

The Top 5 Myths About Unschooling

When I started writing this document, I thought it would be beyond easy. Only *five myths*? Piece of cake, considering the volumes of misinformation surrounding children who learn outside of school. However, the more I thought about it the more I realized that most myths are specific to homeschooling, and while unschooling is officially seen as a ‘type’ of homeschooling, in practice it is not the same thing at all.

Upon digging a little deeper what I found was that most people outside the already established homeschooling community have no idea what unschooling even IS. I cannot tell you how many times I have explained unschooling to an “outsider”, only to have them ask, “Yes, but how many hours do you spend on it every day?”

Sigh.

If you have gotten to the point where you’ve joined the email list (thank you) then I am going to assume you already have some idea of what unschooling is and that I do not need to define it for you. It is with that in mind that I present the top 5 myths about unschooling.

Myth Number 5: Only hippies and freaks unschool

I used to dismiss this one with a roll of my eyes. Really, who has time to even address such things? The 60’s are fifty years gone, after all.

However, as the cult of celebrity grows and along with it, the “bully culture”, I’ve taken a second look at this, on the surface, ridiculous myth.

Why?

Because a “freak” in today’s society seems to be someone who dares to think for themselves and act accordingly. In which case, yes, most unschoolers ARE freaks. (So much for debunking *that* myth!)

But hippie? If by hippie you mean someone who doesn’t dress like the latest ad from Ann Taylor, or worry that their hair and makeup is *so* last season, then probably a lot of unschoolers fall into that category. But not all. And if you think a hippie is someone who lives in a yurt with no electricity or running water, then maybe there are unschoolers who fit that description, but no one I know. (That would be quite a feat in the middle of New York City.)

I believe that this myth is the product of the fact that most unschooling children do not go out of their way to “fit in”, to wear the “right” clothes and to look a certain way. Those

traits are more often found in the culture of school, of cliques and sororities and fraternities and every other exclusionary group.

The truth is that unschoolers cannot be defined by any one demographic. We are city dwellers and country dwellers. We are two parent, one income families and two parent, two income families. We are single parent families. We are minorities and majorities. We are Christian, Jew, Muslim, Atheist, Buddhist, Pagan, Hindu and Agnostic. We are gay and straight. We are Democrat, Republican, Libertarian and everything in between. We are well off and struggling to make ends meet. We are hippies. We are freaks.

We could be you and your children as well. There are no typical unschoolers. And that's the beauty of it.

Myth Number 4: Unschoolers do whatever they want

First we must define, "whatever they want". Most people define it as a negative, meaning the parent is a bystander while the child runs amok. This myth is born, I believe, from the use of the term "child-led learning" which seems to downplay the role of the parent.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

The role of the unschooling parent in their child's learning is different than the parent of a schooled child. Different, and I would contend, much more involved. For schooled children the parent acts, in regards to "education", as an extension of the teacher, enforcing a curriculum and making sure the child does their homework & assignments. In this scenario, it is the child who is passive. They are a vessel to be filled with someone else's idea of an education. Their only job is to do as they are told and get good grades; to score high on standardized tests and get into a good school. Their own desires are secondary, at best.

An unschooling parent is a keen observer of their child, and acts as a facilitator to their interests, whatever those interests may be. The parent does not impose a curriculum or particular path of learning or subject on the child, which is the main difference between parents of unschoolers and any other type of homeschooling or schooling. Instead the parents provide guidance as necessary and help when asked. Unschooling parents are not "enforcers" but partners in their child's learning. Unschooling parents can and do suggest activities they think their child might enjoy, they "strew" information which they think might be of interest, but they do not insist or force.

Unschoolers have the freedom to follow their passions with the help and support of their parents and families, but unschooling is not a license to disregard the rules of society. An unschooling child cannot go into a store and pick up fragile item labeled "Don't Touch", then say it is because they unschool and therefore the rules don't apply to them. Sandra Dodd clarifies by saying that if the parent wishes to buy the breakable

item and give it to the child, knowing full well it might not remain intact, that is their choice.

Unschoolers, therefore, DO learn according to their interests and without any imposed or forced curriculum, but they do NOT simply “do whatever they want”.

Myth Number 3: Unschoolers don't really learn anything (also sometimes known as “But what about Math?”)

This one might be my favorite of all the myths. I love it because it is so impossible. Kids who learn *nothing*? Fantastically deluded!

Myth #3 is powered by a strong school bias which says that to have learned anything you must have a grade, or test scores to show for it. “Learning” as employed by those who believe this myth is narrowly defined as academic subjects which are taught in school, and does not include any number of real world skills or knowledge that can only be learned through experience outside of school. Instead, it only applies to a curriculum through which you can point to different subjects and specific facts at your age appropriate grade level and say “Yes, I learned this.” Learning is therefore highly compartmentalized and most of the time those compartments do not overlap.

By contrast, in an unschooled world life is a continual journey of learning. Learning does not begin with a bell in the morning and end with another in the afternoon. It is not always separated into neat little compartments with labels like Math and Science and Geography and History. Rather, learning is non-linear and multi-faceted; a trip to the beach becomes a “lesson” (though rarely announced as such) in marine life, the effects of the sun on unprotected skin and geology all wrapped together. Learn to cook and you gain knowledge of fractions and multiplying or dividing.

