

## **A Family of Individuals by Pam Laricchia**

In our society family harmony is a prized goal, promising an easygoing peace. It can be elusive, yet we see some experienced unschooling families in action and we want that joy. "Why can't you guys just get along??" Yet focusing on the interactions between family members often invites comparisons and discord—the opposite of harmony. Come dig deeper with Pam and see how, though it may seem counterintuitive at first, fully supporting and celebrating the *individuals* in the family better fosters a long-term atmosphere of joy and harmony.

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Today I'd like to talk with you about family relationships.

When I first started learning about unschooling I clearly remember reading about the lives of other, more experienced families. Maybe it was a snippet of their day, or a description of the ways the family supported a child's passion, or how they worked together through a tough spot. Even if the relationships weren't mentioned explicitly, I recall being struck by how well they seemed to get along—how supportive the family members were of each other. I imagine some of you have had that experience too! Maybe you've caught a glimpse of unschooling families in action, like at a park day, or even this weekend here at the conference. You see the respect and the caring in action and you want that for your family.

You begin to seriously ponder: How do unschooling families get along so well?

You already know the conventional drill. The plea for "family harmony" that focuses on encouraging family members to "get along", to "be nice to one another", "because you're family." Yet judging by the number of books, movies, and TV shows based on sibling rivalry and family discord, this hasn't been a particularly successful strategy. I imagine the typical interactions you so often see playing out around you are *not* what you're looking to cultivate. You want something different for your family.

Today I'll share some of my thoughts and experiences surrounding the idea of family harmony, including ways I've found helpful to foster an atmosphere of joy and cooperation in my family. My premise is that focusing on the individuals instead of the family as a unit, is key for cultivating good

relationships and in turn getting along well with each other. It may seem counterintuitive right now, but my hope is that when I'm done you'll have a good idea how that perspective helps build a strong foundation for easygoing family relationships to flourish.

To that end, first we'll talk a quick stroll through some of the interesting verdicts I've heard people issue over the years about why my family, and other unschooling families I've known, get along so well. Then we'll look at three unsuspecting ways parents actually undermine their goal of family harmony. Then we'll take a stab at what it all means in the bigger picture.

So, let's get started by looking at some of the interesting conclusions people often draw when they see experienced unschooling families getting along.

### easy kids section

The most popular one is probably that we must have easygoing kids. "Did you see that? No argument or whining at all. They're so lucky their kids are wired that way. If they had *my* kids, things would be totally different!"

Conventional society views the parent-child relationship as *such* an adversarial one, that the idea of a child listening to their parents is often explained away as some miraculous accident of genetics.

Well, let's bust this one right up front. Unschooling parents have regular ol' kids. Their kids have needs and wants and likes and dislikes just like every other kid. Like every other human.

But one thing unschooling parents don't do is leave things to fester. We don't ignore our children as long as possible, hoping they'll get distracted and forget what they were wanting, in essence forcing them to complain or behave loudly enough to get our attention. It's not that children in conventional families aren't wired to get along, but that the **parents have created an environment that actually discourages it**. Responding quickly to our children's needs may *seem* like it would be more work, but it really isn't in the end.

So, if our kids aren't amazingly easygoing, what might another reason be that unschooling families get along well?

### well-trained kids section

Another popular explanation I've heard is that our kids must be well-trained. "Their family must have a lot of rules."

I come up against this one pretty often. Over the years, my kids have been in various recreational activities alongside conventionally schooled and parented kids. At some point I usually end up in conversation with one of the adults running the program and they've often commented, pleasantly surprised, about how well my kids pay attention in the class or group. How they listen and make a genuine and sustained effort to participate and learn at the activity. I can tell they are trying to give me credit for having such a "well-behaved child."

They imagine that as parents we have spent years training our children to listen to adults and do what they're told. Heck, at my son Michael's quarterly diabetes checkups, the doctor often congratulates him for having the best adolescent numbers in the clinic and has joked more than once that he should teach the other kids how to do it. Based on the jokes about homeschooling he attempts with Michael, asking if his "teacher" is strict, if he gets the summer off and so on, I'm pretty sure the doctor thinks his numbers are good because we have strict rules and Michael's been well-trained to follow them. We smile and laugh at his jokes because he's very nice and he's trying hard to connect, plus he's a great resource on the topic of type 1 diabetes.

And if you're ever curious about unschooling ways to approach living with a chronic health condition, I have an article on my website that I wrote about the first year of our journey with diabetes.

*Anyway*, we can bust this "well-trained" myth quickly too. It's practically the opposite: we don't tell him, or any of our children, what to do at all. We give Michael the space and support to explore his *own* reasons and motivation for managing his health. And for practicing and learning karate at his dojo. And all the other interests they choose to pursue.

