

# Unschooling

A Survey of Families and Unschooling Adults

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# **Part I: Unschooling Families**

# What Is Unschooling? Invitation to a Survey

Unschooling is a growing, radical educational movement that deserves attention.

Published on September 15, 2011 by Peter Gray in Freedom to Learn

Unschooling is a movement that turns conventional thinking about education upside down. I'd like to learn more about it and tell the world more about it, and for that reason I'm conducting a survey of unschooling families. If you are a member of such a family and are willing to participate, you can find the form here. If you can't find it that way, you can request the form from me by email, at grayp@bc.edu. The form itself contains all the information you need to complete and return it. It's short and not hard to complete. I would be very grateful for your participation. I invite you also to forward the form, or a link to this post, to other unschooling families, so they might also participate. (I plan to analyze the responses beginning in late November, so please return your form before November 23, 2011).

*[Note added January 8, 2012: The survey is now closed. Note added April 17, 2012: Results of the survey are now posted, as Report I (on benefits of unschooling); Report II (on paths to unschooling), and Report III (on challenges to unschooling. But read on, here, for more on unschooling.)]*

Here's some of what I know already about unschooling, before conducting the survey. Defined most simply, *unschooling is not schooling*. Unschoolers do not send their children to school and they do not do at home the kinds of things that are done at school. More specifically, they do not establish a curriculum for their children, they do not require their children to do particular assignments for the purpose of education, and they do not test their children to measure progress. Instead, they allow their children freedom to pursue their own interests and to learn, in their own ways, what they need to know to follow those interests. They also, in various ways, provide an environmental context and environmental support for the child's learning. Life and learning do not occur in a vacuum; they occur in the context of a cultural environment, and unschooling parents help define and bring the child into contact with that environment.

All in all, unschoolers have a view of education that is 180 degrees different from that of our standard system of schooling. They believe that education is something that children (and people of all ages) do for themselves, not something done to them, and they believe that education is a normal part of all of life, not something separate from life that occurs at special times in special places.

Nobody knows just how many kids in the United States are currently unschoolers. For official record-keeping purposes, unschoolers are lumped in with homeschoolers. State laws don't allow parents to just take their kids out of school; parents have to somehow prove that their kids are being educated at home, and that puts them into the homeschooling category. Homeschooling, overall, is growing at an accelerating rate. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, which conducts a survey every 4 years, there were in the United States about 850,000 homeschooled kids (age 5 to 17) in 1999, 1.1 million in 2003, and 1.5 million in 2007. Stated as percentages of all school-aged kids, these numbers translate to 1.7% in 1999, 2.2% in 2003, and

2.9% in 2007. The data aren't in yet for 2011, but if we extrapolate the curve from the previous years, we might guess that today close to 4% of all school-aged kids are classed as homeschoolers.

People involved in the homeschooling movement estimate that roughly 10% of homeschoolers are unschoolers, which seems reasonable to me based on the proportions of them seen at homeschooling conventions. If this is true, then upwards of 150,000 kids are unschooling in the United States today and the numbers are increasing at an accelerating rate from year to year. The estimate would be even higher, perhaps much higher, if so-called "relaxed homeschoolers" were included. These are families who "sort of" have a curriculum for their kids but don't necessarily follow it or enforce it. All in all, unschooling is a very significant educational movement, because it involves such a large number of kids and it violates so sharply the standard view that kids must be forced to learn an imposed curriculum if they are going to succeed.

Academic researchers have steered clear of any serious study of unschooling, just as they have steered clear of Sudbury model schools and all other innovations in education that deny the value of an imposed curriculum. The one exception is a 2008 Ph.D. dissertation by Donna Harel Kirschner, at the University of Pennsylvania's Department of Anthropology. Kirschner interviewed and conducted home visits of 22 unschooling families, familiarized herself with the literature on unschooling, and wrote a dissertation describing the philosophy and practices of the families she studied. Unfortunately, Kirschner's work has not appeared in any academic or non-academic publications, and the dissertation itself is hard to obtain. You can purchase a copy of it from ProQuest Digital Dissertations (or get it free from them if you happen to have membership status at a subscribing university library). The full title is *Producing Unschoolers: Learning Through Living in a U.S. Educational Movement*.

But you can learn much more about unschooling by perusing the websites and reading the books of those who are involved in the movement. If you Google *unschooling*, you will find many choices available, but here are a few such resources that I am familiar with and recommend:

- **Pat Farenga's website.** Pat Farenga is perhaps the foremost authority on unschooling. He worked closely with John Holt, the noted author on children and learning, until the latter's untimely death in 1985. Holt's books, including *How Children Fail* and *How Children Learn*, published in the 1960s and '70s, are still seen as guiding lights by most people in the unschooling movement, and Pat has done much to keep those writings in press and available. Holt coined the term *unschooling* and founded the magazine *Growing Without Schooling* in the 1970s, and Pat continued to publish the magazine after Holt's death, from 1985 until 2001. Pat is a very popular writer, speaker, and media consultant on unschooling and has served as counselor to many new unschoolers and homeschoolers. At Pat's website you can find, among other things, Pat's blog, book reviews, videos relevant to unschooling, and a link to the full set of issues of *Growing Without Schooling*.

- **Life Learning Magazine.** When *Growing Without Schooling* stopped publication, *Life Learning Magazine* became the leading journal of the unschooling movement. The magazine is packed with well-written articles about the philosophy and practice of unschooling. Since 2008 the magazine has been completely digital. The editor, Wendy Priesnitz, is herself a terrific author. You can find her blog at this site and links to her other writings. I particularly recommend her brief book, *Challenging Assumptions in Education*. The assumptions she challenges are these: Education is something that is done to you; Knowledge belongs to a cult of experts; Others know best what children should learn; Schools provide effective training; and Schools have a noble purpose.

- **The Natural Child Project.** Here you can find well-written, thought-provoking articles not just on unschooling but on all aspects of parenting, including breastfeeding and the whole range of issues having to do with family harmony. The unschooling movement is very much linked to the larger natural child-raising movement, and here you see that link clearly. You can also subscribe here to the *Natural Child Newsletter* and can find links to writings by Jan Hunt and others. Jan is editor of the newsletter and author of *The Natural Child: Parenting from the Heart*. She is also co-editor (with her son Jason) of *The Unschooling Unmanual*, which I recently read and enjoyed. It is an excellent collection of essays relevant to unschooling, including one by the novelist Daniel Quinn, one by John Holt, and two by Hunt herself.

- **Sandra Dodd's Radical Unschooling Website.** This is another great unschooling website, which I just recently discovered. Its explicit aim is to provide practical information, resources, and encouragement to people who have taken the unschooling path. You can find here clear, well-written essays on almost every topic relevant to unschooling, links to books and other sites relevant to unschooling, and an up-to-date list of state, regional, and national organizations devoted to unschooling. As is true also of Pat Farenga, Wendy Priesnitz, and Jan Hunt, Sandra is an unschooling parent herself, so her words come not just from theory and reading, but also from first-hand experience.

# The Benefits of Unschooling: Report I from a Large Survey

What, to unschoolers, are the benefits of skipping school?

Published on February 28, 2012 by Peter Gray in Freedom to Learn

Five months ago, in September, 2011, I posted an essay ([here](#)) introducing readers to the unschooling movement and inviting unschooling families to participate in a survey. The survey questionnaire—which was posted on Pat Farenga’s Learning Without School site and Jan Hunt’s Natural Child Project site—asked unschooling families to tell us a bit about their family, including the age and sex of each child, the employment of each parent, and the history of schooling, homeschooling, and unschooling of each child. It also asked the respondents to define unschooling as it is practiced in their home, to describe the path that led them to unschooling, and to tell us about the biggest challenges and benefits of unschooling for their family. My colleague Gina Riley (adjunct professor of special education at Hunter College) and I have been working on analyzing the results and preparing a report for publication in an educational journal.

Here, in a series of reports in this blog, my intention is to present a more informal report of the survey results. In this first report, I present some general statistics about the families who responded and then focus on their definitions of unschooling and their statements about the benefits of unschooling. In subsequent reports I’ll focus on their paths to unschooling and the biggest challenges of unschooling. One thing I can do here, which we won’t be able to do in the more formal academic article, is to present many quotations from the survey forms. Many of the respondents are eloquent writers, who had no trouble putting their enthusiasm for unschooling into words.

## Who responded to the survey?

In all, 254 families responded to the survey. However, for 23 of these families the oldest child had not yet reached school age (which we took to be 5 years old), and we chose not to include those families for the purpose of our main analyses. This left us with 231 unschooling families. Of these, 186 were from the United States, 19 were from Canada, and the remaining 26 were from other countries, mostly in Europe. The respondents from the US came from 34 different states, the most frequently represented of which are California (23), New York (14), and Oregon (10).

Of the 231 families, 48 had one child, 104 had two children, 51 had three, and the rest had four or more. In the great majority of families (220), the person who filled out the questionnaire was the mom; in nine families it was the dad, and in two families it was an unschooled child (now an adult). Most (209) of the families appeared to be two-parent families (as best as we could judge from the questionnaires), with both parents (or one parent and a step-parent) living at home. Twenty-one families were headed by single mothers, and one was headed by a single dad.



Concerning employment, roughly half of the mothers identified themselves as stay-at-home moms (often with part-time jobs), and the remaining were relatively evenly split among those employed as professionals of one type or another, self-employed entrepreneurs, and "other". The great majority of the fathers were employed full time and were also relatively evenly split among professionals, self-employed entrepreneurs, and others.

It should be clear to anyone reading this report that this is not a random sample of all unschoolers. Rather, the respondents are those who in one way or another found the survey form and took the trouble to fill it out and email it to me. One might expect that, as a whole, these are among the most enthusiastic unschoolers, the ones who are most eager to share their experiences. The general claims I make here apply only to the group who responded, not necessarily to the whole population of unschoolers.

## How did the respondents define unschooling?

In my earlier post, in which I announced the survey, I defined unschooling simply as *not schooling*. I elaborated by saying: "Unschoolers do not send their children to school and they do not do at home the kinds of things that are done at school. More specifically, they do not establish a curriculum for their children, they do not require their children to do particular assignments for the purpose of education, and they do not test their children to measure progress. Instead, they allow their children freedom to pursue their own interests and to learn, in their own ways, what they need to know to follow those interests. They also, in various ways, provide an environmental context and environmental support for the child's learning. Life and learning do not occur in a vacuum; they occur in the context of a cultural environment, and unschooling parents help define and bring the child into contact with that environment."

In the survey, one of our items was: "*Please describe briefly how your family defines unschooling. What if any responsibility do you, as parent(s), assume for the education of your children? [I am asking only for generalities here. I may ask for more details in a subsequent survey.]*"

Essentially all of the respondents emphasized the role of their children in directing their own education and in pointing out that education is not separate from life itself. The responses varied, however, in the ways they described the parents' roles. We coded the responses, somewhat arbitrarily, into three categories—which I'll simply refer to as Categories 1, 2, and 3—according to the degree to which they mentioned deliberate roles the parents played in guiding and/or motivating their child's education. I should emphasize that these categories do not have to do with the degree to which the parents are involved in the child's daily lives, but just with the degree to which that involvement, according to the parents' descriptions, was deliberately directed toward the child's education.<sup>1</sup>

By our coding, 100 (43%) of the responses fell into Category 1. These were the responses that most most strongly emphasized the role of the child and did not describe parental activities conducted specifically for the purpose of the child's education, other than being responsive to the child's wishes or the child's lead. As illustration, one respondent in this category wrote: "*Un-*

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<sup>1</sup> Note added March 2, 2012. In the earlier version of this post I used the labels "radical unschooling," "moderate unschooling," and "relaxed homeschooling" for the three categories of ways that the respondents described their unschooling practices. However, several readers pointed out that these terms—especially the term "radical unschooling"—have meanings to people in the unschooling community that are different from the meanings that formed the basis for our categories. Therefore, I changed the labels to, simply, Categories 1, 2, and 3. -PG

*schooling equals freedom in learning and in life. We push aside paradigms and established regulations with regards to schooling and trust our children to pave their own way in their own educations. Everything they want to experience has value. We trust them.*” Another wrote: *”Unschooling, for us, means there is absolutely no curriculum, agenda, timetable, or goal setting. The children are responsible for what, how, and when they learn.”*

By our coding, 96 (42%) of the responses fell into Category 2. These differed from Category 1 only in that they made some mention of deliberate parental roles in guiding or motivating their children’s education. As illustration, one in this category wrote: *”We define unschooling as creating an enriching environment for our children where natural learning and passions can flourish. We want our life to be about connection—to each other, to our interests and passions, to a joyful life together...As a parent, I am my children’s experienced partner and guide and I help them to gain access to materials and people that they might not otherwise have access to. I introduce them to things, places, people that I think might be interesting to them, but I do not push them or feel rejected or discouraged if they do not find it interesting...”*

Finally, 35 (15%) of the responses fell into Category 3. These were responses that might be considered as falling at the borderline between unchooling and what is sometimes called “relaxed homeschooling.” The parents in these cases seemed to have at least some relatively specific educational goals in mind for their children and seemed to work deliberately toward achieving those goals. As illustration, one in this category wrote: *”We believe that, for the most part, our daughter should be encouraged to explore subjects that are of interest to her, and it is our responsibility as parents to make learning opportunities available to her... I usually ask her to learn something or do something new or educational every day (and I explain to her why learning something new every day is such a cool thing to do!).”*

## **What, to these families, are the benefits of unschooling?**

The question about benefits came last in the questionnaire. It was worded as follows: *”What, for your family, have been the biggest benefits of unschooling?”* This was the question that led to the most prolific and often eloquent answers. The most common categories of benefits were the following:

1. *Learning advantages for the child.* At least 132 respondents (57% of the total) mentioned benefits that fell in this category. They said that their children were learning more, or learning more efficiently, or learning more relevant material, or learning more eagerly in the unschooling situation than they would if they were in school or being schooled at home. Many in this category said that because their children were in charge of their own learning, their curiosity and eagerness to learn remained intact.

2. *Emotional and social advantages for the child.* At least 116 respondents (50% of the total) mentioned benefits that fell in this category. They said that their children were happier, less stressed, more self-confident, more agreeable, or more socially outgoing than they would be if they were in school or being schooled at home. Many in this category referred to the social advantages; their children interacted regularly with people of all ages in the community, not just with kids their own age as they would if they were in school.

3. *Family closeness.* At least 131 respondents (57% of the total) mentioned benefits that fell in this category. They wrote that because of unschooling they could spend more time together as

a family, do what they wanted to together, and that the lack of hassle over homework or other schooling issues promoted warm, harmonious family relationships.

4. *Family freedom from the schooling schedule.* At least 84 (36% of the total) mentioned benefits in this category. They said that freedom from the school's schedule allowed the children and the family as a whole to operate according to more natural rhythms of their own choice and to take trips that would otherwise be impossible. Some also mentioned that because of the free schedule, their kids could get jobs or participate in community projects that would be impossible if they had to be in school during the day.

## A sample of quotations about the benefits of unschooling

For the remainder of this post, I'm pasting in 33 quotations, from the questionnaires, about the benefits of unschooling. The quotations reflect the views and the enthusiasm of these unschooling families much better than any paraphrasing I could provide. Since many of you are not going to read through the whole list of quotes, I'll note here (rather than at the end) that I welcome your comments and questions. What if any experiences do you have with unschooling? Can you imagine it working for your family? If you were to do a survey of unschooling families, what questions would you want to ask? This blog is a forum for discussion, and your views and knowledge are valued and taken seriously, by me and by other readers. As always, I prefer if you post your comments and questions here rather than send them to me by private email. By putting them here, you share with other readers, not just with me. I read all comments and try to respond to all serious questions. Of course, if you have something to say that truly applies only to you and me, then send me an email. —But now, read on...

Each quotation comes from a different questionnaire.

- "Wow...this list could be miles long! More time together, less arguing, watching our daughter spend hours absorbed in things that she is pursuing on her own, seeing her getting enough sleep and not coming down with viruses that she used to catch at school, exploring museums and other community resources together, talking as a family every day, not rushing in the morning, no homework, no mandatory school functions, no dysfunctional school social environment, no lunch to pack, no papers to fill out and send back every day, no fundraising, seeing our daughter happy with who she is and what she is doing, not worrying about tests/grades/teacher's opinions, spending money that used to be spent on tuition or curriculum supplies on things that she truly wants to learn about. The biggest, number one benefit has to be our family relationships, though. What a difference now that we actually have time for each other! School did not just keep [our child] busy; it overwhelmed the whole family."

