

Grown Unschoolers' Evaluations of Their Unschooling Experiences: Report I on a Survey of 75 Unschoolers

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Abstract *Seventy-five adults, who had been unschooled for at least the years that would have been their last two years of high school, responded to a survey about their experiences. Their responses indicated that their parents generally played supportive, not directive roles in their education and played bigger supportive roles for those who started their unschooling early than for those who started later. The great majority of respondents reported that they were very happy with their unschooling. Nearly all of them valued the freedom it gave them to pursue their own interests in their own ways, and many reported that unschooling promoted their capacities for self-motivation, self-direction, personal responsibility and continued learning. A minority said they experienced a learning deficit as a result of unschooling, and most of those said they easily made up that deficit when they needed to. Most said they had satisfying social lives as unschoolers, and many commented on the special value of having friends of a wide range of ages. Only three respondents said they were unhappy with their unschooling, and those three all said that they were socially isolated, in dysfunctional families with mothers who were psychologically depressed and fathers who were uninvolved.*

Keywords unschooling, homeschooling, grown unschoolers, educational freedom, self-determination, self-directed education

Introduction

This article is the first of two, published back-to-back, which together present the results of a survey we conducted of 75 young adults who had been “unschooled” during part or all of what would have been their K-12 school years. In this first article we review previous research on unschooling, describe the methods of our survey study, and present our findings concerning the participants’ recollections of their experiences as unschooled children and their evaluations of those experiences. In the second article (Riley & Gray, 2015), we report specifically on the participants’ experiences with higher education and careers.

Unschooling is, for legal purposes, a variety of homeschooling, but differs from conventional homeschooling in that the parents do not try to replicate school or school-like activities at home. There is no *schooling*, as commonly understood—no curriculum, no imposed lessons, no testing. In unschooling families, children are in charge of their own education and are expected to “learn through living” rather than to think of learning as something distinct from life itself. The term *unschooling* was coined, in the 1970s, by the author, former teacher, and educational theorist John Holt and was initially described in issues of *Growing Without Schooling*, a magazine that Holt published until his untimely death in 1985 (and which continued to be published by his associate Pat Farenga until 2001—see Farenga & Ricci, 2013).

No firm data exist concerning the number of unschoolers, but the number appears to be growing at a fast pace, at least in the United States, where homeschooling overall is growing rapidly. According to surveys conducted by the US National Center for Educational Statistics (2008, 2013), the number of homeschooled children in the United States grew from about 850,000 in 1999 to about 1,770,000 in 2011, or from 1.7% to 3.4% of the school-age population. Those surveys did not distinguish unschoolers from other homeschoolers, but did reveal a decline over the years in the percentage who were homeschooling primarily for religious reasons and an increase in the percentage who were homeschooling primarily because of dissatisfaction with the methods and environment of conventional schools. This, at least, is consistent with the hypothesis that a growing percentage of homeschoolers are unschoolers, as other data indicate that unschoolers are far less likely than other homeschoolers to cite religious reasons, and far more likely to cite dissatisfaction with the methods of conventional schooling, as their main reason for opting out of conventional schooling (Grunzke, 2012). People familiar with the homeschooling community estimate that roughly ten percent of current homeschoolers consider themselves to be unschoolers (Gray & Riley, 2013). If this semi-educated guess is correct, the number of school-aged children currently unschooling in the United States is about 180,000.

Many studies have been conducted concerning the experiences and characteristics of homeschooled students, and a number of comprehensive reviews of that research have been published. For example, Gloeckner & Jones (2013) and Ray (2013) reviewed research on the academic success of homeschooled students and found that, at least for the samples studied, homeschooled students, on average, outperform conventionally schooled students on every measure used, including scores on standardized tests at all stages of their home education and grade point average in colleges and universities. Similarly, in a review of research on the social and emotional characteristics of homeschooled students and graduates, Medlin (2013) found many studies showing that homeschoolers were more socially skilled, happier with their social lives, and more well adjusted emotionally than were

students or graduates of conventional schools and found no studies showing the opposite. As the reviewers readily admit, none of this research proves a cause-effect relationship between homeschooling and the measured outcomes. Children in families that choose to homeschool might be different from those in other families, from the beginning, in ways that predispose them to do well. Moreover, none of the studies involved a random or normative sample of all homeschoolers, so bias in who is recruited into the study could play a role. At minimum, however, the research fails to confirm the fear of many educators that homeschooling would generally lead to academic and social incompetence (Ray, 2013).

But unschooling is quite different from conventional homeschooling. Conventional homeschoolers do school at home, and apparently many do it quite well, but unschoolers live their lives without, in general, doing anything that looks like school. There is no reason to think that the findings from studies of homeschoolers would generalize to unschoolers. In contrast to the many studies of homeschoolers, the formal, published studies of unschoolers to date can be counted on the fingers of one hand. It is worth reviewing those studies before going on to the present study.

Previous research on unschooling

The earliest formal research into unschooling that we could find is a doctoral dissertation in anthropology, conducted by Donna Kirschner (2008). By volunteering at a resource center for unschooled children and through word-of-mouth, Kirschner identified a set of unschooling families in and near a city in the Northeastern United States, where she lived. She visited the homes of 22 of these families and repeatedly visited a subset of them. Using traditional ethnographic methods involving interviews, informal conversations, direct observations, and qualitative analyses, she set out to characterize unschoolers as a countercultural community. She described unschooling as not just an educational choice, but a life choice. Unschoolers, as she saw them, were trying “to achieve an alternative way of being human, an alternative moral and social order of sorts.” Their lifestyle generally included attachment parenting, concern for the environment, preference for the homemade and for natural foods, and unhurried lives (especially for children). Concerning education and parenting, their approach was to “trust” their children. They saw themselves not as teachers but as “available” and as “resource brokers” to their children.

