

## **Time to Think** **by Pam Laricchia**

Time to think has lost its lustre in today's relentless pursuit of accomplishments, no matter your age. We live in a time when choices abound, but are you comfortable taking the time to fully consider them? When your child lags behind, leisurely checking out the bright flower blooming at the edge of the path, are you more apt to call out "hurry up" than to walk back and join them? Do you worry that the time your teen spends listening to music or swinging on the backyard swing, is time wasted? In this talk, Pam shares some of the many benefits of choosing to give your family time to think.

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Yesterday I spoke about three principal characteristics of learning: engagement, motivation, and thinking. Today I thought we'd dive deeper into thinking. Real thinking is about making those learning connections that bring deeper understanding and insight; it's about analyzing facts and situations and letting creativity loose to see them in new ways; it's about brainstorming options and making choices and seeing where they lead.

For all that delicious stuff to play out, for real thinking and real learning to happen, what is the most basic thing we need to give our children? Time. Looking back on our eleven years of unschooling, I've come to realize that one of the biggest gifts we give to our children and ourselves with unschooling is time. Time to live and to learn and to do it all again the next day, the next week, the next month. Time to cocoon, time to process, time to reflect.

It's so different than the mainstream push to go, go, go. Conventionally, there is so much external control of our day-to-day actions. The danger of that path is that in all the busy-ness we become so disconnected from ourselves that eventually we choose to keep busy just to avoid being quiet, because in the quiet, we notice the disconnect and it can be very uncomfortable.

Yet unschooling isn't about making our children slow down, it's not about saying "going to karate four nights and eleven hours a week is too much"—it's about giving them the time that they want, that they need to move through their childhood at their own pace. It's about helping them explore their use of time and helping them discover who they are so they are not uncomfortable being with themselves. It's about lovingly supporting them when they are feeling "off", feeling disconnected, so

that they don't feel compelled to run and hide from it, but see it as a clue to go deeper in search of the source, and to incorporate what they learn as they move forward.

And just to be clear, I'm not encouraging a return to a "simpler" time—my family and I really enjoy the fruits of the technological advancements of the last few decades. Technology has brought us a much greater ability to connect with others around the world in real time. Our children are part of a digital generation to whom these tools and the pace of connection have been an integral part of life—it's intuitive to them. They are much less likely to feel the information overload that we might sometimes experience, the feeling that our personal space is being encroached upon, because for them, it's the environment they have always known. Adopting new technologies is not done at the expense of our time: we all have 24 hours in a day and, with unschooling, the choice in how we use them all. Having the time to figure out our own comfort levels with connection versus alone time, without demonizing either, will help our children develop an understanding of the benefits of both and gain experience with shifting between them. How interesting for us to live in this time of incredible change!

So back to our topic, I thought it would be fun to explore the idea of "Time to Think" with Winnie-the-Pooh, an adventurous stuffed bear who is quite careful not to be rushed to and fro. The brilliant world of Christopher Robin and his gang of stuffed animal toys was conceived of and written about by A. A. Milne. The quotes I'm using today are from his books *Winnie-the-Pooh*, published in 1926, and *The House at Pooh Corner*, published in 1928.

So, for you and I and the gang in the Hundred Acre Wood to explore the ways time weaves so significantly through thinking, learning, and unschooling, I thought we'd look through these three windows:

- (1) the window of presence, and how mindful living helps us support our children and the learning they find in making choices;
- (2) the window of patience, and how it helps us slow down to be with our children, allowing their learning to expand; and
- (3) the window of process, how giving our children time to ponder and contemplate, encourages even more learning connections to fall into place.

Then we'll try pull it all together.

So let's start with presence, and with a quote:

"When you wake up in the morning, Pooh," said Piglet at last, "what's the first thing you say to yourself?"  
"What's for breakfast?" said Pooh. "What do *you* say, Piglet?"  
"I say, I wonder what's going to happen exciting *today*?" said Piglet.  
Pooh nodded thoughtfully.  
"It's the same thing," he said."

