to visit.

It can look like a huge Lego town, days or weeks spent building a contemporary community with stores and parks and homes and citizens, or a futuristic base with a control room and sleeping

quarters and spaceships and aliens, or a medieval castle with an armory and a mill and dragons and townsfolk.

It can look like one child concentrating hard on playing a video game, while you read the guide out loud for tips and tricks, in between your turns of the board game you're playing with your other children, everyone taking a moment to cheer when a boss is beat, or someone rolls a six, or lands on the longest ladder.

It can look like a puppet show, put on from behind the couch, full of dialog and sound effects and giggles, with you recording it and everyone watching it immediately after; and as you end up watching the other videos on the memory card an impromptu dance party breaks out.

It can look like a weekday afternoon at the practically deserted park, winding the tire swing up countless times, with its passengers laughing maniacally as you release it, eventually their boundless energy spurring them to explore the play structure and escape from pirates down the tunnel slide.

It can look like each child in their room, one reading and writing on an online forum, one setting up props for a photo shoot, one playing a computer game. Each wandering out once in a while to chat and grab a snack, you calling down the hallway to ask if anyone would like a cup of the tea you're brewing.

In each of those little vignettes, can you picture the intense engagement with the activity? Envision what is happening beneath the surface? The learning is rampant. Because each child is following their own curiosity, they dive into their interests as deeply as they want—maybe the Lego town lasts a day, or a week, or a month; maybe they take 100 photos, then play with perspective and take 100 more, then rearrange the set and take another 200. Creativity thrives. Because their time is their own, they let their questions roam as far and wide as their inquisitiveness takes them—maybe the train becomes a bus, then becomes a plane, then becomes an ocean liner; maybe the forum thread leads to a video, which leads to a website, which leads to a new forum: another piece of the world to explore filled with people as keen to discuss their passions as they are. Being deeply engaged in a task like that is often described as being “in the flow”.

In fact, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, the author of *Finding Flow*, describes it as “the joy of complete engagement.” Unschooling is all about creating a learning environment that allows our children to regularly experience “the joy of complete engagement”.

The days themselves can look very different, but the curiosity driving them is the same: What do they love? What questions do they ask? What would they like to try? Who do they want to become? Unschooling is about helping them as they explore the questions that drive them. And when they're in the driver's seat, not only are they fully engaged, but they're learning the way they *want* to learn. And the way they want to learn will also be the way they most enjoy learning, and hence, the way they learn best. Maybe that's reading, or watching videos, or hands-on tinkering, or a combination of them all. They can pick and choose which best suits them in the moment.

Speaking of learning styles, let's hop back to school for a minute. With one teacher and a classroom full of students, one-on-one communication, individualized by learning style, just isn't feasible; you need a communication model that works one-to-many. And because each classroom teacher must report progress to the parents, you need an evaluation model that functions many-to-one. So if you're trying to move a whole lot of students through a system of defined learning that is independent of the participants—meaning it's full of teachers and students, but independent of any particular teachers or students—you probably couldn't think up a much better process than the curriculum-based teaching and testing one we have now—at least from the point-of-view of those tasked with running the system.

But if we look at the situation from the *student's* point-of-view, with *learning* as the goal, it leaves a lot to be desired. For any child whose brain isn't wired from a young age with that sweet spot combination of being a predominately auditory learner with competent reading and writing skills, the communication style of the typical classroom can quickly make it a challenging place to be. As much as teachers try, there isn't enough time in their day, nor space in their classroom, to engage in various modes of communication, to accommodate multiple learning styles, and to personalize lessons to make them meaningful for each student; students need to fit into the classroom environment, not the other way around. Is the classroom setting likely to encourage students to be "in the flow"? Have you often heard students use the word "joy" to describe their learning experiences?

In contrast, unschooling families choose to support their children as they pursue their interests, in the ways they enjoy, as deeply as they want, and for as long as they are interested. That is where the most powerful engagement and learning is found: "in the flow."

motivation – active learning

Now let's look at a second characteristic of real and effective learning: motivation. Motivation is the inspiration to keep trying, even in the face of challenges, to accomplish whatever a person sets out to do.

