

A life without school

The unschooled and unschooling weigh in on why they chose to forgo curriculum and learn 'through life.'

Orin Bishop, a 24-year-old board game developer, never went to school. Not in the conventional sense, anyway.

"For most of my growing up I was just doing whatever I felt like and learning whatever I wanted to learn," Bishop says.

Bishop was educated up until high school through the principles of unschooling, a radical and often controversial way of homeschooling which cites experiential learning, or learning through life, as one of its primary teaching tools.

The young man with shoulder-length brown hair and admirably straight posture says that he was never forced to sit down and learn "certain things because the school says you should learn this at a certain age."

When Bishop reached high school age, he says that his mother told him that if he would like to one day attend university – which he did – that he would have to complete a high school diploma. This would be the only time in his life that Bishop would be faced with a traditional curriculum complete with exams and essays.

"It wasn't really hard," Bishop says of his time spent preparing for diploma level testing. "I mean, especially because I basically had to sit for an hour or two a day for all of the (three years) to learn (high school). Other people were sitting in school for (six) hours.

"And I don't think it's because I'm some sort of genius."

Bishop has developed many opinions about the traditional classroom after hearing about the ins and outs of public school from his boyhood friends who Bishop says were all "super jealous" of his life as a child unschooler.

"I think the main problem with

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– Orin Bishop, 24

public schools is that they teach people that learning isn't fun. Because they don't make the school experience enjoyable for people," he says. "Learning is some type of unpleasant activity. Like work. And they have to cram stuff into their brain and memorize facts.

"The truth is your brain physiologically rewards you for learning things and mastering new abilities. So there is

really no reason that (learning) shouldn't be one of the pleasures of life."

Bishop describes himself as being someone who absolutely loves the process of learning, which he believes he has developed at least in part to his parents "leaving me to my own devices and not making me keep up with whatever curriculum there would have been."

UNSCHOOLING: A DIFFERENT APPROACH TO EDUCATION

Judy Arnall, a Calgary-based author of the book, "Discipline without Distress", and an unschooler of five children defines the alternative approach to traditional learning as "a philosophy of education that is totally self-directed. The child chooses everything – how much, when and how deep they want to learn a particular area (of study)."

Arnall remembers the way that one of her unschooled sons gravitated naturally towards what most would learn inside of a social studies classroom.

"My son really loved the computer game 'Battlefield Vietnam', that came at a time when he was interested in military and war, and that led to him reading a book on the Holocaust – all of his own choosing," she says. "He decided when he was 13 that that was where he wanted to go, and wanted to learn more about."

As for her opinion on the popular belief that video games are for leisure

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only, Arnall says that, "everything is educational."

"Video games are an incredible way for kids to learn or to pique an interest," she says.

Arnall is a professional speaker and resource for people and magazines wanting to know more about parenting and educating kids differently, says that the biggest misconception about unschooling is that "unschooled kids are not uneducated."

"That's a huge myth. They just learn in different methods," she says. "Mainly through play."

"I think 150 years ago when school was created, the teacher was the smartest person in the community and the parent hired a teacher to teach their kids," Arnall says of the reasons why some parents are choosing to keep their children out of the prescribed curriculum.

"But nowadays with technology, a lot of the kids are more advanced than the teachers are in that area, and I think parents sometimes wonder if the curriculum is relevant and how we deliver it is not something they can do themselves at home or in the community."

As for the social aspect of going to a public school that one might assume would be missed as an unschooler, Arnall says that the notion of isolated children kept cooped up in their homes and away from the world is another common myth about the lifestyle.

"Unschoolers are very social. We don't actually stay at home. We are out in the community, which is actually a better mix of kids than having friends that are all the same age."

RADICAL UNSCHOOLING: A PHILOSOPHY FOR PARENTS AND CHILDREN

Michele Amberiadis, a Calgary mother who made the decision to unschool her six-year-old son after learning about the concept from her sister.

"She started homeschooling her kids about two or three years ago and was sort of bouncing ideas off of

they are children, whether they are strangers, it doesn't matter – respecting other people's choices and decisions, however, expecting that respect in return."