Presence is about taking the time to be present in each moment. Piglet is looking at the day, Pooh is looking at the moment. After some thought, Pooh realizes that focusing on the excitement in each moment, over and over, builds an exciting day. They both amount to the same thing in the end, but being in *this* moment, versus looking at the day, is more empowering because this moment is the only one in which you can actively choose what happens, instead of waiting for the day to happen to you. Kids seem to live in the moment much more naturally than adults do—we can learn so much from them if we pay attention. For me, this mindset of being present in each moment is expressed well through the concept of mindfulness.

I love the variety of words that convey the idea of being mindful: observant, aware, attentive, conscientious, careful, cognizant, considerate, present, respectful, thoughtful, sensible.

Living mindfully is a skill that I picked up as I watched my children in action and played with creating a solid unschooling environment in our home. Being mindful walks hand-in-hand with unschooling because they both call us to **be observant and make conscious choices**, to see how they play out, and to incorporate those experiences into our lives moving forward. It's how we learn, regardless of age—from learning to walk to figuring out games to discerning our sleep patterns to improving our communication skills to choosing our work. So much of unschooling is about being aware of our environment, ourselves, the people in our lives, and the ways they all swirl together. It's about real thinking.

Unschooling also asks us to **become more aware of our filters** so we might notice more quickly when they are clouding our vision. This ability to recognize our filters and see beyond them also helps us see situations more clearly from our children's perspective, in turn better understanding their actions and reactions. When we meet our children where they are, we can more effectively support them as they, like Christopher Robin, pull on their big boots to explore and learn about the world.

"As soon as he saw the Big Boots, Pooh knew that an Adventure was going to happen, and he brushed the honey off his nose with the back of his paw, and spruced himself up as well as he could, so as to look Ready for Anything."

Being attentive to the present moment helps us see not only the bigger actions playing out in front of us, but the smaller ones too. A fleeting smile of understanding on our child's face. A quick tensing of our partner's shoulders. A short burst of giggles from a nearby room. A momentary feeling of unease as our child attempts something for the first time. These are subtle yet important **clues about our experiences**. They don't necessarily demand any action on our part, but we'll do well to add them to our collection of observations, small puzzle pieces that may one day become part of the bigger picture of our understanding of ourselves, our children, and our world.

Being alert and mindful also helps us **catch the good moments**, the ones that might rush past our consciousness without acknowledgment because they don't have a direct impact on us. A child sharing a toy with their sibling, or comforting a playmate at the park. Our spouse filling up the gas tank, or playing a game with the kids. All the small moments of caring and connection that populate our days. It's so easy to miss those moments, or dismiss them. Yet they mean so much in the bigger picture—our world is full of small acts of kindness.

If you find it challenging to notice the good moments, you might want to take a couple minutes each day to write down a few you do remember. Knowing you'd like to write them down may well help you see them more often. I think that's the idea behind Gratitude Journals—reminding us to see the kindness around us, rather than getting caught up in the often negative conventional view of people and the world. Kindness is not as rare as you might think.

Something else I've learned from being mindful of my thoughts and actions is to **give space for being wrong**. For me, paying attention to moments has shown me that I cannot predict the future with any significant sense of certainty. Giving up my expectations of the next moment has meant that I don't leap so quickly to try to "fix" or direct them—with my kids, or with other adults. Through giving each moment more space to move naturally into the next, I have learned that there are so many more ways things can go than I might imagine. So many beautiful ideas have blossomed over the years because I stopped myself from jumping in, because I quietly asked myself, "what if?" instead of speaking. Apparently my opinions aren't often necessary for the lives around me to unfold beautifully.

Being attentive to my thoughts and words also means that I can **be selective in what I share**—meaning just the really good stuff. Remembering to take that moment has allowed me to keep my two cents more often, and I feel richer for it! That’s not to say I actively avoid conversation—people ask my thoughts, and conversations with my kids have been known to lead to bouncing excitement as we share our thoughts and opinions about many things. But it’s worth waiting for those moments when your ideas naturally connect to part of a larger ongoing conversation, because it’s in those moments that people are more receptive to your thoughts because, in that bigger context, they have greater impact and meaning.

“Winnie-the-Pooh sat down at the foot of the tree, put his head between his paws and began to think.”

