

A Day in the Life of an Unschooler

by Pam Genant

I am often asked to define or explain unschooling by well-meaning homeschoolers. It is so hard to define unschooling to people who, for so long, have been involved with a school system, whether public, private or their own variation of school-at-home. The synapses in the brain are so wired to separate everything into nice neat categories: - math, science, history, social studies, reading, writing, vocabulary. - Also and to create measurable goals and criteria that a child must meet to be able to “pass” to the next segment of information. So many people are just unable to grasp the fundamental philosophies of trust and respect involved in unschooling my boys.

In searching for ways to communicate how learning just happens as a byproduct of our living respectful, trusting lives as a happy, healthy family, where each individual has interests and passions, I find myself giving examples rather than definitions. - And and thinking to myself, “mMaybe if these people could see how we live they would begin to understand unschooling.”

Our days are filled with examples of living unschooling day to day, unschooling in action. One of those marvelous examples, that I will undoubtedly use when conversing with friends about unschooling, oecured occurred last fall...

It was a wonderful day for us as we drove with another unschooling family to the mountains of North Carolina, headed for a picnic set up by a group of unschoolers from South Carolina, that we had never met. The family that rode with us, a mother and her three children, were fairly new to unschooling, having taken her children out of school in the middle of the previous year. Yet, the children had made tremendous strides over the past months in regaining their interests and passions.

After about two hours of driving, wondering if the experience would be worth the journey, we arrived and - I saw a familiar face and met so many new friends. There was an instant connection and conversation flowed so easily. - Not that usual topic found at homeschool gatherings: - “(what curriculum do you use? - ?), But dialogue about our passions, our children’s passions, what we were doing in our families. So refreshing.

After a few minutes a young boy walked over and, sitting next to me, struck up a conversation, telling me all about himself and his family and inquiring about mine. We talked for a while and I felt like part of a group instead of an outsider going against the flow. How wonderful to be with people who treated children with such respect that these children were engaging, thinking, feeling individuals, not just robots, programmed with the usual “yes ma’am,” “no ma’am.”

I watched my boys, Dallen age nine and Phillip age six, as they easily fit into a group of children deciding what to do with an enormous rotting tree stump. As one child said, “it’s Helm’s Deep; we need to break the fortress walls,” I knew that my boys were in the right place, and each child went about finding his own “tool” to use. I later found out, as my son recounted his adventures, that while destroying the fortress they took the time to rescue unsuspecting insects caught off guard by the advancing army.

Looking around I saw mothers and children wading in a nearby creek, exploring under rocks. Not one mother said “don’t get wet, the water is cold”. They eagerly joined their children or waited on shore with a towel, dry clothes and a warm hug. There was food on picnic tables; the children came for a quick snack and were off again for more

adventures. Not one mother forced her child to sit and eat, knowing that the child had more important conquests and could eat anytime. I sat mesmerized by the awe inspiring community of free spirits, trusting parents, respectful families, and felt like I had always known these people in my heart.

After leaving the picnic we journeyed to a nearby waterfall and watched the water and talked as the children played in the creek at the bottom. As I observed their play, I was amazed at the site. One older boy decided to build a dam at a point where the water had tapered off to a little stream. He was using rocks and trying to find the correct placement of rocks to get the desired effect. After several minutes of adjusting, another boy stepped in and suggested that maybe he could use some of the sand and decaying leaves from the bottom of this stream to help fill the gaps. So they both joined together trying out this new idea. Then the two other ~~two~~ boys jumped in adding more ideas; maybe some sticks to add support for the sand and leaves, and how about smaller rocks? On and on they worked for almost an hour, working with every suggestion thrown out.

Not one child said that it was a stupid idea, or that it would never work. They just all pitched in working-trying everyone's idea and keeping the ones that seemed to help and-while reworking others. uUntil they had a dam. "And that," exclaimed one child, "is a lake." They then proceeded to float sticks and play. Their task complete and successful, they said goodbye to the dam, leaving it for others to enjoy.

On the road home at the end of this visit, I felt recharged. It just filled me up with joy -to see my boys so happy and to spend time with like--minded friends. As some in the car slept and others talked and a couple watched a movie,- I replayed the events of the day over and over in my mind. I did not want to forget one bit of the joy and excitement. I can't wait to enjoy this kind of company again.