Another anthropological investigation into unschooling, for a doctoral dissertation, was conducted by Rebecca Grunzke (2012). Her goal was to compare the viewpoints and lifestyles of unschooling mothers with those of conventional homeschooling and public schooling mothers. She found her subjects through mothering listserves, chat groups, and bulletin boards on the Internet. She analyzed the discussions found at such sites and, through those sites, recruited mothers to

answer questionnaires and perform list-sorting tasks aimed at characterizing their parenting practices. One of her main conclusions was that the unschooling mothers she sampled could be characterized as a cultural subgroup very different from other homeschooling mothers. The unschooling mothers, on average, engaged in far more “alternative parenting tasks” than did the conventional homeschooling mothers. These included natural childbirth, no circumcising, having a family bed (co-sleeping with infants and young children), extended breast-feeding, babywearing, preparing whole/organic foods, and the like. In contrast, she found no statistically significant difference between the homeschooling and public schooling mothers in their frequency of performing such tasks. She concluded that, at least in terms of parenting practices, conventionally homeschooling mothers are more like public schooling mothers than they are like unschooling mothers.

Grunzke also noted that 22% of the unschooling mothers in her sample reported a family income under \$25,000 a year and only 11% reported a family income above \$75,000 per year, in contrast to 16% and 33%, respectively, for the conventionally homeschooling mothers. The only other study to compare incomes of unschoolers and conventional homeschoolers likewise reported lower income for the former—a median income in the range of \$20,000 to \$40,000 for unschoolers and \$40,000 to \$60,000 for homeschoolers (Martin-Chang, Gould & Meuse, 2011, study conducted in Canada). These findings seem consistent with the view that unschoolers are more willing than conventional homeschoolers to sacrifice income in order to pursue their chosen style of life.

In a smaller-scale study, Rebecca English (2014) interviewed 30 unschooling mothers in Australia and obtained findings quite consistent with those of Kirschner and Grunzke in the United States. The mothers in her sample commonly reported that they chose unschooling because it matched their attachment parenting philosophy and allowed them to maintain a trustful, respectful relationship with their children.

In a study that preceded the present one, we (Gray & Riley, 2013) conducted a survey of 232 unschooling parents, mostly mothers, who were recruited through an announcement on websites frequented by unschoolers. The respondents filled out a relatively extensive questionnaire concerning their approach to unschooling, their path into unschooling, and their perceptions of the benefits and challenges of unschooling. We found that only a minority (28%) of this sample started with unschooling, with their first child. Another 19% started with curriculum-based homeschooling, which became increasingly relaxed over time and eventuated in unschooling. Another 16% started with schooling and then switched to unschooling. The largest sub-group (37%) went through the whole sequence—schooling, then homeschooling, then unschooling. Those who unschooled from the beginning seemed to be most like the unschoolers described by Kirschner and Grunzke; for them, unschooling typically followed naturally from a lifestyle that included natural

living and attachment parenting. This was less true for the other groups. They were more likely to choose unschooling because of observations they had made concerning their children's unhappiness in school and/or their children's eagerness and competence in self-directed learning. The most frequent benefits of unschooling reported by the whole sample included the children's improved learning, better attitudes about learning, and improved psychological and social wellbeing; and increased closeness, harmony, and freedom for the whole family, which followed from being free from the school schedule. The most frequent challenge expressed, by far, was that of overcoming feelings of criticism or social pressure that came from others and from their own culturally-ingrained, habitual ways of thinking about education.

All of the studies just described were aimed at characterizing the beliefs, practices, and observations of unschooling parents. The only study prior to the present one to look at unschooled young people was conducted by Sandra Martin-Chang, Odette Gould, and Reanne Meuse (2011), and even that look was something of an afterthought. These researchers set out to compare homeschooling children with a demographically similar group of traditionally schooling children, ages 5 to 10, on standardized academic tests. As part of the study, they interviewed mothers of the homeschoolers about their homeschooling methods and found that 12 of them described their methods as very relaxed and unstructured (and 9 of these used the term "unschooling" in their descriptions). They decided to separate these 12 from the other homeschoolers and treat them as a separate group. The main finding of the study was that the "structured homeschoolers" significantly outperformed the traditionally schooled group on all of the academic tests. In what they described as an "exploratory study" (because of the small sample and its unplanned nature) they also compared the scores of the "unstructured homeschoolers" with those of the other two groups and found them to be significantly lower than those of the structured group, and also lower (but not statistically significantly so) than those of the traditionally schooled group.

This finding, by Martin-Chang *et al.*, is sometimes referred to by others as a condemnation of unschooling, but unschoolers themselves (when we have described it to them) are unsurprised by the finding. As one said, the only surprise is that the unschooling families agreed to be in it. It is certainly no surprise that children, age 5 to 10, who have been studying a standard school curriculum would perform better on tests of that curriculum than those who have not been studying it (but have, perhaps, been baking bread and chasing butterflies). It is interesting to note that the largest deficit of the children in the "unstructured" group was in reading. Informal surveys have revealed that unschooled children often don't learn to read until several years later than the standard school age for reading, but then become highly proficient readers, quite quickly, once they develop an interest (Gray, 2010). It seems quite likely that at least some of the "unstructured" children in the Martin-

Chang *et al.* study would not yet have begun to read. Any real assessment of the effectiveness of unschooling would have to take a longer view: What are these young people like as adults? Do they have happy, successful lives? Or, even more *à propos*: How do they define happiness? How do they define success? Their definitions might be along lines not measured by standardized test scores or income.