Think about it for a moment. How much fun is it to have people tossing their opinions at you when you haven’t asked for them? Not very. Unsolicited advice? Usually annoying. Why? Because it doesn’t match where your thoughts are—it is more distracting than anything. Your best chance to be relevant and helpful to anyone, child or adult, is when you’re responding to *their* thoughts and questions, joining them where *they* are, not indiscriminately sharing every thought you have. Take that mindful moment to figuratively sit and think, to evaluate whether the thought that just occurred to you is worth sharing, worth the effort the listener will need to make to move from where their thoughts are, to find a place to connect this new one so that it makes sense in their world.

Another helpful reason to strive for an attentive state-of-mind is to **keep an eye out for our unthinking reactions**. Those voices from the past in our head, spouting edicts and judging our actions harshly, can definitely affect our mood and our actions. Or those habits we’ve formed over the years that automatically play out but that may no longer be serving us very well. Or the fear that immediately sends our pulse racing and words tumbling out, yet we’re not sure where they came from. Rather than let autopilot take over and respond in our habitual ways, these are moments that would be great to catch so that we have the opportunity to re-consider the situation and choose our response based on our evolving perspective. What once was a knee-jerk reaction can become a choice.

What living mindfully helps us do is **recognize the many choices available** to us every day. If we don’t see any choices, we feel trapped. We feel like we don’t have control over our lives. Our days are an endless procession of telling ourselves we have to do this and that with no end in sight. We lash out thoughtlessly, in general frustration.

Yet when we realize that everything we do is a choice suddenly we feel free, breathing is easier, and a smile is more often within reach—even while changing our toddler’s diaper for the gazillionth time. There are so many choices in there! You could choose to not change it right now, leaving it for a while longer. What might happen? Maybe your spouse gets home soon and changes it. If not, eventually your child will probably become uncomfortable wearing it, maybe developing a small rash; maybe not. Would that be frustrating for your child, and even more of a challenge for you to deal with in the end? Maybe you choose to wait just a little bit. Or you could remove the diaper and leave your child free for a while. Maybe they’d have an accident—how hard would that be to clean up versus a diaper change? Maybe you guys could play in the backyard while going diaper-free, making clean up even easier. Or maybe your child has a really messy diaper right now and outside would be an easier, and more fun, way to clean it all up: a couple buckets of warm, soapy water and sponges for both of you to play with.

Maybe one of those options sounds perfect for the moment you’re in! Or maybe they all sound like more work right now and a regular-ol’ quickie diaper change sounds right. But now it’s not being foisted upon you and out of your control—you’re choosing the circumstances of the diaper change. And now there are even more choices. In this moment, would it be easier to take your child to your regular changing spot or to grab the essentials and bring them to your child?

For me, taking a moment to realize that I have options, even with the most mundane activities, and then mindfully choosing which one best suits the current circumstances, helps shift me out of any frustration I was initially feeling because now I remember the reasons why I’m making that choice. And, unsurprisingly, when I approach the diaper change, or whatever situation I initially felt trapped by, mindfully and with minimal frustration, it usually goes that much more smoothly—even if my child gets frustrated in the moment I don’t react back, spiraling us deeper. When we are careful and considerate with our thoughts we see so many more options to a given situation and soon we realize we have and make a lot more choices than we often give ourselves credit for.

We control our lives; not the other way around.

Living mindfully is not only incredibly supportive of an unschooling environment, it has grown to become a wonderful perspective from which to approach my life in general. With both my actions and my relationships, with both children and adults, being fully attentive to the situation at hand, taking a moment to discover and consider the choices available, and moving forward respectfully from there, continues to bring me a level of peace and compassion that had eluded me earlier.

Each of these opportunities grows out of being mindful: to be observant and make conscious choices, to become more aware of our filters, to gather clues about our experiences, to catch the good moments, to give space for being wrong, to be selective in what we share, to keep an eye out for our unthinking reactions, and to recognize the many choices available.

You're also modeling these skills for your children—sometimes doing the work quietly, sometimes sharing your thoughts along the way. And beyond the abundant thinking and learning, what else benefits from our mindful presence with our children? Our relationships. Being present with them is a key way to build strong and connected relationships.