The school system is steeped in external motivation: awards for perfect attendance; charts to track student behaviour with privileges gained and lost accordingly; stickers for completed worksheets; and grades on tests and report cards. The point? To encourage children to learn. But what is the assumption that lies at the heart of it? That given a choice, a child would prefer not to learn. Wow. Is that really true? We talked earlier about young children, children before their curiosity has been dulled—do they seem uninterested in learning? Think about it for a moment. Might this learning-avoidant behaviour be a reaction to the environment, rather than a basic human trait? Might these external rewards actually be undermining the learning they are attempting to encourage?

Let's imagine for a moment you're back in high school chemistry and there's a test coming up. What's the first thing you and your fellow students ask your teacher? "What's on the test?" Let's say your teacher replies, "It will cover chapters four through six, but there won't be questions on pages 110-113; hopefully we'll get a chance to discuss Dalton's Law of Partial Pressures later." "Will we have to balance any chemical equations?" "Yes, there will be some on the test."

So what do the students study? Just what's going to be on the test. Yes to balancing chemical equations and no to Dalton's Law of Partial Pressures. They aren't interested in learning about chemistry per se, they are interested in learning only the stuff that will be on the test. Why? Because their goal isn't to learn chemistry, it's to get a good grade. With that goal in mind, not only do they focus solely on test topics, if they don't understand something while they're studying, they're much more apt to try to memorize it for the test, rather than try to understand it. And that's reasonable—it's the quickest way to their goal! The external motivation of getting good grades subverts their interest in learning and mastering a topic. It does, however, motivate them to learn lots about gaming the system.

In contrast, unschooling children are following their curiosity, pursuing their goals, and learning things that they find interesting along the way. Their motivation to learn things is intrinsic, or internal, driven by their wish to reach their own goals. They quite willingly learn what they need to know along the way, taking whatever time they need to do it. Their learning helps them progress towards their goal, so any sense of accomplishment is a result of the learning itself, not from an external reward. They are in control of their learning and over time their confidence in their ability to reach their goals, to learn things as needed, grows.

If your goal is to help your child develop a love of learning that will last them a lifetime, which style of motivation do you think would likely work better?

Beyond the education system's reliance on external motivation, its dependence on curricula also makes motivating students challenging: "Why do I need to know this?" is a common refrain, and for good reason. There needs to be something relevant in their lives to connect it to, some way for it to make sense in their world and with that gain understanding and real learning. Without a connection to real-life goals, both the learning itself is more difficult and the motivation is fleeting.

That's an interesting point, isn't it? The learning is more difficult when the student isn't interested. Why? Not only is interest what spurs the motivation to push through the more challenging moments, it's interest that brings the child's existing knowledge bubbling to the surface so they can connect new information to it, expanding their understanding. Without that interest, their mind has to work harder to find a connection to make this random piece of information make sense in their world. Their brain has to work harder to learn.

Conversely, unschooling children don't internalize the message that "learning is hard". Learning doesn't become something to be avoided whenever possible. Without curricula, it's never really about the learning—it's about reaching their goal, about what the learning can help them accomplish. The learning happens almost unobtrusively, it's something to figure out along the way, but it is real and effective learning; it makes sense in their world and has a purpose. And because it makes sense to them, they understand it and can incorporate it into their knowledge base. There is a sense of real world satisfaction with learning and using a new skill or piece of knowledge as part of accomplishing their goal that helps solidify its usefulness—it's not an abstract A on a test.

Still, using curriculum as a standard of "things everyone should know by the age of eighteen" can be hard to give up! I remember when my children left school and I chose to turn away from curriculum, how I wondered if my children might miss something they "have to" know. I was a bit surprised to feel a growing sense of responsibility—I didn't realize that I had begun to rely on school to provide that. *Is there a certain set of skills and knowledge that is needed to get along in society?*

Then I asked myself, even if there is, won't they encounter it living the real world? Think about that for a second. Since unschooling kids are living and learning *in* the real world, interacting with people in their community as they grow up, won't they, by definition, then encounter occasions where those basic skills and knowledge will come in handy, and pick them up?

