



ILLUSTRATION BY ANDREW RAE



Class Dismissed: It's Not Homeschooling, It's *Unschooling*

Unschooling is a) The best way to learn; b) A new education trend in Ohio; c) A way to get school credit while playing Minecraft; d) All of the above.

September 2015 | Jenny Burman | 14 Comments

Like money that grows on trees, it seems like a child's impossible dream: *not* to go to school today, next week, next season—to stay up late, play Minecraft, read comics, climb a tree, with *permission* to boot.

But for some children this is no fantasy. As the number of homeschooled children grows nationwide, so too does the number of “unschoolers,” families whose children follow no formal curriculum, unless the children themselves devise it. Instead of going to school, the kids plan their own day and largely do what they want. While they do sometimes take organized classes, it only happens when the child wants to. There are not a lot of statistics available for unschoolers—the U.S. Census counts them as homeschoolers—but anecdotal evidence

“Research in unschooling remains in its infancy,” according to Kellie Rolstad and Kathleen Keeson, who wrote “Unschooling, Then and Now,” in a 2013 volume of *The Journal of Unschooling and Alternative Learning*.



At their home in Blue Ash, Abby, Iain, and Owen Ruehlman-Walsh are involved in the process of unschooling—in this case, a game of cards with their mother, Cathy Ruehlman. “I feel like you only really learn something if you’re interested,” says Cathy.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY AARON M. CONWAY

At the same time, trends in homeschooling in general indicate steadily increasing numbers that government agencies, such as the Census, attribute in part to disaffection with Common Core and the No Child Left Behind Act (the standards movement). *New York* magazine cites increasing rigidity in traditional schools as a reason growing numbers of middle-class students in New York are staying home. Richard Stackpole, assistant dean at the University of Cincinnati College of Education, Criminal Justice, and Human Services, says that he has seen the numbers of homeschooled students in college increasing—in fact, he would like to attract more to UC.

On one hand, you could say unschooling began in caves. On the other, you’d look to the 1960s and the work of one-time educator turned un-educator John Holt, the brainparent of modern unschooling in this country and author of books that include *How Children Fail*. Holt describes unschooling as “child centered” education that respects human intelligence. “The human animal is a learning animal,” Holt said in a 1980 interview with *Mothering*. “We like to learn; we need to learn; we are good at it; we don’t need to be shown how or made to do it. What kills the processes are the people interfering with it or trying to regulate it or control it.”

Behind this sits another question: What are we—as parents and a society—hoping to accomplish in educating our children? Is it to become employable? Is it to take their place in a community just like those their parents have known, or gain entry to one higher up the ladder? College for college's sake? Most of us think of education as some kind of launching mechanism, which raises the question, at what point should the child be sprung? At what point does real living begin and the deferment, the training for it, trail away? For unschoolers there is no deferral—life is now and education is forever.

Here in Cincinnati, there are informal networks of unschoolers. Precise numbers are unavailable, partially because unschoolers often dip in and out of regular school or sign up for classes at random. In *Psychology Today*, Peter Gray and Gina Riley surveyed parents who identified as unschoolers; Gray says that nationally perhaps a tenth of homeschooled students could be called unschooled (sometimes because intentions to follow a curriculum get dropped).

Unschooling is completely legal: In Ohio, a parent or at-home “teacher” must have a high school education, a general plan for a child's education during the school year, and superintendent approval; at the end of the year “students” must either be evaluated by a certified teacher or be tested, the results mailed to their district. Beyond that, the specifics as to how an unschooled child spends his or her days are not strictly codified. On one end of the homeschool spectrum you have kids in their living rooms saying the Pledge of Allegiance at 8 a.m., followed by 45 minutes of Bible study, then math—in other words, highly routinized. On the other, unschooled end, they're making cupcakes, or rocket ships, at 10ish—or noonish. Whatever works.

In Cincinnati, unschooling is one of a myriad of alternatives—including online public education, religion-based co-ops, and accelerated à la carte programs—available to families who feel traditional, at-school schooling is not for them. Ohio has at least two formal unschooler associations, both further north: Akron Area Unschoolers Tribe and Northern Ohio Unschoolers. No one has created a similar association in this part of the state. But they will. Because here, too, there are families looking for an education in a child's impossible dream.

