

# **The Challenges and Benefits of Unschooling, According to 232 Families Who Have Chosen that Route<sup>1</sup>**

By: Peter GRAY & Gina RILEY

---

## **Abstract**

Unschooling families (families that don't send their children to school and don't school them at home) were invited to participate in a survey about their unschooling practices. Two hundred and thirty two self-identified unschooling families, with at least one child over five years old, completed and returned the questionnaire. Qualitative analyses revealed considerable variability in the routes to unschooling and in the ways in which the parents saw themselves as involved in their children's education. The biggest challenge expressed was that of overcoming feelings of criticism, or social pressure, that came from others who disapproved and from their own culturally-ingrained, habitual ways of thinking about education. The reported benefits of unschooling were numerous; they included improved learning, better attitudes about learning, and improved psychological and social wellbeing for the children; and increased closeness, harmony, and freedom for the whole family.

## The Challenges and Benefits of Unschooling, According to 232 Families Who Have Chosen that Route<sup>1</sup>

Individuals learn through exploration and interaction with their environment. For most children in school, this means interaction with teachers, same-age peers, textbooks, assignments, tests, and the like, selected for the child as part of a pre-planned curriculum. Teachers and educators commonly claim that the goal of school is preparation for the “real world.” What if the child’s classroom were the “real world”? Unschooling is a growing counter-cultural movement. At a time when the culture as a whole is moving toward more narrowly defined curricula, more standardized testing, and more hours, days, and years in school, an increasing number of families are choosing to keep their children out of school and not do anything like schooling at home.

*Unschooling* is often considered to be a branch of homeschooling. While other homeschoolers may do “school at home” and follow a set curriculum, unschoolers learn primarily through everyday life experiences--experiences that they choose and that therefore automatically match their abilities, interests, and learning styles (Wheatley, 2009). It is estimated that approximately two million children are being homeschooled in the United States today (Lewin, 2011; National Center for Education Statistics, 2008). There is no way to know for sure how many of these are unschoolers, as official counts do not distinguish unschoolers from other homeschoolers. However, based on their prevalence at homeschooling conventions and estimates from people familiar with homeschooling generally (e.g. Farenga, personal communication, July 11, 2012), our best guess is that roughly 10% of homeschoolers would identify themselves as unschoolers, and that percentage seems to be growing over time.

It is difficult to define unschooling formally, as the practice is, by nature, informal. John Holt, who coined the term unschooling and popularized this form of

education beginning in the 1960's, believed that "children want to learn about the world, are good at it, and can be trusted to do it without much adult coercion or interference" (1977, p.1). Sandra Dodd, who unschooled her own children and frequently writes and speaks about unschooling, defines it as "creating and maintaining an environment in which natural learning can flourish". Many unschoolers see unschooling as a lifestyle rather than a philosophy of education. Kirschner (2008) explains that unschooling parents tend to facilitate self-regulation, self-understanding, and intrinsic motivation in their children. Also, she writes, "these parents treat their children's' activities as intrinsically valuable and therefore private; most unschoolers consider evaluation – whether in the form of adult commentary or standardized testing – as disruptive to learning" (2008, p.44).

Recent publicity by the mainstream media has helped to spread the word about unschooling (Fuller, 2011; Wilson, 2011), and the general public has not been shy about offering their opinions. Many people seem intrigued; others doubt that children are competent to direct their own education. Because many people have never encountered a homeschooled child and few have encountered an unschooled child, the media plays a big role in the popular perception of homeschoolers and unschoolers, and that perception may be quite distorted (Houseman, 2011). In a qualitative analysis, David Cameron Houseman (2011) found that homeschoolers and unschoolers were commonly portrayed in films and television clips as having paranoid, controlling parents or as being "nerdy know-it-alls" basking in their self-proclaimed genius.

Although mainstream media have shown some interest in the unschooling movement, there has been a conspicuous lack of academic research on unschooling. A

## The Challenges and Benefits of Unschooling, According to 232 Families Who Have Chosen that Route<sup>1</sup>

literature search brought up only a handful of qualitative explorations, theses, and dissertations. Martin-Chang, Gould, and Meuse (2011) discuss the difficulty of gaining access to those within the unschooling community, given their ‘self-contained’ structure and philosophical hesitancy to be involved in research.

