

Parental Motivations in Unschooling: What a Life Without School Can Teach Us

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Sunny days, cuffed jeans, catching frogs in a creek, endless hours spent with friends doing the things you want to do: The feeling that summer break is never going to end. For most kids, this feeling is something confined to the brief time between May and August each year before school starts again, and they are sent back to classrooms with teachers and curriculum. For other kids, the freedom to do whatever they find interesting is a year-round guarantee. Unschooling, an offshoot of homeschooling, offers freedom for families who choose to pursue alternative education. Rather than having children adhere to a set curriculum and educational milestones, unschooling emphasizes children's autonomy and ability to choose what they learn.

This can look like a variety of things. For some families, it might mean days spent in museums learning about dinosaurs. For others, it's a lot of time spent playing Minecraft. The learning part, according to this style of education, will come naturally as children grow. Unschoolers operate by the belief that children are intrinsically motivated to learn, and students will learn skills like reading and math when they are ready and motivated.

For those whose only educational experience is from the public school system, this lifestyle might seem absurd. How can a child possibly learn to read without workbooks? What kid would ever *want* to sit down and learn math of their own free will?

On the flip side, unschoolers often see public school as stomping out creativity and motivation. What's the point of learning all day if it isn't enjoyable? Why don't students have more of a say in what they're doing?

Within the past few years, public awareness of unschooling has grown primarily from social media. Day-in-the-life videos from unschooling influencers like Mami Onami have gone viral, sparking intense debates about the ethics and viability of unschooling. Onami is a self-described spiritual guide, teacher, and unschooling mother of three who caused a lot of

controversy in her Tik Toks about her children's education. In one of her videos, she explained her unschooling process as, "everything that they learn is in response to either their interests or their questions."

Onami's emphasis on taking advantage of "teaching moments," wherein her children might ask a question about something as their sole source of learning, prompted mass criticism online. Her videos had a viral moment, resulting in her controversial methods of education to be the first impression of unschooling that many people had.

However, moments like this do not speak to the true experience that many unschooling families have. After all, the loudest voices are not always the most accurate.

After seeing the public's reaction to unschooling, it begs the question of why any parent would choose such an extreme lifestyle for their family. When just the mere discussion of this education sparks so much immediate controversy, what could make the choice worthwhile? To answer this question properly, it's important to look past influencers like Onami and start talking to more parents and students about their choices and experiences.

The following experiences were relayed over Zoom calls and in-person interviews. Each taking about an hour, the interviewees discussed their personal experiences with unschooling. This included discussions about things like what day-to-day life looked like when unschooling, how they found the education, and how they saw it affect their families.

Aside from Gina Riley, who was reached out to directly, the interviewees responded to a post about being interviewed about unschooling on a secular homeschooling Facebook group.

Although they each had different pathways to the same conclusion, every family's experience reveals parts of a similar truth. The parental motivations behind this anti-institution

education stem from a desire to do right by their children, even if that means going against what society and experts say.

Letting kids be kids

“I realized that what we were doing was just letting kids be kids, and I was just letting my kids have a childhood,” explained Laurie Dreesen.

Dreesen, originally from Austin, Texas, is a mother of three boys, now 18, 16, and 12. She began their unschooling journey without a clear plan of where the path would lead them. Dreesen became a stay-at-home mom after she and her husband realized that nearly her entire paycheck was going to childcare. After a few years at home with her boys, she didn’t like the idea of sending them off during the day again. “When they got to be 4 or 5 years old, I’m like, why do they have to go away? So, we tried it.” What began as a short-term plan to homeschool during the kindergarten years led them to a community where Dreesen found her kids thriving.

Her kids started participating in homeschooling groups, without a curriculum, that emphasized learning in a natural environment.

“It’s project-based, and it’s activities, and it’s movement, and it’s demonstrations, and it was amazing.” Their days became filled with hiking, science experiments, and play. The way that Dreesen’s kids seemed to excel in the loosely regimented education convinced her that this was the way. She soon realized, “Oh, this is unschooling. This is what we’re doing; we’re just living our lives.”