One family in the loose network of unschoolers in Cincinnati lives in Blue Ash. On a warm June morning, I ring the bell of their nicely maintained two-story house, on a street of similarly well-kept homes. I have come to observe and interview the Ruehlman-Walsh children and their mother, Cathy. I half expect to find pet goats roaming the house, along with chickens. But like the exterior, inside is a well-kept, conventional middle-class home. No goats. No lava lamps. All four of Cathy Ruehlman and Joe Walsh's children have been—or were—unschooled for much of their childhood. Present today are Owen, age 10; Iain, 13; and Emily, 20. Their sister Abby, not present, has just graduated from Sycamore High School, which she attended part-time, and has been admitted to UC's College of Engineering.

Cathy Ruehlman says her evolution toward unschooling her children began with her own experience. “I hated school with a passion” as a kid, she says. “I was not interested in one single thing that they were telling me. I went



Owen Ruehlman-Walsh keeping active at home

PHOTOGRAPHS BY AARON M. CONWAY

Emily did not want to separate from her mother for the readiness observation: “She wouldn’t leave my side, and they said ‘If she won’t separate from you she’s not ready.’ I said OK. And so we thought about it another year but I had another friend who told me about homeschooling and unschooling in particular. I was already reading John Holt. I started thinking [more deeply] about education and how people learn. [Conventional schooling] all felt so wrong to me.” Ultimately, she says, “we joined a homeschool network.”

And it worked. “Emily was a free spirit and wanted to be outside all of the time,” Ruehlman says. “She was so happy. I bought books. We have curriculum books, and every now and then we’ll pull them out if Iain and Owen are interested, but I really didn’t have the stamina [to force them to follow the printed work books], especially if they weren’t interested. It seemed like it was silly. I feel like you only really learn something if you’re interested.”

Which does not mean unschooling her kids was stress-free. Emily had a hard time learning to read and was tested for phonemic awareness. Cathy and her husband worried she wouldn’t learn. For a couple of years, they enrolled her in a Langsford Center reading program for two hours a day.

At what point does real life begin and the deferment, the training for it, trail

had eraser marks [all over my clothing]. It was humiliating. I don’t know how I got through school. My grades were decent, but not perfect. My guidance counselor told me I was not college material, and I thought, *Good, because I don’t want to go to college.*”

But after working and living independently, she did go to college. She ended up earning a bachelor’s degree in education from UC (where she received honors) and will begin attending grad school to continue her education studies in the fall. What changed her attitude, she says, was that she was studying something she cared about and wanted to learn.

“I wanted to be a teacher, of all things. I thought I was going to make it interesting and exciting for those kids.” She got a job teaching sixth grade at a public school. “I worked so hard and for long hours. But after lunch the kids were like this—” She droops. “They were polite, but they weren’t interested. I tried to make it as fun as I could. I just felt like a failure every day.” She left the job.

Then came her own children. Ruehlman and her husband, a pharmacist, enrolled their first daughter, Emily, in Waldorf’s preschool program, but when it came time for kindergarten,

forever.

Now 20, Emily works for Lewis Animal Hospital as a vet assistant and rides, cares for, and trains horses—she owns two and is an accomplished eventer (dressage, cross-country, and jumping). Like many unschoolers who stick with the un-program, Emily describes herself as inner-directed. “I learned at a very young age to be self-motivated,” she told me. “I didn’t have to have people tell me it’s time to get up and do *this*, it was very easy for me to get up and learn to get everything done.” Like all of her siblings, she has tried regular school; she decided quickly that she preferred staying home.

Academics, of course, are not the only reason children are enrolled in school these days. Social contact and development are a large piece of it—wanting your kid to fit in with her peers.

“I think it was always hard because everyone wants to fit in and be part of the normal,” Emily says, “but over the years I learned that it was a lot more fun to be different and to be able to express myself, and I didn’t have to feel scared to say ‘I don’t go to school every day.’ A few of my friends didn’t understand, they were like ‘What do you do all day?’ And then I had a few friends that were super-envious because they hated school, and they were like ‘Do you just sit there?’ None of our days were scheduled, and we were pretty much allowed to do whatever.”

