

The Secret Lives of Children

I thought I was the omnipotent mother. I thought that I knew everything my children did. After all, I am with usually with them 24/7. Aside from an occasional overnight visit with friends or family, they are with me. And upon their return, or even during their visit, I get detailed updates and extensive reports about what they did. I have discovered, despite my all-seeing eyes, my all hearing ears, and my never stop talking mouth, that my children are growing and learning behind my back! I have been shocked by this revelation more than once. But, each time I realize my children learned something without me, I am surprised. It is very similar to putting a pair of pants on your child that they wore last week, and, WHAT?? The pants do not fit! You know your child grows. You see them every day. But, when those clothes suddenly and without warning become too small, it seems impossible that something that big (no pun intended) happened while you were not watching.

The longer my family unschools, the more often this happens, and I have moved from amazement to mild surprise when one of my children shares something with me that I had no idea they knew. When my children were in school, they learned without me. But, I attributed their knowledge to their teachers. Others were guiding them, directing them, and presenting the facts and figures for them to absorb. Of course I knew that children learn on their own. They learn the natural stuff, like walking, talking, eating and other mimicked behaviors. But, to learn facts and figures and “important information”, one must have the material presented to them and be required to complete the assigned work in order to attain the knowledge. Over the last 15 years, my understanding of how children learn has swung from that extreme much more to the other end of realizing that children learn freely, naturally, and easily as they live their lives. I have altered my way of thinking about learning, and I certainly do not believe that one can only learn in a structured classroom with a teacher and books and assignments. But, with all enlightened understanding of learning, I am still surprised when one my children casually mentions something that I had no idea they knew.

This weekend we went camping. We camp pretty often, but usually in my sister’s pop up, with water and electricity. We braved it this time and we hiked in to campsites with no hook ups. I could probably write a short novel about the things we learned on this camping trip, trial and error and hands on experiment type learning. Anyone who has been camping knows what I am referring to. And, if you have not taken your family camping.. DO IT! But the small incident that prompted me to write this article was not something that we learning while camping.

We were hiking back from the swimming hole along a marked trail. My sister had attempted to take the trail earlier in the day, but she missed the trail head and ended taking the long way around. On the way back, I knew the general vicinity of the trail head and we were searching for it along the edge of the woods. Jon Phillip, my 10 year old, saw a red tag on a tree and exclaimed. “That’s it, that is the trail, that red tag is for the trail” I said, “Oh yeah, here it is, this is it” But, I honestly thought that red tag on

the tree was ??? I don't know, something else, just a fluke that there was a red tag attached to the tree. But, as we went along the trail, there was a red tag on trees spaced along the trail. JP, said, "See, there are the markers, this is the right trail". I said (surprised) "Yes, you are right, the tags are along the trail" Then he went into a long and very descriptive explanation of trail tags. He told us what each color of tag meant for the difficulty of each trail. I can't even remember the color codes. I do remember that we were on a red trail which was "Difficult, but not the most difficult, but harder than a blue or orange but easier than flaming red orange or black, which is the hardest", according to JP. He talked and talked all the way along the trail about the color codes and the different kinds of trails, and how each trail is rated. I was totally shocked that he knew all of this information. I asked him, "Where did you find out about these trails?" (I really thought that maybe he was just making it up) He said.. "I read it in a book about camping at Barnes and Noble". At that point, I almost fell off the trail. I said, "Oh, you did, what book was it?" He said, "It was a book all about camping. I read some of it. The trail codes were in the back, I read about all the different kinds of trails. I want to go on a black trail sometime." Still, finding it hard to believe that my 10 year old picked up a book about camping in Barnes and Noble, I pressed him for details. I asked him the name of the book. He said, "It was one of those dummy books, the yellow ones. There was dummy on the front of it roasting a marshmallow and it was on fire" "Oh, Camping for Dummies!", I said. "Yes, that was it, Camping for Dummies", he answered. He went on to tell me other stuff he read in the book, and how most of it he already knew about camping, but he was really interested in the trail stuff. We are going to check out some trails within driving distance for a day trip and try some of them out.

So, I found out, while I was drinking coffee with some friends, that my son was reading about camping and trail codes. Maybe that does not seem too unlikely to some people, but for my son, it was not what I expected him to be doing at Barnes and Noble. Usually while my friends and I chat and have coffee, he and his friends play in the kid's section of the store. Sometimes his friends look at books and magazines, but he usually opts to go over to the video game store and try out demos. He usually balks at going to Barnes and Noble unless I buy him some pastries and he can go to the video store next door. Books and reading are not his forte. If I suggest a book, maybe sit down and read it aloud to him, he will listen and sometimes take turns reading aloud to me. But, the idea of him picking up a book, sitting down to read it, that is unusual for him. Or, I THOUGHT it was unusual for him. I guess I am not the omnipotent mother I thought I was. Who knows, maybe he has been reading manuals and guides and novel and magazines secretly for years. Maybe he knows the secret to the universe. Maybe he could do brain surgery. Or, maybe he just liked the look of that dummy burning a marshmallow and he flipped through the book to the most colorful page that caught his eye. Whatever the case, he learned something of which I was not aware. These moments are exciting, and they serve to reaffirm my decision to unschool and allow my children to freedom to learn what they find interesting.. It is ironic that he picked up that book while I was sipping coffee and commiserating with my friends about my son's lack of interest in reading.