

Unschooling kids learn what they want – no curriculum, no homework, no tests

Unlike home-schooling, where parents follow provincial curriculums, unschooling means letting pupils choose what, when, how and where they learn

STACEY STEIN

As kids across the country gear up for another school year in pursuit of an A average, a parallel universe exists where kids don't do homework, don't take tests and don't worry about grades.

For acolytes of unschooling, kids call the shots and direct their own learning. There's no rigid structure, no provincially prescribed curriculum and no bell at the end of the day. An unschooled kid with a preternatural interest in the Jurassic Period, for example, might spend a few weeks learning about every single dinosaur of that era.

"In a nutshell, [unschooling] is letting the learner choose what they learn, when they learn, how they learn and where they learn," says Judy Arnall, president of the Unschooling Canada Association. The Calgary author's latest book, *Unschooling to University*, published by Professional Parenting Canada and set to hit bookstores in late September, follows the trajectory of 30 unschooled children who entered or graduated from postsecondary institutions.

Unschooling is different from home-schooling, where parents follow the provincial curriculum. As with home-schooling, it is legal across Canada, although provincial registration regulations vary. For the most part, parents

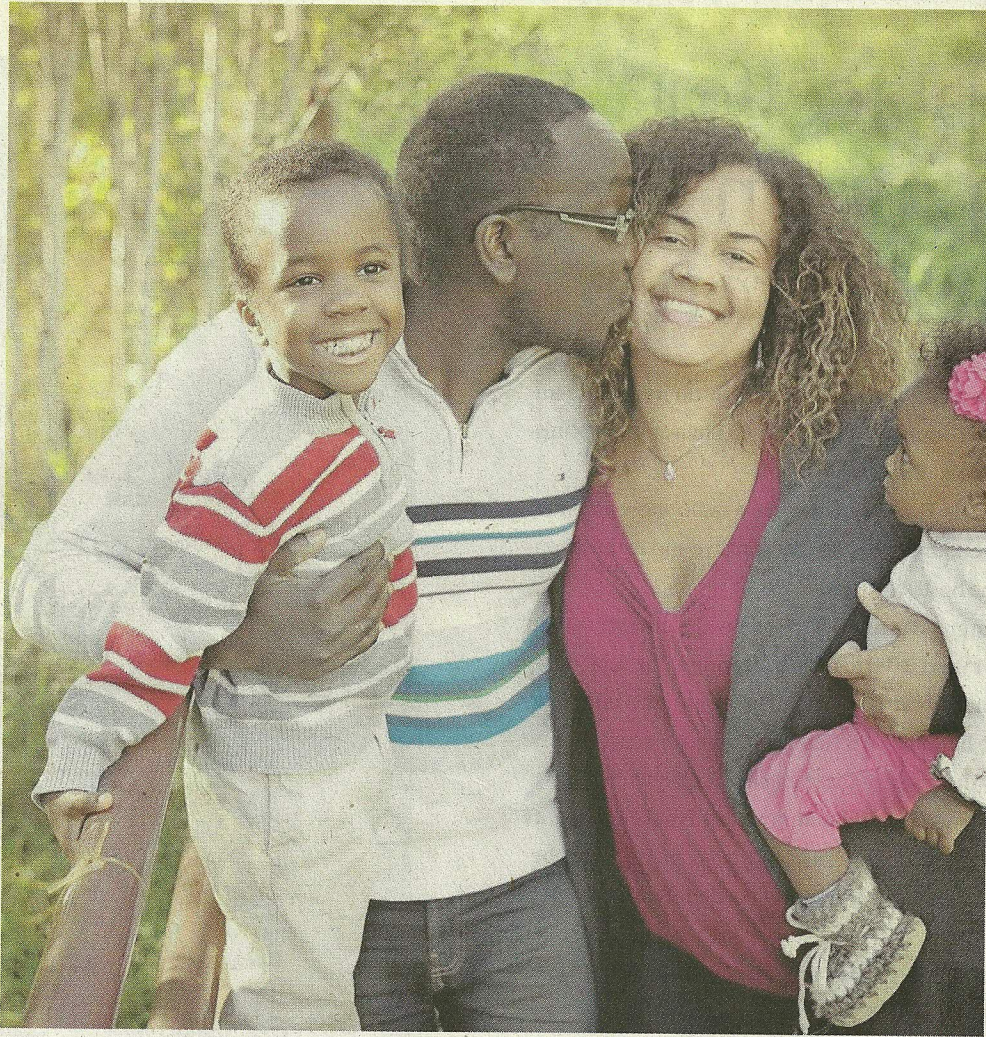
are only required to notify or register with the school board at the beginning of the year.

Unschooling is not without its critics, who contend this unorthodox approach to education leaves room for knowledge gaps, doesn't impart higher-level learning and can shut kids off from certain career paths, especially in math and science, if parents blithely allow children to avoid subjects that don't interest them.

Ms. Arnall refutes this type of thinking. Having unschooled her own five children, who range in age from 16 to 27, she counters that at least half the kids profiled in her book pursued careers in STEM (science, technology, engineering and math).

Two of Ms. Arnall's children work in STEM fields – one in computer science and the other in bioscience, and another child is in university majoring in biology and chemistry. While hard stats are difficult to come by – no educational or other regulatory body tracks the number of unschoolers – the Unschooling Canada Association Facebook group has 1,500 members, up from about 1,000 members last year, according to Ms. Arnall. The association has representatives in every province and territory, from Nunavut to Newfoundland.

So what is unschooling like for those who practice it? Four parents shared their experiences with *The Globe and Mail*.



LARA AND MARK ONABA

Children: Denzel, 6,
and Jazlyn, 2½

Location: Burnaby, B.C.

No two days are the same for Lara Onaba's children. A trip to the grocery store may include a math lesson by comparing the prices of organic versus non-organic produce, Ms. Onaba explains. Skipping stones can turn into a lesson about angles and velocity.

"There's no blanket of, 'Our days must start at 9 and must include writing and math,'" says Ms. Onaba, an entrepreneur who runs a property-management company and tow-truck company with her husband. "We don't have those requirements of 'musts' in our days."

When a topic sparks six-year-old Denzel's interest, he'll learn more about it online by using Siri or voice-to-text, since he can't yet

read. (Unschooling families often point to educational resources online that make it easier than ever for kids to self-direct their learning.)

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"I know he learns a lot better and retains a lot more information for longer when it's a topic either he's chosen himself or he's interested in," Ms. Onaba said during a recent camping trip, adding they're often on the move. "We make an effort to go to so many places and do so many things so that he's introduced to ideas that maybe plant seeds for

him for later."

Ms. Onaba says she and her husband had originally thought about sending Denzel to private school, but this changed after they attended a conference in New York about unschooling when Denzel was 3. Rather than enter Grade 1 this fall, Denzel will continue to be unschooled, just as he has been during his preschool and kindergarten years.

Ms. Onaba says Denzel has resisted having his parents' way of doing things imposed on him, so "rather than push against a brick wall, you just go with it, and it's a lot easier this way." She feels unschooling does a better job of fostering kids' analytical capabilities and problem-solving abilities, describing traditional school as "top-down" education.

"If you don't categorize it as school work and you just think of it as living, then there's no opportunity to have a negative relationship with it."