- "Children who are full of joy, full of love for learning, creative, self-directed, passionate, enthusiastic, playful, thoughtful, questioning, and curious. Siblings who are very good friends. Close family bond among all of us. Lots of time together. Ability to experience and explore the world."

- "Oh my, the benefits are enormous. ... Lifelong curiosity, family closeness, extraordinary success as my children step into academia and careers, and the empowerment that comes with being oneself in a world relentlessly telling us that we're only what we look like or own. I see it every weekend when my college kids are home and my research biologist daughter is back from work. They sit at the table long after dinner is over, talking about their admittedly esoteric

interests and bantering as only those who love each other do. Then, even as adults, they push away from the table to go work on a project together, something that has bonded them for years. As the day stretches out they finally gather on the porch, reluctant to part, still conversing and planning and laughing. I can't imagine greater riches."

- "Enjoying a family-centered life rather than an institution-centered life has been the biggest benefit of unschooling. Our late riser can rise late and our early morning lover can get up early. We don't need to wrap our lives around the schedule of a school. Our kids learn all the time, instead of being trained to learn one subject at a time, in 50-minute increments bookended by bells. We are incredibly fortunate to live in a time and place where we enjoy the free life of unschooling."

- "The other big benefit is that my kids have such a love of learning and of life, which was never destroyed by conventional school. So we don't have the kind of power struggles that other parents seem to have over bedtimes and homework. ... After all, happy relationships should ideally not be based on power issues. I can truly say that we are free of that, and that we spend time together as a family not because we are forced to, but because we enjoy it and love each other. What could be better than that?"

- "Seeing the kids learn things naturally, and at their own pace without forcing them. Seeing the amount of creativity and imagination my kids have because they aren't expected to conform and be followers. Seeing them become very involved and interested in subjects that I wouldn't have imagined."

- "When I am around friends whose kids are in school, I am struck by how much of their lives center around school. Get to bed so you can get up so you can be there on time, pack lunch, get home so you can do homework, organize all your stuff so you'll have it the next day. There are so many disagreements and struggles around all of this stuff-YUCK. It's life-changing just not having to have a schedule and nag everyone all the time to keep up with it!"

- "The children can delve deeper into subjects that matter to them, spend longer on topics that interest them. . . . The children can participate in the real world, learn real life skills, converse with people of all ages. They do not have to waste time with endless review, boring homework, having to work above or beneath their abilities, or in unpleasant power dynamics with adults with whom they have no connection. They can be themselves, and learn about themselves, and become who they truly want to be."

- "The world, and all of its amazing opportunities, truly is my children's playground. My husband and I firmly believe that if our children have freedom and the opportunity to explore and follow their interests now that, as they mature and have to work, they will have a much better chance of truly knowing what they would like to do and will find their careers and adult life both worthwhile and enjoyable."

- "Watching our daughter relax and enjoy her days is immensely satisfying, especially against the backdrop of her past few schooled years. The freedom from school and its expectations, the freedom to be, to live, has been liberating for all of us."

- "Watching my children learn so much so effortlessly. I watched my 5 year old daughter teach herself to read and write. It was the most amazing thing to watch. It was like she was a codebreaker."

- "The biggest benefits have been witnessing our daughters' creativity blossom full force, their ability to think outside the box when presented with problems, their resourcefulness, and their genuine desire to ask questions and learn as much as they can about the world around them. Also,

seeing them internalize the lesson that making mistakes is a necessary and wonderful platform for growth and further learning, which means they see mistakes as a positive and necessary part of their education. They're not afraid to try their hand at just about anything."

- "Trust!. This unschooling path has taught me to trust my instincts and to trust my children to know what feels right to them. There is no perfect life but mistakes are our mirror to see what we would have done differently and how we will decide now with the knowledge we have."

- "The list is endless: Most important: that learning was simply a normal part of everyday life, as natural and as necessary as breathing-never something confined to a specific place or time. But also: Being able to spend so much time together, getting to know each other so well. Being able to travel whenever we wanted (useful when the girls began fencing competitively, too-we never had to worry about school releases). That the girls OWNED their learning-despite their occasional doubts, by the time they reached adulthood, they knew how to go about learning anything they were interested in because they'd been able to do that all their lives. That the girls grew up curious and could indulge that curiosity. That the girls were not subjected to school textbooks and could read what we still think of as "real" books. That the girls learned for themselves how to organize and prioritize their time and energy to get things done. That we had the leisure not only to learn what and where we wanted, but to figure out the best ways we learned, which could change from year to year and subject to subject. That nobody had to ask permission for bathroom breaks. That we could eat while we read if we wanted to."

- "The curiosity that he had as a 3 or 4 year old is still there. He thinks life is interesting and fun. He has confidence in his ability to do anything he wants to do."

- "A huge reduction in stress for our kids and me... being able to sleep and eat on our own natural schedule ...learning at their own pace, in ways that work best for them, information and skills that they chose to learn, and therefore coming to enjoy learning!

Freedom! [My children] got to live as free people, and blossomed as individuals! They had the time to figure out who they are, what they enjoy and are interested in; had opportunities to learn and do all kinds of interesting things that schooled children typically don't have time for; were free from the bullying and threats (from the teachers) at school; and had a group of home-schooled friends who were/are very nice, generally happy and optimistic, friendly, interesting and interested people."

- "Another huge benefit is that [my son's] stress levels are way down, and he is happy. I realized by keeping him in school, I was stifling his creativity, his passions, and teaching him he must put those things on the back burner and conform to what society thinks is best for him to learn... He wants to work and make money, and now he is also free to contribute to society in a valuable way instead of being in a classroom all day."

- "I got my son back. The school wanted him 'diagnosed' with something he doesn't have... he's just a super creative, intensely sensitive kid who has so much to offer the world just as he is. ... He has never had a problem getting along with other kids. He makes friends everywhere he goes and is still in touch with his school friends too. Unschooling has been such a blessing for us it has taken the stress off of my son (as well as me) and allows him to follow his bliss... and create and imagine and think for himself. He reads better now than he ever did in school."

- "One example is that of control. My youngest is a walking power struggle; she can turn any moment into a fight for control. By allowing her education be her choice and responsibility, we have a far better relationship and she spends her energy learning instead of fighting. (We have

enough to fight over with whether she will brush her teeth or wear weather-appropriate clothes, after all.)”

- “I feel like I’m trying to answer a question about the benefits of breathing. We don’t have to schedule, assume, judge, direct, or anxiously evaluate. We just get to enjoy each other. My son gets to live a life focused on what he loves at the moment.”

- “I love watching my kids grow and learn and ask questions. I love having one less thing to worry about (finding the time for “school”) and I love being able to skip curriculum shopping and planning. I also look around at other homeschoolers and feel sorry for their constant stress and worry. (Is my kid learning enough? Did we pick the right curriculum? How much does homeschooling cost?) I see traditional homeschoolers so burned out by the stress they make for themselves. Don’t they know their kids will learn despite them?”

- “Hands down, the relationship with our kids has flourished. We have never gone through the typical teen angst or rebellion so often touted as normal. I don’t think it is. If you build up your family life where members work together and help one another, where the focus is on happy learning, it’s hard NOT to get along and enjoy each other’s company! Schools have an insidious way of pitting parents against kids and eroding the relationship that could flourish outside of that environment. When kids, and all people really, can relax and enjoy life and learn and pursue interests, they are happy. When people are happy, they get along better, they work together and inspire one another, learn from one another and grow stronger and healthier. All of that has spilled over into marriage life and all family relationships, including siblings. I knew without a doubt that the learning would happen and that it would be amazing! I didn’t expect the stark difference in our relationship with our kids, as compared to what I thought it should be like by what I saw in other families with kids in school.”

- “Watching our children’s interest in learning grow rather than diminish, and seeing them use their knowledge regularly in conversation and in play with others, rather than “dumping” it after a test.”

- “The happiness and joy we experience every day is the biggest benefit. Our lives are essentially stress free since we are living our lives the way we want by making the choices that feel good for us. We have a very close relationship built on love, mutual trust, and mutual respect. As an educator I see that my daughter has amazing critical thinking skills that many of my adult college students lack. ... My daughter lives and learns in the real world and loves it. What more could I ask for?”

- “Looking at my grown children, I can see that both are securely self-motivated, both are much more social and outgoing than I was at their ages, both are living lives they have crafted out of their own interests and talents. That is deeply satisfying. In addition, we all have a strong connection which has grown directly from our shared experiences throughout their childhoods.”

- “I have seen my sons’ passions bloom. They are happy and expressive and take pride in themselves and their projects. They are knowledgeable about so many more things than their schooled peers. They have a mindset that is not hampered by negativity or limitations, something more common with their schooled peers. They have big imaginations.”

- “My daughters are very creative and artistic, loved college way more (they reported) than their burned-out-about-institutions peers, are skeptical and generally science-minded, and are ethical people.”

- “Unschooling saved both my children’s self-esteem, for different reasons. [My son] was pegged as a ‘bad’ kid at school, and, had he continued down the path he was going (with the

school and teachers openly hostile towards him), the damage school was causing him would have led him to self-medicate through alcohol and drugs by the time he was in high school. When we withdrew him from school, not only did his self esteem return but the close, trusting relationship we had before he went to pre-school returned. [My daughter] was diagnosed with learning disabilities and I was told she would never read on grade level and she was always going to need special services. Keeping her out of school and letting her learn at her own pace prevented her from a lifetime of feeling like she was stupid.”

- “Unschooling is not a panacea that prevents all unhappiness or difficulty; it’s important not to oversimplify or romanticize this. Our daughters have had problems and struggles like all teenagers do in our society. They are extremely smart and well-educated, but I think that would be true if they had gone to school. I think the biggest difference is that they know themselves better than we did at their age. They may be a little closer to their true path in life. That was certainly our hope, and if it turns out to be true, it’s worth a lot.”

- “This cannot be answered except by the children themselves. For us as parents the child’s joy is all the benefit needed. Today, our children have their own children and they also have chosen to unschool. Daily they face a life that is entirely different from those things that came our way during their childhood.”

- “The peace, the joy, the trust between us far exceeds anything I imagined possible in parent/child relationships. Seeing [my daughter] be who she is! Her self-confidence, her curiosity, the joy with which she lives are all strong characteristics that I think would have been damaged by school. Watching her engaged in the things that move her has been a lesson in and of itself for all the adults in her life—she is the most focused human being I’ve ever met. She can work for hours on something that is meaningful to her—nothing she wants is “hard” or “work” even, so my language isn’t correct. (I’m sure if she were in school, though, she’d be labeled as having ADD).”

- “My daughter’s happiness, her curiosity, her love of exploration, her freedom. Our freedom as a family, the cooperative nature of our relationships and the trust between us that remains intact.”

# What Leads Families to “Unschool” Their Children? Report II

Why 232 families chose to trust their children’s educative instincts

Published on March 26, 2012 by Peter Gray in Freedom to Learn

This is the second in a series of three reports on a survey of unschooling families that I conducted in the Fall of 2011. In the first report, which you can find here, I described the survey method, gave some demographic information about the families that responded, and summarized their responses to questions about the definition and benefits of unschooling as applied to their family. [In that report I said that 231 families with children age 5 or older responded to the survey. I now add the minor correction that this number was actually 232 families. We inadvertently omitted one family in the initial tabulation.]

Briefly, for those who are new to the topic and have not yet read Report I, families who identify themselves as unschoolers are those that do not send their children to school and do not do at home the kinds of things that are done at school. More specifically, they do not establish a curriculum for their children, do not require their children to do particular assignments for the purpose of education, and do not test their children to measure progress. Instead, they allow their children freedom to pursue their own interests and to learn, in their own ways, what they need to know to follow those interests. They also, in various ways, provide an environmental context and environmental support for the child’s learning. To learn more about the various ways by which unschoolers operationalize these ideas, and the benefits that these families see in unschooling—both for the child and for the family as a whole—look back at Report I.

My goal now, in Report II, is to describe the paths by which the families that responded to the survey came to unschooling. This report is based on a qualitative analysis that my colleague Gina Riley and I made of the responses to Item 6 on the survey form, which reads as follows:

*6. Please describe the path by which your family came to the unschooling philosophy you now practice. In particular: (a) Did any specific school experiences of one or more of your children play a role? If so, briefly describe those experiences. (b) Did any particular author or authors play a role? If so, please name the author or authors and what most appealed to you about their writing. (c) Did you try homeschooling before unschooling? If so, what led you from one to the other?*

Here, in brief, is what we found:

## The decision to remove a child (or children) from school

In response to Question 6a, 101 of the 232 families indicated that at least one of their children attended school prior to starting unschooling, and that the child’s experience in school led them to remove the child from school. In their explanations, 38 of these families referred specifically to the rigidity of the school’s rules or the authoritarian nature of the classroom as reason for removing the child; 32 referred to the wasted time, the paltry amount of learning that occurred,



and/or to the child's boredom, loss of curiosity, or declining interest in learning; and 32 referred to their child's unhappiness, anxiety, or condition of being bullied. [Note: The numbers here and elsewhere in this report are all approximations, as they depend on interpretation of the written statements.]

Here, as illustration, is a representative sample of quotations from respondents' answers to Question 6a (names have been removed in each case):

*Responses emphasizing rigidity of rules and authoritarian nature of the classroom:*

- "The school principle threatened to have [my son] prosecuted for bringing a 'weapon' to school. The 'weapon' was a can of silly string."
- "I saw kids punished for being inquisitive and talkative, which is something I thought most young kids were, naturally."
- "We were increasingly frustrated by the way things were taught to the kids. One example: kids who understood things quickly in math still had to go through the tedious process of 'showing their work' even if they could figure it out in their heads. Our daughter was bored and frustrated with this kind of busy work. She was getting punished (loss of recess) for not doing her homework, yet got very good grades on her report card and a perfect score on her first MCAS exam."
- "When my 5yo was going to be held back in kindergarten for not knowing his letters, I knew this was wrong and that all kids learn at a different pace."
- "We were tired of our children being labeled and tired of them coming home exhausted and quite frankly full of nastiness. They weren't the nice people we remembered them to be. Once we brought them all home, they became 'people' again."
- "Our oldest child, on her first day of school, was told that she must ask for permission to urinate and permission to eat. She told us that she was unwilling to do that, and we decided, with the school, to withdraw her after a few days of her leaving the school grounds and coming home."

*Responses emphasizing boredom, wasted time, or loss of interest in learning in school:*

- "After I put them in public school for a time, it became extremely clear to me that being forced to follow someone else's idea of a curriculum was counterproductive, to the point of making them 'hate' learning (we found this intolerable)."
- "We hated the blue ribbon public school our oldest attended. He had 1 hour of homework (reading comprehension and math worksheets) every night, for a 6 year old! The work was too easy for him, and he hated it and dragged his feet every night, and we resented the intrusion into our family life and relaxing time."
- "I worked in the classrooms a lot and saw a LOT of wasted time during which my kids were stuck sitting still and doing absolutely nothing."

- "By 5th grade, when we took [our son] out, school was destroying his natural curiosity and love of learning. Too many hours in school and then working on homework. He said to me, 'Mom, when is my time?' It was breaking my heart."
- "We ... found that increasing levels of homework and projects left us slaves to the school's schedule even after school hours and on weekends. Additionally, we found that our oldest child was losing his love of learning, and our 2nd child did not have enough time for her passion and gift - the performing arts."

*Responses emphasizing the child's unhappiness, anxiety, or being bullied at school:*

- "School was awful for the whole family. Homework. Hours. Social issues. Lack of physical exercise. Lack of family time. Discipline problems... I was literally dragging my kids to school they hated it so much."
- "My eldest son was late to read (late according to the school) and that frustration led me to explore other options, but I didn't pursue any at that time. Later when the same child was in 3rd grade the workload and his frustration level with it, while still achieving "advanced" grades, seemed incongruous. He was working longer hours at school than his father spent at work. For what purpose?"
- "My older daughter was having test anxiety (it was the first year that No Child Left Behind was implemented), wasn't eating at lunchtime, was overcome by the noise and smells, and was distracted in the classroom. My younger daughter was bored and beginning to refuse to participate in classroom activities. My older daughter had been unhappy her entire school career - I kept thinking she'd outgrow it, but she didn't. Things finally got to the breaking point and I pulled them out without having a plan, but knowing I could definitely do better than the school. I was done sending them someplace that made them so sad and created so much tension in our family."
- "Our older daughter absolutely hated going to school and all of us were miserable. Due to misconceptions and lack of exposure to homeschooling (forget unschooling, even homeschooling is not common in India), we did not realize that it was a viable option, 'till desperation led us to consider it."
- "The faculty repeatedly ignored situations where other kids attacked my son physically and verbally. and after two years of taking it he pushed one of his bullies back and was suddenly in trouble (the bully was not in trouble even though it was witnessed by several teachers him being a bully toward my son) The school repeatedly set my son up to fail and ignored my requests and demands for change. Then they called a meeting to discuss what to do 'about my son' instead of what they could do FOR HIM... I told them that there would be no such meeting..."
- "My eldest child lost her love of learning early on at school. Eventually she stopped even doing maths and went from top of the class to bottom. This was due to a maths teacher who used to mock her and make her feel small."

