

20 WAYS TO DESCHOOOL

(so you're free to unschool)

by Esther Jones
www.aplaceonahill.com



There are many reasons why people choose to unschool. Whilst some could never imagine living any other way, many more end up here after exhausting all other options. They may have experienced school-induced anxiety, have neurodiverse children who can't thrive in a rigid education system, or they just came to the realisation that there's a more joyful way to live and learn. But, though the individual journeys may be different, one thing is almost certainly the same for every unschooling parent: they will need to make a huge paradigm shift.

In fact, the stumbling block to happy unschooling is always going to be the parent. The child will always do the best they can with the tools and environment they have. It's up to the parent to understand how to create that environment, to know when to back off and when to facilitate, and to learn how to live in a more collaborative and authentic way with their child.

But, even though your heart tells you you made the right choice, it's hard to let go of ingrained notions about learning and parenting. Unschooling flies in the face of these notions and, in order for you to make progress, you'll have to challenge a lot of conventional wisdom. Like any shift, it will take time and is likely to be uncomfortable. Eventually, you'll look back from solid ground and be surprised how challenging some of this was to you. Until you get there, and to help you on your way, here are a few tips to help you on your deschooling journey. All learned the hard way :)



1

Learn everything you can about unschooling

Unschooling can feel like stepping into the unknown at the beginning, and being armed with information is extremely helpful when it all feels overwhelming. Lots of people have walked this road before, and their experience and insights will be invaluable to you in those inevitable moments of doubt. Read up about unschooling and self-directed education, join one of the many excellent Facebook support groups, find people you trust and see what they do. Fill yourself with inspiring stories!

2

Let go of rewards and punishments

At the heart of unschooling is a deep trust of the child and their natural processes. Rewards, bribes, punishments, and anything coercive, however mild they seem, just aren't coherent with this way of living. When you find yourself wanting to stamp some authority on a situation, think instead about connecting with your child. Forget for a moment about solving whatever the issue may appear to be and see what happens when you give it all some more space and understanding.



3

Spot your triggers

What makes you feel insecure or worried? Is it when someone says they're bored? When there's an argument? When someone has been on a screen for a while? Learn to be mindful with these triggers, by noticing the response in your body. By observing what our triggers are, we can start to unravel the thoughts behind them. If we can slow down and understand our fears behind these things we'll be capable of responding from a different, less reactive, place.



4

Observe what your children are actually doing

Perhaps your children aren't doing what you hoped they would do. Maybe you're concerned because no apparent learning is happening. Rather than attempt to redirect them, take a closer look at what they are actually doing. What are they getting from their experience? Chances are that they have chosen this activity because it satisfies something in them and it has a value to them. Try to see it through their eyes.



5

Find your own rhythm (and it probably won't match anyone else's)

Modern life can be relentless, and it expects us to conform to certain rules. It is hard but remarkably liberating to let go of some of these rules. Constraints of work and activities may mark your days and create some structure, but there is still going to be a lot more flexibility than school allows. You may well find that everyone is doing busy things on a Sunday evening, then hanging out in pyjamas on Monday morning. Let go of any notions around when children are supposed to be busy or learning, and enjoy the freedom.



6

Don't forget that children need to deschool too

If your child has been at school, they'll need a little time to adjust to the new status quo. It's easy for parents to panic when they see their children 'do nothing'. Many children need a while to nest safely at home before rebuilding the confidence to start exploring their interests, particularly those who had negative experiences at school. Put your energy into providing a healthy, calm environment and let them find their way in their own time. Showing you trust them will help them to learn to trust themselves again.



7

Change the environment, not the children

If you feel like things are not quite right, instead of trying to change what your children are doing, see what happens when you tend the environment a little. Put on the radio, open a window, get on with a gentle activity, or just offer a drink or a cup of tea. Sometimes a small shift in the surroundings can create a bigger shift in people's energy.



8

Start to find your tribe

It's so much easier when you have understanding people around you. Tap into online resources, see what's in your community, and look for home ed groups that are more self-directed. It might take a while and there may well be lots of dead ends on the way, but it's worth the effort.