“I really wanted them to be able to focus on their own self-understanding, their own interests, to figure out what they are passionate about. I want them to have a childhood,” said Marnie Kammersell.

A mother of three children ages 16, 13, and 9 from Broomfield, Colorado, Kammersell, knew she wanted to homeschool her children before they were born. Her poor experience in public school as a child left her wanting to give her kids a better education.

“I figured there had to be a better way of doing it,” she said. Before she reached the title of unschooler, Kammersell started her kids off with eclectic homeschooling, a form of homeschooling that has more adult direction than unschooling does. Eclectic homeschooling draws upon multiple types of homeschooling to create a custom learning plan for children. But after a few years, she found that unschooling simply served her children’s needs better.

	Curriculum	Academic goals/milestones	High parental involvement	Custom learning plan	Child-led
Public school	Yes	Yes	No	No	No
Traditional homeschooling	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Eclectic homeschooling	No	Sometimes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Unschooling	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Radical/whole life unschooling	No	No	Yes	No	Yes

Chart comparing different educational methods.

Her three children have each taken to the unschooling lifestyles in different ways and never wanted anything different. Her youngest son, who she describes as very independent, rejects the very idea of being taught by adults all day. His dislike for public school is something he doesn’t hide. Kammersell said, “When we are seeing a school or kids coming out of a school, he’s like, oh, there are the prisoners!”

“I thought how amazing it would be to be able to live a life where you’re joyful and curious and learning what you want to,” said Gina Riley, an educational psychologist at the City University of New York Hunter College. She decided not to put her son in public school as a

result of her own research on intrinsic motivation. Still, her plan did not originally involve *never* sending her son to public school. She kept him home for kindergarten, and then every year they would have a check-in. And every year, he wanted to keep doing what they were doing.

“There wasn't one moment where we said we're unschooling. It was kind of like he was learning through life; he was doing that successfully, and we just kept doing it,” she said.

Each of these families found themselves unschooling as part of a natural progression, but the foundations of unschooling can be traced back to the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

Unschooling's roots

Rousseau's five book collection, “Emile: Or, On Education,” published in 1762, follows a child through adolescence into young adulthood and focuses on his unstructured education with a tutor. The message of these books is that children are born good and should be allowed to explore their interests, unburdened by societal expectations. Rousseau's philosophy of child-led education is one of the earliest examples of unschooling, although it was not called that till much later.

In 1977, over 200 years after Rousseau, John Holt started the Growing Without Schooling newsletter, the first national newsletter for homeschooling and unschooling families. Though there were numerous education reformers before him, Holt is often acclaimed as the “father of the unschooling movement.” Before starting Growing Without Schooling, Holt published several books about his experience as an educator that advocated for school reform. His work led to the dissemination of home and unschooling as increasingly popular alternatives to public school.

Now, almost 50 years after *Growing Without Schooling*'s first edition, homeschooling has grown significantly across the United States. According to the National Home Education Research Institute, there were about 3.4 million homeschooled students in the 2024-2025 school year. The numbers are rising each year, and as unschooling grows in visibility, more families are choosing this educational path.

The basis for this form of education lies in the long-held idea that children are intrinsically motivated to learn. The core idea of public school is that extrinsic motivation from teachers and grades will increase a student's intrinsic motivation through rewards and consequences. If a student's intrinsic motivation is low, extrinsic motives will help bring it up. In theory, the boost given by external motivations will be enough to make students want to succeed on their own terms. Striking a balance between the two forms of motivation has been a challenge in schools for decades and remains an evolving issue.

For unschoolers, the solution is not to change curriculum or grading scales: It's to remove them completely.

Loving learning without school

"I just love learning so much because I haven't been forced into it," said Aster Nyx-Friesen, a 15-year-old from Westminster, Colorado, who has never attended a public school and has been unschooled their entire life. They currently attend Metro State University in Denver where they are earning their associate's degree. Learning alongside students who went through traditional schooling for the first time, Nyx-Friesen does not feel behind. The hardest part was not in the material itself, but in the rigidity that college requires. "I adapt really well to new environments, but it was weird not being able to just do what I wanted."