Donna Kirschner’s (2008) doctoral research in anthropology is one of the few studies specifically centering on the unschooling movement. In her qualitative, ethnographic study, Kirschner spent a significant amount of time with 22 unschooling families, 5 of whom she studied for five years, allowing her access to those who lived an authentic unschooling lifestyle. This lifestyle commonly included a history of attachment parenting, volunteerism, and creating and participating in online and in-person unschooling meetings and conferences. Living an unschooling lifestyle also entailed challenges, according to Kirschner, including the challenges, for both children and adults, of dealing with societal pressures to conform to a more traditional lifestyle. These pressures came from inside and outside the family network, and to some degree from state education laws and regulations. Despite the challenges, most of Kirschner’s research highlighted the benefits of unschooling, including the freedom unschooling families felt in their lives and the “real-world learning” that happened every day.

The purpose of our study was to survey a relatively large sample of unschooling families to learn how they define unschooling, why they chose the unschooling path, and what they perceive to be the main challenges and benefits of this path.

### Methodology

In September of 2011, one of us (Peter Gray) gained access to those within the unschooling community through his blog called “Freedom to Learn” at the *Psychology Today* website. He posted an essay introducing readers to the unschooling movement and invited unschoolers to participate in a survey focused on their experiences. The survey form and information about how to respond was also posted on Pat Farenga’s *Learning without Schooling* website (patfarenga.com) and Jan Hunt’s *Natural Child Project* website (naturalchild.org). The survey asked for basic demographic data, as well as the history of schooling, homeschooling, and unschooling for each child in the family. The survey then asked respondents to define unschooling as it was practiced in their home, to describe the path that led them to unschooling, and to describe the biggest challenges and benefits of unschooling for their families. The specific wording of the relevant survey questions will be given within the results sections of this paper.

#### Demographics of Those Who Responded

A total of 255 self-identified unschooling families responded to the survey, by emailing completed forms to Peter Gray, all of them providing informed consent on behalf of all members of the family. In 23 of these families, the oldest child had not reached school age (5.0 years), and we chose not to include those families in our analyses, which left us with 232 families. A majority (80.1%) of the respondents resided in the United States. Thirty-four states in the United States were represented; those with the largest number of respondents were California (23 families), New York (14 families), Oregon (13 families) and New Jersey (10 families). Nineteen families lived in Canada, and 26 in other countries, including Australia, Costa Rica, France, Finland, Hong Kong, India, Ireland, Israel, Puerto Rico, and the UAE.

## The Challenges and Benefits of Unschooling, According to 232 Families Who Have Chosen that Route<sup>1</sup>

Of the individuals who filled out the questionnaire, 221 (95.2%) were mothers, 9 were fathers, and 2 were unschooled young adults writing about their family of origin. Two hundred and ten (90.5%) of the respondents identified themselves as married and/or living with a significant other. Twenty two (21 females, 1 male) identified themselves as not married or not living with a significant other. Regarding number of children in the family, 21.6% had one child, 44.8 % had two children, and 33.6% had more than three children.

Participants were asked (in Question 3 of the survey): *“What is your main employment? Does that employment generate income, and does it take place primarily at home or away from home? If you have a spouse or other domestic partner in your family who is also a parent or guardian to the children, please also answer these questions for that person.”*

In answer to that question, roughly half of the respondents identified themselves as primarily stay-at-home moms (many of whom also mentioned part-time jobs). This was not surprising, as it takes time and energy to unschool. Overall, the responses concerning employment of both mothers and fathers, made it clear that these families represented a wide range in terms of socioeconomic strata. Many parents identified themselves as professionals of one type or another; others defined themselves as self-employed entrepreneurs, or as blue-collar workers. The great majority of the fathers in the survey were employed full time.

### The Spectrum of Unschooling

People who identify themselves as unschoolers vary, to at least some degree, in their educational practices. In the blog essay announcing the survey, unschooling was described as follows: *“Unschoolers do not send their children to school and they do not do at home the kinds of things that are done at school. More specifically, they do not establish a curriculum for their children, they do not require their children to do particular assignments for the purpose of education, and they do not test their children to measure progress. Instead, they allow their children freedom to pursue their own interests and to learn, in their own ways, what they need to know to follow those interests. They also, in various ways, provide an environmental context and environmental support for the child's learning. Life and learning do not occur in a vacuum; they occur in the context of a cultural environment, and unschooling parents help define and bring the child into contact with that environment.”*

As Question 5 of the survey, we asked: *“Please describe briefly how your family defines unschooling. What if any responsibility do you, as parent(s), assume for the education of your children?”* We coded these descriptions into three categories according to the degree to which they emphasized the role of the parents as compared to that of the children themselves in the children’s education. The coding was based on our interpretation of the descriptions the respondents gave us, and we cannot judge to what degree they reflect differences in their actual unschooling practices.