In fact, I've had parents at Michael's dojo come over and ask me, with what seems to be a mix of appreciation and envy, if Michael practices at home. I reply "yes." From their follow-up comments, almost apologizing that their child is too busy for that, the implication is that they think I regularly remind him to practice, but I don't at all. I usually nod sympathetically and add "he enjoys it" to the conversation, to hint at the fact it's completely his choice. There have been many days he's had his nunchuks in hand almost constantly. Or spent hours outside with his bo staff. Other times he's jumping on and off our picnic table or off the roof. He *chooses* to go to the dojo at least three nights a week, with a fourth spent training on the trampoline at the nearby gymnastics club. He chooses to

assist four hours a week with the kids classes at the dojo. He also chooses to spend two more fun, but very grueling, hours each month at another dojo an hour and a half away, focusing on tricks and stunt fighting. All his choice—and his joy.

Now, I'm quite sure that my kids wouldn't be as attentive and dedicated to any activity they weren't interested in. But if they aren't interested, they wouldn't be going in the first place. The great thing about not forcing them to go to any activity "for their own good," is that their whole life looks interesting and fun to them!

It's like that quote from Albert Einstein I see making the social media rounds pretty regularly: "Everybody is a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid."

If you keep trying to get your child interested in climbing your tree, you are bound to be disappointed. Instead, help them find their river and watch them swim with relish.

### **well-trained parents section**

So, it seems those first two hypotheses are pretty much rubbish. What else might explain how unschooling families get along so well?

Well, let's look at the flip side: maybe it's the *parents* that are well-trained. Maybe in their eagerness to present the image of a "happy unschooling family" they let their kids have their way all the time to avoid disagreements. From the parents' perspective, at least it *looks* like everyone is getting along.

This one's a bit trickier. Especially for parents newer to unschooling, this can be an intricate puzzle to sort out. As unschooling parents we continually ask ourselves, "Am I comfortable with this?" And if not, "Why not?" We wonder if our unease is the result of old tapes in our head perpetuating a groundless worry, or whether it is based on a valid concern born of our own experience and understanding. These questions makes us think. And thinking is good. On one hand, we are learning to appreciate all the learning that happens as our children follow their interests and passions and we don't want to interfere with that. Our trust in them, and theirs in us, is growing in leaps and bounds and we don't want to squash that with overbearing interference. On the other hand, we have more life experience that may help us see some possible outcomes that our children may not yet envision. As I said, it's tricky.

Where might we go from here? Well, one of the first things we're encouraged to do as we learn about unschooling is to open our minds to a bigger picture, to no longer think in terms of "my way or the highway". Instead, we strive to be open to more information and to changing our outlook as a result. We try to model thinking and learning; analyzing situations as they arise. So when you think you have an important point to be considered, bring it into the discussion. Cultivate an atmosphere where *everyone's* thoughts can be discussed. What you *want* to drop is the belief that just because you're the parent you're always right, and the expectation that everyone will agree with you.

However, if the parents fear of interfering often overpowers their wish to share their thoughts, they might find themselves falling into this well-trained parent trap. It's something that many parents moving to unschooling will tussle with—I remember that time myself, and I still often question myself so I don't get complacent. So yes, there is a chance that this factor of "well-trained parents" may be at play, but hopefully most parents soon recognize the pattern and move beyond that dynamic.

If they don't, what can happen when parents choose not to voice their thoughts and become, in essence, well-trained?

Their children lose out on some very valuable learning.

When parents continually choose to keep mum, their needs aren't being considered as the family moves through their days. This can lead to a chaotic atmosphere because children simply don't have the life experience adults do: their world becomes all automatic yeses with no consideration for the situation or the people involved. Without parents adding their perspective to the conversation, children can't see the bigger picture. They don't learn to take others' needs into consideration. They learn to expect to get their way, regardless.

There is also a good chance that this atmosphere can lead to burnout as parents run themselves ragged trying to meet their child's every whim. There's no thoughtful analysis, no deeper understanding of their needs. Not only are the children not learning more about the world through their parents' perspective, they also aren't gaining any experience with the very useful social and analytical skills that are an integral part of these kinds of conversations.

So, if the kids aren't naturally easygoing, if they're not well-trained to do what they're told, and if the parents aren't unthinkingly saying yes to everything, how *do* those pesky unschooling families get along so well?

