

Unschooling Life Podcast #7 - august 6th, 2014

Peter Gray on Learning

Peter Gray is a psychologist and a professor at Austin College.

He has done research on adults who were never coerced to learn as children.

One study was with graduates of free school and another looked at now grown unschoolers.

His latest book is called *Free to Learn* and in it Mr. Gray writes about how all people are born to be self-directed learners.

I was fortunate enough to spent some time on the phone with Peter and ask him a few questions. I've broken this conversation into two episodes for the podcast.

Today is about self-directed education in general, and the next episode will be about why children need to play.

I am Amy Childs and Welcome to the Unschooling Life Podcast.

Amy: First I asked Peter, what encouragement would you give to new unschoolers or to people who are new to self directed learning?

Peter Gray: I think the most encouraging thing is to look at the graduates, the people who have already done it.

My very first study, a long time ago in this realm was of the graduates of Sudbury Valley School, which is a school for self-directed learners.

Founded a long, long time ago, it's now on its 40, 60 year of existence.

So, it's been around for almost half a century.

When I did this study the school was smaller, but had already been around long enough that had about 90 graduates, and my colleague who did this study with me, David Chanoff and I, found most of the graduates, looked at what jobs they've gone on to, whether they gone to college or not, talked about if they had any regrets about taking the self-directed rootage.

And amazingly, absolute none of them had any regrets about having gone to the school that they went to.

Those who wanted to go to college didn't seem to have any difficulties to getting into college. Including some of them went to very prestigious colleges.

None of them seem to have any difficulties doing well in college once they've got in.

This seem remarkable when you think about it, from the viewpoint most people have, people think that if you miss a few months of school, that supposedly takes you progressively, step by step, step up to the level of being able to getting into college and doing college, people think if you miss just a few months you might be hopelessly behind.

Well here are people who missed the whole darn thing.

They didn't do any of it. They really didn't do any of it, yet they went on to college and they just did fine.

That just flies in the face of everything that most people believe, and that the school system tries to convince us of.

I don't think the school system is cynical, I think they really do believe that.

But the truth is you don't.

There is no critical period... there is kind of critical period for learning language, all kids learn languages naturally and easily without any accents, when they learn it very young.

But, other than that, there is no critical period for learning anything. You can learn math at any age, you can learn to read at any age, you can learn anything else at any age.

So the idea that you have to learn things in some order, that you have to learn them at some schedule, that there is some scientific bases for the scheduling of the lessons taught at school, is simply wrong.

And that's been disproved over, and over, and over again, by self directed learners.

As long as they have been... I mean there is always been self-directed learners, and they've shown it over, and over again, you can learn any of these things at any time.

The most important thing that promotes learning, is when you want to learn it.

When a child wants to learn something, they learn it very quickly and they learn it often very easily. This has been shown over, and over again.

Kids learn to read quickly when they want to read.

Some of them learn when they are 4, some of them learn to read when they are 6 or 7, some of them don't learn to read until they are 11 or 12. I've seen as late as then.

But when they want to learn, and when they are ready to learn, they learn it.

And it's not that difficult.

Math is another thing people worry about, but when kids are self-directed learners, some kids get really fascinated by math, and they learn math on their own. Math is a big game for them, they are the kind that go on to become a mathematicians or scientists that use math.

But, most kids that are unschoolers, or that've gone to a democratic school like Sudbury Valley School, where children are responsible for their own education, aren't that interested in math.

But they know they need to learn math if they want to go to a competitive school, and they need to take the SAT, or whatever admission test, they need to take.

They simply prepare themselves and often they do it in matter of weeks. A kid who never study maths at all, decides: "well, I want to apply to this or that very competitive school. To get in I need to get a high score in the math SAT test".

And they deliberately prepare themselves for it.

Sometimes they'll ask for some help, but very quickly they can get to the point when they can study the SAT prep books on their own and learn it.

This is not difficult, this is really not difficult when the child wants to do it.

I think that's the most encouraging thing.

I would say to the people who are anticipating unschooling, or anticipating sending their child to a school such as the Sudbury School, where the children are responsible for their own education, the best way to assure yourself that they are not doing something dangerous, that you are not taking a huge risk with your child, is to look into the evidence based on the graduates, the people who have already done it.

Amy: Next, I asked: What makes a good unschooling parent?

Peter Gray: You know, unschooling, I don't think you can fake this, I don't think you should be doing this just for your child sake.

I think you should probably not unschool unless you are the kind of person who naturally has a lot of interests, who is involved with the community, who is intellectual.

You know, your family, you're going to have interesting discussions, where you are the kind of family who is open to have visitors, you feel comfortable by having kids spending a lot of time around your house, and playing in your house.

One of the things that successful unschoolers tell me that they do, so that their kids will have friends, they kind of make their own home in their own yard, a kind of neighborhood play centre so kids can come there.