"Piglet sidled up to Pooh from behind.

"Pooh?" he whispered.

"Yes, Piglet?"

"Nothing," said Piglet, taking Pooh's paw. "I just wanted to be sure of you."

### **the window of patience**

So we've talked about ways being mindful helps in creating a strong unschooling environment for our children. I touched on the importance of giving moments time to play out: rushing pulls everyone involved out of their thoughts, out of their learning. Yet with children, there are times when we are definitely moving at a very different speeds, like when your child lags behind when you're out for a walk. You look back and he's leisurely checking out the bright flower blooming at the edge of the path. Are you more apt to call out "hurry up" than to walk back and join him? That's when our next window on time, patience, comes in very handy.

Why is patience important for unschooling? Because it helps us parents move at our child's pace.

In the school environment, one of the challenges for teachers is that there is really only one pace at which they can move forward: that of the curriculum they need to cover in a fixed number of days. Some kids move faster, some slower, and the rate of learning is often not the same across the board, but dependent on the subject. Parents can fight for special services in an attempt to find a better match for their child's pace, but in the group environment of a classroom, it is very difficult to meet any one individual's needs specifically.

With unschooling we understand the value of the learning found in day-to-day living. So when our children are interested in something, we can better support their learning when we meet them at *their* pace of discovery and exploration. With patience, you can help them dig into their learning as

deeply as they are inspired, giving them the time to absorb it at the pace that suits them best. Not to mention the patience to support them as they bounce quickly from activity to activity.

"By the time it came to the edge of the Forest, the stream had grown up, so that it was almost a river, and, being grown-up, it did not run and jump and sparkle along as it used to do when it was younger, but moved more slowly. For it knew now where it was going, and it said to itself, "There is no hurry. We shall get there some day." But all the little streams higher up in the Forest went this way and that, quickly, eagerly, having so much to find out before it was too late."

With our greater life experience we, like the mature river, can see that there is less need for our immediate hurry: we shall get there. Our bigger picture perspective allows us to see that our children's need to eagerly explore the world often outweighs our need for routine because we know we'll still get there in the end. We question the conventional wisdom of parents' wishes always coming first.

Practicing patience can be easier around more obvious academic topics because we can quickly see the value of the learning happening in front of us. Their boundless curiosity as they dive into dinosaurs is such a beautiful sight to behold that answering their seemingly endless questions about the Jurassic Period can be more exciting than frustrating. And there's a bubbling joy to be found in watching the *Land Before Time* movies over and over, quoting lines over dinner, acting out scenes in the yard, and setting up a prehistoric world in the living room, complete with your child's growing toy dinosaur collection. That joy reminds us to slow down and let them savour the moment; to allow them to fully immerse themselves in the experience.

But there is also plenty of important learning that is less about the world and more about living in it: eating and sleeping and relationships and property and emotions and health and more. This knowledge is more focused on learning about themselves and how they relate to the world around them. Instead of straightforward facts, here living is entangled with people and feelings and sensations and judgments. It can take longer to explore one's personality and how one relates with others, but it is definitely essential knowledge for living. And, as with all kinds of learning, exploring how they fit into the world works best when you can be patient: when you meet and support them where they are and move at their pace.

And what about those moments when our children get frustrated? Our first reaction may be to try to get them to stop what they're doing, "If you're frustrated, do something else for a while!" Their

frustration frustrates us. Stopping may be a reasonable path forward, but it's not the only one available. Patience helps us step back a moment and see some of the other possibilities. And when I manage to do that, you know what I find so fascinating? Their level of commitment to accomplishing what they are trying to do. We talked about this yesterday, the internal motivation of unschooling kids to push through challenges to reach their goals is incredible. Reminding myself of this can help me shift from frustration at their persistence to seeing the beauty of their determination. From that perspective, I can better empathize and more patiently help them find ways to move through the situation.

Whether it's putting on their shoes without help, or building a block tower as tall as they are, or beating the final boss in their video game, there's learning in everything they attempt. Whether they are learning a particular skill (like tying their laces), or discovering where their limits are (does their skill diminish when they are frustrated?), or exploring the ways they can deal with their frustration (does a break help? or a deep breath?), they are gaining experience, even if they haven't yet put it all together. That takes time.

