

From School to Unschool

The main points in bullets precede each paragraph. I did this so I could remember my main points and not have to read from my essay. However, for those of you that came to the conference, you know that I forgot my essay and I ended up improvising my talk. I tried to recall the main points and expound on them from memory. Maybe this essay will be a bit complete and clear. My motto is “just wing it” so, as usual, I did ☺

- **Public school history**
- **Charter School history**
- **Lincoln Charter school**

My children all started in public school. Landon and Anna went to a conventional ps until they finished the 4th and 1st grades. I was very disappointed in the ps system, I felt it had failed Landon and with Ethan starting kindergarten, I had assumptions that it would fail him as well. I began researching alternatives to ps. with homeschooling being my last option. I felt I couldn't do it with 4 small children. The demands and expectations of “teaching at home” were more than I felt I could handle. I found out that a charter school was being organized in our county and I hopped on the bandwagon to help that vision come to fruition. I placed all 3 of my children in the charter school and I became an integral part of its existence. I served as the president of the PTO, and also as an elected board member. I volunteered countless hours at school, as well as subbed for absent teachers, and tutored some children. We stuck with the CS for 5 years. There were lots of ups and downs, but mostly it was a very good alternative. When Anna aged out of the school, I moved her to another charter school in the neighboring county. I decided to also move Ethan and JP so they would all go to the same school. At this time, Landon was in public high school after attending at private school for 2 years during middle school. So, having children in 3 different schools was not practical.

- **Lincoln Charter school failure**
- **Decision to homeschool –reasons I felt I could do it**
- **Before taking them out , Oct-Dec**

The new charter school was a dismal failure. It was nothing but an “exclusive” replication of ps curriculum and ideals. needless to say, that venture didn't last long and I decided to take my children out of school. I bit the bullet and decided could home school them. Most of my confidence stemmed from the fact that they were all much older, I had been so in school for the past 8 years, and I was much more enlightened about why it didn't work. I made the decision to take them out of school around October of 2002. I figured I would take them out at Christmas to make a smoother transition. And also to have some time to plan and have a good grasp of what we were going to do when they came home.

- **My original ideas..**
- **PATH research**
- **Replicating school setting to some extent**

My idea of home schooling was pretty much what most people perceive it to be. “School at home”. Replicating a schedule, lessons, tests, etc just like students have a school. With the much added benefit of one on one interaction, more flexibility in curriculum and approaches, and more opportunities to explore outside the “classroom” i.e., field trips and other excursions. I knew I would never be the strict school at home type with a model classroom, assignments, records, etc. I had not appreciated their education in the most conventional sense previously. I had always bucked the system and took a much more relaxed and flexible approach. Which I was able to do at the charter school. But, I did foresee me spending time with each child even if it meant “teaching” it. And also doing family projects, unit studies that incorporated each child's individual skill level into the lessons. I researched our local hs support group and I was very happy to find out that just about everything ps “offers”.. our local hs also participated in. Spelling bees, geo bees, science fairs, band, BOB, yearbook staff.. and of course field trips. Also the 4'H, scouts, and other groups that met regularly. I felt very confident that my children would not be “missing” anything by taking them out of school. I could provide them with the same opportunities and also provide them with better instruction therefore they would succeed academically, as well as socially.

- **Continuing Research**
- **Researching different methods**
- **Discovering unschooling**

Fortunately, being a seeker at heart, I did not stop my research there. I continued to look up and read about every type of schooling approach I could find. I read and read and read.. about Charlotte Mason, Waldorf, Classical approaches.. I looked at different curriculums, online studies, I read suggestions and outlines. I joined every online hs support group in NC and national groups. I talked to other hs'ers. I asked for advice. I read every article I could find.. every website I came across was overwhelming.. BUT, I had the benefit of time on my side. I had 3 months to read and process and plan ahead for the coming year. As I researched and discovered so how diverse homeschooling actually is, I kept coming across "unschooling"

- **Defining unschooling – first impressions**
- **Learning more, moving to real unschooling**

At first the idea was not totally clear to me. I understood unschooling as "following your child's interests" allowing your child to choose what they want to learn about.. And I envisioned taking a unit study approach to that. For instance, Ethan loved mechanics.. So, we would study cars and mechanics, we would read books, do projects, watch movies, take field trips. A unit study would incorporate all the basic subjects into his interest in cars.. And as their interests changed, I would adapt the course to accommodate what interested them. That sounded like a good plan. But, as I continued to explore the lifestyle of unschooling I joined several unschooling discussion groups, and I found out that even that level of "direction" and instruction was unhelpful and even prohibitive to children actually learning.