- "In the beginning of grade 2, my daughter told me one evening of how one of her friends had been verbally threatened (the term used was 'YOU'RE DEAD MEAT') by another classmate, pushed up against a wall, and told that the classmate's older cousins were going to get her. I was appalled that this was happening to 8 year olds and that, upon talking to my daughter's teacher about this incident, this type of interaction was not considered alarming by the teaching staff. I never want my children to accept and numb themselves to think that treating other humans horrendously, unloving, and unkindly is normal! I wanted my children to know that a loving, more nurturing world exists, thus we began homeschooling!"
- "When we first started homeschooling my oldest, at age 11, had been so emotionally damaged from his school experiences that we were shocked to see how quickly his personality rebounded within a month or two."

## The transition from homeschooling to unschooling

In response to Question 6c, 110 of the 232 families said they had tried homeschooling before transitioning to unschooling. As explanation for this transition, most of these families described the child's resistance to the home curriculum, the family's unhappiness by the stress the curriculum created, and/or the parents' observations that the child was learning much more on his or her own initiative than through the imposed curriculum. Here is a representative sample of quotations illustrating these explanations:

- "We did try school at home initially, using the Waldorf-inspired Oak Meadow curriculum. I think I was in love with the idea of 'playing school' like I was a little girl again! I loved ordering all the supplies and books and planning our 'lessons.' But each year, after a few weeks, I'd eventually start leafing through the pages trying to find content that was relevant, appealing, something that wouldn't make us both nod off! And when tears started flowing over math drill, I knew there had to be a better way. I started to question why it was necessary for my son to learn this thing at this time, and then realized, simply, that it wasn't."
- "We came to unschooling from traditional homeschooling, because my then-5-year-old wholeheartedly rejected any attempts at regimentation. He learned twice as much if I simply strewed resources in his path and let him go. Unschooling is all that works for him."
- "With my oldest I had the entire school at home setup. I thought I had to do it that way for him to learn. ... We were both stressed and dreaded sitting down at the table for the day's lessons. Gradually, I started pulling back and began to see that the more I pulled back, the more he flourished. Eventually, we began to ditch curriculum and strict schedules until it evolved into unschooling."
- "In the beginning we provided lots of exercise books, but our girl's reluctance to do them gradually led us to unschooling (anything looking like instructions made her run away and we didn't want this kind of relationship)."

- "I never wanted to recreate school at home, but I did find that I pushed school-like activities on my kids in the transition time just after we left school. ... Eventually I saw with my own eyes and heart that anything my kids chose on their own was more meaningful, pleasant, and long-lasting than something I coerced them to do."
- "It was terrible. We fought all the time and I found myself not only responsible for making him do his homework, but for teaching him as well. Too much pressure for both of us. We were both miserable."
- "At first I tried Classical Method (The Well-Trained Mind) and reproduced school at home, complete with desk, worksheets, grades, etc. After a month, we were both miserable."
- "We tried 'school at home' and it was a big flop - we were taking the problems that my son had at public school and were just changing the location. We tried a number of different styles of curriculum and they just didn't feel right. He and I were both happiest when I just let him be. In the meantime I was researching all I could on different ways to homeschool and each time I read about unschooling I thought, 'That would work for him, I just know it would.' I was afraid to trust, though, so we muddled through pretending to homeschool. When my younger two children taught themselves to read, I had the ah-ha moment and said, 'Hey it really can work.'"

## Other factors leading to the decision to unschool

### *Influential authors.*

In response to Question 6b, the majority of respondents said that a particular author or authors did play a role in their decision to unschool. Not surprisingly, the author most often mentioned, by far, was **John Holt** (named by 127 respondents), the former teacher who went on to condemn forced schooling and promote self-directed education in books such as *How Children Fail* and *How Children Learn*. Holt also coined the term *unschooling* and founded the first magazine devoted to unschooling-*Growing Without Schooling*. Holt's work continues to be carried on by Holt Associates, led by Pat Farenga.

The next most frequently mentioned author was **John Taylor Gatto** (named by 52 respondents), the former New York State Teacher of the Year who left teaching because he was convinced that compulsory schools, no matter how one taught within them, were doing more harm than good. Gatto went on to write, among other things, *Dumbing Us Down: The Hidden Curriculum of Compulsory Schooling*; *A Different Kind of Teacher: Solving the Crisis of American Schooling*; and *Weapons of Mass Instruction: A Schoolteacher's Journey Through the Dark World of Compulsory Schooling*.

The third most often mentioned was **Sandra Dodd** (named by 39 respondents), who maintains a very active website devoted to unschooling and parenting, is author of *The Big Book of Unschooling*, and promotes a version of unschooling called "radical unschooling." Some of the respondents who mentioned Dodd were quite passionate about their respect for her ideas and influence. Other authors mentioned with considerable frequency were Alfi Kohn, Grace Llewellyn, Mary Griffith, Dayna Martin, Naomi Aldort, Ivan Illich, Jeanne Leidloff, Raymond & Dorothy Moore, Jan Hunt, Pat Farenga, Joyce Fetteroll, Rue Kream, and Susan Wise Bauer.

In addition to mentioning specific authors, many mentioned that unschooling websites, conferences, or lectures played a role in their decision. Many also mentioned the role of friends or acquaintances who were very successfully unschooling their children.

*The decision to unschool, without an intervening period of schooling*

Eighty six of the families who responded to the survey indicated that they chose unschooling right from the beginning, with no initial period of in-home or out-of-home school. Some of these said that they had made their decision even before they had any children, on the basis of their overall philosophy of life. At least a third of the 86 mentioned that their experiences parenting their young children, before school age, played a role in their decision to unschool. Some of these had been practicing "attachment" or "natural" parenting, and the decision to unschool seemed to follow naturally from that. For example, one mother wrote:

- "My first child was a very high need infant, as Dr. William Sears calls babies who want to be in arms constantly. I learned to respond to her cues from day one and it was hard at first, giving up my old life! I learned about attachment parenting and implemented that brilliant idea into my life and followed her lead since. My home births for babies 2 and 3 propelled me with strength that I could also take control of my children's education, or really we could do it together, with them leading the way and me there to support them."

Nearly a third of the whole set of 232 respondents mentioned that their own negative school experiences influenced their decision to unschool their children, and many of these went directly to unschooling without any intervening period of schooling. For example, one in this group wrote:

- "My own school experiences probably played a role. I discovered during my college experience that all of my schooling previous to college was completely unnecessary, and a waste of time. ... My K-12 experience was the unhappiest time of my life."

Some of the unschooling parents had been teachers or school counselors and made their decision to unschool based on those experiences. Here are two excerpts from parents in families in this category:

- "My husband was teaching in a small high school in \_\_\_ by the time our oldest reached school age. I think the experience of dealing with kids who did not fit the system really opened his eyes. It pained him that so many students had simply given up all enthusiasm for learning at that point in their lives. The kids had either learned to jump through the hoops or had completely stopped trying, but there was very little real passion for learning left in them."
- "I was a public school teacher. I loved teaching, for the most part. I loved being with the children. But I also began to see how flawed the system is, and when my children neared school age I realized I didn't want them on the receiving end of all that was wrong."

## Summary

And so, in sum, the people who responded to our questionnaire came to unschooling by many routes. Most often, it seems, the decision to unschool came from some combination of (a) a philos-

ophy of life emphasizing the value of freedom and respect for individual differences; (b) observations of their children's learning and emotional experiences both inside and outside of schooling; (c) reflections on their own negative school experiences; and (d) knowledge gained from writers, speakers, websites, and the experiences of other unschooling families. My next post will be Report III on the survey responses. There I will focus on the main *challenges* of unschooling for these 232 families.

# The Challenges of Unschooling: Report III from the Survey

The biggest challenge to unschoolers: standing up to social norms.

Published on April 11, 2012 by Peter Gray in Freedom to Learn

[Note: The social media counts accidentally reset to 0 on this post.] This past fall, I conducted a survey of 232 “unschooling” families who have children older than 5 years. This is the last in a series of three reports on that survey. In the first report, I described the survey method, gave some demographic information about the families that responded, and summarized their responses to questions about the **definition** and **benefits** of unschooling as applied to their family. In the second report, I described the various **paths** that led these families to unschooling, including their previous experiences with conventional schooling and homeschooling, their observations of their children’s natural ways of learning, and the influence of authors who had written about natural forms of education. Now, in this final report, I examine the **challenges** of unschooling as experienced by the families in the survey.

Briefly, for those who are new to the topic and have not yet read the previous reports, families who identify themselves as unschoolers are those that do not send their children to school and do not do at home the kinds of things that are done at school. More specifically, they do not establish a curriculum for their children, do not require their children to do particular assignments for the purpose of education, and do not test their children to measure progress. Instead, they allow their children freedom to pursue their own interests and to learn, in their own ways, what they need to know to follow those interests. They also, in various ways, provide an environmental context and support for their children’s learning. To learn more about the various ways by which unschoolers operationalize these ideas, and the many benefits that these families see in unschooling, both for the child and for the family as a whole, look back at Report I.

The present report is based on a qualitative analysis that my colleague Gina Riley and I conducted of the responses to Question 7 on the survey form, which reads as follows: “What, for your family, have been the biggest challenges or hurdles to surmount in unschooling?”

As a first step in the analysis, we coded the challenges that people described into several relatively distinct categories. The most frequently cited of these categories is the one that we labeled “Social Pressure.” It includes negative judgments and criticism from other people, from relatives, friends, acquaintances, and even strangers, and unschoolers’ perceived needs to justify their choice repeatedly to people who don’t approve or don’t understand. A total of 106 families (46 percent of the 232) included this category of challenge in their answer to Question 7. In fact, for 57 of these families, Social Pressure was the only category of challenge listed.

The second most frequently cited category of challenge is the one that we labeled “Deschooling the Parent’s Mind.” This category has to do with parents’ difficulties in overcoming their own, culturally ingrained “schoolish” ways of thinking about education. Included here are all descriptions of conflicts between the parent’s unschooling philosophy and that same parent’s

automatic ways of thinking and responding that could undermine that philosophy. A total of 95 families (41 percent of the 232) included this category in their answer to Question 7. This category will become much clearer, below, where I present a sample of quotations exemplifying it. Many respondents cited challenges in both this category and the Social Pressure category, and some pointed to a link between the two. Others' criticisms would sometimes reawaken old, socially normative ways of thinking and raise again the fears that unschooling parents thought they had overcome, even when they could see full well that unschooling was working beautifully for their children. These fears could lead the parent to begin trying to direct and control their children's learning, which, if unchecked, would defeat the unschooling practice.

Both of these two most often mentioned categories of challenge have to do with the power of social norms. We are social creatures, and it is very difficult for us to behave in ways that run counter to what others perceive as normal. In the history of cultures, harmful normative practices or rituals may persist for centuries at least partly because of the stigma, or perceived stigma, associated with violating the norms. These have included such practices as foot binding in the upper classes in China and genital mutilation in many other cultures. Even people who knew that such practices were harmful did them, because failure to do so would mark the family as "different" and therefore aberrant. School is the most predominant cultural ritual of our time. It is a practice ingrained as normal, even necessary, in the minds of the great majority of people. To counter it, one must overcome not just others' negative judgments, but also the judgments that rise up from one's own school-indoctrinated mind.

Other categories of challenge lagged well behind these first two in frequency. These remaining categories include: "Time/Career/Income" (problems deriving from a parent's inability to pursue a career, or earn more money, or have sufficient time for herself or himself while attending to the children at home), cited by 45 families; "Finding Friends" (problems of finding friends for their children to play with, or finding others who shared their philosophy), cited by 18 families; and "Legal Issues" (problems deriving from laws or regulations that make unschooling illegal or difficult to practice), cited by 15 families. Although "Legal Issues" was cited by only 5 percent families in North America, they were cited by 33 percent (5 out of 15) who resided in Europe and by 75 percent (3 out of 4) who resided in France.

The remainder of this post is devoted to selected quotations from the questionnaires, which illustrate each category of challenge. Since some of you might not read through the whole list of quotes, I'll note here (rather than at the end) that I welcome your comments and questions. If you are a member of an unschooling family, how have you dealt with the kinds of challenges described by the respondents to this survey, or what other challenges have you faced? If you are not a member of an unschooling family, what other questions do you have about unschooling that are not addressed by this series of reports? This blog is a forum for discussion, and your views and knowledge are valued and taken seriously, by me and by other readers. As always, I prefer if you post your comments and questions here rather than send them to me by private email. By putting them here, you share with other readers, not just with me. I read all comments and try to respond to all serious questions. Of course, if you have something to say that truly applies only to you and me, then send me an email.

But now, read on. These quotations are eloquent statements of the hurdles that unschooling families have had to surmount.



## Quotations illustrating the social pressure category of challenge

- “By far the greatest challenge is with other people. It is such a radical concept, I think it feels so easy for people (especially family members) to criticize it. I get tired of feeling like I need to wait until my children are adults so I can finally say, ‘See, it’s all right!’”
- “The biggest challenge has been overcoming fears about going against the norm and dealing with extended family members who are critical or unsupportive of our choices.”
- “We still have not told my husband’s family that we are unschooling. We fear that they would panic and feel the need to step in. We don’t want that tension for ourselves or our children.”
- “Answering the questions of other people who do not understand, including [those of] homeschoolers. Things like, what grade are you in, what curriculum do you use, how does an only child get any socialization, etc.”
- “I would say the only real challenge we have is dealing with others’ (mostly strangers’) prejudices and misunderstandings. When we say we homeschool (because ‘unschooling’ is met with blank stares most of the time) they assume I have little desks set up in my living room. They assume we have no social life. It just gets really, really tiring hearing those comments all the time (from people we meet out in public). Then a program comes on mainstream TV about unschooling and people think that is our life (these programs are usually sensationalized and edited in such a way as to portray us as neglectful, ignorant parents who don’t care about their kids). I’m sick of answering questions like ‘Well, that’s fine for art and music, but what about math?’ or ‘How will your kids function in the Real World.’ I don’t always want to be an ambassador for unschooling, especially when I’m just trying to buy groceries! But it seems I often find myself in that situation and sometimes it is tiring.”
- “I think for us, being Christians, it is the stigma of being lazy parents. Unschooling is viewed as a hands-off approach to child rearing and is especially viewed as wrong or sinful in the Christian community. God loves order—or so it goes in their minds. The funny thing is that Jesus was probably unschooled.”
- “Our extended family was our biggest challenge. They were negative about homeschooling, and outraged by unschooling. We had to pull away from them for a little over a year. Now they see that [our daughter] is ‘OK.’”
- “My biggest hurdle has been gracefully handling interactions with friends and others who are invested in public school. I have a number of friends who are teachers or connected somehow with schools, and they saw (still sometimes see) what we do as thumbing our noses at them and their efforts.”
- “The skepticism and open disapproval of most of my friends and family was incredibly hard on me and isolated our family from our previous social group. I learned not to mention unschooling, because most of my old friends were already completely unsupportive of my decision to homeschool and the few people I told about unschooling completely freaked out.”
- “My daughter’s father and stepmother were so opposed to it that they literally kicked her out of their house because they felt she was setting a bad example for their younger children.”
- “My MIL stopped asking about her grandchildren, unwilling to try to understand what we were doing or why...so they essentially lost a grandparent.”
- “When we first discovered unschooling, and really were exploring the philosophy, I was so excited to talk about it with family/friends. I learned very quickly that most people can’t (won’t?) understand, and some are downright disapproving. I have learned to talk about our unschooling

in very schooly terms so that other people are more comfortable with us, and feel that we can relate on some level.”

- “Dealing with ignorant or defensive comments from those who don’t know anything about unschooling is tiring.”