Rationale and general methodology of our survey of grown unschoolers

The main purpose of the present study was to gain insights about unschooling from the vantage point of those who were unschooled, as all previous studies had viewed it from the vantage point of unschooling parents. We chose to survey adults (over age 18) who had been unschooled, so they could tell us about their past experiences as unschooled children and their experiences in life so far as adults. We chose to recruit only those who had been unschooled for at least what would have been their last two years of high school (grades 11 and 12), as one of our main interests was in how unschoolers cope, in higher education and employment, without having a standard high-school diploma or taking the courses that would most immediately precede that diploma (discussed in the second paper in this series, Riley & Gray, 2015). Most of the participants, however, were unschooled for more years than that, and some had been unschooled for all of what would have been their K-12 years.

In March, 2013, we posted a call for survey participants on the Psychology Today blog, *Freedom to Learn* (Gray, 2013), and that post was subsequently reposted or linked to by others to help recruit participants. In that call, we defined unschooling, for purposes of the study, as follows:

Unschooling is not schooling. Unschooling parents do not send their children to school and they do not do at home the kinds of things that are done at school. More specifically, they do not establish a curriculum for their children, do not require their children to do particular assignments for the purpose of education, and do not test their children to measure progress. Instead, they allow their children freedom to pursue their own interests and to learn, in their own ways, what they need to know to follow those interests. They may, in various ways, provide an environmental context and environmental support for the child's learning. In general, unschoolers see life and learning as one.

We noted further that we were seeking participants who were at least 18 years old and had been unschooled for at least the final two years of what would have been their high school years (they could not have attended 11th or 12th grade at a high school). The call included Gina Riley's email address, with a request that potential participants contact her to receive a copy of the consent form and survey questionnaire.

The questionnaire included questions about the respondent's gender; date of birth; history of schooling, home schooling, and unschooling (years in which they had done each); reasons for their unschooling (as they understood them); roles that their parents played in their education during their unschooling years; any formal higher education they had experienced subsequent to unschooling (including how they gained admission and how they adapted to it); their current employment; their social life; the main advantages and disadvantages they experienced from their unschooling; and their judgment as to whether or not they would unschool their own children (see Appendix for the full form). We received and accepted completed questionnaires over a period of six months following the initial call.

We analyzed the questionnaire responses using a grounded theory approach (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2012). For all questions other than those that called for strictly factual information, we each, separately, read and reread the responses and jotted down key terms referring to the main ideas expressed. We then each listed those key terms, for each question, to develop categories of responses that seemed to occur frequently enough to be of interest. At the next step, we compared the response categories that we had independently developed and, through discussion, developed a common list of those categories and a shared understanding of how to code for each. Then we each read all the questionnaire responses again and coded them using the codes that we had generated. Finally, we compared notes on our coding of the response to each question, for each respondent, and resolved discrepancies through rereading and discussion.

Although unschooling is generally considered to be a variety of homeschooling, in the remainder of this article (and in the second article in this pair) we use the two terms to refer to distinct categories. *Homeschooling*, for our purposes here, is schooling at home—schooling with curriculum and assessments, in which parents are playing the teacher role. *Unschooling*, in contrast, is the practice we described in recruiting participants into the study.

The limitation of this study resulting from the non-random sampling method is similar to that in all other studies of unschooling to date. Because there is no public listing of unschoolers, there is no way to sample them by normative or random means. It is reasonable to conjecture that those who volunteered for the present study might generally be among the more successful or satisfied unschoolers. Moreover, our choice to include only those who stayed with unschooling through what would have been their last two years of high school may further bias the sample toward the more satisfied. Our purpose was not to assess the degree to which unschooling is successful for all families that try it. Rather, it was to describe the experiences of a group of volunteer participants who were unschooled during a significant portion of what would have been their school years and who entered adulthood without a conventional high-school diploma. The study, at minimum, shows what is *possible* for unschoolers, even if it can't address the question of what

is most typical for all who try this practice. The design also allows us to compare participants who were unschooled for their entire K-12 years with those who began unschooling later, and it allows us to identify common features in the lives of satisfied unschoolers and in their perceptions of the unschooling experience. We also expected to find at least some who were unhappy with their unschooling and to learn about why they were unhappy with it.

Survey participants and their division into three groups

Eighty-one people completed the questionnaire and provided informed consent to participate, but we dropped six from the study because they did not fully meet the criteria for inclusion (they were either under 18 years old or had some schooling or homeschooling in 11th or 12th grade). For the 75 who met the criteria, the median age was 24 years, with a range from 18 to 49. Eight were in their teens, 48 in their 20s, 17 in their 30s, and 2 in their 40s. Fifty-eight (77%) were women, 16 were men, and 1 self-identified as gender queer. Sixty-five were from the United States, 6 were from Canada, 3 were from the UK, and 1 was from Germany.

For purposes of comparison, we divided the participants who met the criteria into three groups based on the last grade they had completed of school or of curriculum-based homeschooling. Group I were entirely unschooled—no K-12 schooling at all and no homeschooling (by our definition of parent-directed schooling at home). Group II had no schooling or homeschooling beyond sixth grade; and Group III had at least some schooling or homeschooling beyond sixth grade. Respondents were placed into Group II even if they had only one year of schooling or homeschooling prior to sixth grade, and into Group III even if they had only one year of schooling or homeschooling sometime after sixth grade and before eleventh grade. So, in theory (and in fact), those in Group II could have had anywhere from 1 to 7 years (K-6) of schooling/homeschooling and those in Group III could have had anywhere from 1 to 11 years of schooling/homeschooling (K-10). As shown in Table 1, the three groups were quite similar in number of participants, median age, and percentage female, but, of course, differed in median number of years of schooling plus homeschooling.