Growing up as an unschooler meant that Nyx-Freisen had most of the say in what their days looked like. Much of it, however, was structured around the different homeschooling programs they attended. About three days a week were spent at these enrichment programs, but they were “more holistically based, never strictly academic,” Nyx-Friesen explained.

The Wild Ones Forest School in Evergreen, Colorado, co-founded by Nyx-Friesen’s mother, was where they spent a lot of their childhood. Evergreen is an unincorporated community located in Jefferson County, about 30 miles west of Denver. Sitting at an elevation of 7,074 feet with a close proximity to the mountains and Evergreen Lake, the forested area makes for a peaceful escape from busy city life.

Forest schools are a nature-based alternative to conventional schools, with an emphasis on child-led activities and play. These schools are where many homeschooling and unschooling families find their communities. On its website, Wild Ones explains they, “believe in the interconnectedness of life and that we elevate our world by building connections to bring us closer to ourselves, others, and nature.” Founded by Cassie Nyx and Erin Pyne, the school began with the desire to create a learning space for children that focused on them. Nyx and Pyne each have backgrounds in education and took the things they felt were lacking in public schools to make a more rewarding experience for kids.

Riley, Dreesen, and Kammersell all participated in extracurricular groups to provide their children with community and development. One of the activities Dreesen and her sons attended was a homeschooling group called Wild Readers. She credited the group with helping her middle child learn to read in a fun, self-driven way. The group, led by a fellow homeschooling mother, would take the kids to a Barnes and Noble where they would pick out books that looked

interesting and then work their way through them. “She systematically helped my kid learn to read,” Dreesen said.

When not hiking through the forest or exploring nature, Nyx-Friesen spent a lot of their childhood reading. They never used a phonics workbook to learn as many children do, and credit this as where their love for reading and writing started. Nyx-Friesen described the journey to literacy as something that was self-guided. “[My parents] helped, whenever I wanted help,” they said. “But I just taught myself to read.” As early as 4, they were asking their parents to write down stories they made up, and by 6, they were well on the journey to doing it themselves.

Nyx-Friesen’s natural draw towards reading and writing is not a reflection of every unschooling family, however. Like in public schools, some children face barriers that are completely out of their control. Both Dreesen and Kammersell have sons with reading impairments that made it difficult for them to learn the skill on their own.

Kammersell’s oldest son has dyslexia and dysgraphia, making his learning process much more complicated. She realized something was different when he started learning to read around age 6. “By the time he was about 8, I was pretty sure he had a writing disability.” After a visit to a public school to evaluate her son, Kammersell decided the best course of action was to follow advice from homeschooling experts and create a relationship between storytelling and her son that did not overemphasize his challenges.

“I did a lot of jotting down his words, making books where he would tell me the stories and I would write them down.” The result was that “he would have a sense of himself as a writer without physically doing the writing,” Kammersell said. Her son’s ability to write was still not truly tested until his first community college class at age 15. She was proud to report that, despite

never having done it before, he was successful in communicating his thoughts through the written word.

Kammersell's methods to help her son learn to read is just one example of the ways unschooling allows parents to tailor their children's education. When describing how their children learned to read and do math, each parent was open about how they reached those milestones later than is traditional. But there was no sense of shame or embarrassment when discussing this; they all had faith in the process and now have literate children to show for it.

The different ways in which unschoolers learn to read and write are, in Riley's view, just a reflection of how children at large learn. "Everyone learns to read in different ways," she said. One unschooler's journey will not reflect an entire community of learners.

Though certain components like an emphasis on outdoors time and homeschooling groups connect unschooling experiences, the very nature of this education means that every family has a completely unique journey. The lack of structure, deadlines, and curriculum is where many on the outside push against unschooling. Despite the reported success from many unschooled families, criticism about this educational pathway goes beyond just its unorthodox methods.

A common critique of unschooling is the simple fact that parents are not teachers. Although a parent knows their child best, educators must go through years of schooling to do what they do, and parents cannot replicate that knowledge at home. As children get older and are expected to understand more complex topics, most parents are not equipped to teach things like calculus and physics, should those subjects even arise.