One of my favourite ways to distinguish between schooling and unschooling is that school focuses on teaching the knowledge and skills they believe students will need to accomplish their goals once they graduate into the real world; while with unschooling, children pursue their interests in the real world right now and pick up the knowledge and skills they need to accomplish their goals along the way.

If there's something they haven't come across, then obviously it's not something they "have to" know—certainly not yet. Without curriculum telling us they need to know X by the age of Y, they can learn it when a need or interest develops, regardless of their age—when there's a real reason to learn it. When there's a purpose to learning something, there's internal motivation. And there's a much better chance it will be understood and remembered because it has meaning in their lives. Being taught things in anticipation of a need, when there is little interest, is frustrating, more difficult, and diminishes their drive to learn in general. And the chances that they'll remember it years later when the time comes that it might actually be helpful? Pretty small.

thinking – creating and thinking critically

So now that we have an engaged and motivated learner, the third characteristic of real and effective learning I want to talk about today is thinking. Not memorizing—thinking. Real thinking is about making those learning connections that bring deeper understanding; it's about analyzing facts and situations and letting creativity loose to see them in new ways; it's about noticing the hidden gems of opportunity, brainstorming lots of options, making choices, and seeing how they play out.

In contrast, the education system is steeped in memorization: facts and figures and step-by-step processes. On the vast majority of tests and exams it's the ability to remember things that is being graded—memorization has come to *represent* understanding, to represent learning. Yet as Einstein said way back in 1921, "I do not carry such information in my mind since it is readily available in books." Nowadays there's even more information in existence, but with tablet and mobile phone browsers, it's even more readily available in the moment.

So let's move beyond the memorizing and focus on the learning; on real learning, learning that is understood and remembered. The learning that happens when a person, no matter their age, is curious and engaged. What does real learning look like outside of school?

It looks like life.

To those with a school-based mindset, unschooling can look like an endlessly unfolding summer vacation, but with one big difference: the kids don't spend it decompressing, burning off steam from many months of strict schedules and the stress to perform. And they don't end up complaining they

are bored because someone isn't telling them what to do. Instead, they are busily pursuing the things that interest them.

Soon the idea of a school year falls to the wayside: the learning is found *in* the everyday living. Eventually even summer vacation is a pretty meaningless concept, and the idea that a person could go all day without learning something seems rather preposterous—that's the tongue-in-cheek point of Sandra Dodd's *Learn Nothing Day*. Once your family is enmeshed in unschooling, it's life. And there's no need to take a vacation from life. Vacations become about exploring new places and experiencing fresh surroundings; not about escaping from obligations. Parents and children are living and learning *together*—neither feels the need to escape from the other. Sometimes that's hard for parents of schooled children to imagine, but much of their children's behaviour right now is in reaction to the highly controlled environment in which they live; it's not innate.

Another difference between life and school? Schools group students together by age, so the classroom setup of lots of kids and one teacher means that students learn a lot of their social skills from their age peers, who know as little as they do. Instead of having their pool of potential friends and acquaintances limited to kids their own age that live in close proximity, unschooling children often have friends with a wide range of ages. And how do they find friends? Through their interests. Karate. Building robots. Sports. Art. Video games. A shared interest is often a better basis for a developing friendship than age. And having friends with a range of ages also gives unschooling children opportunities to connect in various ways: to nurture those that are younger and less experienced; to actively play with those with similar interests and skill levels; and to learn from those with more experience. More thinking and learning in all those cases.

I've talked about younger kids quite a bit up to this point, so as we explore thinking and the creative analysis of situations that can bring deeper understanding, I thought it might be an appropriate time to talk about teens and that infamous question: "What about college?"

If your kids are young that may seem far off, but it's a question I've been asked regularly ever since we started unschooling when my eldest was almost ten. And it's a good one! During our lifetime, a college degree has been practically synonymous with getting a good job and being conventionally successful, so it's no wonder that family and friends worry that our unconventional path may force our children to forfeit the golden egg.

Certainly we can debate the value of the conventional definition of “success”, but for now, let’s continue to focus on the thinking and learning side of the equation. In what ways can unschooling teens and young adults continue to think and learn? When is college a useful destination?

