

How do I explain Un-Schooling to skeptics?

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When I decided to present a paper for **The**

Homeschool Conference (<http://www.homeschoolconference.com>), I was not sure what would be the theme of the paper. Each day for a month I sat down at my lap top and opened a blank word document and stared at the screen, with nothing coming forth for me to write. The earlier me, which was a paranoid, perfectionist, professional, wanting to excel, 'kind of human being' would have given up and shelved the idea or lost sleep over it and would have cursed myself for not being good enough. But hey I am none of those now. Unschooling my two children, Gourika, 11 and Ishaan 7, changed that old me of mine! People often ask me what is unschooling and why don't I send my children to school. There was this old me again which would go on a rampage of blaming the school system and the modern education systems each time this question was asked of me. But hey now I can just smilingly say, "oh we just love to be in each other's company, doing all the things we like to do at and in the comfort of our homes, stepping out only for those things that really drive us or we are passionate about. Schools are great but they don't suit our unique needs and desires." Those who see us perfectly happy alone and in each other's company, often curiously ask, "What about socialization?" The old lonely and angry me would have gone on a rant of how cruel the world is and who needs to be around people who hate who we are anyway. But hey now I joyfully say, "We are learning to be fully there with our own thoughts, emotions, feelings, moods so that we may better understand who we truly are and what it means to be fully ourselves without the pressure to conform to social conditions that come from teachers and peers. We are spending enough time with our own minds and focusing lesser on what impressions my mind will catch from social, cultural, educational inputs that are born of someone else's mind, so that we learn to be fully and consciously aware of the roots of our thoughts and actions." I recently was fortunate to attend a talk by His Holiness the Dalai Lama, and he said, "The modern education system gives no value to the mind and its nature. There is no value given to the understanding of emotions and feelings. No education is wholesome without the understanding of the nature of the mind." I felt happy and peaceful to be validated by the greatest soul of our times. My children spend a lot of time with each other and at home with me. They have no choice but to face, walk through, resolve and learn from conflicts that surface in each of us. We learn the communication tools needed to stay in harmony and balance with each other. My children know their energies so well that they socialize not under any peer pressure but only when they feel heart to heart connections and when they feel drawn by interests in each other's passion and life. So they surprise the most skeptical of adults when they start a conversation with them or engage in play with a child much younger or older than them in age. I feel children who feel safe and secure to be themselves fully and express their emotions fully without being judged at home, are often the ones who go out there and forge harmonious relationships with people outside family. My response seems so unreal to most that their next question is often meant to throw me off balance. "But do you think watching television and sitting in front of the computer or toying with the iPad will help them in gaining any knowledge?" The earlier 'fearful of multimedia mother', who looked at TV as the idiot box would have gone on a sleepless guilt trip and imagined her children watching violence and pornography on TV and internet and would have nightmares about her children growing up to be mass murderers who shoot school children with guns! But hey now this peaceful with 'all things are learning tools for my children', mother says, my son learns about the world from surfing the internet. He has knowledge of history, geography, geology, gemology, astronomy, architecture, paleontology, cosmos, global warming, scientific phenomenon, films, animation, art, cooking, numbers, currencies, phew...from the internet. My daughter learns to sing with ear plugs and YouTube songs with lyrics. Her knowledge of films and music is all from the internet. She watches videos of animals giving birth and pictures of different breeds of dogs, as she harbors a quiet dream of running an animal shelter one day. She plays complex video games with other kids all over the world and writes messages online, proving to many that she can read and write without being taught to do so by a teacher. She is in tune with the latest fashion trends and keeps a sketch book of her fashion drawings. The next question invariably is about obscenity and vulgarity on electronic media. I must admit, I am surprised that my children have never naturally felt any need to watch anything that is "vulgar or obscene". This question comes in the minds of adults who grew up in repressed environments as children and had to sneak out for their dose of forbidden things! The unpleasant outcomes of those adventures still have painful memories in the minds of the adults and hence they fear TV, Internet, and other media and operate from those old fears of painful memories. But they mostly forget the reasons that drove them to sneak out and seek adventures with unpleasant outcomes, in the first place. The adults forget that the reasons for such adventures were to start with prohibition, restriction and moralization. The root of that old fear is what parents want to propagate with their children, which bring in the same results, of children seeking misadventures in the wrong places. Sometimes when adult and vulgar images or content pop up on the net or TV, my children are more curious about knowing what it all means and why do they show such stuff on net or TV. And that leads to healthy conversations between my children and me. We talk about sex, sexuality, pornography, prostitution, violence, etc like any other subject of knowledge. Of course the real work is being done by me, the parent, in cleansing my fears of sexuality and violence. As a parent when my children ask questions that cause discomfort in me, it acts as cues for me to understand the root of that discomfort in my mind and body. Invariably it is because of some unpleasant experience of mine stemming from my childhood or past, which needs my attention and healing. This process also prevents me from projecting my fears and ignorance on my children. This detached process helps me to be a more alert, attentive and compassionate parent to my children and their real and immediate needs. When the skeptics hear of this from me, they say, "Oh well, who has time with school and work and the daily routine of life, to indulge in such processes?" I smile and say, "Exactly the reason why we unschool so that we have more time and space for such slow and internal learning and integration of knowledge and self discovery". By now we all know what the next inevitable question is going to be. "Well all this fine, but what about getting a job or finding a livelihood or earning money?" Hmmm...I say to myself silently, "with 18 years of leisurely time spend in self discovery, finding a livelihood would be easier than it has been for me who spent 25 years of my life in formal education and still could not figure out a work that spoke of my heart and represented my unique gifts." But this is what I say. I tell them that my daughter wants to be fashion designer, singer, kennel owner, home-maker and stay-at-home mother. My son wants to be inventor, archaeologist, architect, linguist, professor, artist and world and space traveler. "And how will they become all that if they do not go to school or college and take exams?" is the logical next question. I explain to them in words that when there is a seed of desire in the heart,