Table 1 Division of Participants into Three Groups

Group:	I. No schooling ^a	II. No schooling ^a past 6 th grade	III. Some schooling ^a past 6 th grade
Number of participants	24	27	24
Age: Median (range)	24 (18-35)	25 (19-37)	24.5 (18-49)
Years of schooling ^a : Median (range)	0 (0-0)	5 (1-7)	8 (1-11)
Gender: Percent female	19/23 = 83% ^b	20/27 = 74%	19/24 = 79%

^aThe term *schooling* in this table includes homeschooling as well as attendance at a school.

^{NB}: One participant in Group I self-identified as gender queer and was not classed as either male or female.

All inferential statistics were Chi square for 2 X 3 contingency tables, to determine if the three groups of participants differed significantly in the presence or absence of a particular category of response according to our coding. We considered such differences to be statistically significant if p (the probability that the differences could occur by chance) was less than 0.05.

Their reported reasons for unschooling

Question 3 of the survey read: “*In your opinion, why were you ‘unschooled’ instead of going to school or doing school at home? Is this something that both you and your parent(s) wanted to do?*” For this question, we coded each response for whether the mother, father, or child was mentioned as an initiator of the decision to unschool. We also coded reasons given for unschooling into a number of categories, including Parental Belief (cases where the respondent indicated that one or both parents felt that unschooling is a preferable means of education in general).

One clear finding is that mothers were the most influential family members regarding the unchooling choice. All (100%) of the respondents in Groups I and II, and 48% in Group III, mentioned their mother as an initiator of the decision to unschool (difference across groups was highly significant, $p < .001$). In contrast, fathers were mentioned as initiators by only 50% in Group I, 42% in Group II, and 26% in Group III (differences across groups not significant, $p = .24$). Over all three groups combined, 31 respondents mentioned their mother but not their father as an initiator, but only one respondent mentioned the father without mentioning the mother. In most cases where we recorded the father as one of the initiators, the respondents had referred to their “parents” as initiators, without specific mention of the father.

The child (the respondent) was mentioned as an initiator of the decision to unschool by 21% of respondents in Group I, 50% in Group II, and 74% in Group III. This increase across groups (which was statistically significant, $p = .0013$), is not surprising, as it is reasonable that the child would more often be the initiator in families where unschooling was started later, when the child was older, than in families where it was started earlier. Indeed, for 11 of the respondents in Group III,

the child was the only initiator mentioned. These were cases where the child decided to leave school and had to convince his or her parents. In three of these cases, the respondent mentioned Grace Llewlyn's book, *Teenage Liberation Handbook* (1998), as playing a major role in their decision to leave school.

Parental Belief was a stronger reason for unschooling for Group I—the group who started unschooling right from the beginning—than for the other groups. By our coding, 79% in Group I, 46% in Group II, and 39% in Group III cited this as a major reason for the unschooling choice (group differences significant, $p = .012$). As children got older, the decision to unschool was based less on initial parental belief about the value of unschooling and increasingly on such factors as the parents' observations about their child's unhappiness or boredom in school, the child's manifested ability to learn through his or her own self-directed efforts, the child's own determination to leave school, and frustration with attempts to enforce a curriculum at home. Our previous survey, of parents in unschooling families (Gray & Riley, 2013), provides a better breakdown of such reasons for choosing unschooling than we could provide in the present study, partly because of the larger sample size there and partly because parents' knowledge and memories of the reasons were more complete than those of grown unschoolers.

Role of parents in the respondents' education

Question 2 of the survey read: "*Please describe briefly how your family defined unschooling. What, if any responsibility, did your parent(s) assume for your education?*" We coded the responses here into three mutually exclusive categories—A, B, and C—depending on the degree to which the parents seemed to assume responsibility for the child's education.

Category A referred to cases where the parents assumed least responsibility, that is, cases where the unschooling situation was least like homeschooling. These were cases where, according to the respondents' descriptions, the parents did not deliberately or explicitly motivate, monitor, or guide the child's learning, though they might be responsive to the child's questions and requests, readily share their own interests, and influence naturally through example in everyday life. For example, one response coded as in this category was:

We defined unschooling as the freedom to do and learn what you wish, as long as it was not harmful to yourself or others. My parents created an open, supportive environment for my brother and me. They shared their interests with us, brought books and movies and experiences into the house, and let us move at our own pace. I think when we began unschooling, my parents let go of their self-imposed responsibility for my education—they had confidence in my ability to organically learn what I needed.

We found that 17% of respondents in Group I, 37% in Group II, and 54% in Group III fell into this category (across-group difference significant, $p=.0238$). Apparently, and perhaps not surprisingly, the older a child is when unschooling begins, the more fully the child is expected to assume responsibility for his or her education.

Category B were cases where parents were to some degree deliberately and explicitly involved in the child's education, though still in ways viewed by the respondent as facilitation and not as direction, prodding, or coaxing. A sample response in this category was:

Our unschooling was very self-directed. My parents were involved in the role of facilitator, and, well, Parents! They took us places like the library, zoo, museums, etc. They helped us when we needed help with a project we wanted to do and my dad very frequently would do so much research into whatever thing we kids were currently into that he would become a bigger expert in it than we would!