To this point in time, much of humanity’s body of knowledge has been ensconced in colleges and universities, making higher education the “go to” place to expand your horizons, but over the last couple of decades we have been witness to an incredible transition. The explosion of information, the growth of technology, and the resultant blossoming of near real-time communication between people around the globe has created an entirely new backdrop to our lives.

Society is really just beginning to embrace this exponential increase in connectedness, to wrap it’s head around the implications and contemplate what might be possible. To that end, a number of interesting online learning communities have been created over the last few years. For example, more and more free learning resources have been made available online, a smattering of which includes: iTunes University, Khan Academy, MIT’s OpenCourseWare, and edX, founded by Harvard and MIT, which offers free courses from many universities around the world. These are wonderful resources to have access to! They are a first step in rethinking how we might support learning in this new, highly-connected world and there are definite advantages beyond the free access: the learner is in more control of both the content and the pace. Yet still, the focus is on bringing the typical teacher-student, curriculum-driven, learning paradigm into the online space.

Moving a step closer to a bigger-picture view of learning, TED Talks expand beyond academic topics and focus on sharing ideas for discussion and engagement. With their tagline “ideas worth spreading”, their talks are terrific inspiration, connecting interested learners with those passionate about their topic. These talks are often wonderful fodder for thinking and exploration.

Another interesting slice of the online world is focusing on the many other ways to learn beyond college. There’s Dale Stephen’s UnCollege, “a social movement designed to help you hack your education. His manifesto wants to “show you how to gain the passion, hustle, and contrarianism requisite for success — all without setting foot inside a classroom.” Granted, experienced unschoolers likely already possess the curiosity, confidence, and grit he speaks of, yet they too may find inspiration through the blog or Dale’s book, *Hacking Your Education*.

For experienced unschoolers looking for like-minded community there’s Blake Boles’ Zero Tuition College, an “online community of self-directed learners who educate themselves without college.” There you can connect with other learners, including a mentoring aspect. Blake’s newest book, *Better*

Than College: How To Build a Successful Life Without a Four-Year Degree, has been well-received. And he's here this weekend talking with the teens!

Maybe your young adult is more interested in continuing to gather with others, online or in-person, around shared interests and passions, a mainstay of unschooling. No problem! People love to share their passions with others, and the Internet has made gathering around topics so easy to do. Pick any interest and I'm sure you'll find others who share it through blogs or mailing lists or forums; through Twitter or Tumblr or Facebook groups or Google+ circles: more amazing connections to piece together a bigger picture view of the world.

So what might contemplating this "what about college?" question look like in real life? I thought I'd share a snapshot of what it has looked like so far for my nineteen year-old daughter. Probably starting in earnest around age fifteen, Lissy, who had developed a love for photography, began exploring the possibilities for expanding her passion. Alongside her everyday exploration of photography, over the course of the next couple of years she reviewed college curricula for photography programs at colleges near and far, spoke with people in some of those programs and in the industry at large, and took note of the beginning journeys of established photographers. This wasn't a case of "you're approaching college age so you better figure out what your next step is" but of "I've been immersing myself in my passion for a few years now and I want to connect with others as passionate as I am and expand my learning." Note the perspective—the motivation was coming from her.

From this searching and contemplation, a path forward that seemed to best mesh with her goals began to emerge: at age eighteen she chose to spend six months living in and exploring New York City to see if it met her wish for community and learning. For her, it was stellar! It fed her soul in so many of the ways she was looking for. From there we spent countless hours over the last couple months of 2012 gathering all the bits and pieces that make up a US artist's visa application. During that time, in conversation with our more conventional family and friends, we likened the lawyer's fees to college tuition—that seemed to help them make the connection that this was in support of her real learning in the world. Her application was approved for the full three years and in January 2013 she officially moved there. In this last year her knowledge and understanding of photography and the business world that surrounds it has grown exponentially!

Yet none of this means that college is forever out of the picture. Maybe her interests will change—one of the keys to finding joy in life is to not to feel locked into anything, to remember that whatever you

do, it's always a choice. Maybe she will encounter a program, or even just a course, that intersects with something she is looking to learn.