"The old grey donkey, Eeyore stood by himself in a thistly corner of the Forest, his front feet well apart, his head on one side, and thought about things. Sometimes he thought sadly to himself, "Why?" and sometimes he thought, "Wherefore?" and sometimes he thought, "Inasmuch as which?" and sometimes he didn't quite know what he *was* thinking about."

Recognizing the work they are doing can help us gather our patience and meet them where they are. We can help them to figure out both the task at hand *and* the ways that work best for them to move forward. Maybe you can help by giving them small tips and encouragement (try using the bigger blocks at the bottom), or by sitting nearby as you research and share battle strategies from online walkthroughs, or by bringing a glass of water and a snack to share. By finding ways to help them, you show them other possibilities for moving through challenges beyond just expressing frustration.

Without the time and space that a patient parent gifts a child, their learning may not be as deep and thorough as it could be. And it's patience in all the moments:

- patience for a messy bedroom, giving them the space to learn about themselves, about what their feelings toward clutter and organization are;
- patience for waiting as they chat with friends after karate class, honing their social skills and just plain having fun;

- patience for driving your children and their friends to each other's houses, or to another activity in another city, where they continue to explore the world and their place in it; and
- patience to stay home another day, or week, or month, as they practice listening to themselves, exploring their thoughts, their anxieties, what brings them comfort.

And again, as with living mindfully, not only does patience deeply support your child's learning, it has a wonderfully positive effect on your relationship. Patience is a visible display of respect for, and understanding of, your child. You understand their determination when they want to try to use the spoon themselves, or attempt the monkey bars over and over until they get to the other side, or watch their favourite movie for the fifteenth time, or get to a good stopping point in their video game, or have you wait at the studio during their dance class, or chat in detail about their thoughts, or take them here and there and back again. In respecting their need to move and learn at their own pace, you undermine the conventional concept of adult power over children and they experience a concrete example of "we're in this together." This is a pretty significant shift from the paradigm where kids are expected to fit into their parent's needs and schedule, with the implication that the kids can get their way when they are grown up. Instead, you are giving your children time to think, to process, to learn. To live.

Now let's take a moment to talk about some ways you can practice patience day-to-day. One of the common situations where patience is called upon is when you have a time commitment you're trying to meet and your child is unhappy about the plans. The first thing you can do is ask yourself if it's really so much a commitment you *need* to meet, or a routine you may be stuck in. In other words, take a moment to ask yourself whether it is a need or a want. If it's a want, ask yourself why you want it, and whether it's worth this challenge to your relationship with your child. If it's a need and you find you and your child at odds, that's a clue to work on improvements to your process for the next time a similar situation arises so you can both move through it with more patience and grace.

Remember, these transitions can be challenging for both children and adults. There are ways we can help our children move through them with less frustration. If they have trouble leaving the house you might bring a few of their loved things with them so the transition is less jarring; maybe add some stops to the trip that they would enjoy. Or if they find leaving other places to go home challenging, have something interesting set up at home that they can look forward to like watching a new movie, starting a new craft, or playing a board game with you—try focus on anticipation for what they'll do next, instead of getting mired in the sad task of leaving. Ask them what they think might help, not

during a difficult moment, but later when the adrenaline is gone and thinking is clearer. Get to know your child so well that you can not only anticipate their challenges but also generate ways that will help them move through those challenges with less frustration. When you understand them deeply, their actions are more logical and less frustrating, making patience much easier to find.

Beyond planning for times when you need to move others through your schedule, one thing I often do when I'm feeling impatient in general is to look at the situation from my child's perspective. That seemingly simple thing so often helps me understand why we are out-of-sync. What is it that they are thinking that calls them to move faster or slower than my pace right now? What is their goal in this moment and why do we find ourselves at cross-purposes? **Taking the time to see things through your child's eyes is not about giving up your perspective, it's about expanding it.** It's a way to practice patience: try not to jump to frustration before you better understand the situation and your child.