It was the last sentence in this description that made this example a B rather than an A. By our coding, 58% of respondents in Group I, 33% in Group II, and 29% in Group III fell into this category (differences did not reach statistical significance, $p=.08$).

Category C were cases where parents seemed to have at least some relatively specific educational goals in mind for their children and seemed to work deliberately toward achieving those goals. They didn't require specific learning (which would have made them homeschoolers, not unschoolers), but made clear efforts to encourage it. Such cases lie at the border between unschooling and what is often called relaxed homeschooling. A response illustrating this category was:

Unschooling for us meant my parents observed my siblings and me and continuously supplied materials and information sources for anything we were interested in. In the areas where my parents actually had significant knowledge of their own to share, they sought relevant moments to share it. From ages 7 through 16, my mother did encourage me to progress through a set of math textbooks and requested that I write something she could read and edit at least once a month to encourage me to improve my English skills. From time to time we haggled over some school assignment or other my mother felt she ought to assign when she was stressed about trying to prepare a report for the public school officials and worrying that it needed to sound more like public school.

By our coding, 25% in Group I, 30% in Group II, and 17% in Group III fell into this

category (group differences not significant, $p=.55$).

Over all groups combined, 39% fell in category A, 37% in B, and 24% in C. In our previous study (Gray & Riley, 2013), we asked parents in unschooling families essentially the same question about their role in unschooling. Using the same method of categorizing their responses as we used in the present study, we found 44% in A, 41% in B, and 15% in C. All in all it appears that the parents in roughly 15 to 25% of families who identify as unschoolers, to some degree, encourage or coax their children toward specific learning goals (our category C), while parents in the large majority of such families help their children achieve the children's own goals but do not attempt to direct their education. We note further that unschooling is not incompatible with formal study at home or even with taking classes outside of the home, as long as those are clearly the unschooler's own choices. As discussed in the second article in this pair, a number of the participants in our survey took community college courses while they were still unschooling, to gain specific knowledge or to prepare themselves to apply to a four-year college.

Their social experiences

A common stereotype is that children who are educated at home, whether in homeschooling or unschooling, are socially isolated and socially awkward. In our survey of unschooling parents, the great majority indicated that this stereotype was not true of their children (Gray & Riley, 2013). They generally reported that their children had rich social lives, with friends across a wide spectrum of ages, and were more socially adept than they would have been had they been schooled. We were curious to see if grown unschoolers would agree with such an assessment; so, for Question 6 of the present survey, we asked: *“What was your social life like growing up? How did you meet other kids your age? How was your social experience as an unschooler similar to or different from the types of social experiences you have now?”*

We coded the responses first for whether they reflected generally a Good, Poor, or Mixed (partly good, partly poor) social life during their years of unschooling. Overall, 52 (69%) of the responses were judged as Good, 9 (12%) as Poor, and 14 (19%) as Mixed. There were no significant group differences here. For example, the percentages coded as Good for Groups I, II, and III, respectively, were 76%, 63%, and 67% ($p=.430$).

Most of the respondents appeared to have had no particular difficulty meeting other children and making friends. Overall, 55% wrote that their local homeschooling group was a major source of friendships, and 43% stated that organized afterschool activities—such as dance, theatre, sports, and art classes—provided opportunities to meet others and make friends. Many also mentioned church or religious organizations, community or volunteer associations, and such youth organizations as Boys and Girls Clubs, 4H, and Scouting. Teenagers who

took part-time jobs met others through their work. Eight participants made special mention of Not Back to School Camp as a place where they made lasting friendships with other unschoolers, which were maintained through the Internet when camp wasn't in session. Some also stated that their families were very social and involved in the community, so friends were made through family connections.

One of the more extreme examples of a response in the Good category, which illustrates many ways of meeting others, is the following, from a 19-year-old woman:

I made friends at church or in the neighborhood or through sports or random classes I would take. I made friends at the store, at the post office or at the park. I made friends with people of all walks of life, all ages, all social and economic backgrounds. Our house was and still is a meeting place for many different types of people. We have always had the house where hungry kids came for a meal, where any of my mother's friends or brothers would come for a place to crash when things went awry or a place for just hiding out for a weekend from all that was bothering you. Some nights we cook for 20 people, others only for our family, so it is never dull. It is a great way to learn about people when you see them in all different situations and all different lights. I have learned what true friends are and have the ability to discern true friendship from passing friendship in most cases. My best friends are a 15-year-old girl who loves to dance and who is crafty, a young man my age who is slowly going blind but who is very driven, and an older woman who is enjoying retirement. It gives me perspectives I don't think I could gain from a group of people only my own age.

Even though we didn't ask about age mixing, 68% of the respondents mentioned that an advantage of not going to school was that they interacted with and made friends with people of all ages. Some of these added that they felt advantaged socially now, because the age-mixed social world they knew as children was similar to the social world of adult life beyond school.

The nine respondents categorized as having Poor social lives as unschoolers wrote mostly of social isolation. An example of such a response is:

My social life was pretty much nonexistent as an unschooler. I had friends from when I was in school, and then the only other friends my age I really ever had were neighbor kids, in my early years of unschooling. In my middle and high school years, I really didn't have friends my age. I interacted in various online communities a lot and would make friendships online and would meet a few of these people later in my high

school years. I also did have a few friends during the late high school years while I was working retail, from work.

Those coded as Mixed typically wrote of difficulties finding compatible friends—difficulties that might or might not be attributable to unschooling. Some of these people indicated that they were introverts, by nature, and were in some ways happy not to have the forced social interactions that would have occurred in school.

