

What is Unschooling?

by Rebecca English

So many people ([see Jennings-Edquist, 2015](#)) have it in their heads that unschooling means doing nothing ([see Wexler, 2020](#) for another example). But this idea is seriously misguided. Unschooling is a legitimate educational practice frequently defined by what it is not; it is not anything like school.

Schools follow the Australian curriculum, which, according to ACARA ([Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority](#)) is there to suggest what young people should learn and when they should learn it (ACARA, 2016). They acknowledge its development was undertaken in consultation, “with the best national talent and expertise” (ACARA, 2016, ¶ 3) but excluded young people, on whom the curriculum will be delivered. This point, that young people are not consulted, is a major departure



There is also the power dynamic in schools. Schools have large groups of young people managed by a teacher, who's managed by line managers who are managed by deputy principals who are in turn managed by a principal who is, in turn managed by a district, a diocese or archdiocese (in the catholic system) or another group in independent schools who are, in turn managed by the various education departments in each state or territory.

Obviously, unschoolers eschew that kind of management. However, this lack of formal structures doesn't mean that unschooling children can't learn formal lessons. It just means that learning is driven by the child.

One way that might be seen is in a young person doing something 'real'. Say a parent is making dinner, an unschool child might ask about what they're making and how. Learning can be qualified in terms of the Key Learning Areas seen in this activity, although it doesn't have to be.

With cooking, there's English (reading), Maths (measuring), Technology (using the oven), Science (the chemical reaction that cooks the food), HaSS (if you talk about the recipe and the region of the world from which it comes), and Health (if there's a discussion about why cake is a sometimes food). Far more creative and innovative folks than me will also be able to see a link to Languages and the Arts.



Another way child led learning might be seen is in a request for instruction. An unschool child who wants to learn piano might ask for piano lessons. While it'll be formal, that learning has been driven by the child and is in accordance with what they want to learn. Similarly, a child who's interested in becoming an architect will need to learn some serious maths. A child who requests to study Specialist Mathematics (maybe through a tutor or maybe through buying the textbooks and learning on their own) is still unschooling, even though they are doing a school subject, again it's learning that is driven by the child and is at their behest.



In 2013, [Gray and Riley](#) undertook a study of grown unschoolers. Through that work, they defined unschooling as:

- *Not sending a child to school*
- *Not doing the kinds of things that are done in a school*
- *Not establishing or forcing a curriculum onto a child*
- *Not implementing assessment that is outside the child's desire to document and to produce artefacts*
- *Providing freedom to pursue interests*
- *Provide an environment that is conducive to learning in the way that suits that child*
- *Support that child to learn in a way that meets the child's needs*



- *Bringing children together with the environment so that learning is not removed from living in the world*

Gina Riley (2020), in her recent book cited the work of Mary Griffith (1998) to argue unschooling involves a child spending the bulk of their time in the pursuit of learning and exploration. This pursuit may happen in any place that is conducive to that task, facilitated by parents who provide resources and materials that are needed by that child in the pursuit of their interests.

So, as you can see from Riley's (2020) definition, it is much more complicated than doing nothing. It is one of the most engaged, in depth and rigorous approaches to parenting. It requires, from the parent, a level of engagement, a level of commitment and a level of involvement no schooling parent would ever be required to invest. It requires parents to tune in to the child's needs and meet those needs, however that is facilitated. It is very hard to say what unschooling is because it can look like everything from very little to a child taking formal lessons. The key take away is that it is driven by the child in pursuit of learning they are driving.



The Model United Nations Assembly (MUNA)

(MUNA) is a significant international Rotary youth program in which our District participates.

Senior high school students develop an awareness of the United Nations and the countries they represent at a simulated UN Assembly. The event provides an excellent forum for students to develop and practice their public speaking skills whilst debating on topical world issues.

www.muna.com.au

The United Nations continues to give enthusiastic support for the ongoing growth of this worthwhile project for youth.

Dr Rebecca English is a mother, a home educator, a research and a teacher. She is a Senior Lecturer in the faculty of Creative Industries, Education and the Arts at QUT. Her work is concerned with why parents choose alternatives to mainstream schools, in particular, home education.