As I mentioned, in my experience there are three things conventional parents often do that undermine family relationships. If we can shift our thinking in these areas I think it really helps cultivate an atmosphere of joy and understanding, which in turn frees up family members to be supportive of each other and get along well. The first shift has to do with power and the conventional paradigm of parents versus kids. The second shift has to do with how parents measure fairness between siblings. And the third has to do with how parents approach relationships with their children. As we explore the effects that each of these shifts have on family relationships, I think the value of treating each member of the family as a unique individual will become clearer.

### **power paradigm shift section**

So first let's talk about the role of power. Conventional parenting practices promote an attitude of "us versus them." Even when it isn't mentioned explicitly, it's there. A quick web search turned up articles on popular parenting sites with titles such as: "Get Your Kid to Stay in Bed"; "15 Foods All Kids Should Eat"; "Don't Buy These Video Games"; "How to Deal with Defiant Kids"; "How to Keep Your Cool When Your Kids Push Your Buttons"; and "How to Deal With Your Preteen's Messy Bedroom". Could you feel the pervasive undercurrent of power struggles in those titles? Of pitting parents against their children? In the end, someone has to win and someone has to lose.

What happens if you don't presume these power struggles are inevitable?

Moving away from the paradigm of adults versus children allows both unschooling and relationships to flourish. How? **By giving children choices.** Instead of trying to directly control their children's lives, unschooling parents focus more on supporting their children as they explore the world, as they dive into what *they* find interesting, from facts to skills to relationships. That's when the best learning happens because the child is interested and engaged. This in turn opens up every day situations for further discussion and analysis: more choices and more learning.

We can think of this as us adults handing some of our power over to our children. And though that image is a step closer, it still leaves us with a mental picture of "us and them"; just with the tweak that we're looking to balance the power between the adults and children in the family. That can be tricky to implement though. Remember the tricky bits we were talking about earlier with well-trained parents? This is one of the ways that can materialize. Sometimes parents can overcompensate. Giving the children more power than the adults in the family is not better—it can lead to children that feel entitled regardless of the situation.

So, what happens if we remove the “us and them” dichotomy altogether?

Instead of thinking of our relationships with our children in terms of power, where one side has more and uses it to control the other, or getting stuck in the teeter-totter troubles of trying to balance power between us, let’s drop the idea of sides altogether.

Note that I don’t think we need to drop the concept of power. After all, power is just a representation of what we can accomplish. To feel powerful is to feel strong and capable. Most adults feel more powerful than children because they have more experience and feel more competent in many situations. That’s natural. What we can drop is the overtone of power *over* others. It’s not about giving my children as much power as I have. It’s about showing them how powerful we are when we all act *together*. Acting together in support of each other helps *everyone* in the family feel understood and loved. Everyone feels safer because they have the power of their family behind them. Even when a child isn’t able to contribute concretely towards a sibling’s or parent’s goal, they can still actively contribute by being emotionally supportive, and not standing in the way.

What do I mean by that?

If a child feels powerless in a family, there’s a good chance they will try to exert what little power they feel they have to thwart others in reaching their goals: taking away someone else’s power increases their relative power. Say Jill wants to play her video game. Adam might try to frustrate her in all sorts of ways: playing loudly in the same room; running in front of the TV; tossing toys at her—all in an attempt to get a reaction. The power in the air is almost tangible. These kinds of power struggles can play out over and over, day after day.

Remember though, that when kids are younger this might happen innocently enough because younger Adam wants to play with Jill and doesn’t yet realize that while trying to meet his needs, he’s also impeding hers. If you see this happening, you can actively engage Adam, finding something else he can do with you. Jill will appreciate your support in giving her space to continue with her activity, and Adam gets and appreciates the attention and engagement he was looking for. And in short conversations and observations with Adam over time, he will begin to understand and incorporate Jill’s perspective. During a quiet moment you can explain Adam’s perspective to Jill too, helping her better understand that Adam’s motive isn’t specifically to frustrate her, but to play with her—it’s not that he doesn’t like her and is trying to make her mad, but that he really loves playing with her.

Building that kind of supportive relationship with each of your children allows them to feel more comfortable in the family and to trust that their needs and wishes will be fully considered. They feel powerful and in control of their own life, so they don't need to feel powerful by frustrating others—by exerting power *over* others. **There is no driving need or reason to *not* get along.**

Another really interesting outcome I've seen is that when children feel fully supported, when they are confident they have the power of their family behind them, they become much more discriminating in their desires. Life isn't a constant barrage of wanting this and this and this with little rhyme or reason. That doesn't mean I always understand why my kids want to do or have something, but I do trust they are motivated by a real need or want. Even if there were times over the years when their motivation may have been more frivolous, they saw me take their wishes seriously and do my best to meet them, and that helped build their trust in me.

