

UnSchooling

Emily is nine years old, and like any child her age, she likes to learn on her own terms. Her reasons are straightforward.

(EMILY) Well, I like to have fun. That's really that much how much I learn by having fun.

Emily's mother, Danielle, agrees with her completely. Danielle has chosen not to enroll her children in school. But she doesn't home school them either; she unschools them. Home schoolers teach their children at home, Danielle says she doesn't teach them at all.

(DANIELLE) I don't believe my role is as their teacher, I believe my role is as their mentor, as their mother.

That means no textbooks, no exams -- no compulsory education of any kind. She says they live simply as if school and curriculum didn't exist.

But Emily and her two younger siblings, Julia and Sam, say they don't mind; they keep themselves busy doing normal kid stuff, such as reading Harry Potter or doing art projects. They also play downstairs in their miniature basement gym, and help raise dozens of animals on their family's small farm.

(JULIA) His real whole name is Pumpkin Pie, and Latte is the girl goat.

Danielle trusts that somewhere in there, her children will learn the three "R's" — reading, writing and arithmetic — but only when they're ready.

(DANIELLE) With unschooling the child is in the driver's seat, they control what it is they're learning; they control how they're learning it; they control to what degree they want to learn it.

Because unschooling parents don't believe in forcing their children to learn, unschooled students go at their own pace. Some begin to read when they're five, others don't begin until they're teenagers. But unschooling parents, such as Danielle, don't doubt that their children will learn what they need to, as long as they provide a rich learning environment.

(DANIELLE) The premise we take is that humans are programmed to learn. That humans want to learn about the world around them--they're curious, inquisitive, they don't require lessons to learn about the world, to learn to walk, to learn to talk.

But Fordham Foundation public education expert Chester Finn says there's a limit to this logic.

(FINN) Humans are programmed to learn, but they're not always programmed to learn algebra, or American history, or chemistry.

Finn adds that he doubts whether this approach would work on a wider scale. He says the unschooling approach treats children as though they were wildflowers, but that a public education system must be more regimented.

(FINN) You can't count on running into wildflowers. And you can't count on wildflowers managing to feed the goats and the sheep. If you have an economy that you have to keep going, you gotta grow corn and hay and alfalfa, and that requires a much more systematic and much more structured approach to education than letting wildflowers grow where they wish to.

But unschoolers often argue that they're just trying to do what's best for their kids, not necessarily transform the public education system. And they say there's plenty of evidence unschooling works on an individual basis.

(MOSES) I have always been in the position of deciding what would be best for me to learn and deciding where I could go with a given subject.

Twenty-one year old Marina Moses attends college in Arizona.

(MOSES) So I think having experience with that has helped me as an adult, because once I'm out on my own, every decision is me deciding where to go next.

She was unschooled through the age of 18, and says she loved it.

(MOSES) Unschooling has given me a lot of confidence in my ability to direct my life and to choose what really will be best for my education and for my life.

Although Marina admits she was behind in a few areas when she first started attending college, she says she was able to quickly catch up. There's now a widespread network of support groups for unschoolers, and numerous books on the subject, but Marina says even still, it's not easy to explain her unconventional education.

(MOSES) When I tell people I've been unschooled, most people say, "What's that?"

Lack of familiarity, however, may not be an issue for the next generation of unschoolers — one advocacy group estimates there are now around 150,000 unschoolers nationwide. For Intern Edition, I'm Jeff Swingle in Washington, D.C.