I think what's important for teens, and parents, is to see college as a tool that can be used to meet a goal; not as a goal in and of itself. College is an option on the learning platter. I think it's much less useful, and more expensive, to go to college to "figure out what you want to do in life." Instead, when you figure out what you'd like to pursue, if there's interesting and unique knowledge and/or community available at college, that's when it merits serious consideration.

And if that moment comes, depending on the program, maybe your teen or young adult will need to spend some time picking up prerequisite classes. Maybe online, or taking a remedial class or two—likely alongside students who did go to school and still didn't pick up the needed skills. Maybe they'll start at another college with minimal entrance requirements to build a student record and then transfer to the college and program of their choice. None of that means unschooling failed.

Unschooling teens haven't been doing nothing, they were busy learning other things. Just because they weren't things that could be used to check off these particular requirement boxes, doesn't mean it was time wasted. It was experience gained. And with a lifelong view of learning, there is no ahead or behind, there is stuff you know and stuff you want to learn. Regardless of age. It's life.

Let's take a moment to dig a bit more into the idea of lifelong learning. With the cumulative knowledge of humanity growing at an exponential rate you'd be hard-pressed to find anyone to argue the point against lifelong learning—we all realize the body of knowledge and the technology we use will be quite different even just ten years down the road. But to conventional society, stuck in the classroom learning paradigm, lifelong learning looks like continuing education classes for adults. Or maybe a stint at college as a mature student.

But unschooling breathes life into the concept of lifelong learning.

For unschoolers, it expands beyond conventional society's definition of continuing to learn things as an adult so you don't become out-of-date, to mean that you have your whole life to learn things. Knowledge and skills can be learned at any point in a person's life. With that paradigm shift, the importance of curriculum, of learning certain things at certain ages, just melts away. Without the artificial time-line of school, learning happens when it best works for the individual—not the teacher.

So what does that look like, not being bound by a curriculum? An unschooling teen may not be able to dictate the rules of algebra on command, but their years of experience with analytical thinking puts them in great stead beside everyone else who doesn't happen to be a math major. They may not have

read fluently until they were twelve, but you can't see any evidence of that now—in fact, in those intervening years they figured out so many other ways to learn and explore the world beyond sitting with the written word. Their creativity hasn't taken a beating at the hands of “do it this way for full marks.” They continue to learn about and embrace the unique person they are. Living interesting lives and learning all they bump into in pursuit of their goals has, in essence, created a wonderfully personalized curriculum that fits like a glove. And as they continue to pursue their interests into adulthood, much of their childhood learning will continue to be useful.

Unschoolers also value understanding *how* they learn, not just what they learn. That doesn't mean tossing the classroom and teacher paradigm entirely, it means placing it as one of many options on the learning platter. Unschoolers have spent years figuring out how they best learn; and experiencing how that changes over time, and why. This focus on exploring the *process* of learning gives teens terrific skills and experience to take with them into adulthood. When they want to learn something they aren't at the mercy of others, waiting for the next continuing education course to start; or worse, waiting for one to be developed. They aren't waiting for permission. They seek out others who already have knowledge and experience with their topic of interest. You'll find them reading blogs, joining forums, meeting up with others locally: expanding their knowledge and understanding. They are in charge of their learning. As Seth Godin, author of *The Icarus Deception: How High Will You Fly?* would say, they aren't waiting for gatekeepers to approve their actions, they are picking themselves and finding paths to their goals that work for them. They are living with passion.

living unschooling with your children

So how do you begin to live this learning lifestyle with your children? If you're newer to unschooling, be sure to note that, as parents, you've been in school longer than your children so you most likely have more deschooling to do than they do—that's the adjustment period as you discover the many pockets of conventional school-think buried in your mind that aren't supportive of real learning or the development of strong relationships. It's not enough to just get out of your children's way: it's important to actively live *with* them and cultivate a thriving unschooling environment with your family.

Yet be careful not to imagine a “perfect” unschooling home and then berate yourself when you fall short. That's a school-ish way to approach a goal. Keep deschooling! Continue exploring unschooling, discovering what unschooling looks like for your children, and in *your* family. Focus on discovery and learning, not demands and expectations.