Their perceptions of the advantages of unschooling

Question 7 of the survey read, “*What, for you, were the main advantages of unschooling? Please answer both in terms of how you felt as a child growing up and how you feel now, looking back at your experiences. In your view, how did unschooling help you in your transition toward adulthood?*” None of the categories of responses to this question, or the next (on disadvantages), differed significantly over the three groups of participants, so we present the findings only for the total set of participants.

In response to this question, the great majority wrote enthusiastically about the advantages of unschooling. Overall, 77% of the participants mentioned advantages that we coded as Time to Pursue Own Interests and 75% mentioned advantages that we coded as Freedom/Independence. These are very similar categories, and when we combined them into one category we found that 95% of the participants gave responses in the combined category (in one or both of the original two categories). Sixty percent mentioned advantages that we coded as Improved Learning, meaning that unschooling improved their motivation to learn or allowed them to learn in their own ways, by their own schedules.

In describing continuing effects in adulthood, 75% noted Self-Direction and/or Self-Motivation, 48% noted high sense of Responsibility, 44% noted Continued Learning (sometimes expressed as continued interest in learning because of not being burned out by school), and 43% noted Self-Confidence as results of their unschooling. Some of the other advantages frequently mentioned were that unschooling allowed for a smooth transition to adulthood (33%), allowed them to avoid stressors associated with school (28%), and gave them more time to spend with family (24%). Many also reported advantages that they had previously noted in the question about their social lives as unschoolers, especially that of interacting with people of all ages. In addition, many indicated that their experiences as unschoolers gave them a head start in their higher education and/or career (discussed in the second article of this pair).

In our previous survey, of parents of unschooling families, we asked a similar question about advantages of unschooling, and the two most frequent categories of responses there were Improved Learning and Family Closeness, each mentioned by 57% of the parents (Gray & Riley, 2013). Concerning the latter, parents noted that

unschooling allowed family members to spend more time together, get to know one another better, and engage in more activities together than would be possible otherwise. It's perhaps not surprising that the value of family closeness was not as frequently mentioned by grown unschoolers as by unschooling parents. No matter how much children may love and appreciate their family of origin, their destiny is to move on and become independent of that family. That may help explain why the grown unschoolers saw the advantages of unschooling more in terms of their own freedom, independence, and responsibility—and less in terms of family relationships—than did the parents. As illustration, here are excerpts from four participants' responses to Question 7—chosen semi-randomly but partly because they are concise and touch on many of the most frequently cited categories of advantages:

The main advantage has been my freedom to learn whenever and, perhaps more importantly, whatever I want. ...When I found an interest in something, I had the ability to pursue it as focused or widely as I wanted. I've been left with a sense of initiative and self-direction.... In terms of the transition to adulthood, there really wasn't one! I've always socialized with adults and my parents always fostered a sense of responsibility in me. The day I became a legal adult came and went without fanfare. I had already started my business and was planning for the future. The time I've spent getting to know my parents has been invaluable. ...

I have very fond memories of my childhood. There was much time and space in my life for reading as much as I wanted, being creative, and for play of all kinds—alone and with friends. I strongly feel that unschooling builds a foundation for questioning and challenging the mainstream aspects of society. It provided me the ability to be confident in not blindly “following the crowd” and being comfortable about being myself and/or different. ... I think that I have more ownership over my life than I see in the general population, generally speaking.

As a teenager, I cherished that unschooling let me pursue my interests. It opened up experiences that are extremely unlikely I would have had the opportunity for if I was schooled: living in South America for six months when I was 15-16, working as an apprentice on vegetable farms when I was 16; all the travel I did around the USA and Canada from 14-19. As an adult, I see how strongly my independence and self-reliance were built during those years, especially with the travelling I did alone and then living away from my family working on farms. My curiosity and thirst

for knowledge blossomed during my years unschooling and I expect will stay with me throughout my life. ...Unschooling kindled my passions and destroyed the concept that learning only occurs in structured environments.

The main advantage of unschooling was that it supported me in understanding myself clearly and helping me craft an adult life which is meaningful to me. I do not identify as ever having stopped unschooling—I am continuing to learn as much as I did as a youth. When I was 15 I was studying microscopes and nuclear particles, and now I am studying nonprofit bylaws and building codes, or training for a marathon. I am 30 years old, and I have been practicing how to run my life, be motivated towards my own goals, think creatively for myself about how to solve a problem and seek out what interests me for 20 years. I find myself consistently in an advantageous position compared to my “schooled” peers. ...

Their perceptions of the disadvantages of unschooling

Question 8 of the survey read, “*What, for you, were the main disadvantages of unschooling? Again, please answer both in terms of how you felt as a child growing up and how you feel now. In your view, did unschooling hinder you at all in your transition toward adulthood?*” In response to this item, 37% of the respondents indicated no disadvantage, and most of the rest made it clear that, to them, the disadvantages were minor compared to the advantages.

The most frequent category of disadvantage, by our coding, was Others Opinions (dealing with others’ criticisms of unschooling or ignorance about it), mentioned by 28% of the participants. This was also the most frequently mentioned disadvantage in our previous study of unschooling parents, where it was mentioned by 46% of the respondents (Gray & Riley, 2013). Dealing with others’ opinions seemed to be more distressing to the parents, in the previous study, than to the unschooled children, in the present study. Perhaps this is because criticisms and doubts are more often directed toward parents than toward children, and parents feel responsible for the unschooling decision. A typical comment in this category, in the present study, was this: “As a kid, I found it endlessly annoying that I had to constantly explain my family’s choice to unschool. It wasn’t the norm, which was equally exciting and inconvenient.”