We labeled as D0 those descriptions that placed all or almost all of the emphasis on the role of the child in directing his or her education. Unschooling parents within this category, according to their own descriptions, did not deliberately attempt to motivate, guide, direct, or monitor their child’s learning; any involvement in that learning was at

## The Challenges and Benefits of Unschooling, According to 232 Families Who Have Chosen that Route<sup>1</sup>

the child's request. One hundred and one families (43.5% of the total) received this code.

These families emphasized the child's freedom as a central concept to unschooling. For example, one parent in this category stated: *“For us, unschooling is self-directed, interest-driven, freedom-based learning all the time. We do not use curriculum, nor do we have certain days or hours where we schedule learning. We are learning as we live. We view learning as a natural part of humanity, and we believe that learning is naturally joyful and desirable. We value a spirit of wonder, play, and meaningful connections with others. We seek to experience ‘education’ as a meaningful, experiential, explorative, joyful, passionate life.”*

By our coding, 96 (41.4%) of the responses fell into category D1. These differed from D0 only in that they made some mention of deliberate parental roles in guiding or motivating the children's education. Respondents in this category also often mentioned some deliberate attention to nurturing a child's interests. As illustration, one in this category wrote: *“We define unschooling as creating an enriching environment for our children where natural learning and passions can flourish. We want our life to be about connection—to each other, to our interests and passions, to a joyful life together....As a parent, I am my children's experienced partner and guide and I help them to gain access to materials and people that they might not otherwise have access to. I introduce them to things, places, people that I think might be interesting to them, but I do not push them or feel rejected or discouraged if they do not find it interesting....”*

Finally, 35 (15.1%) of the responses fell into Category D2. These were responses that seemed to occupy a borderline between unschooling and what is often called “relaxed homeschooling.” The parents in these cases seemed to have at least some



relatively specific educational goals in mind for their children and seemed to work deliberately toward achieving those goals. For example, one parent wrote: "*We believe that, for the most part, our daughter should be encouraged to explore subjects that are of interest to her, and it is our responsibility as parents to make learning opportunities available to her... I usually ask her to learn something or do something new or educational every day (and I explain to her why learning something new every day is such a cool thing to do!).*"

### Paths to Unschooling

Question 6 of our survey asked families to discuss what paths drew them to unschooling. Specifically, we asked: "*Please describe the path by which your family came to the unschooling philosophy you now practice. In particular: (a) Did any specific school experiences of one or more of your children play a role? If so, briefly describe those experiences. (b) Did any particular author or authors play a role? If so, please name the author or authors and what most appealed to you about their writing. (c) Did you try homeschooling before unschooling? If so, what led you from one to the other?*"

In response to Question 6a, 101 families (43.5% of the total) indicated that at least one of their children attended school prior to starting unschooling and that the child's experiences at school led them to remove the child from school. In their explanations, 38 of these families referred specifically to the rigidity of the school's rules or the authoritarian nature of the classroom as reason for removing the child. For example, one parent stated: "*We were increasingly frustrated by the way things were taught to the kids.*"

## The Challenges and Benefits of Unschooling, According to 232 Families Who Have Chosen that Route<sup>1</sup>

*One example: kids who understood things quickly in math still had to go through the tedious process of 'showing their work' even if they could figure it out in their heads."*

Thirty-two referred to the wasted time, the paltry amount of learning that occurred, and/or to the child's boredom, loss of curiosity, or declining interest in learning. These families seemed to resent the amount of busy work and/or homework given in schools and commonly felt that their child's love of learning and intrinsic passion was disappearing because of school. Thirty-two respondents referred specifically to their child's unhappiness, anxiety, or condition of being bullied at school. One parent described her daughter's unhappiness as follows: *"My older daughter was having test anxiety (it was the first year that No Child Left Behind was implemented), wasn't eating at lunchtime, was overcome by the noise and smells, and was distracted in the classroom. My younger daughter was bored and beginning to refuse to participate in classroom activities.... Things finally got to the breaking point and I pulled them out without having a plan, but knowing I could definitely do better than the school. I was done sending them someplace that made them so sad and created so much tension in our family."*

For many families, the transition from traditional schooling to unschooling was gradual, often starting with structured homeschooling using a prepackaged or state-supplied curriculum. In response to Question 6c of the survey, 110 families (47.4%) reported trying homeschooling before unschooling. As reasons for shifting to unschooling, they commonly reported that their children resisted the structured curriculum, that it was causing tension in the family, and/or that their children were learning much more on their own than through the structured curriculum, so the curriculum was unnecessary. For example, one parent reported: *"We tried 'school at*