The concept that unschooling hinges on is that children will somehow know what to be curious about in the world. If they are limited to their family and friends without consistent

exposure to other ideas, gaps in their knowledge start to form. ResearchED, an organization that connects research to classrooms, noted that some studies point to explicit, guided learning to be more efficient than minimal guidance education. The pressure inadvertently placed on children to “know what to know” puts them at a disadvantage compared to their public school peers who are being walked through new information every day.

Within the same vein of comparison to public school kids, there is a lot of concern that unschoolers are being isolated. Most unschoolers register with their state as homeschoolers, but each state has their own laws and restrictions for homeschooling. High-regulation states like New York require homeschoolers to alert the state, create an Individualized Home Instruction Plan, comply with subject requirements, file quarterly reports, and participate in annual child assessments. Low-regulation states like Oklahoma don’t even require homeschoolers to alert the state of their intent.

The minimal overhead in some states brings up the potential lack of social interaction that unschoolers might receive. Without state enforcements, some home and unschoolers may stay confined to their immediate family. Even if they are attending homeschooling groups, the population they are interacting with remains limited in comparison to public school students. Especially for unschooling families that choose to keep their children primarily at home, not in groups, this concern grows stronger. Learning to interact with others from different backgrounds and experiences is one of the most crucial parts of public education. When allowing a child to lead their schooling, it becomes very easy for them to avoid conflict and therefore never learn how to handle it.

A 2013 study from Chloe Morin at the New College of Florida surveyed 92 unschooling respondents about their experiences and found that unschoolers are generally kept in more

racially homogenous environments than their public school counterparts. As a result, Morin suggested that unschoolers will also have fewer opportunities to “have positive experiences with others from different backgrounds.” Without the explicit effort from parents to educate their children on other experiences, Morin noted that this could potentially narrow unschooled children’s worldview.

The perception that unschooling stems from a desire to take children away from the outside world completely might be true in some cases, but it's not the case for all. For Riley, Kammersell, and Nyx-Friesen, there was never a question about whether they were ‘allowed’ to try out other educational opportunities.

Do you want to go to public school?

“Every year, I’d be like, ‘Let’s explore schools,’” Riley explained. “And so, every year he explored, and every year he chose to unschool.”

“I’ve always tried to really tell them, ‘Here are all the opportunities I know near us. Here are all the options. Even if you don’t think you want to go to school, let’s just go do a tour so you know what that is like,’” Kammersell said.

“And then [my mom] would give me both sides of the argument, and be like, ‘This is the pros and cons of public school, these are the pros and cons of unschooling, you can choose,’” said Nyx-Friesen. “And each year we’d do a check-in, she’d be like, ‘Are you happy with the path you’re on right now?’ And I’d be like, ‘Yeah, this is great.’ So, it was always up to me.”

Since part of the core ethos of unschooling is letting children choose their own learning, it begs the question: What if a child *wants* to go to public school?

Though this may seem like a ‘gotcha!’ question, it is something that many families factor into their educational plans. Not only do they factor in the possibility that their child might want to attend a traditional school, but some parents in the unschooling camp also offer the option openly. Riley, Kammersell, and Nyx-Friesen were offered the choice, and each time the children chose to keep unschooling.

To Nyx-Friesen, the structure of most public and private schools will, ultimately, just burn kids out. “Learning is something you do on your timeline, but if you are forced to do all of these things again and again, you're just going to start regurgitating the information, and you'll learn it, but you won't really process it.” Their decision to first attend community college and then a larger university came as a natural progression of their interests. Having grown up in a family that valued learning, despite their rejection of public schools, Nyx-Friesen found higher education as a viable, worthwhile option, especially since many college courses are free to high schoolers in Colorado.

The Concurrent Enrollment program offered by the state allows high schoolers, both in public schools or homeschools, to take college courses and get credits for free. This option is something that Kammersell’s oldest son has also taken advantage of.