The next most common disadvantage, mentioned by 21% of the participants, was that which we coded as Social Isolation, which varied in degree and typically derived from a lack of other homeschoolers or unschoolers nearby and difficulties of socializing with school children because of their busy schedules and different orientation toward life. For example, one wrote:

The main disadvantage of unschooling for me was that I wasn't in close proximity to other unschoolers after the age of 13....My closest friends during my teen years... were people I met through NBTSC [Not Back to School Camp] and lived far away.

Only eight participants (11%) mentioned any sort of learning deficit as a disadvantage. Three of these described this as a major disadvantage; the other five presented it as a relatively minor problem, solved by making up the deficit when they needed to.

The three participants who saw learning deficits as a major disadvantage were also the only ones who indicated that, for them, the disadvantages of unschooling outweighed the advantages. Although they came from three different families their stories were quite similar. All three described their mothers as in poor mental health and their fathers as uninvolved. All three indicated that their parents did not allow them the choice of going to school and that they felt socially isolated, ignorant, and stigmatized. Two of them attributed their isolation partly to the fundamentalist Christian beliefs of their parents. It is instructive to look a little closer at each of these cases, to identify conditions in which unschooling may be a bad idea.

One of these respondents grew up in the UK and was entirely unschooled (i.e. was in Group I). She wrote:

I actively disagree with unschooling because I believe that it is a very easy way for unwell parents to bring their children up without those parents needing to actively participate/integrate into society.... Because of my mother's poor mental health she found it difficult making friends and generally disliked attending social events, etc. I think this was the main reason she decided to unschool us.

This person went on to say that, as an unschooler, she didn't study anything or develop a satisfactory plan for her own life. She went on to higher education in the fine arts, and a job as an art teacher, not because she was interested in art or enjoyed teaching, but because she didn't feel qualified for anything else.

Another was Christian homeschooled through third grade and then was unschooled, not, she claimed, because of a deliberate decision, but because of her mother's psychological and physical disabilities and consequent inability to manage homeschooling. This person also wrote that her mother kept her and her sister out of school "to be able to control the kinds of information we were exposed to, including sex education, science, or health, as well as control the kinds of people we interacted with." She wrote further:

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Disadvantages would be not having the groundwork of basic knowledge and social skills! I am also uncomfortable with most people and prefer to be alone, which may be from my experience growing up alone and unsupervised, but also might just be my nature, I don't know. As a kid the main thing was knowing that I was not fitting in anywhere, our always being the “weirdos” in the neighborhood, always missing rites of passage and being alone too often.

As an adult she had worked mostly at temporary jobs such as cleaning or house painting, but at the time of the survey she was enrolled, at age 35, in a bachelor's program in industrial design.

The third of these respondents wrote that her mother pulled her out of the Baptist academy she had been attending, in 4th grade, because of the mother's conflicts with the staff. The mother intended to homeschool her after that, using a Christian curriculum, but failed to follow through because of her own struggles with depression. In this respondent's words:

In my opinion, I was “unschooled” simply because my mother could not tolerate the anxiety of having me in public or private school—where other non-Christian people could “negatively influence” me. She needed me at home to do chores and take care of her, because she was a non-functional depressed person.

She wrote further:

As an adult looking back, the main disadvantage was that the social isolation allowed my parents to get away with more abuse and neglect than they otherwise would have. ... Lacking a formal education did chip away at my self-confidence as I transitioned toward adulthood. ... I still feel permanently damaged in some way, like I am a freak who was kept in a cage and not educated formally. As I prepared to begin formal college education, my unschooling experience hindered me by having failed to provide standard levels of math and science knowledge. I had to tutor myself to pass the GED. I had to tutor myself remedial math and science skills to keep up in introductory-level college courses.

Apparently, however, she succeeded quite well in tutoring herself, as, at the time of the survey, she was a 29-year-old Ph.D. candidate in archaeology at a prestigious university. Although this person felt negatively about her own upbringing, she (unlike the other two) was not dead set against unschooling in general; she even indicated that, depending on circumstances, she might unschool her own child.

Would they unschool their own children?

The final question of the survey read: “*If you choose to have children, do you think you will choose to unschool them? Why or why not?*” One respondent omitted this question. Of the remaining 74, 50 (67%) responded in a way that we coded as Yes, indicating that they would definitely unschool their own child, or would unless the child expressed a clear preference for something else or circumstances prevented it. This number includes eight respondents who already had children of school age and were unschooling them. The reasons they gave for preferring to unschool their own children were quite similar to the answers they gave to the question about the advantages they experienced in their own unschooling.

Another 19 (25%) responded in a way that we coded as Maybe, meaning that they would consider unschooling, but would weigh it against other possibilities, such as a progressive or democratic alternative school. Five (7%) responded in a way that we coded as No, meaning that they would definitely not unschool their own child or would be very unlikely to. Of these, two were among the three who were unhappy about their own unschooling (described above); another felt that unschooling worked well for her but poorly for her younger brother, so she was against unschooling except for highly self-motivated individuals; another preferred democratic schooling (such as a Sudbury school) over unschooling, for the greater sense of community it offered; and a fifth, who was in the military, favored a semi-structured school environment, such as a Montessori school, so the child would learn to adapt to imposed structure. It’s noteworthy that all of the respondents who mentioned that they had children of school age were unschooling them; nobody said that they had a child of school age in school or doing curriculum-based homeschooling.