Think of the reverse situation for a minute. If children are used to only some of their needs and wants being considered and fulfilled by their parents, they take that into consideration moving forward. They're smart! If they are used to, say, having one in five of their requests being taken seriously, they'll be sure to ask for five in hopes of getting at least one. And to get to those five, they are likely asking for some things that would be fun, but aren't particularly necessary in their eyes. What *is* necessary is getting *something*. Some attention, some consideration, some feedback that says they are important. Some power.

In that situation they can come across as needy because they always seem to be asking for something. That worries their parents, who may then feel they need to say "no" more often in an attempt to teach their child that "they can't have everything". As a result, the percentage of their needs being met falls even further, prompting the child to ask for even more, and so on. It can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. At that point, recovery of that trust can take some time, but it's definitely worth the effort.

An example of the interplay of desires and trust in my family grew out of my then 18 year old daughter Lissy's wish to take an extended trip on her own to New York City last year. Looking back, I am struck by how powerful and supported she must have felt to even consider it! My visceral reaction when she first mentioned the possibility was fear, but I quickly realized two things: one, that my fear was general, not based in anything specific. That was a clue to me that I needed to think more before voicing anything; and two, she wasn't planning to leave tomorrow. We had plenty of time to plan and talk and plan some more. By not trying to use my power to discourage her immediately, I didn't put a



wedge in our communication. From years of experience, I knew that if I supported her as *she* explored the possibility—helped *her* gather information—she would make a reasonable decision and I would eventually learn the many details that would help me feel more comfortable with the idea. That's what all the years of living and learning together had given us—a deep level of understanding and trust. And it's true. In the end she did choose to go and in the end I was comfortable with her plans. Turns out she spent six months there last year, and in January moved there for at least the next three years, the length of her artist's visa.

Feeling powerful is, well, empowering! Imagine how supported your children will feel knowing they have the power of their family behind them. Both tossing aside the conventional attitude of parents versus kids and being careful not to use our power as parents to control our children but rather to genuinely support them as they live and learn, go a long way toward creating strong and connected relationships with them. **And when each child feels well-supported, it removes much of the power-based motivation for discord between family members, cultivating a joyful family atmosphere.**

### measuring fairness shift section

Now let's look at the second helpful shift in thinking. A very common way that parents lump their children together, thereby undermining their individuality, is by how they measure "fair".

The idea behind fairness is an important one: to be fair is to be free from bias, to not show favour for one child over another. It has come to symbolize love and no parent wants any of their children to feel they are less loved than their siblings.

But how do you measure "fair"?

Many families measure it based on quantity and strive for equality: they give all their children the same number of gifts for holidays; or spend the same amount of money on each for their birthdays; or sign them up for the same number of recreational activities.

Is that fair? It certainly looks justified from the parents' point-of-view: "Look, there are five presents for you and five presents for you. The numbers prove it! We love you both equally!" Over time, the kids hear the message loud and clear and start to view their lives through the same filter—everything is weighed and measured. "Hey, his bowl of ice cream is bigger than mine!" "Why can't I go out with my friends tonight? She went last night!" Parents can cling to this equality paradigm, but the score-

keeping can get wearying. And in the end, it doesn't really seem like a helpful measure of love, does it?

So how else might we look at things?

Unschooling families are more apt to observe and evaluate situations from the child's perspective. Sure, both kids got a pair of skates, but did they both *want* a pair of skates? As parents move to unschooling they begin to see fairness not as a quantitative measure of what the parents give, but as a qualitative measure of the value each child receives. They take themselves out of the picture and look to their kids directly. Instead of "Do I think my children should feel loved and secure as a result of my actions?" they ask themselves, "Do my children feel loved and secure?" It's a change in perspective. And a quick observation: if you find yourself using the word "should", that's a strong clue that you might still be mired in your own perspective.

Equality in what you give each child isn't a helpful measure of fairness or love because what each child needs from you is probably different. One child may need more of your time, wanting a lot of personal interaction. Another might have an active outside interest that needs more of the family's money to support it. Still another might need more of your direct participation, joining them as they pursue their interests. You may be giving each of your children very different things that take varying amounts of time and effort and money. But when their unique needs are being met, they each feel content, secure, and happy: equally loved.

Yet no matter how hard you try, there may be real reasons why things feel unfair to a child in the moment. Maybe one child gets sick or injured and needs more attention for a while. Maybe there's a busy season with one child's activity. Siblings can understand the need, but still feel things are unfair at the time. Those are really good moments to talk with your child about the situation. Or better yet, just focus on listening. Hear their perspective and acknowledge it. Be compassionate. If it seems appropriate, share your perspective—though not with an eye to convince them to change their feelings. There's a good chance it *is* unfair right now. You're learning more about each other. About life. That's why I don't put much stock in the idea that parents shouldn't help their children as much as possible because kids need to learn that "life isn't fair". There will be enough real moments when life feels unfair—we don't need to manufacture them.