For Kammersell, higher education is something that may only be worthwhile on the condition of its free price tag. Despite having a master’s degree, she doesn’t see academia as something that translates into real-world skills. She is honest with her kids, and said, “While it's free in high school, I think that's one thing, but especially at the point where they have to take on debt, I [ask them], what are you doing this for? What's your goal with this?” Higher education, for her family, is not treated as an end-all, be-all goal, but rather one option amongst many.

Riley, whose decision to unschool was guided largely by her academic knowledge of the practice, is now proud to say that her son has completed a master's and post-master's degree after a childhood in which he never stepped foot into a public school classroom. Like Nyx-Friesen and Kammersell's son, he also attended college classes as a teenager and earned a Berklee School of Music certificate at 16. "[He's a] highly successful adult," Riley said.

The achievements for these families, not only in basic skillsets but in higher education, might seem counterintuitive. The standardized pathway to college success emphasizes the importance of doing well in school. To hear multiple stories about how such a different avenue ultimately led to the same results calls into question the necessity for some aspects of traditional education.

Clearly, public school was not a key ingredient for Nyx-Friesen, Kammersell, or Riley's families' success. But Dreesen, despite her love of unschooling, always planned for her kids to transition to public school. Though she found the experiences that unschooling offered in primary years to be invaluable, there comes a certain point where it stops being applicable to the real world.

"My problem with unschooling was the way that they want kids to just do what they want all day. There's no undesirable tasks, there's nothing that they have to do. There's no accountability. And that's just not how the real world is," she said. The feeling some homeschooling and unschooling families have that their way of living will shield their kids from the worse parts of public school is something Dreesen never agreed with. "You don't trade one for the other. It's all there, it's just a different setting."

Her plan was originally to start her sons in public school in the ninth grade, which her oldest did. However, she was forced to put her youngest in school starting in the third grade

because he was struggling to read. The methods she used to help her older sons learn to read were not working for her youngest, and she eventually learned he had dyslexia. After numerous attempts to help him at home, Dreesen called the principal of a local elementary school.

“I knew they had to eventually go to school,” she said. “But it broke my heart that my youngest was going to start in third grade. That's not what I wanted, but he improved 300% from third grade to fifth grade.” The decision for Dreesen’s kids to go to public school was made for them, not by them, and this alienated Dreesen from the unschooling community. Still, she implements unschooling techniques in her home alongside her children’s daily attendance at public schools.

“It's basically just reminding them that they're in charge of their education, not these people. And this is not how the real world works. School is not really how the real world is operating out there.”

Even before her children transitioned to public school, there were certain parts of the unschooling culture she couldn’t abide by. “I couldn't reconcile, adhering to unschooling, the radical unschooling, the whole life unschooling,” she said.

Radical and whole life unschooling describe a form of unschooling wherein children have total say over everything in their lives, not just education. This means radically unschooled kids get to choose what they eat, when they go to bed, and what they do every day. Parents serve as support for their children but don’t participate in creating a structure for the day.

This extreme version of unschooling is often the one that is sensationalized by the media, creating an exaggerated view that this is what *all* unschooling looks like. In reality, many unschooling families participate in some form of relaxed unschooling where parents serve as guides for their children. Though the kids still have final say in what they learn, here parents

offer different topics and resources for their children to choose from. The reasoning behind which type of unschooling a family chooses stems from a variety of places, including their specific reasons for opting out of public school.

The motivations to unschool can vary from the belief that it is simply the best fit for a child to a flat-out rejection of the public school system. Whatever the reason, it is usually supported by the progress parents feel they see in their children as time goes on. Alongside the actual progression in learning, there is a certain level of “trusting the process” that parents must commit to when unschooling. There is a feeling of “having to see things differently,” Dreesen explained, “[and] realizing that it's going to be okay.”

As much as the children are learning in unique ways when unschooling, so are the parents. The resources families use can depend on their religious beliefs, previous experiences, and the communities they are in. In each instance, research plays a huge part in parents' decisions to unschool and shape how they interact with their children's education. Works from people like John Holt act as justifications and guides for many unschooling families when they are first starting out.