Concluding thoughts

In sum, the results reported in this first article on the survey indicate that (a) mothers most often initiated unschooling for younger children, but the main initiators for those who began unschooling after sixth grade were often the children themselves; (b) parents of those who were unschooled from the beginning played a larger facilitative role in their children’s education than did parents of those who began unschooling later; (c) most participants reported that they found friends through community activities and were happy with their social lives, both as unschooled children and later as adults; (d) most reported that a social advantage of unschooling was the opportunity to become friends with people over a broad range of ages; (e) the most frequently reported advantages of unschooling were time and freedom to pursue their own interests, improved motivation and ability to learn, and development of a sense of responsibility for their own lives; (f) the most frequently reported disadvantage was the annoyance of having to explain or defend

unschooling to others, who did not understand or approve of it; (g) all except three of the participants indicated that, to them, the advantages of unschooling outweighed any disadvantages, and the great majority indicated that they would unschool their own children; and (f) the three participants who were unhappy about their unschooling reported that they came from dysfunctional, socially isolating families.

As noted earlier, because the participants were self-selected, any temptation to generalize these findings to the unschooling population as a whole must be treated cautiously. However, the results indicate considerable uniformity, among those who were happy with their unschooling, in their reasons for that happiness, and great uniformity among the three who were unhappy with it in their reasons for that. The results also reveal consistent differences among the participants in the parents' roles in unschooling, and in the reasons for choosing unschooling, depending on the age at which unschooling began. Even if the present study includes a disproportionate number of satisfied unschoolers, these contingent differences may well represent differences that would apply to a normative sample of unschoolers.

An unanticipated consequence of the self-selection into this study is the over-representation of women; only 16 of the 75 are men. Other surveys, on other topics, have likewise revealed a higher response rate from women than from men (e.g. Smith, 2008), but not by as great a proportion as occurred in the present study. There is no reason to believe that more females than males are unschooled; indeed, our survey of parents (Gray & Riley, 2013) revealed slightly more unschooled boys than girls in the families that responded. It is noteworthy, however, that both the present survey and our survey of parents revealed that mothers are much more directly involved in their children's unschooling than are fathers. Perhaps many more women than men responded to this survey in part for the same reason that many more mothers than fathers responded to our previous survey. Women may generally be more invested in the education of their own children than are men and may, therefore, place relatively higher value on any study pertaining to children's education. The gender imbalance becomes a somewhat bigger issue in the second article of this pair, where we discuss the participants' choices concerning further education and careers.

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Appendix—Consent form and survey questionnaire

Consent Form

You have been invited to participate in a research study focusing on the experiences of adults, age 18 and older, who have been unschooled. We ask that you read this form and ask any questions you have before agreeing to be in the study. This study is being conducted by Dr. Gina Riley from Hunter College; and Dr. Peter Gray from Boston College.

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Background Information: The purpose of this study is to gain insight into the experiences of unschooled adults.

Task: Individuals participating in this study are asked to submit their responses to a brief survey pertaining to unschooling.

Benefits: By participating in this study, you will be advancing academic research related to unschooling. This research may help other families make informed decisions regarding the education of their children.

Confidentiality: The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report that might be published, we will not include any information that would identify a participant. Please note that this survey is completely voluntary.

Contacts and Questions: Any questions relating to this study can be addressed to professorginariley@gmail.com via email.

Statement of Consent: By returning the survey below, I am giving consent for my participation in this study.

Survey of Unschooled Adults (Age 18 and older)

You may respond simply by returning this email to professorginariley@gmail.com with your answers typed in below each question.

Name (Please note that names will not be used in any reports that come from the study):

Gender:

Birthdate (written as month/day/year):

1. Please tell us about your history of schooling/homeschooling/unschooling:
 - (a) Did you ever attend a school, as a regular student, when you were between the ages of 5 and 16? If so, please list any schools you attended by type of school (e.g. public, Montessori, etc.), your age when you attended and when you left, your grade level(s) at that school (e.g. kindergarten through 5th grade), and your understanding of why you left that school.
 - (b) During the years when you were not in school, between age 5 and 16, did you ever do homeschooling—that is, school at home, where you were following a curriculum determined by your parent(s) or another adult? If so, please describe that experience, how long it lasted, and your age at the time. If you switched from homeschooling to unschooling, what led you and/or your parent(s) to make that switch?
2. Please describe briefly how your family defined unschooling. What, if any responsibility, did your parent(s) assume for your education?
3. In your opinion, why were you “unschooled” instead of going to school or doing school at home? Is this something that both you and your parent(s) wanted to do?
4. Are you currently employed? If so, what do you do? Does your current employment match any interests/activities you had as an unschooled child/teen? If so, please explain.

5. Please describe briefly any formal higher education you have experienced, such as community college/college/and graduate school. How did you get into college without having a high school diploma? How did you adjust from being unschooled to being enrolled in a more formal type of educational experience? Please list any degrees you have obtained or degrees you are currently working toward.
6. What was your social life like growing up? How did you meet other kids your age? How was your “social” experience as an unschooler similar/different to the types of social experiences you have now?
7. What, for you, were the main advantages of unschooling? Please answer both in terms of how you felt as a child growing up and how you feel now, looking back at your experiences. In your view, how did unschooling help you in your transition toward adulthood?
8. What, for you, were the main disadvantages of unschooling? Again, please answer both in terms of how you felt as a child growing up and how you feel now. In your view, did unschooling hinder you at all in your transition toward adulthood?
9. If you choose to have a family/children, do you think you will choose to unschool them? Why or why not?



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