*home' and it was a big flop; we were taking the problems that my son had at public school and were just changing the location. We tried a number of different styles of curriculum and they just didn't feel right. He and I were both happiest when I just let him be. In the meantime I was researching all I could on different ways to homeschool and each time I read about unschooling I thought, 'That would work for him, I just know it would.' I was afraid to trust, though, so we muddled through pretending to homeschool. When my younger two children taught themselves to read, I had the ah-ha moment and said, 'Hey it really can work.'"*

In response to Question 6b, the majority of respondents said that a particular author or authors did play a role in their decision to unschool. Not surprisingly, the author most often mentioned, by far, was John Holt (named by 127 respondents). Holt was a former teacher who went on to condemn forced schooling and promote self-directed education in books such as *How Children Fail* (1964) and *How Children Learn* (1967). Holt also coined the term unschooling and founded the first magazine devoted to it--*Growing Without Schooling*. Holt's work continues to be carried on by *Holt Associates*, led by Pat Farenga. The next most frequently mentioned author was John Taylor Gatto (named by 52 respondents), a former New York State Teacher of the Year who left teaching because he was convinced that compulsory schools, no matter how one taught within them, were doing more harm than good. Gatto went on to write, among other things, *Dumbing Us Down: The Hidden Curriculum of Compulsory Schooling* (1992); *A Different Kind of Teacher: Solving the Crisis of American Schooling* (2000); and *Weapons of Mass Instruction: A Schoolteacher's Journey Through the Dark World of Compulsory Schooling* (2001). The third most often mentioned was Sandra Dodd (named

## The Challenges and Benefits of Unschooling, According to 232 Families Who Have Chosen that Route<sup>1</sup>

by 39 respondents), who maintains a very active website devoted to unschooling and parenting, is author of *The Big Book of Unschooling* (2009), and promotes a version of unschooling called "radical unschooling." Other authors mentioned by at least 9 respondents were Alfie Kohn, Grace Llewellyn, Mary Griffith, Dayna Martin, Naomi Aldort, Ivan Illich, Jeanne Leidloff, Raymond & Dorothy Moore, Jan Hunt, Pat Farenga, Joyce Fetteroll, Rue Kream, and Susan Wise Bauer. In addition to mentioning specific authors, many mentioned that unschooling websites, conferences, or lectures played a role in their decision. Many also mentioned the role of friends or acquaintances who were unschooling their children.

Eighty-six (37.1%) of the families indicated that they chose unschooling right from the beginning, with no initial period of in-home or out-of-home school. Some of these families said that they had made their decision even before they had any children, on the basis of their overall philosophy of life. At least a third of the 86 mentioned that their experiences parenting their young children, before school age, played a role in their decision to unschool. Many of these respondents had been practicing "attachment" or "natural" parenting, and the decision to unschool seemed to follow naturally from that. For example, one mother wrote: *"My first child was a very high need infant, as Dr. William Sears calls babies who want to be in arms constantly. I learned to respond to her cues from day one and it was hard at first, giving up my old life! I learned about attachment parenting and implemented that brilliant idea into my life and followed her lead since. My home births for babies 2 and 3 propelled me with strength that I could also take control of my children's education, or really we could do it together, with them leading the way and me there to support them."*

Seventy-four (31.9%) of the respondents mentioned that their own negative school experiences influenced their decision to unschool their children. One parent stated, *"My own school experiences probably played a role. I discovered during my college experience that all of my schooling previous to college was completely unnecessary and a waste of time. ... My K-12 experience was the unhappiest time of my life."* Some of the unschooling parents had been teachers or school counselors and made their decision based on those experiences. One in this category wrote, *"My husband was teaching in a small high school... by the time our oldest reached school age. I think the experience of dealing with kids who did not fit the system really opened his eyes. It pained him that so many students had simply given up all enthusiasm for learning at that point in their lives. The kids had either learned to jump through the hoops or had completely stopped trying, but there was very little real passion for learning left in them."*

And so, the people who responded to our questionnaire came to unschooling by many routes. Most often, it seems, the decision came from some combination of (a) a philosophy of life emphasizing the value of freedom and respect for individual differences; (b) observations of their children's learning and emotional experiences both inside and outside of schooling; (c) reflections on their own negative school experiences; and (d) knowledge gained from writers, speakers, websites, and the experiences of other unschooling families.