9

Explore real life

Children want to engage with real life because it's meaningful to them, and because they are naturally curious about discovering their place in the world. So let them into all the things the family and community around has going on. Work, cooking, family finances, sports, hobbies, politics, meetings, events... Meet new people, do new things, go to new places. Open it all up and let them discover what resonates with them.



10

Embrace conversation

Long conversations and debates in the kitchen have proved to be an enriching tool for all of us. It's a wonderful way to share knowledge and different viewpoints, and everyone learns about things they might never have otherwise thought about. By simply being available to talk with your children you'll start to really see what makes them tick. And, you'll also be reassured as you hear how much they know about all sorts of things.



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Don't turn learning moments into teaching moments

We still find ourselves falling into this particular trap. Someone comes to ask us a question. We answer it to our best ability and they're happy with the answer. But then we start to tell them more, and their eyes slowly glaze over. We have become boring, and whatever information we're offering is irrelevant to the learning journey they are on right now. Resist teaching when no one asked for it.



12

Don't hijack their interests

Beware of letting your own agenda take over. You may think it's fantastic that your child has expressed an interest in something new. But you shouldn't necessarily sign them up to a term of classes or rush out to buy all the kit. They may not be at that point yet, and when we turn something they are mulling over into an expectation, we're probably going to put them off. It is also worth asking ourselves why we are valuing that activity so highly. Would it calm some of our fears if they were to do it?



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Don't try to sneak the learning in

It can take a while to gain confidence in the fact that your child is constantly learning. Until that time, it may be tempting to try to create opportunities for 'learning' everywhere. Children can sniff out these contrived moments a mile away. There's a big difference between asking someone to measure something while you're cooking because you need to add it to the bowl, and asking them because you think it will be good for their maths. They should sound the same, but they don't. There's plenty of maths and reading out there - so there's no need to spoil a moment of fun or connection.

Stay authentic.



14

Take care of yourself

It takes a lot of strength to get beyond all your own conditioning and to hold steady for others at the same time. Understand what nurtures you, and set an excellent example of self-care by not running yourself ragged. Figure out what you need to keep yourself together, then make it a priority. Nourishing food and good sleep should be high on your list, plus whatever else keeps you sane and happy: dance class, quiet time with a coffee, reading, study, meeting with friends...

The calm, healthy space starts with you.



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Explore your own passions

Set another great example and show your child that our passions matter.

Whether it's painting, music, hang-gliding, knitting or local politics, enjoy doing what you love and let them see your joy! If we want our children to go through life seeking out the things that make them tick, then we need to do that ourselves.

These are rich lessons for life.



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Take things at your own pace

If this is all new to you, don't throw out all the rules at once. It could be great but it might also be overwhelming and confusing for everyone. Much better is to start letting go of the easier things and build your confidence as you go. This also allows you time to observe your feelings and responses, and to learn where your challenges lie.



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Be honest about your emotions

It's okay to be honest about how you're feeling. Of course, this depends on the age of your children, but being authentic about struggles can open the door for some heartfelt conversations and greater mutual understanding. If you're feeling overwhelmed, it's better to let everyone know and to take a breather from the situation than to keep going until you crash. Again, it's back to setting an example for our children. Being able to recognise, voice, and deal with difficult moments is a fine thing to show.

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Don't compare yourselves to anyone else

Occasionally, your family will look exactly how you imagined an unschooling family to look like. But most of the time, it inevitably won't. You are unlikely to spend all day on nature trails or doing science experiments. Your children will not be always smiling, and you are unlikely to always be the calm, resourceful parent. It's more likely that every day will be a curious mix of all sorts of activities, conversations and moods. And no two days will ever be quite alike. Embrace it all. It is your personal version of unschooling and it will be constantly changing, morphing and growing.



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Don't let other people undermine you

Many people struggle with the idea that it's okay to let go of school. Some will be curious, and others won't understand but will respect your choice. There may also be a few that disapprove of your choice and feel the need to let you know. Over time and as you become more confident in your decisions, you'll find your own ways to halt those conversations quickly enough. If these are people who are close to you, then it can be hard. It's good to work out what your boundaries are around this, and to feel empowered to not enter conversations that are only likely to cause distress.



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Always stay curious

None of us ever stops learning. By staying curious to the process, you'll see so many magical things happening. No book will ever teach you as much as you'll learn simply by observing your children.