It's been my experience that when each child feels like their needs are being met, they feel less competitive with their siblings. There's minimal push and pull and struggle for attention or power.

That's because they have come to measure their happiness based on their *own* needs being met, instead of constantly comparing themselves with those around them to validate their own worth.

So in an unschooling family what does it look like if one child gets \*super fun thing A\* and is really happy? In my experience, their sibling doesn't feel spiteful; they don't demand they get one just to be fair. Now, that's not to say that they might not try it out and like it and ask for one too because they feel they would also enjoy it. If so, when they get it they'll most likely use it and learn and expand their world. But if a child is used to measuring "fair" by the numbers and wants something specifically because their sibling has it, once they get it, their goal is accomplished! There's no need to actually use it—it just sits on the shelf.

What do kids learn if their parents make this paradigm shift? In my experience, instead of learning to measure fairness through numbers, they learn to see and consider the real people behind the numbers. The individuals. They learn that people have different needs, and that it's meeting those *needs* that is important. **They come to respect one another as individuals, happily allowing each other to live the lives they love because they understand that their sibling's happiness doesn't mean their unhappiness.** And as they get older and extend this understanding beyond their family, their friends feel better understood and supported. And that's a much better skill to bring into adulthood than a penchant for tit for tat comparisons.

### **developing strong relationships section**

Now let's look at the third shift, how we approach developing meaningful relationships with our children. Strong relationships are built on strong connections. When you have a strong connection with your child, they feel safe and communication can flow. And it's in that flow that you'll discover what your child's individually unique needs are: in the swirl of their thoughts and interests and fears and dreams.

In my experience, there are a couple of things that often get in the way when a parent is trying to connect or reconnect with a child.

The first is the parent not honestly evaluating their own actions and motivations. Think about the flow of your relationship with your child as it sits right now. When they ask you for help do you most often say yes? Do you consistently help right away, or do you put them off until it's more convenient for you, sometimes not ever getting to it? Are you delaying your help in the hopes that they will forget

about it? Are they asking you for help less and less often? If so, do you think that's because they have become more proficient, or because they've mostly given up on getting your help? Does your spouse ask you for help for them, acting as a go-between? Asking yourself these questions can help you better see the signals you are giving your children regarding your availability for connection.

Now let's look at the flow from the other direction. When you ask your child for help, is the answer most often no? Are their answers to your general questions short and sweet, lacking the richer details that deepen an already well-connected relationship? These are clues that your child may be feeling disconnected too.

The second thing I see time and again is the parent trying to connect by attempting to pull the child to them rather than going to the child. "Want to go for a bike ride with me?" The answer is often no because as part of the relationship disconnect the child likely doesn't trust that you are suggesting the activity for *their* enjoyment. And are you really? Do you truly think it is something your child would enjoy, or is it really something that *you* would enjoy doing with them? There's an incredibly important difference there.

How can you break this cycle? For the next while, just stop asking. You already know you are both feeling disconnected so stop creating moments that highlight this disconnect and increase frustration in the relationship. Stop asking questions where the answer is likely to be no or lacking in any meaningful detail.

So, if you're not asking questions, not asking for help, and not asking them to join you in activities, what can you do instead? Go to them; join your children in activities they enjoy—and not just family activities that everyone enjoys together, but different activities with each child, based on their individual interests. Take the time to see the world through their eyes. Spend some time quietly observing them so you begin to see what they actually *like* to do. Then do those things. Not passively, but fully engaged *with* them.

Creating a strong base of connection and trust on which to build a relationship is not about putting in time with your child but about using that time to discover who your child is: the activities they enjoy, the food they like to eat, the kinds of clothes they prefer to wear—and why. What are the signs they are hungry or tired? What kind of humour do they enjoy? Find out these kinds of answers for each of your children, instead of lumping them together as "your children." Paint a lovely picture in your mind that includes their differences, the interesting things that set each child apart and make them unique.

Then through your actions show them that you understand them individually. To build relationships with each of them is to connect with them as they are, not with an idealized version of a child born of your imagination, nor a generic “child” that is an amalgamation of all your children’s interests. If Billy loves baseball, don’t ask Amelia if she’d like to toss a ball around with you.

Once you begin to understand your children as individuals, you can begin to connect with each of them where they are—*that* is the comfortable place from which they can welcome you. As you create more and more of these connections, your relationships will get stronger.