- **Who tells us what we need to know and when?**
- **Why do we follow that?**
- **Deeper understanding of unschooling.. talking, interaction.. real life stories**

Somewhere, sometime, somebody decided what we "needed" to learn and when we needed to learn it. That really didn't make sense the more I thought about it. I always knew that a lot of ps work was mostly hogwash, but I couldn't see past the influence of society and years of brainwashing that most everyone falls prey to when it comes to what one "needs" to succeed in life. The more I read about unschooling, in particular the real life accounts of families who unschooled and are very happy, healthy, intelligent and "successful".. the clearer it became to me that we COULD and SHOULD totally abandon any 'schoolish' thinking in our daily lives. I had the benefit of talking to and interacting with some veteran unschoolers.. many of whom their children had never been to school and low and behold, they were not illiterate freaks. So, I made the decision that we would just go with the flow, and at least "deschool" for a few months and see how it went

- **Differences in never schooled and coming out of school**
- **Comparing what is more worthy**
- **Our own brainwashing as well as our children's**
- **My benefits of prior research**

The difference in being in school and coming out of that environment is that you and your children do have to make a total lifestyle change, You have to change your way of thinking, processing information, and your values on "what" is worth learning. You have to come to the understanding that no one else can put a value on what one learns. Learning the parts of a flower in second grade is not more important or worthy than learning all the parts of a bicycle. We may know and believe this in our hearts and minds, but it is very difficult to totally let go of old notions and values. Especially when your children have been in a school setting.. Not only do we have to combat our own indoctrination with school, as most of us went to school.. we also have had the more recent reiteration with our own children of school, how much children need it, and we get caught up in the same patterns with our children that we learned as children ourselves. I was fortunate in that I had the time before I actually took my children out of school to make the adjustments in my thinking and I liberated myself from most of my schoolish thinking.

- **The spectrum**
- **Moving away from conventional thinking**
- **Different needs for different families.. comfort levels**

Most families who take their children out of school start the process on one end of the spectrum.. leaning toward conventional methods and approaches. They naturally try to replicate school and they employ the same methods and approaches that school use. Some families are very comfortable with school at home. They feel they are successful and they never want to move from that method. I think that most folks end up moving toward the other end of the spectrum as they experiment with their children, their individual needs, situations and family dynamics. They start out trying to be very “strict” to the letter.. following the advice and guidance of outside sources who are “better equipped” to tell us what our children need to know. But, as time and error prevail, most families begin to modify and ease up on the conventional school approach. Some (most) end up being comfortable and happy somewhere in the middle of school at home and “radical, total unschooling.. To get farther and further along the continuum towards total unschooling is different for every family, and every child.

- **My own experiences..**
- **Having time to think and process**
- **Landon being in PS**

I think I had a relatively easy time coming to this lifestyle because I began somewhere to the left of the middle in my thoughts about “education”.. and I had the benefit of researching and exploring the concept of unschooling BEFORE I actually took my children out of school. I also had the life experience of having a child in public high school. So, I had a recent, ongoing experience of what the reality of public school is. Having Landon in public high school, going through all of that boloney, it helped confirm my convictions that conventional methods were NOT the best way for children to learn.