Unschoolers may have a passion for something that takes them far above “grade level” at a very young age. They may choose to take classes in order to pursue certain interests, or they may be completely self-taught. Many fall somewhere in between.

Unschooling is not something you “do” for a certain amount of time each day. It is a chosen lifestyle, and is synonymous with learning, though each child's interests and preferred methods will be unique.

A few years ago Sandra Dodd (www.sandradodd.com), unschooling advocate and Mom to three grown unschoolers, decided that unschoolers need a day off from all this 24/7 learning. She declared July 24th “Learn Nothing Day”. (It was meant as kind of a joke, but you'd be surprised how many people thought she was serious.) As she wrote on her website regarding what happened on Learn Nothing Day, “No great successes have been reported thus far.” And why not? Well, can you imagine a day where you learned NOTHING? Think about that. Nothing. Not a new idea, thought or fact. My kids love to toss around reasons that learning nothing is impossible. Their favorite is that even if

you locked yourself into a closet all day, then you'd learn what it's like to be locked in a closet all day!

Myth Number 2: Unschoolers won't know how to function in the "real world"

I used to think this one was synonymous with Myth #1, but it is not. Apparently there are people out there who believe that children who spend their days pursuing their own interests supported by their families will become too attached to their parents and siblings and will never be able to leave them to go out on their own. They will simply move into the basement and stay there forever.

This Myth, to my ears, sounds like an excuse parents make to justify sending their kids to school - sometimes as early as age 3 - for the better part of each day. Deep down it feels agonizing and wrong, but they tell themselves that it must be done. That it is essential because it is akin to sending the child out into the "real world". Which it so clearly is not.

Is there anywhere in the real world where you spend your days locked in a building in a designated room, surrounded only by other people of exactly your same age, perceived intelligence levels, and sometimes even gender? A place where you must do exactly as you are told all the time or you will fail and where you have little or no choice about what you are "taught"?

If there was such a place in the real world, no one I know would be clamoring to get in.

The real world is the place where your family is. It is the neighborhood in which you live, the stores you visit. It is your walk to the subway. It is knowing how to buy a Metrocard and how to open a bank account. It is running a lemonade stand, then a garage sale and then opening an etsy store. It is that college class you took at the age of 15, or the computer you built on your own. It is the adventure of travel and the ability to meet new people, no matter their age, race or perceived intelligence levels. People who believe that unschooled children will never step out from the protective shadow of their parents have clearly never met any unschooling families. Unschoolers, in my experience, tend to be very "free range" (to steal the term from Lenore Skenazy) and independent.

Why is that?

I have only my own opinion on this, but I believe that growing up with the constant support and availability of your family inspires confidence and independence, much more so that the counter-intuitive world of school, which put the family in a secondary position.

Whereas schooled children may be loud and brash and take risks out of defiance, unschooled children are more likely to take their independence at a measured pace that is in keeping with their own personality and confidence.

Who do you think will function better in the real world?

Myth Number 1: Unschoolers are socially backward

I guarantee you've all either heard this or thought it. It is the number one mother of all superstitions surrounding unschoolers & homeschoolers. "But what about socialization?" is always, always, *always* the first thing people ask me when I tell them we unschool. (After, of course, I explain to them what unschooling is in the first place).

Where this myth originated is something of a mystery to me. Not even the strictest of homeschooling families spend all their days every day within the four walls of their homes. Why do people think that the only way to become properly "socialized" is to be locked in a room with 30 kids of exactly your own age? It seems to me that type of socialization is mostly negative in nature, and one of the root causes of bullying.

Unschoolers are very well socialized, mostly due to the fact that they are not locked in school all day. Some days they go out, some days they don't. They interact with people of all ages every day. They see other kids and friends all the time. Our local homeschool organization is so active that sometimes it feels like we have to make time **NOT** to see other kids.

Of course there will be kids who are more introverted and others who are complete extroverts, but that is a matter of personality and can be found in any group of kids anywhere.

Because unschoolers spend all their time living and learning in the real world, they gain confidence in a variety of settings and with people of all ages and backgrounds. They pursue their own interests, knowing they are trusted and supported by their family and those who love them. They may be ignorant of the types of bullying that is rampant in schools, but as unschoolers they've definitely dealt with naysayers and criticism. Despite this, the unschoolers we know are generous and giving, creative, unique and independent.

If anything, it would be more apt to say that unschoolers are socially forward.

Conclusion:

We are all born unschoolers. We learn to walk and talk in our own fashion and at our own pace. As toddlers we are master scientists and explorers, expanding our knowledge of our world tirelessly and at lightning speed.

All of that ends when we are sent to school. Creativity and independent exploration is discouraged if not forbidden outright. The light of exploration dims, and we learn only that we must be taught; that our intelligence is given to us and not innate.

Unschooling, then, is a rejection of that philosophy, and an embracing of the natural path of learning children so eagerly and capably follow from birth. It is trusting that each child's path is unique and right for them. It is allowing them to learn the way they were born to learn.

Unschooling is real world learning. All the time.