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# We are All Unschoolers Now

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## We are All Unschoolers Now

**Kathleen Kesson**, Professor Emerita, LIU Brooklyn

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Families who unschool, or home school (at least 2 million kids in the US) usually reach this decision after much deliberation, and after weighing innumerable factors: available time and energy, capacity, desire, and finances. Now, overnight we have hundreds of thousands of young people with no school to go to - **compulsory unschooling**. While some families will manage to cope (those with resources for alternative childcare, those who can work from home, those with good internet access and lots of available books and materials), many more are making painful choices. *Do I leave the kids home alone? How will they keep up with their schoolwork? Will they graduate?* Others are dealing with even more grave issues. *How will I pay my rent? How will my child get their meals? How can I keep them safe?*

Like the proverbial butterfly wings in Chaos Theory, which flapping over the Amazon create a cyclone in China, an invisible molecular particle encircled by a crown emerged in China and has created a global firestorm. It has thrown our multiple and interlocking global and local systems into chaos. If there is anyone out there who was not aware of the fragile interdependence of our lives before, they are now. The cracks in our system have been revealed as gaping caverns; as is the case in many crises, the people who will suffer the most are low income, food and/or housing insecure, or dependent on low wage jobs that demand their physical presence (wait staff, cleaners, clerks) and emergency responders and health care workers. Stay home? Not possible for the half million homeless people including over 100,000 school children in NYC alone who are in shelters or temporary, transient housing. Take sick days? Over 34 million nationwide with no paid leave for illness. Seek medical treatment? Another 34 million with no health insurance. Keep your distance from other people? 2.2 million incarcerated people, crowded in cells, and innumerable refugees detained in horrific conditions along our southern border. At a very minimum, this crisis may demand that we work tirelessly to eradicate the deep inequalities that have come to represent our (US) society.

It is hard to consider the Big Picture when personal crises demand immediate attention. For many families the present crisis revolves around questions like *what will this mean for my child's academic future?* And *what in the world am I to do all day with the kids?* If you are a parent of a suddenly unschooled young person, I offer here some words of hope, some rays of possibility to grasp as we seek the collective meanings of our experiences. Our family was far from privileged when we embarked on our five-year unschooling adventure. We lived in a 984-square foot, Depression-era shack that we relocated onto 20 acres of land in rural Oklahoma. We had an uncertain income stream (which often slowed to a trickle), and no health insurance for our family of six. There was little cash to spend on fancy educational resources, but we did the best we could with what we had. Actually, duct tape might have been our largest single expenditure (that was the year that my eight-year-old spent constructing cardboard and duct tape swords and shields to re-enact his favorite myths with his younger brothers). Despite these very real challenges, those five years were some of the best in our lives. With no lesson plans, no tests, no grades, no textbooks, and no "do-nows," our four boys managed to learn a whole lot about the world. But I think I learned even more than they did.

### Ten Things I Learned from Unschooling

#### 1) Personalize Learning

For the most part, conventionally schooled children and teenagers follow structured curricula with predetermined (often by testing companies) learning goals and anticipated outcomes. Their physical movement is limited, and there is an emphasis on "accountable" behavior (raising hands, lining up, staying on task, not talking out of turn, etc.). They are monitored, judged, and assessed on every aspect of their experience - their academic achievement, their habits of mind, their behavior, etc. In Vermont, where I live, we have legislation guaranteeing that every

child has the right to a personalized education, which has been a very promising development. The current enforced unschooling, which is challenging in so many ways, offers an opportunity to interrupt practices that “de-personalize” learning, and give your child a jump start on discovering the interests and curiosities that may encourage them to design their unique and amazing personalized learning plan.

## **2) Craving Structure**

If your child seems to crave the structure of completing their internet assignments or packets that their teachers have laboriously put together (bless their collective hearts for caring), by all means encourage them. Whatever gives young people a sense of security and continuity. But as unschoolers have learned, the work required in most classrooms can be done in much less time than it generally takes to get an entire class rolling. They are likely to have time on their hands, even if they meet all their structured requirements.

## **3) Boredom**

Don't panic if your child complains that “I'm bored.” Boredom can be productive. Children are by nature curious about the world and eager to learn new things. Pardon me for saying it, but schooling, with its curriculum mandates, lesson plans, pacing calendars, Carnegie units, and assignments tends to eradicate these healthy natural instincts. John Holt, the renowned scholar and educator who wrote the pivotal book on unschooling (*Teach Your Own*) suggested that children only become self-directed learners after they “de-toxify” from the demands of schooling for a period of time. (If you want to learn more about self-directed learning, see the Alliance for Self-Directed Education – ASDE – at <https://www.self-directed.org/>)

## **4) Get Outside**

In our unschooling experience, the most profound moments of learning happened outdoors. Indigenous scholars and educators teach us that the land itself is the best teacher. If you have any access at all to the surrounding countryside or a body of water, go there. Right now. Listen for the birds, watch for signs of spring, feel the wind brush against your face, smell the forest floor. Learn to listen to the trees,

and think about the amazing underground “Wood-wide Web” through which these upright relations of ours communicate with each other. The world is facing multiple ecological crises, of which COVID-19 is only the most apparent at the moment. To survive and thrive, young people will need to become attuned to the deep interconnectedness of all species and the wisdom that the land has to offer us.

## **5) Play**

Play is not just for pre-schoolers. Play is freely chosen. Play is pleasurable. Play is engaging, engrossing, spontaneous, imaginative, self-directed, experimental, improvisational, purposeful, absorbing and transformative. It is a negotiation between the inner world of the child and the environment. In play, we try on the world and see how it fits. Isn't this what learning should be all about?