“My experience is that most people who unschool are not just all of a sudden like, ‘Okay, let's just do nothing!’” Kammersell explained. “Most of them really have gone through a huge process of, ‘This feels like what we need to do; is this going to be okay? I'm gonna do a lot of research.’” She added that for many homeschooling and unschooling families, herself included, there does not seem to be any other option that makes sense after conducting research. “I think the way that schools are set up right now would make it really hard for even the best educators to [be successful]. I don't think that they're set up for success.”

Kammersell's poor experience in public school had a hand in her choice to unschool her kids. As a gifted child, she felt that school did not offer her the things she needed to learn successfully and focused more on meeting requirements. "I got really good at checking boxes. And I didn't want a life of checking boxes for [my kids]."

An anti-public school sentiment rings strongly amongst many unschooling families, but over the course of raising her son and conducting research on education, Riley has come to a different conclusion. "Amazing learning happens in all of these different environments, right? So, whereas previously, I was like, 'Oh, [unschooling] is the best thing in the world!' [Now], everything is the best thing in the world." To her, the best educational choice for a family is whatever choice is best for the family. Unschooling worked for her son, but that does not mean that public school is a bad decision for someone else.

Regardless of where a child attends school, whether it's in a classroom or in their kitchen, the hope is that parents have made that decision thoughtfully and intentionally. The processes leading up to a parent's choice to unschool is typically fueled by research, thought, and time. But the decision to reject long-standing educational institutions in favor of an against-the-grain lifestyle is one that goes deeper than that.

"If you're a parent, anything you do, you're gonna feel guilty about something," Dreesen said. "If you choose to go to work, you're gonna feel guilty because you're leaving your kids. If you stay home, you feel guilty because you're not at work. You feel like you're doing something wrong all the time anyway. And, you know, education, parenting, it's the same thing."

Knowing how to make the right choice

Early on in her unschooling journey, Dreesen realized that she had to stop caring about other people's opinions on her parenting. Watching adults try to quiz her kids when they found out they did not go to school used to make her nervous, but it eventually reached a point where she couldn't care anymore. "I just grew into myself," she said.

What mattered most to her, Kammersell, and Riley was not the opinions of others, or even the opinions of educational experts. The most validating and encouraging evidence was right in front of them. "I mean, everyone was like, 'You're not doing it right.' But then they saw that my kids were turning into good people. My kids were good people. Good guys. I'm really proud of them," Dreesen said. "And proof started showing that they're gonna turn out okay."

Before any proof that their children were going to be alright without school materialized, Riley, Kammersell, Dreesen, and Nyx-Friesen's parents all made the hard decision to unschool. This decision affected not just how their children were going to learn, but also how their children were going to understand what it means to be a member of society. In a traditional learning environment, school becomes the center of most children's world. Beyond academics, it's where they develop social skills, discover interests, and make friends. When taking away this avenue, parents are drawing from a different motivation than public school parents.

Wherever this motivation comes from, Riley noted, "I think any choice that a parent makes about education, whatever it is, is born out of love and care for their child and their child's unique personality and characteristics." For her, the motivation to unschool her son was simple: She just wanted what was best for him.

"But I didn't have any expectations," Riley said. "I really wasn't doing this to get my child into an Ivy League, I wasn't doing it for any sort of thing except for the fact that I wanted

my child to be happy and healthy, and that happened to be the happiest and healthiest decision that we could make.”

In accordance with typical societal perceptions, a happy and healthy child is social, well-mannered, and excelling in school. Kammersell insists that public schooling prevents many children from being truly successful. The very structure of public education, to Kammersell, is not aligned with how children really learn. Emphasis on memorization in an age where information is readily and easily available is just one of the ways that schools are falling behind how kids need to learn.

Her desire to push away traditional education stemmed greatly from her own journey through school growing up. The inability to engage with learning the way she wanted to, coupled with a unique pathway through academia, brought her to that conclusion. “I never got a high school diploma,” she said. “I never took certain classes, and it was totally fine. No one ever cared, and it made no difference in my life.”