It's not for the faint of heart—it's an incredibly busy and exciting time. Unschooling children often bounce up in the morning and dash straight to their activity of choice, their boundless energy propelling them through the day, from activity to activity, until they drop with exhaustion. I remember wishing many times that I had their energy! Some evenings I would walk through the house tallying the bursts of imagination and play that had consumed them that day: a tableau of stuffed animals on the couch; a marble maze built in the corner of the play room; a Pokemon battle scene depicted on the kitchen table; swirls of shaving cream drying out on the bathtub walls; video game controllers askew in front of the TV; the dress up box empty and toy swords and crowns strewn around, the detritus of another battle.

Winding down at night, maybe watching a movie or playing a video game, I might start to tidy up. Sometimes they'd help out—more often if I remembered to suggest a small and specific task, "Can you toss the stuffed animals in the bin?" Sometimes I'd tidy up after they fell asleep, surprising them with a fresh canvas when they came down the next morning. Sometimes morning came and the house was just as we left it, and seeing the stuffed animals frozen mid-scene inspired them to pick up their game where they left off. Every day is a new day of fun and exploration for them, even when I sometimes lost track of what day of the week it happened to be.

Childhood play and learning is fascinating. As they reach out into the world so much is new to them! Pirate movies. Bike riding. Pioneer villages. Building toys. Science centres. Water play. Somersaults. Museums with dinosaurs. Fantastical stories with dragons and magic. Baking cookies. Piles of leaves. Board games. Video games. Card games. Dice games. Hide and seek. The questions fly: Why are you doing that? How do you do that? Why does that happen? How does it work? At times you may feel like a walking reference library; other times you seriously consider investing money in your best friend Google. Through their play, children process and explore and connect the new facts and ideas they encounter, learning all the while. They are definitely curious and engaged.

How can you support them? Let their minds roam free—that's where the best learning is because they will choose to do what their mind is thirsty for in the moment. A thirsty mind is engaged, motivated, and thinking—a sponge. Be their companion in play when asked, or offered and accepted, to support and expand their exploration. Answer their questions earnestly, or look them up, so they never stop asking. Share their excitement and wonder, to stay deeply connected with them. Offer up food and drink regularly to keep them fueled. Share what you know beforehand about the places you go so they begin to understand the world around them. Be patient. And when you're tired, sit and watch them for a while. Children are pretty awe-inspiring beings.

Alongside all that learning about the world, they are also learning so much about themselves. Their reactions are often visceral—immediate and strong: deep sadness and frustration when things don't go as envisioned; bursting joy when they do; overflowing anticipation for upcoming events; overwhelming fear of things that scare them. As you are their reliable extra set of hands as they explore the physical world, you're also their solid anchor as they navigate their emotional world.

How can you support them here? Meet them where they are, emotionally and physically—kneel down to meet them eye-to-eye, or sweep them up in your arms. See the situation through their eyes. Share their excitement and empathize with their challenges. Listen to them, talk with them—either in the moment, or later when things settle, or both. Figure out how you can best help them process their emotions by looking to your child for clues. And don't assume the process will be the same for all your children. If they're receptive, point out things you notice that you think might help them make a connection, like "It can be hard to concentrate when you're tired."

Be their anchor, their safe place, and build a strong relationship with them. Trust and learning will blossom.

A child's curiosity and enthusiasm for life is contagious—if you let it wash over you instead of trying to tamp it down. Looking back, those moments when I remembered to be amazed at their persistence instead of battling it would often re-energize me. I eventually discovered a pattern: the exhausting days were those when I tried to make them fit into my schedule. I asked myself what I was really trying to accomplish with that. They often enjoyed the comfort of routine—knowing generally how the day flowed, how we'd get ready to go out and so on, but a routine is not time-dependent like a schedule. So I stopped watching the clock and instead watched them. They were so beautifully curious, and much happier, when they followed their needs and interests, from the earliest ages. And I noticed that I was happier too when I wasn't continually trying to redirect them; trying to coax them to adhere to my vision of what our lives "should" look like. More deschooling for me.

And what about you? Are you curious and engaged?