Her mother was more than fine with that. “Not many years ago they would climb those big evergreen trees in the yard to the top with binoculars and just kind of look out,” she recalls. “One neighbor said, ‘Owen or Iain is all the way at the top!’ I’m like, *I know*.”

“I wanted to go to college,” Emily says. “But once I got my two horses and took over caring for them myself, it was the horses or college. It was a really hard decision.” Her younger sister, Abby, who also owned horses, chose college. Says Emily, “I’m hoping eventually I’ll be able to pay for college.”

Meanwhile, college or not-college is a ways off for Emily’s brothers, Owen and Iain. For now, they say, they are into sports and Minecraft. When I ask Owen what he’s most interested in, he says, with a twinkle, “soccer and baseball, and soccer and baseball.”

“Do you play all of them?”

“Yeah, not at the same time.”

His older brother, Iain, admits to a wider range: swim team, baseball, basketball, and football. He says video games helped him learn to read—he wanted to understand what people were saying on game chats and figured out how to put the words together.

Owen mentions that he recently took a class at Leaves of Learning. The class: “Sports of All Sorts.”

They’re both into the history of World War I and II, and soon we’re discussing the Jewish ghettos in German-occupied Poland. Owen wonders why the Jews didn’t put Nazis into concentration camps.

Now that it’s summer, I ask them, does it feel any different than the rest of the year?

It's tempting to consider the Ruehlman-Walsh family as outliers. Or maybe lucky oddballs. Some might think their choices—helping to legitimize such a free-form mode of education—misguided, even dangerous. A psychotherapist I know wondered if the potentially isolated learning environment that unschooling often requires might provide cover for abuse. And then there is the more benign danger of children growing to adulthood without gaining what some call critical skill sets, such as the laddered instruction that leads to higher math acquisition.

Melissa Stewart, principal of Indian Hill Elementary School, for one, says that while she works with several district families whose children are mostly homeschooled, she was unfamiliar with the concept of unschooling. On hearing a description she reflected: “I would like to find more information on how there is purposeful thinking about the scope and sequence of skills that are taught so that students don’t miss important components of the curriculum that traditionally educated children learn.” To wit: What if the child can read and write but does not learn the basics of constructing a written argument?



Nonetheless, analysts with the U.S. Census take the homeschool choice and what it represents for our society at large seriously, noting in 2001 in *Home Schooling in the United States: Trends and Characteristics*: “There is a true tension between home educators and the school standards movement, just as there is between homeschooling and the increasing demand by employers for occupationally specific training and credentials. What these movements have in common is not a conservative agenda but an attempt by each sector with an interest in schooling to gain greater control over the system.”

Cathy Ruehlman’s decision to keep her kids home was philosophical, supported by her own early experiences as a student. But Rita Rozzi, an unschooling parent who has a law degree and majored in French literature at UC, says it was quality-of-life issues that got the ball rolling for her. As Rozzi tells it, her eldest child, Alina, hated school. Getting her to go was a constant fight—bedtime, wake-up time, getting dressed time, it was all a struggle. “Alina was a nightmare,” she says. But when they stopped forcing her to attend school, not only did the fighting stop but her child became happy. She learned how to read and do math with a minimum of fuss. She liked being

home. Crucially, she was getting enough sleep.

“We just wanted our kids to be happy,” Rozzi says. “I was lucky enough that my husband did make enough money for us to be able to [unschool them]. But I told them if you don’t want to go to school, you have to help out because it’s a lot more work with you guys being at home.”

Rozzi’s second child, Bruno, was happy in his Montessori school, but with his sister home he felt left out and asked to stay home as well. (Eventually Bruno and his sister Monica both chose to attend private high schools.) The family joined a group of unschooling families who met weekly on Mondays. The kids were all ages and played together. The parents brought in guest speakers; they discussed issues in educating their children. A community was formed.

“[One] mother was a mathematician, and she came and talked to the group about all of the things our kids could be doing that are mathematical, like making those little potholders and weaving,” Rozzi recalls. “She said, ‘Don’t discount all of these things that you think aren’t any big deal, like roller skating, playing piano.’ But in the back of my mind I’m like ‘God, I’ve got to get both sides of their brain working, so they have every advantage they can.’”

