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# EcoParent

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# Unschooling

PERSONALIZED,  
SELF-DETERMINED  
EDUCATION IN THE  
COMMUNITY

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**S**ophia is sitting on the couch reading a book about space. She needs to research the universe for her school's grade seven science project even though she has little interest in space. Her friend, Braedon, is also sitting on the couch reading another book on space. He is unschooled and so is not required to read it, but he is absolutely fascinated by the vast universe and wants to know everything about it.

The difference in the educational approach between Sophia and Braedon is very significant. Sophia must learn about a subject because it's included in her state's/province's curriculum outcomes. Braedon, on the other hand, is intrinsically motivated to learn, driven by his desire to know more. The payoff for him is the satisfaction of his own curiosity.

Unschooling has been around for over a century, ever since Summerhill, the first "unschooling school", was established in England in 1921. It came into wider fashion in the 1970s when the term was coined by John Holt, a prominent leader of the secular home education movement. The term is somewhat of a misnomer in that it doesn't necessarily mean anti-school, but rather embraces the philosophy of learner self-determination, whether the learner is a child or an adult. This was opposite to what was happening in mainstream schools, thus Holt decided to call self-education "unschooling." The learner can choose to learn whatever their heart desires, not an approach advocated at all in schools in the 1970s despite the progressive philosophy of school administration promoted by John Dewey. Unlike self-directed learning, unschooling allows the child to control more than just the pace of a course; learners can choose what they want to learn, when and how they learn, and even if they want to learn a concept.

## EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY

Unschooling is legal in most jurisdictions across North America, Australia, and some areas of Europe and is usually undertaken according to the laws and regulations of the home education jurisdiction. According to Pat Farenga, a prominent proponent of unschooling, approximately 10 percent of home education families self-identify as unschoolers, although it is hard to find data as many governments don't require home educators to notify or register. People choose unschooling as an educational philosophy because they trust in the science that the brain is always learning and that all humans (even children) know what they need to learn, and when. Humans are learning machines that adapt to satisfy their knowledge needs. If we breathe, we learn. We don't need to "learn how to learn." We begin this process from the moment of early consciousness in the womb, and we never stop learning until we are in our graves.

## THE UPSIDE

The benefits of unschooling are many. Motivation—one of school-teachers' greatest challenges—is never a problem, because the learning agenda is always chosen by the child. Another benefit is that children are always developmentally ready for the material they choose, or they wouldn't choose it. Absorption of learning is high when the learner is fascinated and able to delve into an interest as deeply as



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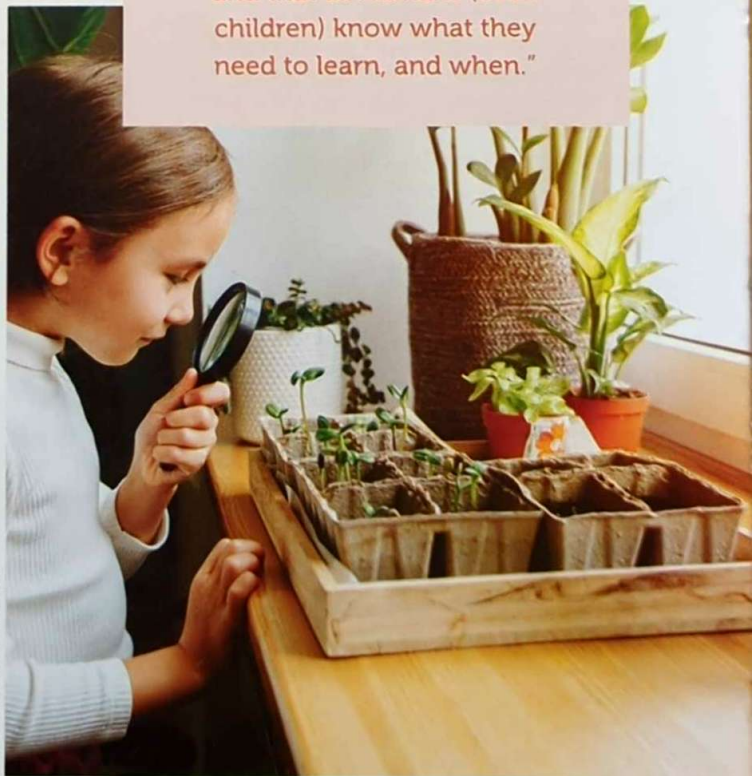
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possible. With a lot of unstructured time, children can explore their passions and interests, and may find a career path sooner than traditionally educated children. It has never been a better time in history to unschool because the internet has made information so accessible. Another benefit that people may not have considered is that when children grow into their teen years, they benefit from having lots of time to sleep in order to grow those neurons.

One benefit for society as a whole is cost savings. The minimal requirements for unschooling are a facilitator (usually a parent or caregiver) to provide access to resources, and a lot of free time. Because unschooling costs so little, it saves taxpayers quite a bit of school funding. It's also better for the environment in that thousands of children are not being bussed or driven to a physical building. Home education also benefits family life, with its pajama days, off-season vacations, no homework, close family relationships, and increased time together; unschooling is stress-free learning. Many unschooling families travel for education (also called world schoolers) and learning comes alive when children are immersed in a new culture.

