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11 academic benefits of unschooling

In *Unschooling to University*, Judy Arnall, a parenting expert and 'unschooler' to five kids, makes the case for ditching the classroom.

By **Judy Arnall** October 1, 2019



Photo: iStockPhoto

Many people ask, “How do kids pick up 12 grades of knowledge if they don’t go to school or homeschool?” The answer is that children acquire **knowledge through play**, projects, volunteering, field trips and everyday life. They don’t need to “catch up” because they are learning in a different way and much of it is invisible. When

they get older, they may switch to a different track; one where all that accumulated knowledge is proven with gradable output such as exams, essays, presentations, and research projects. Here are 11 academic benefits that unschooling provides:

1. Critical thinking is encouraged

Large bureaucracies do not handle questioning well. They operate, by their very nature, on the contingent of obedience. If there are too many disrupters, they get bogged down and lose time and efficiency.

Critical thinkers are disruptive because they interrupt the prescribed flow of content delivery. Classroom dissenters are often dealt with by being sent to detention or shamed into silence.

All children should be critical thinkers. They should respectfully question everything they don't understand, from content to rules and regulations. Critical thinking is about gathering information, exposing embedded values and assumptions, breaking down data, and analyzing arguments.

Unschooling promotes questions without punishment.

2. Problem solving is encouraged

When schools have problems, teachers, principals, and support staff are expected to solve them. Children are rarely consulted. Yet problem solving is the most valued among the top ten skills that employers seek. Most problem solving in the education system ignores the central stakeholder—the learner. Problems involving students are “solved” by using punishments and bribery, not by consulting and collaborating. Yet

success in life is attained by solving problems. When win-win is always the goal, life becomes easier and healthier, with **far less stress**. In unschooling, children are free to practice problem solving.

3. Initiative and grit is encouraged

School is an institution; it must have rules, routines, policies, procedures, and permissions. To run efficiently, it must adhere to those elements above all other considerations, including personalized learning. A student who wishes to do something outside of the norm is often shut down because of “liability issues,” or “safety concerns,” or just plain “policy.” The beauty of unschooling rests in its very lack of these constraints. If your son wants to make a potato print, let him! **As long as it is safe, it can be done!** Unschooling allows for yeses, instead of “No, you can’t do that. It’s against our policy.”

4. Unschooling is multi-aged and interest-sorted

Children in schools are graded by age, not by interests or abilities. Thus, they are often corralled into the wrong group for their actual level with no movement for personalized learning.

If a child excels at math, she shouldn’t be held back because of her age. If she needs to take years to learn a concept, she can. True personalized learning cannot be offered in same-grade classes. Learning must be as **multi-age friendly** as unschooling is.

5. No streaming or tracking

School children are sorted and ranked according to the government system's judgment and placement criteria at around age 15, or Grade 10, in North America; sooner in Europe. In some countries, children are streamed as early as age 10. This is wrong. Research consistently shows that children's brains do not develop their pre-frontal cortex and children do not develop their abstract thinking abilities until age 13 or 14. Thus, children are sorted even before they have demonstrated their capabilities.

When children unschool, they are not streamed until they apply and write the entrance exams for postsecondary courses.

6. Unschoolers can delve deep into a topic

In schools, topics are broad and diluted. Schools teach wide and shallow in order to give bits of everything to their students. The goal is maximum exposure; time constraints do not allow for deep, involved learning. Children become masters of tidbits and experts on nothing. Deeper learning must be done on their own time. Because there are so many topics, schools pick and choose. A child cannot possibly study every country in 12 years, so the system picks a few: Japan, Brazil, Peru, Greece. Why should the system choose? Why can the learner not choose?

Clearly, customization is the adult model. People are *not* masters of all topics. We specialize.

Most children don't know what they want to do in life when they finish high school. Many blindly enter college or university without having had time to pursue their passions. An engineer might have preferred to be a baker; a psychologist might have been happier as an artist; a teacher might have had a passion for welding.

When children need to know something, they can consult their mobile devices; information is readily available. What they need more is to focus on their true interests. In unschooling, students choose. They can go as deep as they wish, for as long as they want. Children have the time.

7. Unschoolers learn entrepreneurial skills

Schools can't teach how to run a business until university. Hence, many children may have art or products to sell, but not the business skills needed to do so. Success in business requires critical thinking, risk-taking, creative problem solving, communication skills, and initiative. Organization and record keeping require long hours, discipline, and responsibility. Success requires persistence—an unwavering faith in a product or service in the face of naysayers. Success requires making mistakes and learning from them; rejigging a model, idea, or product until it's perfect.

A bureaucracy such as school does not teach how to operate a business or how to succeed in a competitive environment. Schools barely touch on the topic of financial literacy—indispensable knowledge in today's world, regardless of a person's choice of career or profession.

Many young unschoolers start businesses. They learn math, English, science, and social skills through the execution of the business.

8. Unschooling eliminates cheating

The school system is the worst for drilling into kids the idea that mistakes are a bad thing. The entire system is based on grading to motivate kids, but in doing so, **low grades punish them**. On a test or project, they are not rewarded with marks for the

effort they put in, nor is the quality of their learning assessed. They are marked negatively, on the basis of the mistakes they made. Ideally, all students should be marked and then given the chance to fix every marked item before the final assessment. That way, learning actually takes place and poor marks are not permanent.

The consequence of marking by punishing mistakes is that kids will cover up their mistakes. Covering up mistakes has unforeseen consequences that, at worst, can endanger lives—I don't want my child's brain surgeon to have cheated on her exams. Cheating is rampant in our schools. According to a survey of Canadian university and college students, 73 percent had cheated on written work in high school; 58 percent had cheated on a test. (CBC, 2016) When the majority of students cheat, something is wrong with the system.

In unschooling there are no marks, and thus, no competition for marks. There is nothing to cheat against.

9. Parents, teachers, and caregivers learn too

We must continue our learning and our enthusiasm for learning throughout our lives. When we set an example for our children by following our own pursuits, by being curious, or by taking adult education courses, we stoke their enthusiasm for learning. Unschooling models learning for its own enjoyment.

10. Children have more time to read

School children are required to read one novel in English per grade. That's it. My informal poll of home education parents of various ages revealed **amazing reading**

habits. Homeschooled children read from 10 to 40 novels in a year. Why? Because they had free time. Reading enhances ideas, discussions, world knowledge and provides pleasure. With so many hours of free time, unschooled children tend to be voracious readers.

11. Sleep grows children's brains

Time for sufficient sleep is a physical benefit of unschooling, but it also contributes hugely to academic performance. The natural sleep rhythms of young children in elementary school are early-to-bed, early-to-rise, which works well for an early morning start to school. However, when children get older, their circadian rhythm shifts to later-to-sleep, later-to-wake. Adolescents are sleep deprived because of early-hour starts, a critical factor affecting in their performance in junior high and high school. University kids have somewhat more flexibility in scheduling their classes around their need for sleep.

We are at risk of high blood pressure, stroke, diabetes, heart disease, compromised immune systems and the propensity to gain weight when we don't get enough sleep.

Children who unschool can sleep in until noon or later. A full night's sleep benefits their developing brain cells. Kids eventually do have to prepare themselves for 8 a.m. workday starts, but not until they reach adulthood, when seven hours sleep a night is sufficient. When the time comes to adjust to a new schedule, they will.

Many of these benefits only exist when education is delivered outside of a big institution. We owe it to our children to provide the best form a education for them.

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