### The Challenges of Unschooling

Question 7 of the survey asked, *"What, for your family, have been the biggest challenges or hurdles to surmount in unschooling?"* After reading through the responses several times we concluded that the main categories of challenges expressed were (a)

## The Challenges and Benefits of Unschooling, According to 232 Families Who Have Chosen that Route<sup>1</sup>

feelings of social pressure or criticism concerning the decision to unschool; (b) difficulty on the part of one or both parents in ridding themselves of their own culturally-ingrained beliefs about the value of school or curriculum; (c) practical issues concerning time, career, and income; (d) difficulty arranging opportunities for their children to socialize with others; and (e) legal issues associated with unschooling.

It's difficult to go against cultural and societal norms. It is especially difficult if relatives and those around you don't seem to understand or support what you are doing. The most frequently described challenge, noted by 101 (43.5%) of respondents, was that of overcoming Social Pressures. These respondents wrote about negative judgments or criticisms from others (from family, friends, relatives, and even strangers) and the perceived need to continuously justify the unschooling choice to others. Many unschoolers met the challenge partly by forming in-person and online communities, conferences, and conventions to provide one another with social support as well as information.

The second most cited category under challenges was one we labeled "Deschooling of the Parent's Mind"—a parent's need to overcome her or his own culturally-ingrained notions regarding the value of traditional schooling. Ninety-six families (41.4%) cited this challenge, which they sometimes described as an internal conflict between their unschooling philosophy and old voices in their heads that argued the opposite. Many respondents cited challenges in both this category and the Social Pressure category, and some pointed to a link between the two. Others' criticisms would sometimes reawaken old, socially normative ways of thinking and raise again the fears that unschooling parents thought they had overcome, even when they could see that

unschooling was working very well for their children. These fears could lead the parent to begin trying to direct and control their children's learning, which, if unchecked, would defeat the unschooling practice.

Other challenges appeared in smaller numbers. Forty-five families were categorized under the Time/Career/Income code, as they mentioned that a challenge of unschooling was the amount of time it took away from self, career, or the opportunity to provide additional income. Trouble Finding Friends was also mentioned by forty-five families. It can be difficult for unschooling parents and children alike to find individuals who share interests and/or a common philosophy. Legal Issues (problems deriving from laws or regulations that make unschooling illegal or difficult to practice) were cited by 15 families. In the United States, each state has its own regulations regarding home education, and some states' regulations are stricter than others. Although Legal Issues were cited by only 5% of families in North America, they were cited by 33% (5 out of 15) who resided in Europe and by 75% (3 out of 4) who resided in France.

#### The Benefits of Unschooling

The final question (Question 8) of the survey asked, "*What, for your family, have been the biggest benefits of unschooling?*" Not surprisingly, the benefits, as perceived by our respondents, far outweighed the challenges. Far more words and passion appeared in the responses about benefits than in those about challenges. The benefits described included those specifically for the children, for the parents, and for the family structure as a whole. Based on our reading and coding of the responses, we identified the following as the main categories of benefits:

One hundred thirty three (57.3%) of the respondents described advantages of

## The Challenges and Benefits of Unschooling, According to 232 Families Who Have Chosen that Route<sup>1</sup>

unschooling for their children's learning. They perceived their children as learning more efficiently and eagerly, and learning more life-relevant material, than they would if they were in school. For example, one parent wrote, *"The children can delve deeper into subjects that matter to them, spend longer on topics that interest them. . . . The children can participate in the real world, learn real life skills, converse with people of all ages."* Many in this category also said that their children maintained a higher level of curiosity and greater intrinsic interest in learning than would be the case if they were in school or being schooled at home. One hundred twenty one (52.1%) of respondents mentioned the emotional and social advantages they felt that unschooling gave their children. They said that their children were happier, less stressed, more self-confident, more agreeable, and/or more socially outgoing than they would be if they were in school or being schooled at home. These responses contradict the common belief that children not in school would fail to learn to get along well with others, outside the family. The respondents felt that their children had a social advantage, not disadvantage, because they were regularly in contact with individuals of all ages and from different backgrounds, in the larger community as well as at home, instead of being in a classroom filled with same-age peers.

One hundred and thirty two (57%) of the respondents mentioned Family Closeness as a major benefit of unschooling. Parents reported greater closeness with their children and improved sibling relationships. In the words of one parent, *"Hands down, the relationship with our kids has flourished. We have never gone through the typical teen angst or rebellion so often touted as normal. I don't think it is. If you build up your family life where members work together and help one another, where the focus is on*



*happy learning, it's hard NOT to get along and enjoy each other's company! Schools have an insidious way of pitting parents against kids and eroding the relationship that could flourish outside of that environment. When kids, and all people really, can relax and enjoy life and learn and pursue interests, they are happy. When people are happy, they get along better, they work together and inspire one another, learn from one another and grow stronger and healthier. All of that has spilled over into marriage life and all family relationships, including siblings. I knew without a doubt that the learning would happen and that it would be amazing! I didn't expect the stark difference in our relationship with our kids, as compared to what I thought it should be like by what I saw in other families with kids in school."*