- “Others’, be they friends of friends, family members, or just people we have to interact with at public events or activities...Questioning our children, interrogating us, having our motives challenged and scrutinized. Being accused of being selfish or of child neglect by not having them in a traditional school learning state standards. Occasionally, it breaks through and fills us with doubts and fears.”

- “The biggest hurdle has been other people. It is difficult to find others who are encouraging, especially people who live nearby. Our support has been conferences and online communities. . . . Others don’t understand and look down on what we’re doing. Most people are stuck in the school paradigm and feel like it really is necessary for kids to go to school in order to be successful adults. They see things like bullying and doing work that has no meaning for you as necessary rights of passage to the ‘real world,’ which they see as boring, scary, and uninviting in general.”

- “We gave up discussing anything with family...Acquaintances and strangers used to bother us, but now that I have the proof that it works .... [But some] still try to think of something wrong, like how she missed the prom or doesn’t act like a ‘teenage girl’. It seemed to be somehow unusual in a bad way to have a mid-teen act like a graduate student, like maybe we had somehow been responsible for her being so ‘different.’”

- “My son hates explaining what we do or don’t do at length to people who disapprove.”

- “Whenever you do something so outside the norm you have to practically become a spokesman for it. I’m not really interested in being the poster child for unschooling or putting my kids in that role, but it seems to be expected nonetheless.”

## Quotations illustrating parents' needs to "deschool" their own minds in order to practice unschooling effectively

- "My son instinctually knows how to do this, but we [my husband and I] have had to unlearn a lot!"
- "Something in us rebels at the thought of kids 'getting away' with not having to do math and spelling drills, homework, or having something forced upon them 'because they'll need it.' It's hard to see them spending so much time doing unstructured learning and having to fight the feeling that they're not learning effectively even when we can see that *they are*. In a way, we're actually *jealous* that they don't have to put up with the monotony, confusion, frustration, and 'socialization' (i.e. negative peer influence) that we had to deal with and can really focus on the joy of learning."
- "The primary [challenge] is getting over my own worries that they aren't learning enough. I have to deschool myself constantly. There are so many messages in the media, and through family members (cousins, grandma, aunts) that my kids should know certain things on the school schedule. I have to remind myself constantly that they are always learning things, and that they have such a wonderful love of learning, and that they do not need to be on some else's schedule."
- "Oh, keeping the status quo from invading my brain: 'TV is bad!' 'Computers are bad!' 'Children should be reading by age 5!' 'Video games make children violent!' It can be challenging to hear all this over and over and over again and not worry about it even though you can see perfectly well that none of these things are happening in real life."
- "Coming from academia, probably the biggest hurdle was my own schooling or more accurately, deschooling myself and letting go of the belief that a 'good mom' provides endless 'educational' opportunities, without which a child is doomed to mediocrity. Learning to see learning everywhere, and understanding that learning has no connection to teaching."
- "Refraining from pushing and coercing kids into things that I think are good for them. It never works out well and undermines the trust inherent in unschooling. At its root is worry that I've made a terrible mistake and they won't get what they need. Patently ridiculous, but the worry had a way of creeping in frequently in the early years. Not so much anymore as the benefits have become so clear as the girls have matured and proven very competent and eager learners."
- "My own deschooling has been the biggest hurdle. Even though I have always wanted to focus on my kids' interests, I had a hard time letting go of the need to see hard proof (written work, projects, etc...) that they were learning."
- "I still encounter little boxed up sections of my brain with old fears and assumptions. Right now [my son] is 6, and his friends are reading. I've found myself feeling anxious and unsure and then disgusted with myself for having those feelings. Now I'm learning to surf them—let them

come up, remember that they're just outworn, fear-based reactions, let them subside, and watch how creatively [my son] navigates his world.”

- “I keep having to remind myself and get my husband to remind me that this is actually working. I was a teacher myself and this is just so not how I was taught at university to teach kids!”

- “For me personally, getting over the feeling that I am not doing enough—those panicky moments when I jump in and try to force a bit of learning. I soon have regretted them, and now, day-by-day, I am amazed by what the children are learning – what they know.”

- “I have found that the biggest hurdles so far all self inflicted...Sometimes it feels too easy and that there must be a catch. Am I just being lazy? For the love of God, what about the workbooks! Given our schooled background it is easy to believe that if it's ‘educational’, it can't be fun, and if it's fun (and easy), it can't be educational! I generally question the path we have chosen only because I do not know anyone who has homeschooled, let alone unschooled.”

- “I am definitely the biggest challenge! I have to get out of my way, a lot. Whether it is questioning whether their video game play is excessive to ‘what about college?’, sometimes just finding trust is hard! But I always eventually reason that a conversation with any of my children would allay the fears of even the most hardened skeptic; they are articulate, compassionate, engaged people, and I wouldn't change a thing about them or the path we've chosen (except maybe not having had to do the school thing first!).”

- “Our own conditioning is the biggest challenge. The disapproval and criticism from family and friends is easier to deal with than the old tapes playing in our own heads.”

## **Quotations illustrating the time/career/income challenge**

- “Money money money money money. I have always had to work and sometimes more than others. Most of my at-home years were spent freelancing (I'm a writer) to close the gap and then when my husband was laid off I went full-time freelance with some on-site work. For one terrible, terrible year I worked full-time for a nonprofit – three days from home and two days on-site. It was very difficult and although my kids did ok, I about ran myself into the ground. ...Plus my kids' social life depends on mine so much – it's one thing to drive them to events but being in the loop takes parental effort – and when I've been working I haven't been able to do that, which has meant they have missed out on some.”

- “The biggest challenge has been financial—so much to do and see and explore, not enough resources to do it all. But, that too is part and parcel of living life and seeking options and alternatives to meet needs and desires and curiosities within the parameters of a single income household and the time away from home required for the working parent.”

- “Time—trying to balance work and ‘parent alone time’.”

- “Having time alone for me (mom) since my children are with me 24/7.”

- “Our biggest hurdle has just been fitting everything in, with so many children and different interests, allowing for each individual to follow his own path.”

## Quotations illustrating the challenge of finding friends

- “For us the main issues are the travel required for socializing -- this can be tiring. We have to travel further to find girls my eldest daughter’s age.”
- “Because our son is an only child, and the other children who live in our neighborhood attend school and then after-school care, we have had to make sure to provide plenty of opportunity for him to get together and play with other children, as he really enjoys being with other kids. Until we found a couple local(ish) unschooling/homeschooling networks with which we connected, it was challenging to find him children to play with as often as he wanted to get out and socialize...Also because my husband and I both work from home, it can be challenging during busy work weeks to balance everyone’s schedules and needs to make sure everyone and everything is getting attention and support.”
- We live rurally, and it has been very challenging for the children to develop friendships with local people.”

## Quotations illustrating legal challenges to unschooling

- [From Finland, where even non-schooled kids must take tests.] “Especially when the official tests day at the local public school is approaching, we get more worried. Then we typically decline into the ‘teacher-centered’ mode and do our best to drill some test-taking-skills to him.”
- [From the UK] “The problems we have had are with the council and trying to make them realize it is a genuine educational philosophy. Also I always panic every now and then in case they turn up and want ‘evidence’.”
- [From France] “The fear of the inspection. In France, we’re controlled each year, and it’s a harsh time to defend the right we still have to educate according to a different pedagogy/philosophy from school.”
- [From France] “Education authorities, because we are controlled here by people who do not believe in homescholling (so you could imagine what unschooling is for them). We are obliged to hide (so being outlaws) or to [compromise our unschooling principles]. ... In the French law all 16-year-old children must have certain knowledge for each subject. So if you are doing totally unschooling it’s impossible to be sure your child will attain this aim at sixteen.”
- [From North Carolina] “Currently, in our state, I have to give my child a standardized test once a year starting at age 7. I worry about this affecting my commitment to unschooling, since the state will be watching me.”
- [From New Hampshire] “Our biggest hurdles to unschooling have been our state’s home-school requirements. Although the NH requirements are easy and reasonable to comply with, there is still that burden hanging over us during the year that we ‘should find a way to get some of this or that in the portfolio’. In fact, a couple of years ago my son and I rallied at the NH State House three times to prevent the passing of legislation that would have required all homeschoolers to take a standardized test in addition to the portfolio option! My son, who, on his own at age 14 began to write like crazy and subsequently wrote an entire book manuscript, wrote a letter to the newspaper recently stating how state requirements infringe upon his right to learn freely in the way that he wants to learn, because he is aware that he must cover certain ‘subjects’ whether he wants to or not.”

## **No Regrets**

Despite the challenges, none of the respondents expressed regret about their unschooling decision. For the many reasons for their lack of regret, look back at Report I and Report II, for their descriptions of the benefits of unschooling and the experiences that led them to it.

## **Part II: Unschooled Adults**

# Seeking Unschooled Adults to Tell Us About Their Experiences

Pass this on to people who meet our criteria as being "unschooled" adults.

Published on March 12, 2013 by Peter Gray in Freedom to Learn

A year and a half ago I initiated a survey of unschooling families in order to learn about their reasons for unschooling and what they perceived to be the benefits and challenges of this approach to education. More than 230 families generously responded to the survey, and my colleague Gina Riley and I analyzed the results. I published a summary of those results on this blog—here, here, and here; and Gina and I subsequently authored a full report on the survey that is scheduled to appear in the next issue (Vol. 7, issue 14, 2013) of the *Journal of Unschooling and Alternative Learning*. The survey results also contributed to the discussion of unschooling in the final chapter of my new book, *Free to Learn: Why Unleashing the Instinct to Play Will Make Our Children Happier, More Self-Reliant, and Better Students for Life*.

Gina and I are now following up with two more survey studies of unschooling. One of these is a survey specifically of the children, who are under 18 years old, in the same families that responded to the initial survey. For that study we are not seeking new recruits; we have already sent emails to those families asking the children to participate if they are willing to. The other study, for which we are seeking new recruits, is a study of adults—age 18 and older—who were "unschooled" during at least the last two years of what otherwise would have been their high school years. For this study we are seeking the participation not just of those who were in the initial sample of families, but also anybody, anywhere, who fits the criteria.

For the sake of this study, "unschooling" is defined as follows: *Unschooling is not schooling. Unschooling parents do not send their children to school and they do not do at home the kinds of things that are done at school. More specifically, they do not establish a curriculum for their children, do not require their children to do particular assignments for the purpose of education, and do not test their children to measure progress. Instead, they allow their children freedom to pursue their own interests and to learn, in their own ways, what they need to know to follow those interests. They may, in various ways, provide an environmental context and environmental support for the child's learning. In general, unschoolers see life and learning as one.*

For our study of unschooled adults, we are seeking people who meet the following criteria:

- a. Participants must be 18 years of age or older.
- b. Participants must have been unschooled (by the above definition) for at least two years during what would have been their high school years. AND
- c. Participants must *not* have attended 11th and 12th grade at a high school.

If you meet these criteria and are willing to participate in the study, or if you have any questions about the study, please send an email to Gina Riley at this address: [professorginariley@gmail.com](mailto:professorginariley@gmail.com). If you have questions or comments about this study that might be of interest to other readers, please post them here. Either Gina or I will answer any questions.



If you know anyone who qualifies for this study, please tell them about it and send them Gina's email address and/or a link to this blog post. If you belong to an unschooling group of any sort, please send them a link to this post. To make this study most effective, we want to reach as many unschooled adults as we possibly can.

THANK YOU for considering this request!

# A Survey of Grown Unschoolers I: Overview of Findings

Seventy-five unschooled adults report on their childhood and adult experiences.

Published on June 7, 2014 by Peter Gray in Freedom to Learn

In a study that preceded the one to be described here, my colleague Gina Riley and I surveyed parents in unschooling families—that is, in families where the children did not go to school and were not homeschooled in any curriculum-based way, but instead were allowed to take charge of their own education. The call for participants for that study was posted, in September, 2011, on my blog (here) and on various other websites, and a total of 232 families who met our criteria for participation responded and filled out the questionnaire. Most respondents were mothers, only 9 were fathers. In that study we asked questions about their reasons for unschooling, the pathways by which they came to unschooling, and the major benefits and challenges of unschooling in their experience.

I posted the results of that study as a series of three articles in this blog—here, here, and here—and Gina and I also published a paper on it in the *Journal of Unschooling and Alternative Learning* (here). Not surprisingly, the respondents in that survey were very enthusiastic and positive about their unschooling experiences. They described benefits having to do with their children’s psychological and physical wellbeing, improved social lives, and improved efficiency of learning and attitudes about learning. They also wrote about the increased family closeness and harmony, and the freedom from having to follow a school-imposed schedule, that benefited the whole family. The challenges they described had to do primarily with having to defend their unschooling practices to those who did not understand them or disapproved of them, and with overcoming some of their own culturally-ingrained, habitual ways of thinking about education.

The results of that survey led us to wonder how those who are unschooled, as opposed to their parents, feel about the unschooling experience. We also had questions about the ability of grown unschoolers to pursue higher education, if they chose to do so, and to find gainful and satisfying adult employment. Those questions led us to the survey of grown unschoolers that is described in this article and, in more detail, in three more articles to follow.

## Survey Method for Our Study of Grown Unschoolers

On March 12, 2013, Gina and I posted on this blog (here) an announcement to recruit participants. That announcement was also picked up by others and reposted on various websites and circulated through online social media. To be sure that potential participants understood what we meant by “unschooling,” we defined it in the announcement as follows:

*“Unschooling is not schooling. Unschooling parents do not send their children to school and they do not do at home the kinds of things that are done at school. More specifically, they do not establish a curriculum for their children, do not require their children to do particular assignments for the*

*purpose of education, and do not test their children to measure progress. Instead, they allow their children freedom to pursue their own interests and to learn, in their own ways, what they need to know to follow those interests. They may, in various ways, provide an environmental context and environmental support for the child's learning. In general, unschoolers see life and learning as one."*

The announcement went on to state that participants must (a) be at least 18 years of age; (b) have been unschooled (by the above definition) for at least two years during what would have been their high school years; and (c) not have attended 11th and 12th grade at a high school.

The announcement included Gina's email address, with a request that potential participants contact her to receive a copy of the consent form and survey questionnaire. The survey included questions about the respondent's gender; date of birth; history of schooling, home schooling, and unschooling (years in which they had done each); reasons for their unschooling (as they understood them); roles that their parents played in their education during their unschooling years; any formal higher education they had experienced subsequent to unschooling (including how they gained admission and how they adapted to it); their current employment; their social life growing up and now; the main advantages and disadvantages they experienced from their unschooling; and their judgment as to whether or not they would unschool their own children.

We received the completed questionnaires over a period of six months, and Gina and I, separately, read and reread them to generate a coding system, via qualitative analysis, for the purpose of categorizing the responses. After agreeing on a coding system, we then, separately, reread the responses to make our coding judgments, and then compared our separate sets of judgments and resolved discrepancies by discussion.

## **The Participants, and Their Division into Three Groups**

A total of 75 people who met the criteria filled out and returned the survey. Of these, 65 were from the United States, 6 were from Canada, 3 were from the UK, and 1 was from Germany (where unschooling is illegal). The median age of the respondents was 24, with a range from age 18 to 49. Eight were in their teens, 48 were in their 20s, 17 were in their 30s, and 2 were in their 40s. Fifty-eight (77%) were women, 16 were men, and 1 self-identified as gender queer. The high proportion of women probably represents a general tendency for women to be more responsive to survey requests than are men. It is not the case that more girls than boys are unschooled; indeed, our previous study suggested that the balance is in the opposite direction—there were somewhat more boys than girls undergoing unschooling in the families that responded to that survey.

For purposes of comparison, we divided the respondents into three groups based on the last grade they had completed of schooling or homeschooling. Group I were entirely unschooled—no K-12 schooling at all and no homeschooling (the term "homeschooling" here and elsewhere in this report refers to schooling at home that is not unschooling). Group II had one or more years of schooling or homeschooling, but none beyond 6th grade; and Group III had one or more years of schooling or homeschooling beyond 6th grade. Thus, in theory (and in fact), those in Group II could have had anywhere from 1 to 7 years (K-6) of schooling/homeschooling and those in Group III could have had anywhere from 1 to 11 years (K-10) of schooling/homeschooling.

The table below shows the breakdown of some of our statistical findings across the three groups. The column headings show the number of participants in each group. The first three

data rows show, respectively, the median and range of ages, the median and range of total years of schooling plus homeschooling, and the percentage of respondents that were female for each group. It is apparent that the three groups were quite similar in number of participants, median age, and percent female, but, of course, differed on the index of number of years of schooling plus homeschooling.