Still, the decision has been made complicated by the opinions of strangers, who Amberiadis says are often skeptical of the approach.

"For the most part I don't tell people what we do, because I don't think it is any of their business," she says. "Just like a person who is really strict, it's none of my business what they choose to do. Everybody does what works for their family."

"If, by the time you're 18, you can read and write and know enough math that you can do a basic budget and have a job and you can provide for yourself, then who says you need to know the alphabet when you're five?"

– Michele Amberiadis

me," Amberiadis remembers.

"Last fall I had to start thinking about kindergarten for my oldest, and every time I thought about

AN ARGUMENT FOR INSTITUTIONS

Vera Goodman, a retired grade

THE FAILURE TO FAIL

Orin Bishop will be the first to acknowledge that his success as an unschooler had much to do with having two educated parents: his father is a retired scientist and his mother is a musician who teaches the cello.

He also was given plenty of time to socialize and build friendships. In fact, his current core group of friends are some of the same boys he grew up with.

"My only concern for other children is that it would be important for the parents of kids that unschool to make sure that they are interacting with lots of different people and (working on) social skills," he says.

For Bishop, who is a recent graduate of the University of Waterloo's Independent Studies program, one of the most beneficial aspects of his experiences as a child-unschooler was the ability to understand failure as an imperative part of the learning process.

Bishop says that one of his biggest criticisms of public education is the

grading system, where A's are regarded as the ultimate achievement.

"The thing is, failure is one of the most important things you need to learn to do well in life," Bishop says. "You need to learn how to be okay with just trying stuff and if it doesn't work being able to analyze what happened and how you can improve."

"The hazard of being able to learn anything is you need to figure out what you are doing wrong and figure out how to correct it."

Bishop says that because he was given ample time to learn from his mistakes rather than being tested on concepts that he hadn't fully understood gave him the ability to use failure as a powerful teaching

tool – one that helps him in his current career developing European style board games.

"I think the main problem with public schools is that they teach people that learning isn't fun," Bishop says, who continues to have an insatiable passion for learning to this day.

**CALGARY
ECLECTIC**



leaving him at school for a whole half day – it just kind of terrified me, so I started to think about home schooling.”

When Amberiadis began thinking of having to make her children sit down and study for set hours each day, the notion of a home-schooled curriculum started to lose its appeal.

“My sister started explaining unschooling to me, and the more we talked about it, it just started to make sense,” Amberiadis says of her introduction to the philosophy.

“It’s really just about learning through life rather than saying, ‘you’re five, you need to know your alphabet’ – (if) by the time you’re 18 you can read and write and know enough math that you can do a basic budget and have a job and you can provide for yourself, then who says you need to know the alphabet when you’re five?” she asks.

Amberiadis, who is a McGill graduate in Marketing, says that she has only been able to make the decision because of a supportive husband and their financial situation that allows one parent to stay home.

Amberiadis says that throughout the process she has become a radical unschooler, a person who takes the principles of unschooling and applies those principles to each aspect of life.

“It’s helped me to be a calmer parent. Unschooling is ultimately about respecting other people. Whether

sc... tea... er... o now writes, speaks, and workshops on education all over North America, says that she is not sure that the unschooling approach is a practical solution for many families.

In an email, she refers to some of the experience she has had over the years with children who have gone through the unschooling approach to learning.

“I think unschooled children develop in a different way,” she writes. “I think a lot of children are neglected when parents don’t have the ability or financial means to give them a quality experience.”

“I met a young man of 15 who couldn’t read and had never been at school. He was lost.”

Even still, Goodman is not necessarily a proponent of the current public education systems. She especially is an opponent to the emphasis on standardized testing and the lack of fine arts.

“I am a strong supporter of public education because that’s where most children end up,” Goodman writes. “I think it is hard for schools in their present form to support creativity because it requires teacher’s who are creative, and most of them don’t have confidence in their own abilities to be creative. “It is much easier to follow a workbook or textbook.”



Photo: Melissa Molloy/Calgary Journal

Michele Amberiadis and her one-and-a-half year old daughter, Lucy. Amberiadis says that the decision to unschool her children has made her a “calmer parent.”