Eighty-four (36.2%) of the respondents mentioned a benefit that we coded as Family Freedom of Schedule. Unschooling families are not fettered by the traditional school schedule, of waking up early to catch the bus each school day and traveling as a family only on school holidays. Instead, they can follow their natural rhythms to create schedules that fit each individual and the family as a whole. One respondent in this category wrote, *"Enjoying a family-centered life rather than an institution-centered life has been the biggest benefit of unschooling. Our late riser can rise late and our early morning lover can get up early. We don't need to wrap our lives around the schedule of a school. Our kids learn all the time, instead of being trained to learn one subject at a time in 50-minute increments bookended by bells. We are incredibly fortunate to live in a time and place where we enjoy the free life of unschooling."*

## Discussion

## The Challenges and Benefits of Unschooling, According to 232 Families Who Have Chosen that Route<sup>1</sup>

In summary, unschoolers vary in form and technique. For some families, unschooling is a form of “relaxed homeschooling”. For others, it is completely child led and created.

Families come to unschooling from many different paths. Negative experiences with traditional forms of schooling played a role for some. Some came to unschooling after a period of more formal homeschooling. Books, conferences, and web communities were mentioned by most when discussing their path to unschooling. These varied forms of media provided information and support for those considering unschooling as well as for those who had already made the decision to unschool.

The feeling of social pressure or criticism was the most often reported challenge to living an unschooling lifestyle. Many families felt pressure from neighbors, extended family, friends, strangers, and even from culturally-ingrained voices in their own minds. However, they resisted such pressure because of their perceptions of the benefits of unschooling. The reported benefits included, for the children, improved learning, improved attitudes about learning, and improved social and emotional wellbeing; and, for the whole family, greater closeness, harmony, and freedom.

Although “Finding Friends” was an issue for some of the families, most of them felt that unschooling was beneficial for their children’s social development. A misconception surrounding those educated at home is that they have no friends and are socially awkward. In fact, the participants in this study generally reported that their children were happier, more agreeable, or more socially outgoing than they would be if they were traditionally schooled.

Unschooling apparently works very well for the families who responded to our survey. A caveat, however, is that the respondents are a self-selected sample who found

the survey on the Internet or heard about it from others and chose to respond to it, not a random sample of all families who have tried unschooling. It is possible that these are among the more enthusiastic and successful unschoolers. At present, however, there is no way to locate a random or normative sample of unschoolers, as there is no official list of them. If we were to conduct a survey at a conference of unschoolers, we would have the same problems; those who attend such conferences are not a random sample. We can, with some confidence, however, say that our survey tells us about the views and experiences of a large group of unschooling families who enjoy this path and (at least at the time of the survey) have stuck with it.

Another limitation of the study derives from the open-ended nature of the survey questions. The survey instructions asked respondents to be succinct in their answers. Specifically, the instructions included the following sentences: *“I realize that some of the questions below could produce very long answers, even books. However, I am asking for relatively short answers, which just hit on the main points, without great detail. But don’t hesitate to provide those details that you feel are needed to make your main point(s) clear.”* Because of the open-ended form of the questions and the instructions to be succinct, the percentage of respondents who described a certain type of challenge or benefit almost certainly underestimates the percentage who would agree to that challenge or benefit if it appeared in a list on the survey form and the task was to check “yes” or “no” as to whether it applied to them or not. The percentages are still useful, however, in showing the relative weight that the respondents gave to various categories of challenges and benefits. It is quite significant, for example, that many

## The Challenges and Benefits of Unschooling, According to 232 Families Who Have Chosen that Route<sup>1</sup>

respondents cited social pressures as a major challenge and far fewer cited time or money problems, or meeting legal requirements.

A third limitation is that this was a survey of unschooling parents (mostly mothers), not of the unschooled children. Although some the respondents made it clear that they consulted with their children in answering the questions, we do not know to what degree the children's answers, overall, would be similar to those of their parents. For example, would the children claim to value the increased time with their parents as much as the parents claimed to value the increased time with their children? In the future, it would be valuable to conduct a systematic study of unschooled children's views of the advantages and disadvantages of unschooling.