- **Making a lifestyle change**
- **Outside of the norm, the box**
- **Wal-mart analogy**
- **Shades of gray**

Leaving school and adopting a totally different lifestyle that does not involve “teaching and lessons” is not an idea that crosses many people’s minds. It’s like say, the price of an item at Wal-mart. You see the item, you want to purchase it, you take it to the cashier and pay for the item. The thought never crosses your mind that you could ask for a lower price, or that there is some kind of incentive to buy the item. You could take the item up to the cashier and offer her less money for it. or say, I will give you 10% off of these if you give me one free. She may look at you like you are crazy. She may stammer and stutter and insist that it is not possible. Or, she may say, OK and be happy to sell the items to you at a discount. She may call her manager over and go through the same scenarios. But, the bottom line is, NOTHING is really black and white. There are shades of gray in everything.

- **Fear of change.. not questioning status quo**
- **Never schooled vs. reiteration of schoolish ideals**

Most people are afraid to question the status quo. They take things at face value and do not consider that there ARE alternatives and options. If you have never sent your children to school. Then you are not faced with the reestablishment and reinforcement of society’s norm and schoolish ways of thinking. You may have struggled with those feelings in contemplation of whether or not you would send your child to school. But most likely, you just continued your lives and unschooling came natural and easy.

- **Family Support difficultly**
- **Changing to extremes, not understanding**
- **Family opinions**
- **Getting easier – avoiding conflict**
- **Burden on them to find out – not being overt and condescending**

Another challenge to moving to unschooling, actually it is an obstacle to anyone taking their children out of school, even if they are going to school at home, is family support. It’s difficult for family and friends to accept that you are going against the status quo. Just because you become enlightened and determined that school is not the best thing for your child does not mean that everyone around you will agree. As I said before, indoctrination is difficult to overcome. Status quo is easy, people do not want to change it and it makes them uneasy when someone they love does not agree with them. My family was not happy that I decided to take my kids out of school. Actually, they were not happy that I put them in a charter school. They couldn’t understand why I went to school that I went to was not good enough for my children. So, the idea of unschooling was totally ludicrous to them. They begrudgingly accept, halfway, that I would school them at home.. be their teacher, tutor them.. BUT, for me to abandon

of school was very scary and frankly, stupid to them. Both my parents, sisters, and in laws were not supportive at all. They tried to undermine my decision. They would imply to my children that they were “not learning” They subtly and sometimes suggested to them that they should go back to school. They constantly questioned, quizzed them and interrogated them about what they were learning. It was very VERY difficult for the first few months. But, little by little, it did get easier to deal with my strong resolve and my consistent defense of my decision finally wore them down and they saw they were not making any progress by trying to force their opinions onto me. I think they have seen that my children ARE learning, they ARE happy, they have friends and they have a social life. I keep telling myself that its just a matter of time.. I know that in the end, they will get over it and grow for a long time. But, for now, I have to be patient and persevere with my convictions of what I know is right. I think the family/friends support (or non support) issue is more difficult for folks coming from school to unschooling. It is a big jump from one concept to the extreme. I think that it’s better to err on the side of discretion. I didn’t just announce out of the blue “Hey, we are not going to do any school work” I put the burden of finding that out on my family. It was their job to ask questions, and I tried to answer them as delicately as possible. Using this approach, it wasn’t a total slap in the face.. it was a little time to get used to the idea.. Although, they still didn’t agree, I do not try to rub their faces in it.

- **Questioning our decisions**
- **No experts – must always question**
- **Research, re evaluate, reinforce, reconfirm**

Although, I know that there are very few ‘always unschooling’ parents who NEVER question their choices and never have any concern over whether or not they are doing the right thing. That is natural; every parent does that, no matter what path he or she chose. It’s an inherent part of being a parent. If we considered ourselves the ultimate expert that could make no mistakes, we are doing a disservice to ourselves as well as to our children. The important thing to remember is, when those questions and concerns arise, we face them, we re evaluate our positions, we seek for more reinforcement, we reconfirm our decisions with more research, we talk to more people, ask more questions, and reassure ourselves that we are doing the right thing.