Another thing to consider is how your physical state impacts your ability to practice patience. Are you tired? Hungry? Thirsty? In need of some active movement? It's different for everyone, but figuring out and taking care of those needs will also go a long way to helping you practice patience. And don't forget to share what you're learning about yourself with your kids! "I'm sorry I'm getting cranky, I think I need to grab a snack because I'm getting hungry." "I'm feeling antsy and frustrated. I'm going to go run around the back yard for a few minutes. Anyone want to play tag or hula hoop?" Help your children discover how their body's physical needs and their mind's behaviour are connected.

Think about patience in your own life. Do you see benefits to both your children's exploration and learning, and your relationship with them, in those times when you have been able to be patient and move forward at their pace? Is there any commonality to the situations where you find patience hard to come by? Can you set up those situations differently in the future so patience is easier to reach for? Do you find even just the act of recognizing your frustration lessens it a bit? These are just some of the many ways to dig into learning more about patience and how you can use it to support the learning and relationships in your unique family.

## **the window of process**

Now let's look through our next window on time: process.

The time to process, to contemplate, to turn things over and add our own spark of creativity to the mix, to mentally skip down unconventional paths and see where they may lead: that is where real thinking lives—real learning.

"Rabbit's clever," said Pooh thoughtfully.

"Yes," said Piglet, "Rabbit's clever."

"And he has Brain."

"Yes," said Piglet, "Rabbit has Brain."

There was a long silence.

"I suppose," said Pooh, "that that's why he never understands anything."

Rabbit loves to be clever. Yet that doesn't bring him the deeper understanding he could find by taking the time to discover the bigger picture connections. Think of the extensive and valuable experience our children are gaining by having the time to think and work their way through many moments, analyzing situations and making choices, versus a childhood spent memorizing facts and doing what they're told.

Every day is full of choices, some needing little consideration, others needing extensive thought. Both for us and for our children. What do I want to do today? Should I sign up for that interesting-sounding workshop? Do I want to take a bath or a shower? Eat a sandwich or a burger? Should I quit swimming lessons? Do I want to wade into the river or take the path through the trees? Often choices are rather basic, mostly personal preference, with no significant consequences one way or the other. But making those many small choices is good preparation for when the bigger ones come along.

Why are choices important? Because making choices is how we gain experience and learn. It's living in its fullest sense.

But helping your child gain experience in making choices entails a lot of trust from you, certainly at first. Trust helps you give them the space to make these choices, even if they aren't the same ones you'd make for them. You can develop this trust in a couple of ways. One is to examine your thoughts surrounding choices. Spend some time reflecting on whether the same choice is necessarily right for everyone. Remember, your child is not just an extension of you. It's not hard to imagine that different choices in the same situation could work out well for different people, yet it's still pretty easy to fall into the trap of thinking that you know the best choice for another person: a spouse, a friend, or especially a child you love and want the best for.

While developing this trust, it is important that you don't judge their choices, even implicitly. Real choice is lost if you even subtly manipulate your child with a sigh or a certain look. Certainly have

conversations about the options, but it's important that they feel free to follow their preference because that is where their thinking led them—people learn best from an experience when it is their own. If they are living someone else's choices, they are often learning something different.

Another way you can develop trust in your child is through experience. Each time your child makes a considered choice that works out, you gain some experience. Each time your child makes a considered choice that wasn't the choice you'd advise and it still works out, you gain even more experience. And you trust a bit more. Then you see another choice work out, and another. Then you see a choice that didn't work out so well, and you notice your child incorporate that information into their next related decision. More learning in action. With experience, you become less fearful and more trusting of your child. Eventually you and your child work out a harmonious relationship around choices where your input is thoughtfully considered by your child, and their decision is respectfully accepted by you.

Most of the day-to-day decisions in a child's life may seem significant to the parent in the moment but in the bigger picture of childhood they are often inconsequential. To whom does it really matter if your child wears her favourite Halloween costume to the grocery store? In these moments, she has the opportunity to revel in the attention and delight of the other shoppers as they admire her princess gown, and to decide next time that she'd like a quiet trip and choose to forgo the costume. Or if she eats her favourite peanut butter sandwich for breakfast, lunch, and dinner this week? It gives her the time to discover when she's had her fill of peanut butter and would like to try something new. What if she sets up a tea party in the living room for her teddy bears and wants to keep it there to enjoy tea and dainty finger sandwiches for the next few days? After immersing herself in all the tea-related fun she can imagine, she eventually notices that she'd like a clean slate for her next creation. And she may well discover that a tidy room can be quite as exciting as a busy one.