A big question relevant to parents, teachers, and administrators who wish to assess unschooling is, "What becomes of unschooled graduates (or undergraduates)?" To date, there has been no systematic outcome study of unschoolers, but some research has been done on homeschool outcomes. We do know that although not all homeschooled students choose to go to college, those who do are typically judged as very well prepared (Cogan, 2010; Greene & Greene, 2007; Lattibeaudiere, 2000). A number of colleges and universities, including many of the most elite schools, actively recruit homeschooled students (Cooper & Sureau, 2007). Sorey and Duggan (2008) reported that 100% of community college admissions officers in their survey believed that homeschooled students would be as successful academically as students who attended a traditional high school. A dissertation that focused on the academic success of homeschooled students enrolled in a South Carolina technical college found that such students "compared

favorably to their traditionally educated peers” (Bagwell, 2010, p. 122). Comparable follow-up studies on unschooled students are yet to be done.

Although systematic research examining outcomes for unschoolers is lacking, many unschooled young adults have been actively documenting their experiences through blogs, videos, and social media platforms. Kate Fridkis, a writer and unschooled young adult, writes a blog about body image called Eat The Damn Cake and another about unschooling called Skipping School. Peter Kowalke, an unschooled adult, is a writer and documentary filmmaker best known for his writings and speeches on homeschooling and unschooling. And Idzie Desmarais, a twenty-year-old unschooler, has documented her experiences in a blog called “I’m Unschooling. Yes, I Can Write”.

In a Master’s thesis on media use that focused on five unschooling families, Bertozzi (2006) wrote, “If the criterion is happy children who grow into self motivated people with a love of learning – well then, yes, unschooling does work” (p.16). In unschooling there is no worry about test scores or grades. Instead, unschooling parents’ main concern seems to be that of raising healthy, happy, responsible, intrinsically motivated children. It would be a mistake, however, to conclude that unschooling is a solution to all problems. One parent reminded us that *“Unschooling is not a panacea that prevents all unhappiness or difficulty; it's important not to oversimplify or romanticize this. Our daughters have had problems and struggles like all teenagers do in our society. They are extremely smart and well educated, but I think that would be true if they had gone to school. I think the biggest difference is that they know themselves better than we did at their age. They may be a little closer to their true path in life. That was certainly our hope, and if it turns out to be true, it's worth a lot.”*

## The Challenges and Benefits of Unschooling, According to 232 Families Who Have Chosen that Route<sup>1</sup>

Maybe the key ingredient to an unschooling education is time, for parents and children alike; time to explore, think, and make one's own decisions. In our time-starved society, where everyone is rushing from one responsibility or activity to another, time becomes an important commodity. For unschoolers, how to spend time is the biggest question of each day, and learning to make that choice in satisfying ways may be the biggest lesson learned. As one of our respondents wrote, "*The freedom from school and its expectations, the freedom to be, to live, has been liberating for all of us.*"

**Peter Gray**, research professor of psychology at Boston College, has conducted and published research in neuroendocrinology, animal behavior, developmental psychology, anthropology, and education. He is author of *Psychology* (Worth Publishers), a college textbook now in its 6<sup>th</sup> edition. Most of his recent research and writing has to do with the value of free, unsupervised play for children's healthy social, emotional, and intellectual development. He has expanded on these ideas extensively, for the general public, in a blog that he writes for *Psychology Today* magazine entitled *Freedom to Learn* < [www.psychologytoday.com/blog/freedom-learn](http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/freedom-learn) > and in his recently-published book, *Free to Learn: Why Unleashing the Instinct to Play Will Make Our Children Happier, More Self-Reliant, and Better Students for Life* (Basic books, 2013) < <http://www.freetolearnbook.com> >.

**Email:** [grayp@bc.edu](mailto:grayp@bc.edu)

**Gina Riley**, Ph.D. is an educational psychologist who teaches graduate and undergraduate courses in Psychology, School Psychology, Counseling, and Special

Education at Hunter College in Manhattan and Mercy College in Dobbs Ferry, New York. Her master's thesis and doctoral dissertation both focused on measures of self-determination and intrinsic motivation in homeschoolers. Dr. Riley's current research interests include clinical child neuropsychology, homeschooling and unschooling, intrinsic motivation in education, and the study of learning disabilities. She also holds several certificates in online education, distance learning, and educational technology.