## THE DOWNSIDE

The drawbacks of unschooling are few, but they do exist. School-age children are not old enough to stay home alone, so parents need childcare if they work and their children are under the age of 12. Another drawback is that children's interests may emerge at odd times—such as wanting to learn how to build a birdhouse at 11 pm—and it can be tempting to put it off rather than encourage it in the knowledge that learning is not contained to a certain period in the day. Children's wide interests may also mean hobby supplies create a mess throughout the home. Another drawback is that many people do not understand self-directed education and assume that unschooling means being uneducated. It takes a lot of explaining (for people not used to unstructured learning), even though it has been around since prehistoric times.

## HOW TO DO IT?

How do you unschool your child? It's pretty simple. Live your life but be attentive to what your learner wants to do. Let the child lead and you follow. If your child wants you to read a book, read them a book. If they want to play a game, play a game. If they want to build a dollhouse, help them get the materials and build it together. If they want to do it independently, let them. If they want to see a movie, buy tickets and go. Travel, explore, build, work, volunteer, and point out things you find exciting; share your love of knowledge and curiosity. Of course, you have needs too, so if you have an appointment and can't show your children how to make slime at that moment, absolutely postpone it. But be sure to come back to it.



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## A TYPICAL DAY

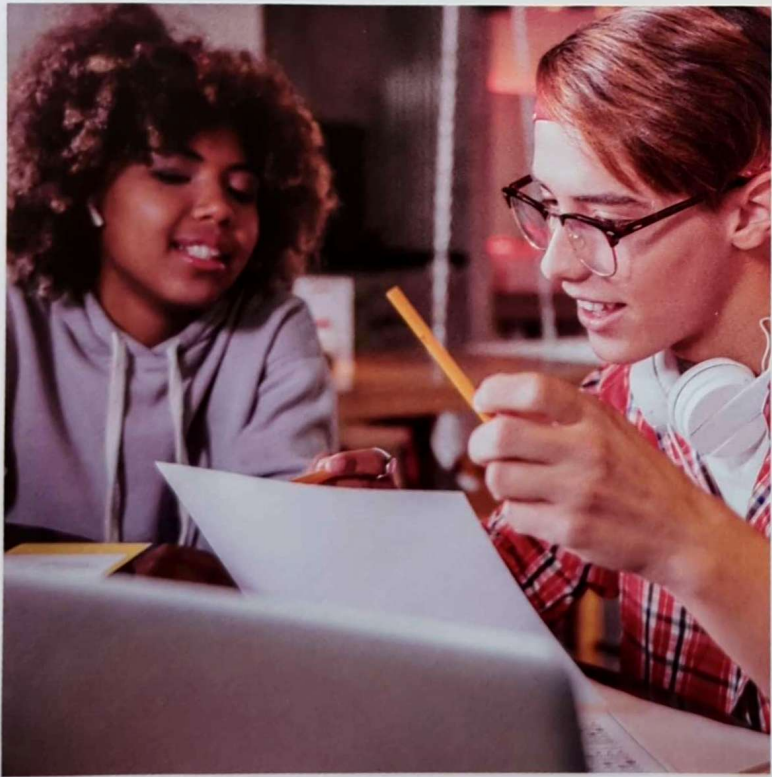
What would a typical unschooling day look like? Imagine a Saturday morning in July. The family gets up one at a time, when everyone has had enough sleep. Some members might gravitate toward the computer while others may start with breakfast. Where the day takes them depends on what has been planned and what gets sidetracked. Every unschooling family day is different. Some families ban all screens while some have no screentime limits at all. A typical day might involve a part-time job (either the parent's or teen's), volunteer work, or attending a concert, play, or presentation. It would involve a lot of free play, board games, working on a project, playing a video game, cleaning the house, and/or socializing with friends. The day unfolds and the learning fits with whatever meandering comes of it. Learning outcomes are not pre-determined but can be recorded in retrospect. Many families take photos, notes, and videos of physical evidence of learning, to keep permanent records.

Unschooling doesn't necessarily mean no textbooks, worksheets, or courses. If a child wants to take a class, it can even be a regular teacher-taught class. The key is that it's the child who wants to take it, rather than the class being imposed on them against their desires. Like play, learning has to be freely chosen by the learner.

## COLLEGE & UNIVERSITY

One of the most common questions is "How will unschooled children get into colleges and universities?" Many unschooled children receive offers of admission to top colleges and universities. Although I outline 14 different ways unschooled children can be admitted into post-secondary schools in my book *Unschooling To University*, the most common avenues are by proving knowledge and skills by writing the Scholastic Assessment Test (SATs) and American College Testing (ACTs). Some unschooled children eventually attend a high school for more formal learning toward their chosen career path, while others prove their self-acquired knowledge by writing the required "end of schooling" exams and applying for the post-secondary school of their choice. Some even apply as mature students or homeschoolers. They do quite well in post-secondary education because they have been keen learners all their lives and easily adapt to new requirements.

Every parent is a home educator because they are a child's primary learning facilitator from birth to age six. Some parents just want to continue educating at home for the next 12 years and choose the self-determined approach of unschooling as a valid educational alternative. •



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