- **Longer in school.. more difficulty changing**
- **Anna’s experience**
- **Ethan’s experience**
- **JP’s experience**
- **Landon’s experience.**

I think that the longer a child is in public school, the more difficult it is for them (and the parent) to embrace unschooling. I know that Anna, who was in the 7th grade when she came out of school. Has the most concerns and questions about whether she is “doing the right thing” She worries about not being smart enough to go to college.. She fears she is behind her peers and considers going to public school so she can be “normal” But, we talk about her fears, we talk to other parents of teens.. we talk to parents of older kids and realize that all of this is normal.. And she realizes that kids DO succeed, they DO go to college and they ARE happy and productive.. and her fears are quelled.. And she also is able to see all the advantages of unschooling.. she can see how much she has learned, how much she has enjoyed, and all of the options she has as an unschooler. Ethan. He had to go to school.. He was just glad to get out of it. So, he didn’t express any regrets or concerns .. for a while.. He was in the 5th grade when he came out of school. But, within the past 6 mos or so, he has mentioned that he feels like he is not smart enough. He says that he wants to learn specific things.. I am more than happy to facilitate that.. I am available and enthusiastic about helping him in any way. BUT, I think his expressions are not from true desire or interest, they are just left over school thoughts.. .. He really wants to sit down and do multiplication worksheets.. but he feels he should because that’s what other kids his age do. JP, he was only in 2nd grade.. and he never (or rather, very rarely) says anything to the effect that he feels he needs to learn something. He made the transition to unschooling much easier, more fluently. Landon was totally against unschooling when we first took the kids out. He thought we were crazy, foolish. I think he felt a personal judgment against his way of life, his upbringing. He was resentful too that he had to buck up and go to school and just deal with things. But, as time went by and he was around more and more. He began to understand and agree that it is all just a learning process. He could see the failures of school and he agreed with them. Of course my opinions of school , grades, requirements changed a bit. (although, as I said before, I was never all that compliant) and he could also see the nonsense in so much in high school. I think he became a schooled unschooler and now he approaches college with much the same attitude. He knows there are some hoops he has to jump through. But he has learned that you do not have to take everything at face value.. there are options and the goal is to acquire the knowledge on your own terms.

- **Finding other unschoolers**
- **LnL conference**
- **Making friends, contacts, plans**
- **Helping new folks**

I think the single most helpful thing that we did to ease the transition from school to unchool was to surround ourselves with other unschoolers. Well, surround is bit too extreme.. LOL.. but we did seek out others of like mind.. We found a few other unschoolers and we began to seek out others. We went to the Live and Learn conference.. we started planning events and activities. It has taken close to 2 years to get to the point where we are now.. Where the majority of our friends are also unschoolers.. But, it has been very much worth the effort. Because we I do have concerns, or misgivings, I have a support system to rely on. I have friends who have “been there done that”.. I can reap the benefits of their advice and wisdom. And, it is helpful to be there to offer support for new unschoolers. I can relate to them, share in their joy, and empathize with their struggles.

- **Cold turkey vs taking steps**
- **Process of understanding**
- **Liberating yourself and your children from school**

Moving from school to unschooling is a big step. I think that some may be able to do it “cold turkey”.. but more often, it is a series of steps.. It is a process of understanding the principles, the theories and the values of truly allowing your children the freedom to learn. The first step is freeing yourself and your children from school.. and from then on, it’s a matter of daily living.

- **Our daily lives – different and always changing**
- **Hand out of what we have done..**

Folks always want to know what we do day to day. Well, we just live. We do all kinds of things. The kids are enrolled in “classes” because they enjoy them and they get to see their friends. Anna takes piano and she really enjoys that. Nothing is discounted or ignored because its “too schooly” or not educational enough. We understand that no experience can usually be perfect. Sometimes one has to deal with the boring stuff (tolerate it) to get to the good stuff.. And sometimes, things turn out to be all fluff and no substance, a waste of time. BUT, that is not really a waste of time, because we learned what to avoid . . . This is a list of the SOME of the things we have done over the past two years. It's definitely not complete, it hits the high spots. You can easily take this list and turn it into quite an impressive portfolio complete with grade transcripts of the most impressive stuff. the truth is, it’s just real living and real learning.