## **Their Formal Higher Education After Unschooling**

Question 5 of the survey read, *“Please describe briefly any formal higher education you have experienced, such as community college/college/graduate school. How did you get into college without having a high school diploma? How did you adjust from being unschooled to being enrolled in a more formal type of educational experience? Please list any degrees you have obtained or degrees you are currently working toward.”*

I’ll describe their responses to this question much more fully in the next article in this series, where I’ll make ample use of the participants’ own words. Here I’ll simply summarize some of the statistical findings that came from our coding of the responses.

Overall, 62 (83%) of the participants reported that they had pursued some form of higher education. This included vocational training (such as culinary school) and community college courses as well as conventional bachelor’s degree programs and graduate programs beyond that. As can be seen in data row 4 of the table, this percentage was rather similar across the three groups.

Overall, 33 (44%) of the participants had completed a bachelor’s degree or higher or were currently fulltime students in a bachelor’s program. As shown in data row 5 of the table, the likelihood of pursuing a bachelor’s degree or higher was inversely related to the amount of previous schooling. Those in the always-unschooled group were the most likely to go on to a bachelor’s program, and those in the group that had some schooling past 6th grade were least likely to. This difference, though substantial, did not reach the conventional level of statistical significance (a chi square test revealed a  $p = .126$ ).

Of the 33 who went on to a bachelor’s degree programs, 7 reported that they had previously received a general education diploma (GED) by taking the appropriate test, and 3 reported that they had gained a diploma through an online procedure. The others had gained admission to a bachelor’s program with no high-school diploma except, in a few cases, a self-made diploma that, we assume, had no official standing. Only 7 of the 33 reported taking the SAT or ACT tests as a route to college admission. By far the most common stepping-stone to a four-year college for these young people was community college. Twenty-one of the 33 took community college courses before applying to a four-year college and used their community college transcript as a basis for admission. Some began to take such courses at a relatively young age (age 13 in one case, age 16 in typical cases) and in that way gained a headstart on their college career. By transferring their credits, some reduced the number of semesters (and the tuition cost) required to complete a bachelor’s degree. Several also mentioned interviews and portfolios as means to gain college admission.

The colleges they attended were quite varied. They ranged from state universities (e.g. the University of South Carolina and UCLA) to an Ivy League university (Cornell) to a variety of small liberal-arts colleges (e.g. Mt. Holyoke, Bennington, and Earlham).

The participants reported remarkably little difficulty academically in college. Students who had never previously been in a classroom or read a textbook found themselves getting straight A's and earning honors, both in community college courses and in bachelor's programs. Apparently, the lack of an imposed curriculum had not deprived them of information or skills needed for college success. Most reported themselves to be at an academic advantage compared with their classmates, because they were not burned out by previous schooling, had learned as unschoolers to be self-directed and self-responsible, perceived it as their own choice to go to college, and were intent on making the most of what the college had to offer. A number of them reported disappointment with the college social scene. They had gone to college hoping to be immersed in an intellectually stimulating environment and, instead, found their fellow students to be more interested in frat parties and drinking. I will describe all this more fully in the next article in this series.

## Their Careers

Question 4 of the survey read, "*Are you currently employed? If so, what do you do? Does your current employment match any interests/activities you had as an unschooled child/teen? If so, please explain.*" Our analyses of responses to this question led us to generate a brief follow-up questionnaire, which we sent to all of the participants, in which we asked them to list and describe the paying jobs they had held, to indicate whether or not they earned enough to support themselves, and to describe any career aspirations they currently had in mind. Sixty-three (84%) of the original 75 participants responded to this follow-up questionnaire.

The great majority of respondents were gainfully employed at the time of the survey. Exceptions were some of the full-time students and some mothers with young children. Of those who responded to the follow-up questionnaire, 78% said they were financially self-sufficient, though a number of these added that their income was modest and they were financially independent in part because of their frugal lifestyle. Several of them described frugality as a value and said they would far rather do work they enjoyed and found meaningful than other work that would be more lucrative.

Collectively, the respondents had pursued a wide range of jobs and careers, but two generalizations jumped out at us in our qualitative analyses and coding of these.

The first generalization is that a remarkably high percentage of the respondents were pursuing careers that we categorized as in the creative arts—a category that included fine arts, crafts, music, photography, film, and writing. Overall, 36 (48%) of the participants were pursuing such careers. Remarkably, as shown in data row 8 of the table, 79% of those in the always-unschooled group were pursuing careers in this category. The observation that the always-unschooled participants were more likely to pursue careers in the creative arts than were the other participants was highly significant statistically ( $p < .001$  by a chi square test).

The second generalization is that a high percentage of participants were entrepreneurs. Respondents were coded into this category if they had started their own business and were making a living at it or working toward making a living at it. This category overlapped considerably with the creative arts category, as many were in the business of selling their own creative products or services. Overall, by our coding, 40 (53%) of the respondents were entrepreneurs. As can be seen in data row 9 of the table, this percentage, too, was greatest for those in the always-unschooled

group (63%), but in this case the differences across groups did not approach statistical significance.

In response to the question about the relationship of their adult employment to their childhood interests and activities, 58 (77%) of the participants described a clear relationship. In many cases the relationship was direct. Artists, musicians, theater people, and the like had quite seamlessly turned childhood avocations into adult careers; and several outside of the arts likewise described natural evolutions from avocations to careers. As shown in data row 6, the percentage exhibiting a close match between childhood interests and adult employment was highest for those in the always-unschooled group, though this difference did not approach statistical significance.

All of these generalizations regarding unschoolers' subsequent employment will be illustrated, with quotations from the surveys, in the third article in this series.

## **Their Evaluations of Their Unschooling Experience**

Question 7 of the survey read, *“What, for you, were the main advantages of unschooling? Please answer both in terms of how you felt as a child growing up and how you feel now, looking back at your experiences. In your view, how did unschooling help you in your transition toward adulthood?”*

Almost all of the respondents, in various ways, wrote about the freedom and independence that unschooling gave them and the time it gave them to discover and pursue their own interests. Seventy percent of them also said, in one way or another, that the experience enabled them to develop as highly self-motivated, self-directed individuals. Many also wrote about the learning opportunities that would not have been available if they had been in school, about their relatively seamless transition to adult life, and about the healthier (age-mixed) social life they experienced out of school contrasted with what they would have experienced in school.

Question 8 read, *“What, for you, were the main disadvantages of unschooling? Again, please answer both in terms of how you felt as a child growing up and how you feel now. In your view, did unschooling hinder you at all in your transition toward adulthood?”*

Twenty-eight of the 75 respondents reported no disadvantage at all. Of the remaining 47, the most common disadvantages cited were (1) dealing with others' criticisms and judgments of unschooling (mentioned by at least 21 respondents); (2) some degree of social isolation (mentioned by 16 respondents), which came in part from there being relatively few other homeschoolers or unschoolers nearby; and (3) the social adjustment they had to make, in higher education, to the values and social styles of those who had been schooled all their lives (mentioned by 14 respondents).

For 72 of the 75 respondents, the advantages of unschooling clearly, in their own minds, outweighed the disadvantages. The opposite was true for only 3 of the participants, 2 of whom expressed emphatically negative views both of their own unschooling and of unschooling in general (to be detailed in the fourth article in this series).

Question 9 read, *“If you choose to have a family/children, do you think you will choose to unschool them? Why or why not?”* One respondent omitted this question. Of the remaining 74, 50 (67%) responded in a way that we coded as clearly “yes,” and among them 8 already had children of school age and were unschooling them. Of the remainder, 19 responded in a way that we coded as “maybe” (for them it depended on such factors as the personality and desires of the child, the agreement of the other parent, or the availability or lack of availability of a good alternative

school nearby), and five responded in a way that we coded as clearly “no.” The five “no’s” included two of the three who were negative about their own unschooling experience and three others, who despite their positive feelings about their own unschooling would, for various reasons, not unschool their own child.

The fourth article in this series will delve much more deeply into the advantages and disadvantages of unschooling as perceived and described by these respondents.

## Limitation of the Survey

A major limitation of this study, of course, is that the participants are a self-selected sample, not a random sample, of grown unschoolers. As already noted, relatively few men responded to the survey. A bigger problem is that the sample may disproportionately represent those who are most pleased with their unschooling experiences and their subsequent lives. Indeed, it seems quite likely that those who are more pleased about their lives would be more eager to share their experiences, and therefore more likely to respond to the survey, than those who are less pleased. Therefore, this study, by itself, cannot be a basis for strong claims about the experiences and feelings of the whole population of unschoolers. What the study does unambiguously show, however, is that it is possible to take the unschooling route and then go on to a highly satisfying adult life. For the group who responded to our survey, unschooling appears to have been far more advantageous than disadvantageous in their pursuits of higher education, desired careers, and other meaningful life experiences.

Stay tuned for the remaining three articles in this series (to be posted later, one at a time), where you will read much more about these grown unschoolers’ experiences, in their own words.

**Note:** The “Unschooling 101” illustration at the top of this article was created by Idzie Desmarais. Idzie is a “kindergarten dropout” who authors a great blog called *I’m Unschooling. Yes I can Write*. Her site includes, among other things, a list of blogs by teenage and grown unschoolers and a collection of interviews of grown unschoolers.

## Survey of Grown Unschoolers II: Going on to College

Can people with no K-12 schooling go to college and do well there? If so, how?

Published on June 17, 2014 by Peter Gray in Freedom to Learn

Can they go to college? If so, how do they get in and how do they adjust to it? Can they do the work? Can they follow the rigorous schedule? Such questions are often asked by people who have heard of “unschooling”. In this post, I will address these questions, in the words of adults who were unschooled and then went on to a formal bachelor’s degree program or beyond.

This is the second in a series of four posts concerning a survey of grown unschoolers that Gina Riley and I have recently conducted. The first post presented a definition of unschooling and an overview of the methods and the statistical findings of our study. Please look back at that post to review them.

Unlike so many others in the general population, most unschoolers do not consider college admission, or college graduation, or high grades in college, to be in any general sense a measure of life success. Nor do we. Our main concern in asking about college in this study was simply to find out about the experiences of those who, for whatever reason, did choose to go to college. These questions have practical ramifications, because many potential unschoolers would be reluctant to take the unschooling route if it precluded the possibility of college and therefore the possibility of careers that, at least today, more or less require college as a stepping-stone.

To learn about their college experiences, we asked the following as Question 5 of the survey: *“Please describe briefly any formal higher education you have experienced, such as community college/college/and graduate school. How did you get into college without having a high school diploma? How did you adjust from being unschooled to being enrolled in a more formal type of educational experience? Please list any degrees you have obtained or degrees you are currently working toward.”*

In this series of posts I use the term *schooling* to refer to attendance at an out-of-home school, *homeschooling* to refer to academic lessons at home that are supervised or enforced by a parent, and *unschooling* to refer to the situation where children are not sent to school and are not home-schooled (by the definition just given). In other contexts, and for legal purposes, unschooling is considered to be a branch of homeschooling—and in some of the quotes, below, respondents use the term “homeschooling” as an umbrella term that includes unschooling—but for purposes of clarity I use the term homeschooling, here, in a more limited way that does not include unschooling. Again, for more on the definition of unschooling, for the purpose of this study, look back at the previous post.

As noted in the previous post, 62 (83 percent) of the 75 grown unschoolers who responded to our survey had gone on to some form of higher education, and 33 (44 percent) had completed a bachelor’s degree or higher or were currently full-time students in a bachelor’s program. The other 29 who pursued higher education most often did so to gain particular knowledge or a license related to their vocational interest, for which they did not need a bachelor’s degree. Also



as noted in the previous post, the likelihood of pursuing a bachelor's degree was inversely related to the amount of previous schooling: Fifty-eight percent of those in the always-unschooled group had pursued a bachelor's degree compared with 44 percent and 29 percent, respectively, in the other two groups (look back at the previous post for details).

The always-unschooled group not only had the highest percentage who went on to a bachelor's degree, but also the highest percentage who did not go on to any higher education. Indeed, of the 24 respondents in that group, 14 went on to a bachelor's degree and 6 did not pursue any form of higher education. The latter generally said that they did not need formal education to learn what they wanted to know or to pursue their chosen careers. For example, one wrote, "I've continued to unschool into adulthood and will continue throughout my life. I think internships and apprenticeships would be the natural extension of unschooling into the traditional workplace. If I become interested in a field that seems like college would be a good resource for, I would look into it—but I would still consider it part of the unschooling journey, which for me simply means following curiosity wherever it leads." Another simply stated, "As an adult, I realize that unschooling helped me see that college wasn't necessary to have a successful, fulfilling life".

I also reported in the previous post that the most common route to admission to a bachelor's degree program, for our respondents, was to take community college courses—typically beginning around age 16—and then use that transcript to gain college admission. Twenty-one of the 33 had taken that route. Most went on to college without any sort of official high school diploma, but seven reported that they had received a GED by taking the appropriate test and three said that they had received a diploma through an online procedure.

The great majority of respondents who went on to college reported no difficulty doing the academic work. Indeed, most said they were at an academic advantage, primarily because of their high motivation and their high capacity for self-initiative, self-direction, and self-control.

The best way to convey the college experiences of the respondents is through their own words. The rest of this post consists of quotations from the surveys. The quotations are selected, but are quite representative of the whole sample, with the exception of two who described difficulties with their unschooling and pursuit of higher education and whose experiences will be discussed in the fourth post in this series. The themes that emerged from the sample as a whole are these: (1) Getting into college was generally not particularly difficult for these unschoolers; (2) The academic adjustment to college was generally quite smooth for them; (3) Most felt advantaged because of their high self-motivation and capacity for self-direction; and (4) The most frequent complaints were about the lack of motivation and intellectual curiosity among their college classmates, the constricted social life of college, and, in a few cases, constraints imposed by the curriculum or grading system.

To preserve the respondents' anonymity, I have identified each only by gender, age at the time of filling out the questionnaire, and extent to which the person had been unschooled. I've also removed potentially identifying information from the quotations, especially the names of the colleges attended. The preponderance of women in the sample below reflects the high ratio of women compared to men who responded to our survey (see previous post). I have chosen quotations primarily from among those who had the least schooling or homeschooling before college, and I've ordered them in such a way that those with no K-12 schooling or homeschooling are first.

**Age 20, no K-12 schooling or homeschooling.** This woman, at age 20, had already earned a BA degree and had gained what, for her, was an ideal job in theatre production. She had taken

some community college courses between age 13 and 16 and then transferred to a four-year BA program at her state university, which she completed in two and one-fourth years, graduating *summa cum laude*. She wrote, “It was not a rough adjustment for me. I found that because I had not been in school before attending college, I was much less burnt out than my peers and had a very fresh perspective. I learned basic academic skills (essay composition, research, etc.) very quickly... I struggled some with time management, but eventually developed a means of staying organized.”

**Age 21, no K-12 schooling or homeschooling.** This young man was in his third year of a four-year BA program, majoring in philosophy at a selective Canadian university, about to declare honors status and with plans to pursue a master’s in philosophy. In explaining how he was admitted, he wrote, “I set an appointment to talk with someone in the admissions department, to find out what I would need to do to apply as an unschooler. After I talked briefly about myself, my achievements, and my style of education, and after he read a sample of my writing, he said ‘I can’t see any reason why you shouldn’t be here’, and proceeded to hand me the forms to become a student.”

Concerning adjustment, he wrote, “It was a bit hard to adjust to the amount of skimming-over that many introductory classes do: I can’t bear it when ideas are left unexplored. Mainly because of the depth of the material covered, I’ve found that my best grades, and some of my best work, have come from 4000-level courses. I’ve always learned in a passionate way and don’t want to stop the flow of an idea until it runs its course.”

**Age 24, no K-12 schooling or homeschooling.** This woman, who had received a BA from a highly selective liberal arts college, wrote, “In contrast to [my classmates], I found great inspiration from my teachers. At [name of college deleted] the teachers must also be practitioners in their fields of study, so I was working with people who were actively interested and participating in their areas of expertise as a teacher and as an actor, writer, director, translator, and so on. Having someone with such a wealth of knowledge looking over my shoulder at the work I was doing was revolutionary. It was not something I wish I had earlier, not something I felt had been lacking my whole life, but it was something that inspired me for my four years at school.”

At one point in her college career this young woman was asked to lead a meeting of students in order to provide feedback to the instructor of a course. She wrote, “I discovered that people wanted the teacher to tell them what to think. ‘I wish he’d told us what to think when we read *Macbeth*’ someone said. ‘I wish he’d let us know what he wanted us to do in our *Hearts of Darkness* essays’ and on and on. It had never, ever occurred to me to ask someone else to tell me what to think when I read something.”