In addition to the motivations from her childhood experiences, Kammersell has rejected the notion that public school can provide an adequate education for any child. The educational system’s roots in the industrial age have left modern students in a position where they are being made to do menial tasks that have no real benefit. Kammersell feels that education has not caught up to modern technology, and the behaviorist lens that much of the curriculum is based on will “traumatize” students.

Behaviorism in education is the stance that learning is an actual change in behavior that results from external stimuli. Through rewards and punishments students become more susceptible to the learning process. This theory emphasizes extrinsic motivation over intrinsic, making for a sharp contrast when compared to unschooling methods.

Kammersell acknowledges, “There have been times when I have wished there was a school that would work.” But as things stand now, she feels there isn’t one that works for her family.

Nyx-Friesen’s family has a similar stance to the way public education lacks an ability to truly educate children. They described their mother’s epiphany on this simply as “she realized that public school is not meant for the kids.” Based on the research Nyx-Friesen’s mother had done, paired with her educational experiences, she concluded that the public school system does not align with how children really learn. And for her own child, there was no question if it was the right fit or not. “It wasn’t that I was wrong,” said Nyx-Friesen. Traditional schooling “would have been the wrong fit for me.”

Backed by research on how children learn, in addition to how they saw their children grow, Nyx-Friesen’s family never wavered from their decision. To Nyx-Friesen, unschooling as the solution for problems in public schools was clear as day.

What was quickly revealed from the interviews was that a parent’s experiences as a child, good and bad, have a direct link to how they navigated their children’s education. Although each family cited the research they had done, and there are countless resources for them to draw upon, there was an emotional element that seemed to lead their decision making more than anything. Arguably, there is no choice a parent makes for their child that is not led by emotions. The relationship between parent and child is one of the most personal things in the world; how could there ever be a true separation from emotions and logic in cases like this?

Dreesen was very aware of how her emotions guided her decision making. Her parents’ parenting style provided a clear example of what she did not want to do with her kids. The authoritarian style she was raised with made authoritative parenting the right choice for her when

she became a mother. Authoritative parenting still provides boundaries for children, but unlike authoritarian styles, it emphasizes communication and respect between parent and child.

Parenting became the seed that eventually bloomed into unschooling. Dreesen said, “So, it was parenting. And then I then just realized that school didn't have to be part of the journey at all.”

Doing right by your children

After spending time hearing about unschooling, untainted by the internet and influencers, it became very clear that each family was making a choice that they earnestly felt was right for them. Though the exact reasons and methods for unschooling were different, there was an overwhelming sense that it was coming from a place of love and care.

The rejection of educational institutions and experts is something that wasn't done on a whim or as political protest. Each family underwent specific research, talked to others, visited schools, and still decided this was the best option for their children. And for the kids, there was never a question of whether they wanted to keep unschooling; time and time again, they kept choosing the lifestyle on their own.

The interviewed families represent only a small sector of unschooling, and one that encapsulates only the success that can be found in the radical lifestyle. The best form of education will vary greatly from family to family, and the experiences featured here don't show unschooling failures. Undoubtedly, there have been attempts to unschool only for it to not be the right fit for a family. But even in those instances, parents undergo a complex process of research and contemplation before making the jump.

The ultimate question of what drives a parent to embrace this anti-institution, unpopular, and controversial form of education is still, at face value, a complicated one. However, it is clear

that each family was driven by the desire to do right by their children. The ability to participate in their child's learning so intimately offered these families the solution they felt they needed. The opinions of others, even long-standing experts, didn't matter once they found unschooling.

Before I started talking to these families, I was under the assumption that the characterizations of unschoolers I saw online would have resonance in the real world. Many unschooling influencers present the lifestyle as something they did with little preparation. So, it came as a slight shock to hear how much intent the parents gave to all their answers. Everything they discussed had a deep weight to it, driving away any perceptions that their choices were made with anything less than genuine care. Reflecting on this, Dreesen summarized her thought process:

“You take a chance with whatever decision you make, and someone's gonna have something to say about it. But my kids just had a childhood. I had 12 years of maternity leave, I raised my kids, and they were surrounded by loving people, doing fun stuff, but also working. We had boundaries. They weren't just living as though they were in Candy Land.”

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