For example, when we first started unschooling back in 2002 I was pretty uncomfortable with my eldest son Joseph’s passion for video games. But instead of trying to control him, I chose to connect with him. At first he knew of my trepidation, so I sat back pretty quietly, just observing. Then over time I began to piece together the real picture of his joy, the incredible amount of learning he was up to. We began to connect in many ways through the games: stories, languages, research, strategies etc. Our relationship blossomed.

Yet another benefit? As you understand your children better, you will see that their actions and reactions are truly grounded in who they are, not random outbursts designed to frustrate you. As you understand their actions better, your trust in them will grow. **And with this developing trust comes true respect, a deep sense of the inherent worth of each of your children, which will most likely be reciprocated in abundance as you use this strong base to build uniquely wonderful relationships.**

I thought I’d spend a few minutes here talking specifically about teens. There is so much fear surrounding conventional relationships with teens, a clear expectation that it will be a rocky time and that the relationship will suffer, but that hopefully it will recover once they become adults themselves and realize it was “for their own good.” Yet time and again, unschoolers have discovered how much they enjoy the teen years. My children are now 16, 19, and 21 and I have discovered the same thing: I truly enjoy my time with them and we get along well. They are really fun to hang out with! They have different personalities and passions, and are all busily exploring, in completely different ways, how they fit into the world at large.

One of the biggest fears I see mentioned over and over by parents is that their teens will make the same mistakes they did growing up. Parents of teens have, at this point in their lives, gained a certain perspective and feel pretty confident about the thread of actions and consequences that wove

through their own teen years. Many imagine that if they could go back and do it all again knowing what they know now, they'd do a better job of it. Mired in the perfect vision of hindsight, their mind starts each flashback with "if only ..." "If only I'd hung out with a different crowd, I would have had better friends." "If only I hadn't wasted my time, I could have had a job." "If only I had studied harder, I could have gotten into a better college." These are simplistic appraisals, but given what they see as a second chance, parents are confident they can engineer a better outcome for their teen, "if only they would listen to me." There it is again.

Although I am suggesting that as parents we try to avoid projecting our personal experiences too deeply onto our teens, I don't mean to imply that we keep our thoughts to ourselves and leave them to figure out the world on their own. Far from it! Parents have experience and wisdom to share that can be very helpful. Yet to be truly helpful, it's important that our teens receive it in the "no strings attached" spirit we intend, or else our motivation is suspect and the information we share is understandably discounted. So the atmosphere of communication is important—the relationship is key.

Conventionally, relationships with teens are painted as either/or: either you focus on maintaining authority, the "tough love" approach, or you avoid challenges altogether and "let them run wild." Yet unschooling families have found the beauty of living inside the spectrum of those two extremes. We continue to cultivate the strong and connected relationships we have built with our children over the years—it's a relationship paradigm that serves us well no matter our children's age. To dig more deeply into this, let's look at five ways unschooling parents view relationships differently and what that can look like in the teen years. Notice how they all boil down to how we relate to them: as people, not possessions.

First, we drop the expectations. Unschoolers don't share their experiences or perspective with the expectation that their teens will reach the exact same conclusions. That's hard, isn't it? We know what we know! To us—for us—our experiences are fact.

For me, it's a kind of philosophical detachment. Not a detachment as in disengagement, but in appreciation of their individuality. Almost paradoxically, when I'm not living my life through them, I feel even closer to them, because it's not about me—their life is theirs to live—so I can detach from the outcome and drop my expectations. They are not younger versions of me but unique beings in their own right. So though the experiences I share may be helpful to them, useful pieces to the puzzle

of their life, I don't expect my stories to mean the same things to them: we are each building different puzzles. And I am excited to see how theirs unfolds.

Second, we realize that the circumstances of their lives are different than ours. Speaking of different puzzles, take a moment to realize just how different their childhood has been from our own. The pace of change has been accelerating at breakneck speed over our lifetime. This is a new thing!

Comparatively, the pace of change from one generation to the next even just a few decades ago was almost negligible. What an interesting time in human history to be living! But it also means that the passing down of generational experience is more about bigger picture human issues, like empathy and morality, than any day-to-day advice to "do this and get that outcome". The nuts and bolts of our stories are often no longer applicable because the world is changing so rapidly.

For example, even mainstream society is starting to question the typical counsel to "go to college and get a good job at a big company." That was the conventional definition of success in the industrial age, and even deeply into the information age, but we are swiftly moving beyond that now. That advice, so adamantly passed on to us by our parents, has become hopelessly out-of-date as our teens move into the adult world. I talked a bit about this yesterday.