This respondent also wrote that the biggest drawback to college, for her, was the lack of a normal, age-mixed social life—with people who are not all students. To achieve that, she joined the local Unitarian Universalist church where she served as religious educator while still a student.

**Age 24, no K-12 schooling or homeschooling.** This woman, who was currently a full-time student working for a master’s degree in English, wrote: “I began attending a community college when I was 16 and enjoyed every second of it. I did not feel as though I had to adjust to anything. After my first psychology class, which was the first time I had to take notes during a class, I went right home and began typing and organizing my notes. I continued going part time for two years until I was 18. The community college accepted my diploma, which I created myself and my parents signed, along with my transcript, which I also created. I turned my interests and

activities into ‘courses’ for the transcript and included a list of books that I had read over the last 4 years.”

“When I began looking for a four-year university to transfer to, my decision not to take the SATs had a minor effect on my choices for schools. One school refused to even open my application without SAT scores, even though I had written them a letter detailing my success at the college level for the last three years. I chose a university that allowed me to register as a part time student for my first semester and then transfer into a full-time program without having to provide SAT scores.”

**Age 29, no K-12 schooling or homeschooling.** This woman, who had graduated with high honors from a selective private women’s college and then gone on to a master’s degree, wrote, “On top of accepting me, they put me into their freshman honors class. I definitely felt strange going into a formal school, especially being in an honors program. I spent long hours studying and doing my homework—way more work than my classmates were doing. After I got straight A’s for the first half of my first semester I started to relax a little more, and I realized I was working way too hard. So I learned how to learn like my fellow classmates were—by memorizing everything just before a test. I still kept getting straight A’s but was doing hardly any work at all. Eventually I learned how to balance it—actually delving into material I enjoyed and memorizing the stuff I wasn’t interested in. It wasn’t hard; it mostly just made me really appreciate the fact that I hadn’t been in school my whole life.”

“I definitely experienced a [social] transition in college. I wasn’t into frat parties, drinking heavily and the like, so my first year/first two years I was a bit of a loner, with only a few friends. My last year in school I finally started drinking and going to house parties, so I ‘fit in’ a little better and got a wider group of ‘friends.’ I realized this was how everyone else in college was socializing and it felt off to me, not genuine or a way to really make lasting connections. Out of school I returned to how I had always functioned socially, and lo and behold, that was what everyone else was doing. I met friends through my jobs, through theatres I worked in, through other friends, and at coffee shops.”

**Age 29, no K-12 schooling or homeschooling.** This woman, who had earned a bachelor’s degree in fine arts at an unnamed college, wrote, “I did have a high school diploma. There would have been greater challenges without that, but for me the transition was logistically really easy. Despite the completely unschooled nature of my upbringing, my mother had our home registered as a private school with the state of CA, so on paper I looked ‘normal’ in the system.

“I went to Community College part time between the ages of 16 and 19 years old. I transferred to a four year school, which I attended for three years before receiving my BFA with High Distinction at 22 years old. I loved college—it stands out as one of the most focused and fulfilling periods of my young life! When I began community college, I was younger than other students, and I was concerned that I would feel behind, but I wasn’t. I didn’t like taking tests, and I still feel a lot of anxiety about tests to this day, but I excelled in most ways and graduated with a high GPA.”

“Growing up, I understood we were outside of the norm, and that was met by kids and adults alike with a lot of skepticism at times. Despite my mom’s great confidence, I was concerned about whether I had what it took to succeed in the ‘real world.’ College was the time in my life where I confronted the unknown and decided I was probably OK!”

**Age 30, no K-12 schooling or homeschooling.** This man took classes at a local state college beginning at age 16, and then transferred to a small, selective, progressive private college where

he completed a BS in conservation biology and ecology. After that, he earned an MS at a state university and completed one year of a Ph.D. program at another state university, before taking a leave of absence from school because of a serious illness. Concerning adjustment, he reported no difficulty with the academic work, but objected to the constraints imposed by the system of evaluation. He wrote, “Even the requirement-free environment of [name of college omitted] felt stifling to me (e.g. its perverse grading incentive to avoid one’s own directions within a field in favor of the professor’s predilections, formal academic bias to the near exclusion of experiential learning, and emphasis on tangible academic products rather than learning/applying process), and grad school has been many times worse (not only in terms of more structured and formalized educational paradigms, but also of lower-level educational opportunities).” He nevertheless plans to return to the Ph.D. program when his illness is brought under control, as he is committed to a career aimed at restoring and maintaining biodiversity.

**Age 32, no K-12 schooling or homeschooling.** This woman, now a mom on the brink of unschooling her own children, wrote: “I took a course in Emergency Medicine and worked a couple of odd jobs while I researched college options, selected my preferred school, and went about the application process. I was scholarshipped for a large chunk of my undergraduate education due to a portfolio that I assembled and my college interviews. Applying for college didn’t seem to be too difficult without an official diploma, because I had SAT scores to submit and high-school transcripts that my mom prepared from all of her years of journaling our unschooling exploits. I remember being very restless for the first one to two years of college. I didn’t feel very challenged by the core classes I was enrolled in and was itching to move on to my major and minor classes. College was fun, but I was stunned to realize that the majority of the other students didn’t work or pursue any other areas of their lives apart from their studies and partying. I supported myself throughout my four-year degree typically working at least two jobs while taking well above the minimum class/load requirements so that I could graduate on time. Two years into my degree I took a full time job in the creative department of the local newspaper, where I continued to work after graduation.”

**Age 35, no K-12 schooling or homeschooling.** This woman, who had earned a BA at a small progressive college and then a master’s degree, wrote, “Through my whole college experience I balked at students who didn’t do the work, even in the courses that were less than desirable or exciting for me. I think my educational background set me up for thinking ‘why are you there, if you aren’t going to participate?’ This was frustrating for me to see. For I have always chosen myself to pursue education, and even though this personal choice meant that there were some courses I had to take that I wasn’t excited about, I still knew what my motivation was for being there. Over time I have learned that these fellow students who were frustrating to be around had been exposed to a drastically different relationship with learning and education.”

**Age 19, no K-12 schooling or homeschooling past second grade.** This young woman had been diagnosed with dyslexia when she was in second grade at school and was taken out of school because of her unhappiness there. As an unschooler, she learned to read at her own pace and in her own way. Later, she was tested and diagnosed with other learning disabilities, but these did not hold her back. During her last two years of unschooling, she took community college courses and then transferred to a bachelor’s degree program at a selective private liberal arts college. She wrote, “I enrolled at [name of college omitted], where I just completed my freshman year. I maintained a 3.9 GPA through the whole year, and I am returning there in the fall.

"I think that unschooling actually prepared me better for college than most of my peers, because I already had a wealth of experience with self-directed study. I knew how to motivate myself, manage my time, and complete assignments without the structure that most traditional students are accustomed to. While most of my peers were floundering and unable to meet deadlines, I remained on top of my work because I have always been an independent learner. I know how to figure things out for myself and how to get help when I need it. While I struggled to adjust in the beginning, it was purely due to the difficulties caused by my learning disabilities. By the end of the year I had overcome my struggles and excelled in school. I am currently working on my BA in English from [name of college omitted], and after that I intend to go on for a Masters in Library Science."

**Age 24, no K-12 schooling or homeschooling past second grade.** This man, more so than most of the others, found that he had to jump through some hoops to get into community college, as a stepping stone to a bachelor's program at a selective state university, but had no difficulties adapting academically. He wrote, "At first I did not want to attend college. When I graduated from homeschooling/unschooling in 2005, I worked at a gym selling gym memberships for two years. Ultimately I figured out that I needed to go to college so I attended a local community college. It was difficult getting in without a high school diploma, and basically I had to go to the county school board office to obtain a 'homeschool completion affidavit' to prove to the college that I actually finished the 12th grade. After a bunch of red tape, they accepted it. Since I never took the SAT, ACT or other standardized test for college prior to enrolling in the community college, I had to take a placement test before I could enroll in classes. After all of this was out of the way, I was viewed as a regular student."

"I went on to graduate from [name of college omitted] with my Associate's degree and a 4.00 GPA. Then I attended [name of university omitted] and obtained a Bachelor's degree, also with a 4.00 GPA. Most recently I just finished my Master's degree at [name of university omitted]."

**Age 24, no K-12 schooling or homeschooling past second grade.** This woman, who earned a BA from a large state university, wrote, "There is an adjustment period going into 'school' from unschooling, but you also have the huge advantage of not being burned out and hating school already. Learning is still something you look forward to." This respondent went on to say that she received nearly all A's and then a full scholarship to law school, and added: "I'm not trying to brag, so much as prove that unschooling works. We took a lot of crap from friends, relatives, and strangers during the entire time we were unschooling. So now, I like having the credentials to prove that unschooling is a legitimate way to educate and indeed, in my book, the preferred way to educate."

**Age 26, no K-12 schooling or homeschooling past second grade.** This woman, who had graduated with honors from a highly selective liberal arts college, wrote, "The transition was a difficult one for me, not for the academics, but for the feeling of being trapped within a system. The college bubble felt tiny to me and I was in a constant state of simmering frustration at being told even simple things like which classes to take and when. As someone who had made those choices myself for years, I felt disrespected that it was assumed that I didn't know what level of study I was ready for. It took most of the first year for me to come to a place of acceptance, remembering that this, too, was a choice that I made that I could change if I wanted to. I never loved college like many people do and never felt as free as I had before college or in the time after I graduated." This respondent subsequently attended graduate school in a medically related field and reported that to be a better experience, because of the real-world setting of the clinical work.

**Age 35, no K-12 schooling or homeschooling past fourth grade.** This woman, who had gained a degree from a highly selective liberal arts college, wrote, “I applied to eight colleges and was accepted at all of them [in 1995]...I interviewed at all eight colleges; for most of them I was their first ‘homeschool/unschooled’ applicant. Several colleges told me I was accepted at the conclusion of the interviews, right after they informed me that I was ‘surprisingly’ well-spoken and bright. I did take (and did very well on) both the SATs and the ACTs, which probably offset the lack of transcripts.”

“The transition was fairly easy, though I was homesick. I think college is a lot like unschooling—you take classes that interest you, do most of the work on your own, and are responsible for getting it done and turned in on time. You are really responsible for your own education!”

“From [name of college deleted] I received a BA in both computer science and mathematics. It proves something: I never had any formal math training beyond 5th grade, but ended up tutoring other students in Calculus 1, 2 and 3. I never had a computer of my own until my junior year of college, but majored in computer science where I wrote extensive computer programs, and programmed my own robot.” This person then went on to a BS and Masters’ in nursing, became a nurse practitioner, and, at the time of the survey, was contemplating going back to school for a doctorate.

**Age 32, no K-12 schooling or homeschooling past seventh grade; mix of schooling and homeschooling before that.** This woman, who had received a bachelor’s degree from an Ivy League university, was a mother unschooling her own children, a yoga instructor, and a student training to do yoga therapy when she filled out the survey. Concerning college admission and adjustment to college, she wrote, “When I was 15, I wanted to take community college courses. At that time, dual enrollment of homeschooled students wasn’t really accepted, so I was told I needed to get a GED to be allowed to enroll. Although I think it disappointed my parents for me to get my GED, it has helped to have that paper that shows I completed some sort of high school education. That said, I refuse to take standardized tests now (because I believe they aren’t a measure of intelligence or even what a student has learned), so I did complete my associate’s degree before I attempted to transfer to a four-year university (some schools will accept a two-year degree in place of SAT/ACT scores.) I graduated from [the Ivy League University] with my BA in psychology in 2003. I think unschooling helped me adjust to college; I was so used to being able to study whatever I wanted that it seemed natural to take classes that interested me. And unschooling also follows the premise that if a child has a goal, they’ll learn whatever they need to in order to meet it. For instance, I don’t like math, but I knew I would need to learn it in order to graduate. So that’s what I did.”

## Summary

As I noted in the first post on this study, we must be cautious in interpreting the results of this survey. By necessity, as we had no way of forcing people into the study, the sample here is a group of grown unschoolers who chose to participate, and they may well be among those unschoolers who are happiest with their experiences and most eager to tell about them. However, at minimum, we can conclude this: The college option is very definitely available to unschoolers. Those who want to go to college and take the steps required to get in have no particular difficulty getting in or doing well once there. Moreover, the similarities in responses within this relatively

diverse sample suggests a certain common ground of experience. The grown unschoolers who went on to college had good reasons in their own minds for doing so, did not want to waste their time there, seemed to work harder and achieve more than did their schooled classmates, and generally felt advantaged because of their previous experiences controlling their own lives and learning.

# Survey of Grown Unschoolers III: Pursuing Careers

When people opt out of K-12 schooling, what sorts of careers do they go on to?

Published on June 21, 2014 by Peter Gray in Freedom to Learn

This is the third in a series of four posts describing the results of a survey of grown unschoolers that my colleague Gina Riley and I recently conducted. It is about the career choices of these people, who skipped all or part of K-12 and took charge of their own education. In brief, we found that most of them have gone on to careers that are extensions of interests and passions they developed in childhood play; most have chosen careers that are meaningful, exciting, and joyful to them over careers that are potentially more lucrative; a high percentage have pursued careers in the creative arts; and quite a few (including 50% of the men) have pursued STEM careers. The great majority of them have pursued careers in which they are their own bosses.

Before reading on, I suggest that you look back at the first post in this series, if you haven't already read it. It presents the definition of unschooling that served as a criterion for admission into the study, describes our survey method and ways of analyzing the findings, presents age- and gender-breakdowns of the 75 grown unschoolers who responded and met the criteria, classifies them into three groups based on amount of unschooling, and presents a breakdown of some of the statistical findings according to those groups.

You might also want to look back at the second post in the series, which focuses on the college experiences of the 33 respondents who chose to pursue a bachelor's degree or higher. It describes how they got into college without a standard high-school diploma or transcript and how they adapted, academically and socially, once there.

Now, in this third post in the series, I elaborate—beyond the statistical summary presented in the first post—on the careers that these generally young adults (median age 24) have pursued. The information discussed here came primarily from Question 4 of the survey, which read, “*Are you currently employed? If so, what do you do? Does your current employment match any interests/activities you had as an unschooled child/teen? If so, please explain.*” Further information also came from a brief follow-up questionnaire in which we asked them to list and describe the paying jobs they had held, to indicate whether or not they earned enough to support themselves, and to describe any career aspirations they currently had in mind. As noted in the first post, the great majority were gainfully employed and were supporting themselves, despite the difficult economic time in which the survey was conducted. Now, I turn to the general conclusions about the types of jobs and careers they have pursued.

## **They chose careers that are extensions of their childhood interests.**

By our coding, 58 (77%) of the participants described a clear relationship between their childhood interests and activities and their current vocation or career. This percentage was highest



for the 24 participants in the always-unschooled group (21/24 = 88%), but was high in the other two groups as well (see the table in the first post in this series). The sample included professional artists and musicians who had played at art or music as children; computer technicians and programmers who had developed their skills in childhood play; and outdoor enthusiasts who had found ways to make a living that embraced their love of nature.

Here are three examples that are among my favorites—favorites because they are the kinds of careers that school curricula ignore, careers that can strike the fancy of brave young people not in school, who have time and freedom to follow their dreams.

- Becoming a circus performer, starting a circus, and then becoming a tall-ship bosun. One of our respondents, a 26-year-old woman who had always been unschooled, wrote:

*“At the age of 3, I decide to become a circus performer, and at the age of 5 I enrolled in an after-school circus program. I trained and performed as a circus performer continuously until the age of 17 and on-and-off ever since. From the ages of 19 to 24, my best friend and I ran our own contemporary circus company. As a result of that, I overcame a strong fear of heights to work as a trapeze artist and learned a considerable amount about rigging so that I would be able to ensure my own safety in the air.*

*“As my circus career has waned, I’ve tried a number of new things and the one that caught my full attention has been tall ship sailing. Working on the ocean is a very captivating experience and it employs the skills that I learned in the circus nearly every single day - skills like balance, hand-eye coordination, and even getting along with people in cramped living arrangements.*

*“I am currently employed as a tall-ship rigger/bosun. ...The job of bosun can change from ship to ship, but aboard training vessels my work involves maintenance as well as training and sailing. I am in charge of inspecting, maintaining and fixing the rigging, the sails, the deck and the hull. Additionally I am expected to be involved in sailing the vessel, leading a watch during extended periods at sea, educating the public about the history of the vessels and educating the trainees about sail handling and vessel maintenance.*

*“I would like to sail and drive large sailing vessels around the world. I am currently studying for a 100T master’s license from the US Coast Guard that would allow me to be the captain of a vessel of 100 gross tonnes or less. USCG license are graduated by size of vessel and area of operation so this is the first step towards a license for a larger vessel.”*

- Wilderness aerial photographer. This 21-year-old young man, who left school after first grade, had started a business of taking beautiful (I can say that, because I saw some of them) artistic photos of wilderness scenes from the air. He wrote: *“Growing up with so much freedom was awesome! I did lots of outdoor activities including skiing in the winter and hiking/camping in the summer. If I hadn’t done it this way, I’m not sure I would have been able to combine the three things I really enjoy—outdoors, flying, and photography—into a business.”* He wrote further that he started his own photography business when he was 15 years old and also, that same year, started paragliding. The paragliding led to an interest in flying fixed-wing aircraft, and then he combined all three of his passions into a single business.