and that seed is watered and nourished with creative and lively inputs from the environment in that moment, in which the children are growing up in, the plant will sprout and the tree will grow and the Universe will support and bring the required nutriment and help the tree to blossom and bear fruits. The children will dream freely and the power of their dreams will manifest the desired results for them. I attended a terrace garden community gathering recently where there were many urban farmers. One urban farmer showed us how to make soil out of dried and decomposed leaves and also showed us mulching. After we prepared the bed for the soil, we filled it with layers of dried coconut leaves and laid it with decomposed leaves and we then stepped on that with bare feet. It felt so soft. Once the bed was filled, the lady farmer got a whole lot soaked seeds from the kitchen. She had soaked them for three hours or so. They were a combination of pulses, beans, oil seeds and spices. She also explained how the moment the seed came in contact with water the process of germination had already rolled in but invisibly and that is why they soaked it only for a few hours. She explained why, sowing sprouted seeds was harmful as sunlight would dry up the sprouts too early and they would not grow so that we could cut them and add them back to the soil. She told us how in Ayurveda (the ancient Indian wisdom of medicinal herbs, health and healthy food) the food that we grow and eat is based on nine Rasas (in Sanskrit rasas also means emotions). Rasas also means attributes or traits. And she told us each of the seeds that we sow will germinate and take root over a period of three 21-day cycles. During which we need to cut parts of that green growth and add it back to the brown soil to green the soil. The reason for doing this is that the roots of each green plant will attract different microbes to the root which will enrich the soil with their unique nutriment. This will create a biodiversity in the soil. And over a period of time the right soil for growing food will be ready. The best part of this process is that every season will have its own beans, own pulses and own oil seeds. The best soil is a right mix of brown and green! Then we covered the planted seeds with more dried and decomposed leaves. The purpose of this was to not expose the soil to too much heat or cold. When the weather is hot the leaf cover will keep the soil cool and when the weather is cold the leaf cover will keep the soil warm! Are we consciously doing this to our children or not? I feel school and modern education has very little scope for this kind of organic protection for real and durable growth to happen. Why am I narrating this whole example? Well to illustrate that, that given the premise that human beings are part of this planet just as plants are and since scientifically too it has been proven that all living beings are essentially made up of the same molecules and atom, what holds good for the plants holds good and true for human beings too. For the soil of the soul and mind to enrich, all Rasas, that is all emotions and attributes are necessary for fruition. Each child will attract according to his or her inherent nature the right ingredients (microbes in case of plants) to come to fruition. And what I explained about making soil ready for growing food is a long and patient process. This process takes root mostly under the earth with no visibility above surface. It all happens mysteriously in darkness. So is the case with children. I am pretty much convinced that school and the modern education system have no space for long, patient and invisible processes. Unschooling is the path for this long enriching process.

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