## **6) Tell Stories**

Unhook from the screen for as much time each day as you can bear. Tell your children stories – stories of their grandparents and their great grandparents, how they lived, the challenges they met. Tell them about your life before kids. What were your visions and your dreams? What do you care deeply about? Look at family pictures, laugh and remember. Relationship is probably the most significant aspect of learning.

## **7) Do Things Together**

Peel vegetables, start a compost pile, make a cake, plant seeds in pots and put them in a sunny window (spring IS coming), play board games, make board games. Our kids learned many of their basic math skills playing Yahtzee. Fold laundry. Teach your kids to sew on buttons. If you are alert to it, there's a lot of learning that can happen in everyday tasks. Vermont's esteemed philosopher John Dewey taught us that real life experiences should be at the heart of learning. It is only through the “doing” and the “making” that a kid's brain can easily connect to and retain more abstract knowledge. Dig deep and find those connections between life and academics.

## **8) Take Things Apart**

Have an old alarm clock or typewriter? A broken toaster? Hopefully you have a few basic tools

around – hammer, screwdrivers, etc. There's a lot to learn from looking at the innards of objects. Of course, you need to remove hazardous stuff like used batteries. Build stuff. Those toilet paper rolls are even more valuable than you thought. Make wind socks, castles, trains. Combined with other stuff you usually recycle or throw away, your kid can make amazing junk sculpture. Some of our greatest, most ecologically conscious artists nowadays are those using recyclable materials in novel and creative ways.

### **9) Read Aloud**

Our whole family once read Hamlet over a couple of weeks. Even the two-year old was captivated by it. Read alone – take some time to enjoy your own novel or catch up on that non-fiction you have been meaning to read. Seeing an adult enjoy reading is how young people become readers.

### **10) Value the Learning *Process* over the *Products***

We are obsessed with the “results” of learning. But it is in the doing, the making, the questions, the exploration, the mistakes – that learning actually happens. Let go of caring about the end result and focus on the learning itself. Observe your child as they go about exploring and making – you will be surprised at what you learn about who they are and how they think. I could go on. But the Internet is full of advice from unschoolers and you probably have plenty of good ideas yourself to share with your friends and colleagues. My best counsel is to take a deep breath and engage in the moment as mindfully as you can. Your child will be learning major life lessons from how you live into and through this crisis. What's the worst that might happen if your young person leaves behind the race to the top for a time? If they were to spend most of their days outdoors? Breathing fresh air. Looking at the sky, noticing the clouds. Spending unlimited amounts of time simply reading books of their choice. Daydreaming. And okay, watching a few choice documentaries on TV. Young people are very resilient, and I am deeply grateful that this disease is proving to have little (physical) effect on them.

It is way too early to reflect on what we grown-ups might learn from this tragedy, but I am hopeful that the resolution of the current crisis

will cause us to reflect on what is truly important and perhaps rethink our priorities. One of the biggest mistakes we could make from the educational situation is being convinced by corporate interests that online learning is preferable to schools. These folks, and their conservative allies, have been engaged in the struggle to privatize our public schools for decades now, and the pervasiveness of online learning programs and their utility in the present crisis will give that movement a boost. Schools have an important role to play in our future, even though I believe we need to rethink many things about how they are organized, what is taught, and how we value young people. Schools could become true community hubs, places of creativity and invention, where young people as well as adults can get connected to mentors in their communities who can teach them the skills they will need for an uncertain future: organic farming, agro-forestry, mutual aid, tiny house-building, invention, solar engineering, ecological restoration, and of course, those non-commodified aspects of life that bring pleasure and bind communities together: singing, dancing, music-making, storytelling, theater, sports, ceremony. We need community *centers* more than ever, to engage in the social rejuvenation and healing that will be necessary in the (hopefully) not-too-distant future.

### **Chaos is Destabilizing**

Chaos theory teaches us that systems reorganize, often in surprising new ways. Our way of life has brought us to a tipping point of which the Coronavirus is only the most urgent evidence. We will undoubtedly be faced with more crises in the future that require us to think in new ways about all aspects of our social life: *How do we create strong communities? What do we collectively value? How can we build networks of support so that all are cared for?* And in terms of our youth, and their education: *How do we create educational approaches that value human development, equity and joy over test scores and academic achievement? What is worth learning and how can we best prepare young people for the actual future that is evolving before our eyes? What needs to be in place to match up learners with the right resources at the right time, so that they might become self-directed and fulfil their dreams?* And for us oldsters: *How can we behave more responsibly towards the generations to come? What do we all need to learn about making our*

*communities ecologically sustainable? How do we establish more harmonious relations with the rest of the natural world? We are all of us, young and old, unschoolers now, and the curriculum for our complex times is emergent, non-linear, and unpredictable. Systems demand that we evolve and adapt. And remember that Butterfly Effect: small actions can have big impacts. Our collective small actions, mindfully taken, could have important collective impacts, so let us proceed into this new experience as thoughtfully and compassionately as we can.*

*Kathleen Kesson is Professor Emerita, LIU-Brooklyn, and is the former Director of the John Dewey Project on Progressive Education at the University of Vermont and Director of Education at Goddard College. She currently lives in Barre, Vermont and is actively engaged in the work to make Vermont schools more equitable, sustainable, and joyful. She serves on the Board of the Community Engagement Lab, and works closely with Vermont Learning for the Future ([utlff.org](http://utlff.org)), a network for educators, parents and community members. Her latest book is *Unschooling in Paradise*. You can read other writing by her as well as an excerpt from this book at <https://www.kathleenkesson.com>*