As the parent, you can take a moment to look at the bigger picture and realize these are wonderful and exciting adventures to your child; more exciting to her than a clean living room would be to you. It's about giving the child the opportunity to discover these things on her timetable, as they have meaning for her, rather than on the parent's timetable, where they don't.

As an example of following your child's choices we can look at the development of my son's interest in karate. Michael's interest in martial arts was evident for quite a while before he decided to try out classes at a dojo. When I first mentioned that he might enjoy karate classes, we discussed it a bit, and

I left the choice to him. He replied noncommittally and at least a year passed before he asked to try it out.

Seeing how much he enjoys going to the dojo now does *not* mean that his choice to wait was wrong, nor does it mean that I should have cajoled or convinced him to try it. It was not a missed opportunity, he was simply not ready. If I had pushed him to go earlier, he may have ended up enjoying himself and continuing, but he may also have been turned off the sport itself because even though he was interested, he would have been going at my behest, not directly from his own desire to explore karate. In fact, the dojo is a wonderful example of pursuing an interest when a person is ready; there are beginner white belts of all ages, from age four to over forty.

Experience in making the smaller choices in life while growing up has a number of wonderful benefits for children: they get to know and understand themselves well, their likes and dislikes, what they excel at, and what they find challenging; and they gain lots of experience in analyzing situations and choosing which path forward to take—in other words, thinking. Their parents are close by to talk with as they consider the pros and cons of possible choices in a given situation, available to share their experiences and thoughts.

But keep in mind that this is all at an appropriate level for the child. If he just wants you to grab an outfit out of his drawer and help him get dressed, do that; if he just wants some quick food to munch on while busily building with his Lego, just bring him a plate with some food that you're pretty sure he'll like; not all situations need detailed analysis. What is important is embracing the time and attention to discuss situations when *the child* sees options and is interested in choosing.

With unschooling we care about and support the process of getting to *an* answer, not "the" answer. There is often no one "right" answer. And a choice is just part of the process, not the "end". We continue to talk with them about it. Has the choice worked out as they hoped? As expected? If not, how has it deviated? Why might that have happened? More thinking is done to incorporate their experience into their understanding of the world, into their knowledge base, accessible as they spend time pondering the next situation. Everything is related—life flows, just like the Hundred Acre Wood river:

["Christopher Robin came down from the Forest to the bridge, feeling all sunny and careless, and just as if twice nineteen didn't matter a bit, as it didn't on such a happy afternoon, and he thought that if he stood on the bottom rail of the bridge, and leant over, and watched the river slipping slowly away beneath him, then he would suddenly know everything that](#)

there was to be known, and he would be able to tell Pooh, who wasn't quite sure about some of it."

Sometimes in the flow of life our child's thinking process is quite clear, say as they constantly take apart and rebuild their Lego town until it fits their vision, or they attempt that boss battle over and over and over. Play is real thinking laid bare for all to see—as long as you choose to look. But sometimes it's mostly internal work: hours, or days, or even weeks spent in quiet activities, their physical energy low as their mental energy churns in high gear. That's harder to see.

"What I like *doing* best is Nothing."

"How do you do Nothing," asked Pooh after he had wondered for a long time.

"Well, it's when people call out at you just as you're going off to do it, 'What are you going to do, Christopher Robin?' and you say, 'Oh, Nothing,' and then you go and do it."

"Oh, I see," said Pooh.

"This is a nothing sort of thing that we're doing now."

"Oh, I see," said Pooh again.

"It means just going along, listening to all the things you can't hear, and not bothering."

"Oh!" said Pooh."