Third, we don't presume we know better than they do how they experience their lives. This can be a hard one too. We have more life experience. We remember a time when they were young children and totally dependent on us and we came through for them—here they are! Yet we can also acknowledge that we don't always know what they are thinking and feeling, how they are experiencing and interpreting the day-to-day moments of their lives. Sure, maybe we really enjoyed camping at the lake as a family over the last long weekend, but that doesn't mean they did. And they're not "wrong" to have disliked it. Different personalities and outlooks are just that: different, not wrong.

As I said, none of this is intended to suggest disengagement—that we don't share our experiences, or that we leave them alone to figure out their own lives. What we can do is listen to teens: they have intelligent information and insights to share! Don't discount what they say just because it's different from your thoughts and perspective. Again, it's different, not wrong. Instead, if you try to connect what they're saying with what you already know, you just might create a bigger picture of the world for yourself. You're learning too. Which leads to ...

The fourth way we view relationships differently: we don't assume that, as parents, we're always right. This seems to be at the crux of so much parent-teen conflict. At some point, teens are ready for more responsibility, more independence, more freedom. Yet so often parents are determined to keep them in that conventional childhood box as long as possible, the box where parents are right and their children need to do what they're told.

With this new perspective—that their childhood environment is radically different than ours, that they are experiencing life in their own unique ways, and that our expectations are entangled with our life experiences—it is presumptuous of us to believe that our worldview will fit neatly into their lives. What was right for us, or what we imagine would have been right for us, may truly not be right for them.

Which leads us back to where we started with my fifth point, that teens are people too. Just because they are our children, they are not our possessions. They are people. And just because they are our progeny, doesn't mean we intimately understand them. We need to get to know them. And be open so that they get to know us. Build lasting relationships. And from there we will have a lasting impact on each others' lives. My kids have inspired me countless times! I have learned things from them that have made me a better person. We continue to learn from each other.

From childhood, through the teen years, and beyond, **everyone wins with strong, connected, respectful relationships.**

### **why getting along is so helpful for unschooling section**

One thing I love seeing is how these ideas come full circle. It lends credence to their foundational nature. We've been talking about building strong, connected, and unique relationships with each of our children and how that helps everyone in the family live together more peacefully—in harmony, as it were. But those relationships are *also* fundamental to creating a thriving unschooling environment in your home. Living *and* learning—it all ties together.

Let's take a peek at some of the important ways these wonderful relationships support learning and the unschooling lifestyle:

- Parents know each of their children's likes and dislikes and personalities, which helps them find interesting things to bring into their lives—this enriches their learning;



- Children feel safe and understood, so they are more apt to ask any questions that occur to them without worrying about feeling judged—this deepens their learning;
- Parents understand each of their children well, so they more easily extend their trust in those moments when they aren't clear on their children's motivations—this expands their learning; and
- Both parents and children are more comfortable approaching each other for candid discussions, even if the topic is awkward—this is where everyone finds all sorts of learning about ourselves and each other.

As our children get older, conversations often centre less around facts and more around thoughts and feelings and morality and principles and behaviour, topics that help them sort out the person they want to be. That's an important bit, the person they want to be. With your love and support, your trust and connection, you are a key piece of this process. And that is where unschooling shines.

## summary

So how does this all come together?

Experienced unschooling parents have invested, and continue to invest, much time and effort into developing and supporting strong relationships with each of their children. Why is it worth it?

First and foremost, as we just discussed, it creates a superlative learning environment.

Yet over the years I've discovered so many other wonderful benefits. My kids have developed good relationship and communication skills and gained an appreciation for the breadth of human needs and motivations. They've seen first hand the benefits of helping those around them meet their needs, and developed solid analytical skills that help them sort through their sometimes tangled goals. Not only did focusing on strong relationships help them better understand themselves, it helped them become more understanding of others. It helped them develop empathy.

As young adults, my children have found that their more conventionally raised peers often have a hard time seeing the perspective of others and are unable to anticipate the impact their actions may have on those around them. With this lack of empathy, watching their friends' attempts at communication sometimes reminds me of a life-sized game of pinball, people stuck in place by fear and confusion, unable to avoid the hits from words flung at them, yet staunchly sending them back out into the world to hit others. Ding ding ding. By the time one set of zingers fades down the drain,

another set is launched to take its place. Not fun. So many young adults are trying to develop these relationship skills now because growing up, their parents and teachers weren't in relationship *with* them, but talking *at* them.