You need to be willing to do all those kinds of things.

You need to be responsive to your child, so your child is interested in this and that, and the child may not have access just on his or her own to be able to follow that interest, so you don't want to push it, you don't want to say just because my child has expressed a tiny... has asked one question about giraffes, let's say, suddenly you are going to go to the library and come back with all the books on giraffe that you could find.

That's the kind of way that drives the interest out of your child.

So you don't want to over respond, but if the child asks for some help in trying to find resources for what the child is interested in, you would respond to that.

One way to think about it is, that you would respond to your child in the same way you would respond to a friend or to your spouse.

You are interested in their ideas, and they would assume interest in your ideas, so you would share ideas with one another.

You are interested in one another welfare, so you would do things to help one another welfare.

And, in the case of the parent and the child, as opposed to the parent and spouse, is a little bit less balance, the child can't be as interested in your welfare or do as much for your welfare, as you can do for the child's welfare, so it's an asymmetrical relationship.

But nevertheless, you need to pay attention to your child, you need to be attuned to your child's interests, respond to those interests, but not respond in such a way that everything becomes a teaching moment.

You know, that you over respond, because when you do that, then the child stops asking questions. There is a kind of trick to knowing, if a child asks a question, what is that the child really wants to know? And just answer that, and then don't go beyond that, let the child take the initiative if the child wants to go beyond that.

Amy: So, I asked: Is there anything the parents can do to help their children learn?

Peter Gray: I think what parents have to do is somehow provide the conditions that allow their children to educate themselves.

The parents don't have to educate their children, they don't have to find anybody to educate the children.

But they have to provide the condition.

A school like Sudbury Valley School or the schools model after it, they provide those conditions.

There is an age mix group of kids where little kids are learning from the older kids, they are being inspired by older kids.

Little kids who can't read see older kids reading and they want to read.

They are playing games with older kids who already know how to read, so they are learning how to read through those games.

They are learning to climb trees, because they see older kids climbing trees.

In other words, the age mixing is really the secret to why the Sudbury Valley school works.

Younger children are learning from older children quite naturally.

The older children are acquiring a sense of maturity.

They are practicing leadership skills, and their nurturing skills, they are learning how to be good parents by virtue of their interacting with younger kids including much younger kids.

And there are all the tools, you know, the important tools of the culture at the school.

So, there are computers, of course most kids of these days have their own computers, but for those who don't, there are computers at the school.

There are various kinds of sporting equipment.

There is a woodworking shop for those who are interested in that.

Cooking equipment for those interested in that.

And because there is this rich setting, there is a lot of people doing different things.

But, if you are doing unschooling, then I think the important thing, first of all, the family itself kind needs, in part to be an intellectual interesting place.

It needs to be a place, you know, where the siblings and the parents are doing things and involved with the community, so the child becomes involved with the community.

And I think its also very important for unschooling parents to figure out ways to allow their children to interact with other kids. The bigger the diversity of other kids the better, because children need to learn not just from their own parents. That's very important. The child wants to learn from everybody. The child wants and needs to go beyond you and your family.

So, that's an important thing, to figure out how you are going to allow your child to connect to the broader community.

We just did, a colleague of mine, Gina Riley and I, have just done a study of grown unschoolers. We published it, first as a series of 4 blog essays in my blog on Psychology Today, called Freedom to Learn, and we are in the process of writing it out for an academic journal.

The interesting thing that come out of that study is that almost all of them were very happy about their unschooling, they didn't seem to see any way that held them back.

The only ones who were unhappy, they were unhappy because their parents restricted their learning, instead of facilitated their learning.

The parents were fundamentalist christians, in two cases, and in another case, the parent really had a mental disability.

Therefore were not connected to a larger community, were only connected to a very narrow-minded community, very narrow specific community.

And the children grow up feeling that they did not have the opportunity to experience the diversity of ideas, did not have the opportunity to get to know other people outside of the specific range of ideas that their parents and their parents closest friends represented.

So the idea should not be... You should not unschool in order to prevent your child from learning things you don't want you child to learn.

You should unschool only if you believe, you trust your child to really swift through and learn what's out there in the culture, and trust your child to make his or her own decisions about right and wrong, truth and false and so on...

The basic parental attitude that underlies a child ability to self direct, for self directed learning is trust. Trust the intelligence and competence of your child.

Song "*His Mother's Legacy*" plays

Amy: It all goes back to what John Holt wrote so long ago in his introduction of his book *How Children Learn*:

"All I am saying in this book can be summed up in two words: Trust Children.

Nothing could be more simple, or more difficult.

Difficult because to trust children we must trust ourselves, and most of us were taught as children that we could not be trusted."

So, there it is again: Trust Children.

Song continues to play.

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