Those hours spent on the backyard swing with their headphones on, or on the couch re-watching their favourite movies may look like doing nothing, but it's often far from it. Quieter activities are clues that there is some serious thinking and processing happening. That processing may even be subconscious. They may not be certain *why* they need that time, but they instinctively seek it out—because they have not been taught to ignore their instincts. As they cocoon, chances are that both recent and distant experiences are being recalled and resorted, like puzzle pieces being turned about to see if they might finally fit together somehow, a bigger picture emerging. There is an incredible amount of learning happening as they ponder.

In those times of cocooning, you can support them by being available to chat, by making them comfortable, by bringing them sustenance, by spending quiet time with them, but really, you can't make the process move faster. Any judgment they feel emanating from you will probably make that processing take even longer, because now they'll need to incorporate that negative judgment into the puzzle. Instead, meet them where they are. And be kind.

"Oh, well then, Kanga can give you some breakfast."

So they went into Kanga's house, and when Roo had said "Hallo, Pooh" and "Hallo, Piglet" once, and "Hallo, Tigger" twice, because he had never said it before and it sounded funny, they told Kanga what they wanted, and Kanga said very kindly, "Well, look in my cupboard, Tigger dear, and see what you'd like." Because she knew at once that, however big

Tigger seemed to be, he wanted as much kindness as Roo.

## summary

So how does this all come together?

Looking through the windows of presence, patience, and process, we've looked at some of the ways that giving our children time deeply supports their learning. Time to think. Time to learn how they think. Time to reflect. Time to cocoon. Time to explore a new path. Time to regroup.

I talked about three of the tools that I found helped me gift that time to my children, and to me: mindful living, so that I can better understand what is happening in the moment; patience, so that I can better see each moment in the bigger picture; and processing, understanding its importance so that I can more readily give my children, and myself, the time and space to make the deeper learning connections that expand our understanding of the world.

And why did I want to take this journey with the gang at the Hundred Acre Wood? Yes, Winnie-the-Pooh is a rather simpleminded bear. Yet simple in no way implies that he's unintelligent. His simple and open approach to life is a beautiful example of really seeing what's in front of us, of not letting filters and judgments cloud our vision. Real thinking does not mean adding layers of complexity. In fact, the more thinking we do about something, often the more simple it becomes. Thinking is more about distilling ideas to their essence, about finding the commonality in things. It is not done for the benefit of others—to show our cleverness, or our wisdom—it is for our own benefit, for our own learning.

Choosing to give your family time to think allows them to develop a deeper understanding of the world around them and of themselves and the people in their lives. They gain lots of experience with interpersonal skills, leading to better relationships. And all this is learned through being free to make choices. Free to learn. Free to live. It's not anything that's going to be on a test, but it is invaluable knowledge to bring into adulthood.

## conclusion

We are always learning. And that learning is found *in* the living. By choosing unschooling we have stepped off the conventional treadmill of education and as such, **time is at our disposal; it is not our master**. When you first begin unschooling it can feel like such a huge leap—one day the kids are

going to school and the next day they aren't. Or they hit school age and the first day of school comes and they don't go. It is huge! And faced with that momentous act, it's so easy to get caught up in the idea that it must be met with equally huge goals and plans and activities. Instead, try gradual, yet determined, steps towards the person you want to be. And remember to take time to think, to turn your thoughts and observations over in your mind, to play with the puzzle pieces and see how they fit together. It is in this time of contemplation that so many connections fall into place. And don't fret that you need swaths of alone time to sit and think—I recall many a-ha moments while doing the dishes, or in the shower, or tidying up the toys.

What else do we discover? That no matter how strongly we wish to know and understand it all right now, to have this life thing figured out—what makes us tick, what brings a smile to our face, and why fear sometimes trickles in—it is a process, a cycle. For everyone. Round and round and round. As a parent, you never reach the end of learning because with each iteration through another question or challenge, our children are older and more experienced, and you are older and more experienced. New things are coming into our lives and others are dropping out, all of which bring new insights. There's always more to learn and understand—about ourselves, about others, about the world.

And somewhere along the line it dawned on me that it's not about figuring it all out so I can *finally*, from that moment on, live a happy life.

This process *IS* a well-lived life.

*"So they went off together. But wherever they go, and whatever happens to them on the way, in that enchanted place on the top of the Forest, a little boy and his Bear will always be playing."*

Thank you.