As an interesting aside to my observations surrounding this, I recently read Peter Gray's book, *Free to Learn*, and in it he discusses how, since the late 70s, studies based on the interpersonal reactivity index have revealed a significant rise in narcissism coupled with a significant decline in empathy. He makes an interesting point, that this relates to a decline in play. He defines play as "nature's way of teaching children how to solve their own problems, control their impulses, modulate their emotions, see from others' perspectives, negotiate differences, and get along with others as equals." His play is our unschooling days.

He believes that ultimately it boils down to the freedom to quit. If children want to play together but any of them can choose to leave at any time, then they are all motivated to negotiate so that the game is enjoyable enough that most children choose to stay and play. In that situation, understanding others' perspectives is a very useful skill that naturally develops over time and exposure to that environment. Unschoolers create that environment at home, where family members are free to say "that doesn't work for me," knowing that the others will do their best to understand their perspective and incorporate their needs. More generally to me, this freedom to quit is the freedom of *choice*—which unschoolers encourage in spades.

The challenge in society is that over the last 30-odd years *organized* play has grown to replace *free* play. Nowadays most play is hosted by adults, and parents insist that their children *don't* quit in the name of "commitment", so there really is no choice. This means that there is no driving motivation to consider the needs of the participants. Even good old play time is often compromised by parents insisting, even after disagreements, that their kids continue to play together; that they work it out with their friends right now in the name of "getting along". That approach does nothing to encourage developing the skills that actually help people learn to get along. Giving individuals the freedom of choice to play or to quit does that so much better.

Unschooling parents also realize that the time invested in developing strong relationships with their children will pay interest over their lifetime. Which sounds more effective and enjoyable: spending time and effort to understand your child and work together to find common ground, or spending time and effort to coerce your child to do what *you* want them to do until they are old enough to refuse. I imagine most parents reason that they are doing it for their child's "own good", that once

their children are adults they'll shift to a peer relationship. But how do you imagine that shift will go? How hard is it to change a relationship dynamic that's been 20-odd years in the making? Why do you think there are so many Thanksgiving movies about the emotional turmoil that happens when adult children go home for the holidays? If you want a less conventional and more loving adult relationship with your child when they're grown, have a less conventional and more loving relationship with them now.

Another discovery? The one I've focused on here today. That those strong and unique relationships with each of my children have led to supportive and loving interactions at the family level. We get along very well. There isn't competition between siblings, but support. There aren't power struggles amongst us, but the feeling that when any of us wants something, everyone will do what they can to help. As for fairness, I think the last time the word "fair" came up in conversation was back in 2008, during those first couple of months after Michael's diabetes diagnosis. Life at the time was very busy with learning a lot of new things and adjusting to some new routines. Still, it wasn't mentioned in an overly jealous tone, but in more of an observational way. And I agreed—time commitments *weren't* looking very fair at that point. There was understanding and commiseration and soon life got back to its more typical rhythm.

And lastly, another problem with treating your children as a homogeneous group and imploring that they "get along", is that you're handing them a group dynamic where they have to choose between fitting in to get along, and being the wonderfully unique person they are. You've set "pleasing you" in direct opposition to "being themselves". What a tough choice! Is that really the position you want to place your children in? Remember, you are not obligated to assimilate your children into a family "hive mind". Instead, focus on and celebrate the wonderful individuals with whom you are creating a family. Sure, the assimilation route is probably less work for the parents in the short term, and rather easily justified by conventional measures, but today we've looked at some of the likely long term consequences of that route. The choice is yours.

## **conclusion**

So, remember the premise? That focusing on the individuals in the family is key for cultivating an atmosphere of harmony. I hope that I've managed to share some of my thoughts and experiences in a way that illuminates how focusing on and supporting the needs of each family member individually better fosters a family atmosphere of joy and harmony than any entreaties to "be nice to each other".

Having expectations about what your children's relationships will look like will at best increase your frustration, and at worst lead to controlling actions.

When their individuality is celebrated, children can get along more easily precisely *because* they don't feel obligated to each other by blood or parent-imposed guilt: it's a choice. It always comes back to that, doesn't it? When choice is removed, resistance naturally increases. With strong and connected relationships with their parents, each child feels loved and supported, and without the looming cloud of power struggles and sibling competition, they are more free to grow into happy and confident individuals who do not need to feel better about themselves at the expense of those around them.

Think carefully about how you want the power paradigm to play out in your family. Consider the effect of how you measure fairness. And contemplate ways you can build stronger and more connected relationships with your children.

When a child, or adult for that matter, feels loved and fully supported in pursuit of their own life, they are comfortable in their own skin. This is the most effective frame of mind for both learning *and* for navigating relationships with others in their lives.

For living life fully, and joyfully.

Thank you.