On a recent day in early summer I am sitting with Rozzi and two of her children—Peter and Monica—as well as Cathy Ruehlman, who is a longtime friend of the Rozzis and belonged to the Monday community. Rozzi’s youngest child, Peter, is 16. Recently, he has been accepted as a freshman at Xavier University, where he’s studying computer science. He says he tried regular school briefly when he was younger before deciding it wasn’t for him.

John Rozzi, who owns a fireworks company, walks in while we are talking and joins the conversation. He says he was skeptical at first: “‘They’re not doing anything! Are they going to learn anything?’ And then in the end, it just works out. They learned how to read. I don’t know. Kids just do. They just pick up stuff.”

Rita adds: “We read to them. I read constantly to them.”

And TV?

“We definitely watched TV—I needed a break in the afternoon,” Rita says. “When they were younger there was a limit to [media exposure], but as they got older a lot of the rules got softer. [Eventually, they] kind of fell away. We would watch Martha Stewart every morning, and when Martha was over we were done. And I hated crafts, but they would get ideas, and I would say, ‘Do you guys want to go to Michaels?’ We would run to Michaels. They would figure out what they needed. They might write a list down. And they loved to cook, so Martha was a springboard for ideas on doing things.”

Before leaving for his class at Xavier, Peter agrees to show me the computer he built at age 13. It’s a black rectangular box—like the PCs in many offices. He says he wanted a computer and knew it would be cheaper—and parent-approved—if he built it himself. He learned how from videos online.

“I spent a year prior to building it mapping out different parts I could use,” he tells me. “It wound up being around \$1,800. I made that [money] working; I’d pet sit for neighbors in my old neighborhood. I took care of their two dogs three times a day because they worked all day. So I made a lot of money for about three years working

“It has an I5 processor,” he says. “I just replaced the graphics card not too long ago ’cause it was getting kind of old, but it still runs triple-A game titles fine. In a year or two I’ll probably start replacing more parts of it.”

Peter Rozzi is an obvious poster child for unschooling—focused, accomplished, and accepted at college. College is the big question for many parents, of course. They fear their child will not gain entry without access to Advanced Placement courses, without the preparation conventional schools offer, not to mention college prep schools.

UC’s Stackpole, who has worked admissions, says one aspect of his job is to bring more homeschooled students to UC. Stackpole is considering dissertation research on college outcomes for homeschooled students, and he believes “nontraditional” students of all types tend to be prepared for college because they also tend to be focused and self-motivated. “People who are unschooled or homeschooled,” he says, “if they’re motivated to get into college, they’re going to make it into college. With all the options that they have, they are going to do what they need to do to get admitted to their choice of institution.” Which is to say, *without* AP classes, extracurricular clubs, grades, or even transcripts.

All of it brings to mind the children’s story *Henry Hikes to Fitchburg*, in which two bears agree to meet in the town of Fitchburg. One works his butt off in order to buy a train ticket, while the other walks the 30 miles, splashing in a river, learning about nature, enjoying himself.

And guess what? They both get there.

Editor’s Note: An earlier version of this story, which appears in the September 2015 issue, used the phrase “Polish ghetto” in referring to the ghettos which the Germans forced Jews to live in during their occupation of Poland in World War II. To avoid any misunderstanding, that phrase has been revised to read: “Jewish ghettos in German-occupied Poland.”

TAGS: ALTERNATIVE LEARNING, EDUCATION ISSUE, HOMESCHOOLING, SEPTEMBER 2015, UNSCHOOLING

14 Comments

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jimprzedzienkowski • 3 years ago

— | 🗨

The term 'Polish ghetto' is incorrect. The German Nazis established the 'ghettos' on occupied Polish soil. The camps were not Polish as implied by the comment. Please correct the error.

6 ^ | ▾ • Reply • Share ›



latHag → jimprzedzienkowski • 2 years ago

— | 🗨

where Jews were allowed to live in Poland.

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Vivian Lam → jimprzedzienkowski • 3 years ago

Can some one please summarized this article for me? Thank you

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Wolfgang → jimprzedzienkowski • 2 years ago

"Occupied Polish soil".