Have you asked yourself that question lately, or something similar? I check in with myself from time-to-time to see if I'm getting complacent. As an unschooling parent, are *you* still excited to explore the world around you? It's a pretty amazing place, no matter your age!

Why is being a curious parent important? Because unschooling will work much better when you dive into this lifestyle alongside your children, rather than staying a reserved step behind, expecting them

to discover the joys of learning on their own. You can show your kids how interesting the world is, not just tell them to go and explore.

How can you cultivate their curiosity? Follow your children's lead. When they are interested in something, explore it with them! Be available when they ask for your help or want to share their discoveries. Don't just encourage them with motivating phrases, show them with your actions that following their curiosity is a priority, and that it's fun and rewarding. Even if you don't find it quite as exciting as they do, revel in their joy. Help them find the answers they seek so they experience the satisfaction of a question laid to rest, and the gift of new questions appearing on the horizon. Follow the connections.

Have and explore your own interests, and share those interests with your family. It doesn't need to be a big production, especially when the kids are younger and stretches of time on your own are few and far between. Maybe you like to read. You can read while sitting by them as they play; you can share your excitement when you find a new book in your favorite series. Maybe you enjoy making jewelry or duct tape creations. You can make space for their projects alongside yours. Maybe you've picked up a hula hoop or found your old RC car: ask if they'd like to try them with you. Whatever your interests—invite them along.

Soon you and your children will be joyfully exploring the world *together*.

summary

So we've been looking at three characteristics of real and effective learning—engagement, motivation, and thinking— and examining them from the perspectives of both the conventional school system and unschooling. I hope I've given you some insight into the question, "How do people learn?" and ways you might support a learning lifestyle in your home.

Now let's pull up to the bigger picture and take a look at some of the far-reaching implications from these two different mindsets:

What do students learn from the education system's laser focus on graduation?

- That most learning needs to be done during childhood.
- That most adults know everything they need to know.
- That most adults don't enjoy learning new things.
- That someone else knows what they need to know better than they do.
- That there is one right answer and one right way to do things.

- That grades are a measure of them as a person.
- That if they don't earn reasonably good grades in school, they are unlikely to be successful as adults.

And what do children learn from unschooling's focus on lifelong learning?

- That people of all ages learn new things.
- That the adults in their lives have more experience but don't know everything.
- That the adults in their lives enjoy learning.
- That life presents all sorts of interesting challenges to figure out.
- That there are often various ways get an answer, and different paths from point A to point B.
- That people have a wide range of interests and goals and definitions of success.

Which perspective better supports our children's real learning today? Next year? In a decade?

Which perspective do you think better serves our children over their lifetime?

For me, it boils down to this: with unschooling, the act of learning is both easier and more enjoyable because the learner is interested. Unschooling children aren't asking, "why do I need to know this?" precisely because their own interest has led them to this moment. Their internal drive to meet goals of their own choosing, learning along the way, vastly exceeds the external motivation of behaviour charts and grades. When we are in control of our lives, we WANT to learn—learning is NOT something that we need to be forced to do. Learning is not to be avoided whenever possible. Learning is FUN, even when it's challenging, and an integral part of living, part of life.

As Einstein said, quoted in *Life* magazine back in 1955: "The important thing is not to stop questioning. Curiosity has its own reason for existing. One cannot help but be in awe when he contemplates the mysteries of eternity, of life, of the marvelous structure of reality. It is enough if one tries merely to comprehend a little of this mystery every day."

What an exciting way to greet each day!

conclusion

Holt said (1967) "man thinks and learns." Einstein said "Curiosity has its own reason for existing." This is what humans do. Why does conventional society try so hard to squash it? To control and direct it? As a parent, you can choose to nurture it. To be a shining example of real learning for your children.

How?

- Model curiosity about the world around you.
- Continue learning: both things that support your work and passions, and new things that strike your fancy. Share the fun and unexpected things you come across.
- Model a deep joy for life, an appreciation for its ups and downs and twists and turns. It's not boring! And it's not out to get you.
- Be present and patient, notice the flow of life around you, watch for new doors to appear, and share your experiences so your children see life and learning in action. I'll talk more about this tomorrow.
- And be the example: **live the life *now* that you wish your children to have as adults.**

Thank you.