- Assistant (beginning at age 18) to a famous movie director, producer, and screenwriter. This young man, who was 20 years old when he responded to the survey, was unschooled except for kindergarten and 9th grade (he went to school that one year to “try it out”—he made honor roll and then left). His passion for film started early. By age 11 he was making YouTube videos with friends. He began taking community college courses in mass communication at age 16, and, at age 18, was in the process of applying to film school when a great opportunity arose—to be a

local production assistant on a major film that was being produced where he lived. His bosses liked him so much that they told him, “If you can get yourself to L.A., we’ll keep you on the show.” One thing led to another, he became close to the famous director, and at the time of the survey had a higher-level job, in L.A., on the production side of another major film. In response to our question about whether he earned enough to be financially independent, he wrote, “*very much so.*” His ultimate goal is to direct movies himself, and he is working diligently toward that goal.

- “Self-employed polymath.” A number of respondents showed a readiness, even eagerness, to change careers as their interests changed—just as they had changed activities as their interests changed when they were children. The extreme of this was one of the older respondents to our survey, 39 at the time. He had experienced a mix of schooling and unschooling through tenth grade and then left high school for good. He went on to a bachelor’s degree in mechanical engineering and a life that he refers to as that of “a self-employed polymath.” He wrote, “*As a polymath, what I do now is very much what I have always done (I mostly ignored traditional schooling, even when I was forced to go); I do anything and everything that catches my attention. Life is about learning, growing, and sharing your discoveries with others who want to learn and grow too.*”

His list of jobs held over the years includes, but is not limited to, the following: research & development consultant for a medical manufacturing company; clinical hypnotherapist; master practitioner of neuro-linguistic programming; director of tutoring services for a community college; wilderness survival, first aid, and bushcraft expert; PADI divemaster (scuba diving) instructor; martial arts instructor (Kung Fu, Judo, and Jeet Kun Do); and author of two published children’s books (and currently working on a new series of bedtime stories).

## **They chose enjoyable and meaningful careers over potentially more lucrative careers.**

This generalization overlaps considerably with the previous one, about careers as extensions of childhood interests. Unschooling children play, explore, and observe in the real world and find their passions. Then they pursue those passions in adult vocations and careers, or they may find new passions and pursue them. A number said that their life as adults was not much different from their earlier life as unschoolers, as they continued to play, explore, and learn. In response to our question about whether they were financially independent, many responded that they could support themselves only because they lived frugally, but they would rather live frugally and pursue their interests than make more money at a job that didn’t interest them.

The four case examples above illustrate this second generalization—about pursuing enjoyable and meaningful careers—as much as they do the first generalization. Here are three more examples, however, in which the career reflects not so much the specific activities of childhood as a set of ideals, or social concerns, that began to take root in childhood.

- Greenpeace activist and community organizer. This woman, age 28 at the time of the survey, was one of the more schooled participants in our survey. She attended public school through age 13 and then refused to go anymore, and so was unschooled after that. As a child she immersed herself in art, but she was also interested in “revolutions and wildlife.” I suspect that her school refusal was itself a sign of her revolutionary spirit. She went to art-college, with the support of a substantial scholarship awarded on the basis of her portfolio, and then taught art for a number of

years. But then she shifted careers to her other great interest and became a full-time Greenpeace activist, fundraiser, and manager. In response to our question about supporting herself financially, she wrote: *“Yep, I make a modest salary. I didn’t exactly chose my job because it’s the highest paying. It’s more important to me that I spend my time ding something that benefits my community.”*

- Founder of an environmentally- and socially-responsible construction company. This woman, age 30 at the time of the survey, had never gone to school but was homeschooled up to age “13 or 14,” when full unschooling began. She wrote: *“I am an owner/employee of a construction company.... The company is a direct reflection of many of my interests and activities as an unschooled youth—for example, democracy in the workplace, environmental stewardship, construction and building, facilitation and project management.*

- “I am also the president of a small non-profit that works to support the use of alternative materials in construction through the development of technical guidelines. I am the project manager for our technical guideline project and coordinate with our diverse teams of supporters around the world. My interest in regulation and policy development, as well as a commitment to support the use of environmentally friendly alternative materials, are both directly connected to interests and projects I undertook as an unschooled young adult.”*

- “I completed a series of internships over 3 years ... during which I studied permaculture, natural building, community facilitation, and conflict resolution. ...*

- “The main advantage of unschooling was that it supported me in understanding myself clearly, and helping me craft an adult life that is meaningful to me. I do not identify as ever having stopped unschooling— I am continuing to learn as much as I did as a youth. When I was 15, I was studying microscopes and nuclear particles, and now I am studying non-profit bylaws and building codes, or training for a marathon. I am 30 years old, and I have been practicing how to run my life, be motivated towards my own goals, think creatively about how to solve problems, and seek out what interests me for 20 years. I find myself consistently in an advantageous position compared to my ‘schooled’ peers...”*

- Urban planner, with focus on non-motorized transportation design. This 30-year-old person, who was entirely unschooled from K-12, self-identified as gender queer and preferred not to be classed as either male or female. After completing a bachelor’s degree program, this person held jobs that reflected the person’s interests in planning, management, and urban development. These included assistant town planner in a small city, administrative assistant for a public health department at an Ivy League university; research assistant for a project involving bicycle transportation (while a graduate student); program coordinator for a low-income housing non-profit; and post-graduate research fellow for the Bureau of Transportation at a large city. This person wrote:

- “My goal is to build a career in either bicycle and pedestrian transportation planning/policy or in human factors engineering. ... My interests have typically come in short, intense cycles. I figured this out when I was about 16 and started researching career options that would let me change projects every few months. At 17 I discovered urban design, which has acted as a thematic connection for a lot of my more passing interests over the last decade. As a topic it connects to some of the things I enjoyed as a teenager - theater set design, model building, textile design, ecology - but it took moving from the rural areas where I grew up to [name of large city deleted] before I really understood what it was that interested me about design. My path since then has been twisty but generally linear. I studied pre-architecture and drafting at community college, got into architecture and urban design at college, wrote a thesis on post-socialist urban planning policy in Vietnam and Hungary in undergrad, worked*

*in a town planning office for a while, and got interested in my current specialties of non-motorized transportation and qualitative research methods for analyzing travel behavior once I started grad school...*

## **A high percentage chose careers in the creative arts.**

As I noted in the first post, by our coding, 36 (48%) of the 75 survey participants were pursuing careers that we categorized as in the creative arts—a category that included fine arts, crafts, photography, film, theater, and writing. Remarkably, 19 (79%) of the 24 participants in the always-unschooled group were pursuing such careers. The observation that the always-unschooled participants were more likely to pursue careers in the creative arts than were the other participants was highly significant statistically ( $p < .001$  by a chi square test—look back at the table in the first post in this series). I could speculate about possible reasons for such a higher concentration of creative artists in the always-unschooled group than in the other groups, but, truthfully, your guess is as good as mine. Here, as illustration, are three examples of respondents pursuing such careers.

- Production manager at a large theater company. This 29-year-old woman, who was unschooled for all of K-12 but had gone on to a bachelor's degree in theatre arts, wrote: *"I am a working artist and the production manager of [a major theater company in New York]. I feel like the way I was raised led directly to what I do now. The tools I learned as a child— to pursue new ideas/interests/knowledge, to creatively solve problems, to actively participate in my community, and more—have helped me greatly. It's actually pretty much what I still do, just in the context of a grown-up life. The organizing, lighting design, dancing, making things is exactly what I was doing as a child and teen."*

To our question about financial independence, she wrote: *"NYC is a hard city to live in, but I have been financially independent the whole time since graduating from college in 2008. I have never had trouble finding work. I gravitate to experimental performance and work with/for a lot of artists. My fees are not high. But it's worth it to me to work on projects that I find interesting and believe in."*

- Textile artist/crafter and entrepreneur. This 21-year-old woman, who was unschooled for all of K-12 and had pursued no higher education, wrote: *"I'm a self employed artist/crafter, I sell online and locally. I am absolutely doing what I was interested in as a child! I've always been making things, I love what I do."* In response to our question about financial independence, she wrote: *"Yes I became financially independent at age 19 and have maintained that (now 21) It is very important to me to make a good living and I feel very proud watching my income rise little by little each year. As an unschooled adult I felt pressured to succeed professionally because people doubted I could/would, also to show my younger siblings what that looks like for us."*

- Self-employed piano and violin instructor and aspiring performer. This 28-year-old woman, who was homeschooled to age 10 and unschooled after that, had two jobs at the time she responded to the survey. One was that of self-employed web designer, a business she had maintained for about ten years. The other—and more significant job to her—was that of self-employed piano and violin instructor, which she had been doing for about seven years. Concerning the latter, she wrote: *"This is my career path, and I have built it all myself... I currently have 31 stu-*

dents. *I teach one-on-one private lessons, teaching pieces/songs, theory, ear training, music history, composition, technique, performance, and share my passion for music. I love my job!*"

In response to our question about financial independence, she wrote: *"Yes. I run my own business, and it brings in enough income to comfortably sustain a living in the expensive area of [name of city deleted]. 'Making a good living' is very important to me. But the way I look at making a good living is as follows: Being financially responsible for my own life and affording the things that are important to me. And most importantly, doing this in a way that brings me joy."*

In concluding her response to our career question, she wrote: *"I love my current career as a music teacher, but I am also aspiring to perform with my band as a second career path. I play bass and sing in this band, and next week we are heading in to the studio to record a full-length album that we raised the money for through a Kickstarter campaign. ... We are continuing to work toward our goals with this record, making touring plans for 2014, and looking over an offer from a record label."*

## **A high percentage were entrepreneurs.**

As I noted in the first post in the series, respondents were coded as being entrepreneurs if they had started their own business and were making a living at it or working toward making a living at it. This category overlapped greatly with the creative arts category, as many were in the business of selling their own creative arts or services. Overall, by our coding, 40 (53%) of the respondents were entrepreneurs. This percentage, too, was greatest for those in the always-unschooled group (63%), but in this case the difference across groups did not approach statistical significance. A number of the case examples presented above are also examples of entrepreneurship.

Sociologists who have studied work satisfaction have found that the kinds of jobs and careers that are most satisfying to people are those that involve a great deal of occupational self-direction. One thing that is eminently clear from our study is that the unschoolers who responded to our survey had, overwhelmingly, chosen careers very high in this quality. They were, by enlarge, working for themselves or in work environments where they were their own bosses. No big surprise here: People who opted out of top-down schooling, where they would be the underlings doing work dictated to them by others, generally opted out of that in their careers also.

## **A high percentage, especially of men, chose STEM careers.**

We had not initially thought of coding the careers to see how many were in the STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) category, but did so after the question was raised in a comment on the first post. We used the definition of STEM published by the National Science Foundation (here), which is broader than some, and includes social sciences as well as natural sciences, technology, engineering, and math. However, we only included people in the social sciences if they were conducting research in that realm and/or were doing applied work that made use of technical aspects of a social science. As we did with other analyses, Gina and I first coded independently and then compared notes and resolved differences in discussion.

Overall, by our coding, 22 (29%) of the 75 participants were pursuing STEM careers. When we broke this down by gender (leaving out the person who did not wish to be classified by gender), we found that 13 (22%) of the 58 women and 8 (50%) of the 16 men in the sample were coded as

having STEM careers. Despite the relatively small number of men in the sample, this difference in ratio is statistically significant ( $p = .030$  by a chi square test). Apparently, the tendency for men to go into such careers at a higher rate than women, which has been well established for the general population, occurs among unschoolers as well.

The majority of those in STEM in our sample were in some aspect of engineering or computer technology, but the sample also included an archaeologist, field biologist, math and science teacher, intelligence analyst, and four involved in various aspects of medical technology.

In the next and final post on our survey, I will examine the grown unschoolers' overall evaluations of their unschooling experiences. What did they like and not like about being unschooled? What was their social life like? Would they unschool their own children? Are there any who wish they hadn't been unschooled, and, if so, what are their regrets?

# What Do Grown Unschoolers Think of Unschooling? IV in Series

Most were very happy to have been unschooled, but a few were not. Why?

Published on July 12, 2014 by Peter Gray in Freedom to Learn

This is the last in a series of four posts concerning a survey, conducted recently by Gina Riley and me, of 75 adults (age 18 to 49, median age 24) who were “unschooled” during much or all of what would otherwise have been their K-12 school years. “Unschoolers” do not go to school and, unlike traditional homeschoolers, are not required by their parents or others to do school-like activities at home. They are not presented with a curriculum, or required lessons, or a system of academic evaluation. Their parents and others may help in various ways, but unschooled children are in charge of their own educations.

Another term for unschooling, favored by some, is “life learning.” Unschooled children live their lives, and in the process they learn. To unschoolers, what we normally think of as the “school years” are not different educationally from other years; people learn all the time. They learn incidentally as they play, work, and converse. They also learn deliberately, to solve real-life problems and to prepare for future steps in life; but, for unschoolers, such deliberate learning is always their own choice, at their own initiative.

In the first post in this series, I described the methods of the survey, presented a breakdown of the respondents based on the last grade of school or homeschool they had completed before unschooling (24 of them had always been unschooled), and presented a statistical summary of the results. In the second post I elaborate on their experiences with higher education, after unschooling; and in the third post I described the careers they have pursued. In brief, the findings presented in those posts indicate that the grown unschoolers who responded to our survey had no particular difficulty pursuing higher education and careers, that they have veered toward careers in the arts and careers that fall into the National Science Foundation’s definition of STEM careers, and that many have started their own businesses. Now, in this post, I elaborate on the respondents’ subjective evaluations of their unschooling experience.

## **Most of the participants expect to unschool their own children, if they have children.**

Perhaps the best indicator of their feelings about unschooling came in their responses to the 9th and final question in our survey: *If you choose to have children, do you think you will choose to unschool them? Why or why not?*

One respondent omitted this question. Of the other 74, 50 (67%) responded in a way that we interpreted as a clear “yes,” indicating that they would definitely unschool their own child, or would unless the child expressed a clear preference for something else or circumstances pre-

vented it. This number includes eight respondents who already had children of school age and were unschooling them. The reasons they gave for preferring to unschool their children are quite similar to the answers they gave (below) to our question about the advantages they experienced in their own unschooling.

Another nineteen (25%) responded in a way that we interpreted as “maybe,” meaning that they would consider unchooling, but would weigh it against other possibilities, such as a progressive or democratic alternative school. Only five (7%) responded in a way that we interpreted as a definite or likely “no.” Of these, two were very unhappy about their own unschooling (described later); another felt that unschooling worked well for her but poorly for her younger brother, so she was against unschooling except for highly self-motivated individuals; another preferred democratic schooling (such as a Sudbury school) over unschooling, for the greater sense of community it offered; and a fifth, who was in the military, favored a semi-structured school environment, such as a Montessori school, so the child would learn to follow rules set by others, including ones that seemed arbitrary.

## **Most were happy with their social lives as unschoolers and valued the age-diversity of their friends.**

A common question that homeschoolers and unschoolers endure is about their social lives. An assumption, and a stereotype, is that children who do not attend a school would not make friends, would not learn how to get along with peers, and would grow up socially awkward. At the risk of generating some eye rolling, we, too, asked about socialization. The sixth question of the survey was: *What was your social life like growing up? How did you meet other kids your age? How was your social experience as an unschooler similar to or different from the types of social experiences you have now?*

Our coding of responses to this question indicated that 52 (69%) of the 75 were clearly happy about their social lives as unschoolers. Of the remaining 23, nine described what we coded as a “poor” social life, and the other 14 expressed mixed feelings. Those with a poor social life talked mostly about social isolation—a point to which I’ll return later. Those with mixed feelings typically wrote of difficulties finding compatible friends—difficulties that might or might not be attributable to unschooling. (Not everyone in school has an easy time finding compatible friends.)

