

School's out forever

Calgary's 'unschoolers' pursue an alternative form of education

MEGAN MACKAY

mmackay@journal.ca

For thousands of families, the day is structured around school. Any given morning means buses to catch, teachers to please and textbooks to read. But a look inside Judy Arnall's household would yield none of these telltale signs of formal education. For Arnall's children, the world is their classroom.

Arnall is practicing something called "unschooling," and is part of a growing movement of people who seek to eschew the formalities of structured education and let children decide for themselves what and how they want to learn.

Essentially, an unschooled child does not follow any structured form of education. They do not attend school, nor do they have an assigned curriculum to complete at home, like a homeschooled student would. Unschooling is grounded in the belief that children are naturally driven to learn.

"Just picture a Saturday in July, and that's what a typical day of unschooling looks like for us," explains Arnall.

Arnall is a Calgary-based author and educator who is president of the Unschooling Canada Association. She's also a mother of five unschooled children, three of whom are now in various post-secondary programs.

"Too often we see kids who go through the conveyor belt of school. All of their friends are going to university and they don't really know what to do," she says. "I saw my kids have passions very early. They very quickly explored, experimented, and learned what they really loved to do and they had the time to do it."

Calgary's unschooling community is vibrant, and growing, according to Elizabeth Surridge, who is a facilitator at Home Learning Connections, one of several school boards in the city that work with unschoolers. Surridge has been working in home education for 16 years.

"I work with two eight-year-olds right now who are starting their own businesses," Surridge exclaims, "One of them is blogging. We have a budding paleobiologist who is just 13 years old. It's wild."

UNDERSTANDING UNSCHOOLING

Unschooling can be difficult to comprehend because by definition, the practice is informal. Coined by activist John Holt in 1923, the term means "allowing children as much freedom to learn in this world as their parents can comfortably bear."

Naturally, the idea of unschooling might raise some eyebrows.

"One question I often get asked is, 'Isn't that giving kids too much freedom?'" explains Arnall. "My response to that is that kids are going to take that freedom anyway. When they tune out in class because they're not interested, they're already choosing what they will and won't learn."

Idzie Desmarais, a 25-year-old blogger from Montreal who was unschooled after six months of kindergarten echoes Arnall's sentiments. Desmarais is an active writer and conference speaker in the free-education movement who writes a popular blog, titled, *I'm Unschooled. Yes, I Can Write.*

"Unschooling doesn't mean doing away with any structure whatsoever. It means creating a structure based on the needs of actual people, instead of following a structure designed for the needs of an institution," writes Desmarais.

The *John Holt Book of Homeschooling* develops this concept further, noting, "Learning to read or do quadratic equations are not 'natural' processes, but unschoolers nonetheless learn them when it makes sense for them to do so, not because they have reached a certain age or are compelled to do so by arbitrary authority. It isn't unusual to find unschoolers who are barely eight-years-old

studying astronomy or are 10-years-old and just learning to read."

For proponents, unschooling is viewed as a unique opportunity to avoid systems and strict methods, and develop independent ideas out of actual experiences. It's a way for the child to constantly pursue knowledge.

This movement isn't necessarily new, but is growing in popularity as more families acknowledge what they believe to be inherent flaws in the public education system.

"By its very nature, an institution cannot provide personalized learning. It needs policies and procedures that apply to everyone," says the mother of five Arnall. "It targets the middle of the spectrum so anyone with special needs or more advanced needs may not get those needs met."

IS IT LEGAL?

The legalities of unschooling in Canada vary from province to province. Alberta is generally perceived as one of the more lenient provinces with regards to home education. Alberta's School Act Home Education Regulation dictates that parents intending to provide a home education program, including unschoolers, must notify an associate school board within the city for each school year and submit a home education plan.

The stipulations also require regular evaluation by parents and the associate school board that the home-educated student is registered with. Failure to do so opens up unschoolers to truancy laws and the resulting punishment.

"We are obliged to write two reports a year," says Surridge. "And if we do see that there isn't enough attention being paid or a student is not meeting their goals, we say that very directly in our report."

SCHOOL'S OUT FOREVER

Continued from p. 13

Families can also contact Home Learning Connections for ideas about curriculum, or a calendar of events. Surridge creates a monthly public update with information about what resources are available to the community. This month, a mother in Cochrane is offering conversational French language courses.

POTENTIAL FOR SUCCESS, POTENTIAL FOR FAILURE

As with any movement away from the status quo, unschooling is subject to some skepticism. Many skeptics acknowledge where there is potential for success with unschooling, there is also potential for failure.

Jodi Nickel, a professor of education at Mount Royal University describes the unschooling movement as “too hands off” and believes it is important to recognize the benefits, educationally or not, of formalized schooling.

“My worry is that unschooling may be cutting off some future options,” says Nickel. “If you present a child with an option — math or soccer — they’re likely to choose soccer because it’s something they can see and understand as pleasurable. But many kids may really

enjoy doing math! They might think they don’t like it, but you’ll never necessarily know until you expose your child to that kind of learning.”

Nickel also believes public school is a key experience where students learn to respect diversity, and coexist with one another.

“In order to have a civil society, to live and work alongside people who may not think the way we do, we need to develop an understanding and be exposed to different patterns of thought — school is a key part of that,” she explains.

In an outspoken op-ed for the New Hampshire Telegraph, American school teacher Katharine Gregg expressed that while she agreed there are inherent flaws in our education system, she didn’t believe unschooling was the answer.

“Some of the principles advocated by Holt seem to me to lead to possibly dangerous conclusions,” Gregg penned. “I fear children who are allowed to run the show themselves and ignore the guidance of elders run the risk of growing up narcissistic individuals unable to work with other people.”

But unschoolers like Arnall and Surridge try not to let the criticism get to them.

“Any time you’re outside the norm, you get subtle comments, and some not-so-subtle comments,” Arnall laughs. “I just say, well, here’s a good book to read on it and when you’re done — let’s have a conversation again.”

As for Elizabeth Surridge, she believes that unschooling is not something to be pitted against formal schooling, but rather an additional option for families to consider when choosing what’s best for their child.

“If school is just... off, then you have to figure out where is the best place for that child to, at the very least, stay supported,” she says.

CAN THE NOW BE EXPLAINED BY THE PAST?

Continued from p. 19

POSSIBLE BENEFITS

The benefits of doing a PLR will vary from person to person but the goal is always to ensure the client leaves a session with resolution, closure, an answer or explanation and just generally feeling better and lighter. Sometimes the answers and understanding are not clear right away but upon reflection a client can start to make connections in their own lives.

“PLR is life changing. Anyone who has done a PLR usually says it was the best thing ever even if the process was hard. After this experience certain fears are gone, you know death is not the end,” Hills explains.

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