**Email:** [professorginariley@gmail.com](mailto:professorginariley@gmail.com)

## References

- Albert, D. & Chilton Pearce, J. (1999). *And the skylark sings with me: Adventures inhomeschooling and community based education*. British Columbia, Canada: New Society Publishers.
- Bagwell, J. N. (2010). *The academic success of home schooled students in a South Carolina technical college*. (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1038&context=cehsedaddi>
- Bertozi, V. (2006). *Unschooling media: Participatory practices among progressive homeschoolers*. (Master's thesis). Retrieved from <http://cms.mit.edu/research/theses/Bertozi2006.pdf>.
- Cogan, M.F. (2010). Exploring academic outcomes of homeschooled students. *Journal of College Admissions*, 6, 18. Retrieved from [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_qa3955/is\\_201007/ai\\_n54718392/?tag=cont](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3955/is_201007/ai_n54718392/?tag=cont).
- Cooper, B.S. & Sureau, J. (2007). The politics of homeschooling: New developments, new challenges. *Educational Policy*, 21, 110 – 131.
- Dodd, S. (2009). *Big book of unschooling*. North Carolina: Lulu Publishing.
- Fuller, S. (2011, June 6). *Unschooling: How one kid is grateful he stayed home* [Audio podcast]. Retrieved from <http://www.npr.org/2011/06/06/137009154/unschooled-how-one-kid-is-grateful-he-stayed-home>.
- Gatto, J.T. (1992). *Dumbing us down: The hidden curriculum of compulsory schooling*. Gabriola Island, British Columbia: New Society Publishers.



Gatto, J.T. (2001). *Weapons of mass instruction: A schoolteacher's journey through the dark world of compulsory schooling*. Gabriola Island, British Columbia: New Society Publishers.

Gatto, J.T. (2002). *A different kind of teacher: Solving the crisis of American schooling*. Berkeley, CA: Berkeley Hills Books.

Greene, H. & Greene, M. (2007). There's no place like home. Retrieved on October 6, 2011 from <http://www.universitybusiness.com>.

Holt, J. (1964). *How children fail*. New York: Pitman Publishing Company.

Holt, J. (1967). *How children learn*. New York: Pitman Publishing Company.

Holt, J. (1977). *Growing Without Schooling*, 1 (#1), p1.

Holt, J. (2004). *Instead of education: Ways to help people do things better*. Boulder, CO: Sentient Publications.

Houseman, D. C. (2011). 'Nerdy know it alls' and 'Paranoid Parents': Images of alternative learning in film and television programs. *The Journal of Unschooling and Alternative Learning*, 5. Retrieved from <http://jual.nipissingu.ca/archives/V519/v5191.pdf>.

Kirschner, D.H. (2008). Producing unschoolers: Learning through living in a U.S. education movement. (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from <http://repository.upenn.edu/dissertations/AAI3309459>.

Kohn, A. (1993). *Punished by rewards: The trouble with gold stars, incentive plans, A's, praise, and other bribes*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Lattibeaudiere, V. H. (2000). An exploratory study of the transition and adjustment of former home schooled students to college life. *Dissertation Abstracts International*,

The Challenges and Benefits of Unschooling, According to 232 Families Who Have Chosen that Route<sup>1</sup>

61, 2211A.

Lewin, T. (2011, June 19). After home schooling, pomp and traditional circumstances.

*The New York Times*, A1.

Lines, P. (2011). Homeschooling: Educating children under the supervision of parents.

Retrieved from <http://searcheric.org/digests/ed457539.html>.

Martin-Chang, S., Gould, O.N., & Meuse, R.E. (2011). The impact of schooling on

academic achievement: Evidence from homeschooled and traditionally schooled students. *Canadian Journal of Behavioral Science*, 43, 195 – 202.

Morrison, K. A. (2007). Unschooling: Homeschools can provide the freedom to learn.

*Encounter*, 20, 42 – 29.

Morrison, K. (2003). What else besides grading? Looking for alternatives in all the right

places. *Paths of Learning*, 16, 22-28.

National Center for Education Statistics. (2008). *Homeschooling in the United States in*

2007. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved from

<http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2009/2009030.pdf>.

Saveny, S. (2006, November 26). Homeschoolers content to take children's lead. *The*

*New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com>.

Sorey, K. & Duggan, M.H. (2008). Homeschoolers entering community college:

Perceptions of admissions officers. *Journal of College Admissions*, Retrieved from

<http://www.nacacnet.org>.

Wasley, P. (2007). Home schooled students rise in supply and demand. *Chronicle of*

*Higher Education*, 54, A1 – A3.

Wheatley, K. (2009). Unschooling: An oasis for development and democracy. *Encounter*, 22, 27 – 32.

Wilson, J.T. (2010). Students' perspective on intrinsic motivation to learn: A model to guide educators. *A Journal of the International Christian Community for Teacher Education*. Retrieved from <http://icctejournal.org/issues/v6il>.

---

<sup>1</sup> A preliminary version of this report was presented in postings on Peter Gray's *Psychology Today* blog, at <http://www.psychologytoday.com/> on Feb. 28, March 26, and April 11, 2012.