Most of the respondents appeared to have had no particular difficulty meeting other children and making friends. Forty-one (55%) of the 75 wrote that their local homeschooling group was a major source of friendships. Thirty-two (43%) stated that organized afterschool activities—such as dance, theatre, sports, and art classes—provided opportunities to meet others and make friends. Many also mentioned church or religious organizations, community or volunteer associations, and such youth organizations as Boys and Girls Clubs, 4H, and Scouting. Teenagers who took part-time jobs met others through their work. Eight participants made special mention of Not Back to School Camp as a place where they made lasting friendships with other unschoolers, which were maintained through the Internet when camp wasn’t in session. Some also stated that their families were very social and involved in the community, so friends were made through family connections.

Even though we didn’t ask about age mixing, 51 (68%) of the respondents mentioned that an advantage of not going to school was that they interacted with and made friends with people of



all ages. Many wrote about the special value of friendships with older and younger people. Some pointed out that in the real world, outside of school, people must know how to get along with others of all ages, so, in that sense at least, the social lives of unschoolers (and homeschoolers in general) are more normal than are the age-segregated social lives of children in school.

One 19-year-old woman, who apparently enjoyed (and still enjoys) an especially rich social life, wrote: *“I made friends at church or in the neighborhood or through sports or random classes I would take. I made friends at the store, at the post office or at the park. I made friends with people of all walks of life, all ages, all social and economic backgrounds. Our house was and still is a meeting place for many different types of people. We have always had the house where hungry kids came for a meal, where any of my mother’s friends or brothers would come for a place to crash when things went awry or a place for just hiding out for a weekend from all that was bothering you. Some nights we cook for 20 people, others only for our family, so it is never dull. It is a great way to learn about people when you see them in all different situations and all different lights. I have learned what true friends are and have the ability to discern true friendship from passing friendship in most cases. My best friends are a 15-year-old girl who loves to dance and who is crafty, a young man my age who is slowly going blind but who is very driven, and an older woman who is enjoying retirement. It gives me perspectives I don’t think I could gain from a group of people only my own age.”*

An example of a response that we coded as a poor social life was this one, written by a Canadian woman, who was quite happy with other aspects of her unschooling experience: *“My social life was not very good, mainly because of our location. It was a very small town with very typical middle-of-nowhere problems. Drinking, drugs, poverty and the like. I realise in retrospect that most of the children who were my neighbours had grown up in a bad situation and didn’t know any better, but I didn’t understand that at the time and I was miserable. By the time I was a teenager and we had moved to a new province, I found that I just couldn’t break into the social groups of the local homeschooling community and, in the end, I wasn’t really interested in doing so. My family did things differently, even from an unschooling standpoint, and social experiences usually have an element of culture shock for both parties.”*

## **The respondents valued most the freedom unschooling gave them and the sense of personal responsibility that came with that freedom.**

Question 7 of the survey read, *“What, for you, were the main advantages of unschooling? Please answer both in terms of how you felt as a child growing up and how you feel now, looking back at your experiences. In your view, how did unschooling help you in your transition toward adulthood?”*

The great majority of the respondents wrote enthusiastically about the advantages of unschooling. Almost all of them, in various ways, commented on the freedom that unschooling gave them to find and pursue their own interests and learn in their own ways. Roughly 70% also said, in one way or another, that unschooling enabled them to develop as highly self-motivated, self-directed, responsible individuals, who take charge of their own lives. A similar percentage wrote about learning opportunities they had as unschoolers that would not have been available if they had been in school.

Many also wrote about a seamless transition to adult life. Unschooling is much more like adult life than school is. In this context, a fair number also talked about getting a head start on their

careers (discussed in the previous post). They were able to focus and become expert in ways that would not have been possible had they been in school.

Some also described how unschooling allowed them to get to know themselves, discover their own passions, and find out how to make their personality work in the world. In this context, several wrote explicitly about learning to value the ways in which they are different from other people and to overcome any fears of being different, or (if always unschooled) about growing up without such fears.

It's interesting to compare these responses to those that parents (mostly mothers) in unschooling families gave to a similar question about the advantages of unschooling that we asked in a previous survey (here). In that survey, the two most frequent categories of advantages mentioned were (a) leaning advantages for the child and (b) family closeness. In that study, 57% of the parents reported that unschooling, in one way or another, resulted in improved learning for their child or children; and the same percentage said, in one way or another, that unschooling allowed family members to spend more time with one another and live more harmoniously with one another (because of lack of arguments and tension about following a school schedule or a homeschool curriculum).

In contrast to the parents in the previous survey, only eighteen (24%) of the participants in the present survey mentioned increased time, closeness or harmony with their family as an advantage of unschooling. This is quite consistent with the view, which I have expressed elsewhere (e.g. here), that children—no matter how much they need and love their parents—are in many ways more oriented toward moving on, toward adulthood, beyond their family of origin. I think that is one reason why the age-mixed nature of friendships outside of the family was spontaneously mentioned by so many of the respondents to the present survey, and also why they focused so heavily on developing their sense of independence and responsibility. The biological destiny of children, which parents sometimes forget, is to move beyond their family of origin; that family is just the starting point in their life course. It is interesting, in this regard, that a major complaint of the three who disliked unschooling was that their parents isolated them and prevented them from exploring outside of the family or outside of the insular group with which the family was tied.

To provide a taste of the ways our respondents described the advantages of unchooling, here are two of the responses to Question 7, somewhat randomly chosen:

- A 37-year-old woman who left school after first grade wrote: “*The advantages of unschooling for me growing up I felt were (in priority order): 1) being able to sleep when and as long as I needed, 2) having time to do all the things I wanted to do (reading books, building tree forts, knitting, making up plays, riding my bike, playing games, exploring trails in the woods, swimming, baking, making things etc. etc.), 3) being able to work and make money without school hours getting in the way. Looking back now, I feel all those same things were definitely advantages, more than I knew at the time even! Though also I feel unschooling nurtured my one true talent—completing things. I get stuff done. Unschooling ensured my ability to “think outside the box” as they say, and leaves me now with the ability to make a plan and do it, relishing in negotiating any obstacle and loving having the power to make good things happen. How did unschooling help me in my transition to adulthood? Well, in many ways I started as an adult, responsible for my own thinking and doing, so there was no sudden transition at all.*”

- A 28-year-old woman with no schooling but some curriculum-based homeschooling before unschooling wrote: “*As a kid, I felt happy to have so much time out of my day to play and have fun.*”

*I could spend more time doing the fun stuff rather than being forced into things I didn't enjoy. As an adult now, I feel I've had the time to explore my own interests and not have activities, knowledge and ideas forced on me, so instead I grew to enjoy them. For example, I've independently read a lot of classic books since I was young, which I don't think I would have wanted to do if they had been forced on me. .... I've been able to take ideas out of classics that haven't been explained to me (with bias) in some class. In terms of transitioning to adulthood, I've learned to be direct and independent. I never had gender roles forced on me, and don't have a lot of the insecurities and limitations that other girls my age have. Because of my knowledge of computer programming, and nerdy interests like Star Trek, I'm very logical and direct. I'm unafraid to say what I mean (although I've learned more tact over the years), and I'm fiercely independent. I don't believe that we're as limited in life as we think."*

## **The most frequently mentioned disadvantage of unschooling was dealing with others' opinions about it.**

Question 8 of the survey read, "*What, for you, were the main disadvantages of unschooling? Again, please answer both in terms of how you felt as a child growing up and how you feel now. In your view, did unschooling hinder you at all in your transition toward adulthood?*"

Twenty-eight of the 75 respondents didn't indicate any disadvantage at all, and most of the rest made it clear that, to them, the disadvantages were minor compared to the advantages.

By our coding, the most frequent category of disadvantage was *dealing with other people's opinions*—mentioned by 21 (28%) of the participants. It's interesting to note that this was also the most frequently mentioned disadvantage in our previous study of unschooling parents, where it was mentioned by 46% of the respondents (see here). Dealing with others' opinions seemed to be more distressing to the parents, in the previous study, than to the unschooled children, in the present study. This seems not surprising, as criticisms and doubts would more often be directed toward parents than toward children, and parents feel responsible for the unschooling decision. A typical comment in this category, in the present study, is the following: "*As a kid, I found it endlessly annoying that I had to constantly explain my family's choice to unschool. It wasn't the norm, which was equally exciting and inconvenient*"

The next most common disadvantage, mentioned by sixteen (21%) of the participants, was some degree of *social isolation*, which came most commonly from the lack of other unschoolers nearby and difficulties of socializing with school children because of their busy schedules and different orientation toward life. For example one wrote: "*The main disadvantage of unschooling for me was that I wasn't in close proximity to other unschoolers after the age of 13....My closest friends during my teen years...were people I met through NBTSC [Not Back to School Camp] and lived far away.*" Also included in this category were two or three who complained about lack of dating opportunities.

Only eight (11%) mentioned any sort of *learning deficit* as a disadvantage. Only three of these described this as a major disadvantage, and those were the three (described below) who were most negative about their unschooling experience. The other five generally indicated that the learning deficit was a minor problem, solved by making up the deficit when they needed to. The most frequently mentioned subject in which they felt deficient, not surprisingly, was math. (As a college professor who taught statistics to social science majors for a number of years, I can attest

that many, many people who studied math for 12 years prior to starting college also complain about, and demonstrate, a deficiency in that subject!)

### **Three respondents were very unhappy about their unschooling experience and complained of negligent parenting.**

Of the 75 respondents, only three indicated that the disadvantages, for them, outweighed the advantages. It is instructive to look closely at them, to understand the conditions in which unschooling is not a good idea. In all three cases the mothers were described as in poor mental health and the fathers as uninvolved. In all three cases, the respondents felt socially isolated, ignorant, stigmatized, and “weird” because of their unschooling and their family environment. Two of these respondents attributed the isolation partly to the fundamentalist Christian beliefs of their parents. Here is a brief summary of each case.

One respondent, a 26-year-old woman who grew up in the UK, wrote: *“I actively disagree with unschooling because I believe that it is a very easy way for unwell parents to bring their children up without those parents needing to actively participate/integrate into society... Because of my mother’s poor mental health she found it difficult making friends and generally disliked attending social events, etc. I think this was the main reason she decided to unschool us.”* This person went on to say that she felt incredibly isolated socially and didn’t study anything during her unschooling years. She went on to higher education in fine arts, and a job as an art teacher, not because she was interested in art or enjoys teaching, but because she didn’t feel qualified for anything else. In response to our question about the disadvantages of unschooling, for her, she wrote: *“My experience of unschooling was negative in every way. I have been bullied as an adult for being ‘weird’ and for working in low status, low paid jobs. I have also had difficulty finding long-term boyfriends, as although I’m an attractive and intelligent person, there aren’t many people who actively want to date people who have huge chips on their shoulders about the way they were brought up (without formal education).”*

The second respondent, a 35-year-old woman, was Christian homeschooled through third grade and then was unschooled, not because of a deliberate decision, but because of her mother’s psychological and physical disabilities and consequent inability to manage homeschooling. This person also wrote that her mother kept her out of school *“to be able to control the kinds of information we were exposed to, including sex education, science, or health, as well as control the kinds of people we interacted with.”* She, like the other two, was never presented with a choice about her schooling. She felt deprived of school, not privileged to avoid it. As an adult she has worked mostly at temporary jobs such as cleaning or house painting, but, at the time of the survey, was enrolled in a bachelor’s program in industrial design. In response to our question about the disadvantages of unschooling, she wrote: *“Disadvantages would be not having the groundwork of basic knowledge and social skills! I am also uncomfortable with most people and prefer to be alone, which may be from my experience growing up alone and unsupervised, but also might just be my nature, I don’t know. As a kid the main thing was knowing that I was not fitting in anywhere, always being the “weirdos” in the neighborhood, always missing rites of passage and being alone too often. It was a very lonely and isolated life, rather oppressive given the strict religious upbringing. I also feel now that I learned more about religion than I did things that would be of any use to me later in life.”*

The third respondent, a 29-year-old Ph.D. candidate studying archaeology, wrote that her mother wanted her to have a Christian education, but pulled her out of a Baptist academy in fourth grade because of the mother's conflicts with the staff. The mother intended to homeschool her, using a Christian curriculum, but failed to follow through because of her own psychological depression. In this respondent's words, "*Her personal struggles with depression, which led to her inability to function in running a house and supervising my homeschooling activities, was the reason for the switch to unschooling.*" She wrote further: "*In my opinion, I was 'unschooled' simply because my mother could not tolerate the anxiety of having me in public or private school – where other non-Christian people could 'negatively influence' me. She needed me at home to do chores and take care of her, because she was a non-functional depressed person. She preferred me to have a socially isolated existence from age 9 to 18 than risk a secular education. My father clearly did not want me homeschooled or unschooled, but he never did anything about it and let my mother do as she pleased.*" Concerning her social life, she wrote: "*My 'social' experiences as an unschooler were restricted to interactions with my parents, my brother, occasionally more distant family members, and going to the grocery store or doctor when I was sick.*"

This person was not entirely negative about her unschooling. In response to our question about advantages, she wrote: "*As an adult looking back, I think being in school while dealing with my dysfunctional and abusive parents at home probably would have led me to make some poor social decisions that could have had long-lasting impacts. So, as painful and traumatic as being kept at home in an isolated manner was, I feel it was preferable to the other options. I had a lot of time to myself to think about things. I developed my own secret meditation practice. These habits of self-sufficiency and self-reflectiveness helped me transition toward adulthood, particularly in cutting loose from my mother's controlling grasp.*" She also wrote, in response to an earlier question, "*I was also a self-driven learner as an unschooler, and much of my employment now requires self-driven education—whether for my dissertation research or for the development of my teaching pedagogy.*"

In response to our question about disadvantages of unschooling, she wrote, in part: "*As an adult looking back, the main disadvantage was that the social isolation allowed my parents to get away with more abuse and neglect than they otherwise would have. I suffered severe abuse and neglect during the time I was unschooled. Lacking a formal education did chip away at my self-confidence as I transitioned toward adulthood. I carried a nagging sense of unworthiness for quite a while; I still feel permanently damaged in some way, like I am a freak who was kept in a cage and not educated formally. As I prepared to begin formal college education, my unschooling experience hindered me by having failed to provide standard levels of math and science knowledge. I had to tutor myself to pass the GED. I had to tutor myself remedial math and science skills to keep up in introductory-level college courses.*"

It is worth adding that the only other respondent, in the whole sample, who commented on the role of religion in her upbringing was also very negative about the fundamentalist influence. Her parents became extreme Christian fundamentalists when she was 15. She wrote, "*At that time, my role shifted to full-time caretaker for my younger siblings. I was expected to get married and have lots of children rather than having any type of career, so further education was viewed as superfluous in that subculture. ... After my parents became involved with the fundamentalists, we were cut off almost completely from interaction with others outside the tight-knit religious setting. Interactions were mostly centered around child-care, chores and religious meetings with no free time to simply socialize.*" This person, nevertheless, went on to become a very successful writer and noted that

she will unschool her own daughter. She is not against unschooling, but strongly against the social and intellectual isolation that occurred in her home when her parents converted.

## A Final Thought

Although the sample is relatively small, the findings of our survey suggest that unschooling can work beautifully if the whole family, including the children, buy into it, if the parents are psychologically healthy and happy, and if the parents are socially connected to the broader world and facilitate their children's involvement with that world. It can even work well when some of these criteria are not fully met. Children growing up unschooled in such environments take control of their own lives and have the support of their families to find and follow their own paths to happiness. But when the dominant parent is truly dysfunctional, or when the family practices a philosophy of isolation from the broader culture rather than integration with it, or when the unschooled child would prefer to go to school, then unschooling can lead to resentment and, quite justifiably, to feelings of abuse and neglect.

Finally, TO THE PARTICIPANTS IN THE SURVEY, Gina and I say, THANK YOU! This was a lengthy questionnaire to fill out, and many of you wrote long and beautiful essays in response to each question. We have learned much as a result of your willingness to share your experiences.

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Two original series of research (Unschooling Families and Unschooled Adults) by educational  
freedom advocate Peter Gray, in one convenient location. Minimal changes to the original text

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