You mean occupied GERMAN soil?

That was OUR land for thousands of years, until you scumbags stole it from us!

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Prima Vera → Wolfgang • 2 years ago

Hej Wolfgang, it might have remained your soil if your CHILD MURDERING ancestors had stayed out of Poland. They didn't, and they ultimately got their arses kicked (again!). Why they didn't wipe Germany (and of course Germans) off the face of the earth, I'll never know. What a shame, eh? Next time perhaps....

2 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Wolfgang → Prima Vera • 2 years ago

YOU PEOPLE ARE SICK RACISTS!

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



JetHag → Wolfgang • 2 years ago

No, not thousands. Not until the greedy, warmongering Germans encroached on Polish lands in the 18th century. Besides, the borders would not have changed had the Germans not started World War Two in search of "Lebensraum." As a result of the war begun by Germany, Poland lost almost half its territory -- Kresy, the eastern borderlands. Millions of Polish people were forced to migrate. So spare us your pity party. And the fact that the ghettos were GERMAN is indisputable. Apparently, the editors realized their error and have made a correction.

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Wolfgang → JetHag • 2 years ago

YOU PEOPLE ARE SICK RACISTS!! GIVE US OUR LAND BACK!!!

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Izabela Vimala • 3 years ago

Please correct. There is nothing like "Polish ghetto" in the whole world. You can find ONLY GERMAN NAZIS 'ghettos' where many innocent people were murdered. While writing way you did

**kgelner** • 3 years ago

I was homeschooled in the 70's, using the "unschooling" approach. I had no problems getting into college, after taking a GED (laughably easy) to prove I had the basics covered and the SAT/ACT to prove I knew more advanced materials.

As the article mentioned, unschooling really helps in teaching kids to direct how they learn - that is an invaluable skill at college, where you are choosing your own direction and what mix of courses you will take. I felt a lot less lost when I first got to college than a lot of my peers seemed to be.

Homeschooling is not for everyone as it takes a lot of parent involvement (even for an unschooling approach). But if you can make it work it makes for a terrific foundation for kids there entire lives, not just the traditional periods of schooling when they are young.

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›

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**Vivian Lam** • 3 years ago

Can someone summarized this article for me? Thank you

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**Susan Raber** • 3 years ago

Excellent article, with one minor quibble - In Ohio, the local school superintendent is not given the authority to 'approve' or 'deny' a homeschool notification. They merely review it for compliance and issue an excuse from compulsory attendance. This is a common misconception, as even school superintendents themselves sometimes don't get it right and attempt to request information not required by law, and to 'deny' parents an excuse letter until they comply with these unlawful demands.

Many people fear homeschooling, especially unschooling, because they can't imagine a child learning or working on their own. But as children are naturally curious (there's probably a study somewhere proving that a 4 year old asks questions at a rate of about 32 per minute), they are learning constantly. We need not fear that homeschooling/unschooling families aren't invested in their child's education, or that their kids will not acquire skills needed to lead happy and fulfilling lives.



Polly → Susan Raber • 2 years ago



Where are the requirements for unschooling in Ohio? My daughter is taking her 2 elementary children out. My Granddaughter is 8, has an IQ of 121, can use words that sometimes I have to look up the meaning. She made B's & C's last year and they held her back because she couldn't say her sight words fast enough. My Grandson has been in so much trouble because he is a boy and a comedian. He is smart, but likes to clown around. They want her to put him on psycho pills to control him. She refuses. He found some boy's underwear in the trash can in the restroom last year and was chasing the other boys with them and got expelled for a day. The principal called me to come and get him and I asked him why there was underwear in the trash can to start with. I also told him to bust his ass and he informed me that was not allowed. He's a boy. I don't see this being a reason for expulsion. They have so many intervention specialists and counselors in schools today they outnumber the teachers. School are a toxic environment today. My main question is the evaluation process. Are they expecting the unschooled to be able to work this common core crap? Because they won't be taught any of this garbage at home. How do I find out more?
Thanks

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



EvelynKrieger • 3 years ago



Thanks for this honest and realistic profile of unschooling. It's not an easy educational approach/lifestyle to sum up.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›