An Introduction to Conscious Parenting and Unschooling



Freya Dawson and Baerbel Fischer

OPEN MIND UNSCHOOLING

ⓒ Freya Dawson and Baerbel Fischer 2022

1. Conscious parenting leading to unschooling

We define conscious parenting as relating to children with respect, understanding and trust. It requires a willingness to do inner work to unlearn old patterns and beliefs. There is a commitment not to use punishments or parent-imposed rules or limits.

We each came to conscious parenting from different directions, and this has influenced our journey.

Just to give you a little of the background, here is a snippet of our stories.

~ Baerbel ~

I had done a lot of personal trauma release work, including inner child work, before having children. When my first child was born, I was guided by my intuition as to what was right for my child. My own inner child also ‘piped up’ with an inner knowing of how she wanted to be treated. This knowing and my intuitive connection with my children guided my way of being with my two sons. I felt very secure and confident in following my heart and intuition, but I didn't have the words to describe it to others. Later I came to know that my style of parenting had some names. It started with on-demand breastfeeding, attachment parenting, then conscious parenting and the use of nonviolent communication, followed by unschooling.

~ Freya ~

I was gifted with two highly spirited children who wanted to do everything in their own way and their own time, so I had to find a way to adapt to that. Conventional

parenting practices just weren't going to work, but they didn't have any appeal for me anyway. I had no idea about conscious parenting when I became a mother 21 years ago so I read a lot of books, experimented with different approaches and shared what I was learning with others as a way of integrating it for myself. It was a long process of unlearning my old conditioning and learning a whole new way of relating to my sons.

I have a background as a legal academic and I've done a lot of thinking about rules, punishments and alternatives to the conventional ways of controlling behaviour. Right from the beginning I was committed to not using force, rules or punishments and to allowing my children their full emotional expression.

When Baerbel and Freya met and became friends they realised that they had come to a very similar path from different directions. They also realised that their different skills and experiences complemented each other beautifully.

How did we come to choose unschooling?

~ Baerbel ~

I chose unschooling because I wanted to continue providing my children with a free lifestyle. A lifestyle that was, and is, free of punishments, arbitrary rules/consequences, blaming, shaming and coercion. A lifestyle rich with personal choices and care for each family member. I did not want to be an authoritarian parent, who tells their child to do their homework, put on a uniform, get up early and all of that. One of my children is on the autism spectrum. Although I didn't realise this until much later, I knew intuitively that he would not fit into the rigid school system.

Time was also an important factor. I wanted time to approach the day in a relaxed way without rushing. This was essential, as my autistic son just does not 'do' rushing. I wanted time to be a patient parent, who can listen to all of their big and small problems. Time to attune to my children and ask questions, when they had no words for what was troubling them. Time to decompress after a stressful

situation, with cuddles and playfulness and good old TLC. Time to creatively problem-solve until everyone felt seen, heard and understood and was happy with our joint solution.

Conscious parenting combined with unschooling enabled my children, and the whole family, to live authentically. For me, to live authentically, means to give children as much agency as possible over their lives and learning journey.

I wanted my children to have agency over these aspects of their lives:

- **Their bodies**
  They don't have to wear a uniform, but can wear comfortable clothes of any colour or design of their choice. They can be barefoot.
  They can eat what they like, when they like. No school bell dictates eating times.
  They can go to the toilet, without having to ask for permission.
- **Their place and surroundings**
  They don't have to be in a school yard or classroom, they can choose to be and learn in the home or outside, go to play parks, into nature and other places that interest them.
- **Their mind**
  They can choose what they want to learn, how to learn, when to learn and at what pace they want to learn. They can follow their interests. Children get to ask the questions, not teachers.
- **Their social interactions**
  They can choose their friends and how much time they spend with them, which would not be possible in a school setting.
  They can choose to be with people of any age, not just same aged peers.
  They can follow their own body rhythms of sometimes needing cocooning and downtime and other times craving connection and activities.
- **Their time**
  They can immerse themselves in a subject until they are saturated. The school bell doesn't stop them.

They can read or play games or pursue any activity for as long as they want.
They can start big projects that take several days, like designing and sewing a soft toy or building a PC from scratch, while managing their time their own way. They can stay in the creative flow without being interrupted by a school timetable.
They can sleep when they are tired and wake up when they are ready.

- **Their sense of worth**
  They get to decide whether they are happy with an activity or creation. No one evaluates and assesses whether their activity or project is up to a certain standard.
- **Their "Why"**
  In a school setting children are being prescribed what to learn. Many times this material is purely theoretical and removed from real life context. Most maths formulas or operations are being taught for the sake of learning them, in case they might be needed later on. As unschoolers children might learn the same formula, because it is needed for a project. The child's "why" is the project (e.g. building a bird house). The maths formula is a tool to execute a meaningful project. Being able to choose projects, being immersed in something meaningful and having the theory connected with the practical, physical 'doing' keeps the love for learning alive.

~ Freya ~

I had to figure out what to do next when my eldest child refused to return to preschool at age 4 and declared that he just wanted to stay home. I couldn't figure out how he was ever going to fit into school and I started to think about other options.

What do you do if your child refuses to go to school repeatedly, persistently and resolutely?

What do you do if they refuse to sit down at a desk and learn to read, write or do maths in the conventional way?

When I was confronted with these issues, I saw clearly what my culture and upbringing (and a voice in my head) expected of me: I should first try and gently persuade my child or use rewards; then upgrade to a stern lecture if persuasion and rewards didn't convince them. If that didn't work, I should try and scare them into compliance by spinning a story about the terrible things that would happen if they didn't go to school or sit down and learn to write. Next, I should try emotional manipulation and threaten to withdraw my love and attention or to embarrass or shame them in some way. If all that failed to get a result, then punishment of some kind was expected.

The problem was, I wouldn't do it. Sure, I tried gentle persuasion.

It didn't work.

A few times I even started on a scary story about "what might happen if……." I felt myself cringe inside as the words came out of my mouth.

I couldn't bring myself to carry on through the list of techniques until I succeeded in forcing my child to do what they didn't want to do. My heart wasn't in it.

The idea of home education came into my head, but I didn't have a clue how to proceed. Then, fortunately, I met some home educators in a park one day and they invited me to a homeschool playgroup. Suddenly the path forward was clear, but it was also very, very scary and unknown.

I learned that there is a way to live with your children and support their learning without ever using force. It's called unschooling. It relies on the natural curiosity, creativity and desire to learn that all children possess. It's child-led education.

Unschooling was virtually unknown in Australia at that time (or so it seemed) but the magic of the internet put me in touch with unschoolers in the US and I lapped up their knowledge and experience. It soon became clear to me that unschooling or interest-led learning was the perfect fit for my children.

I never had a clear idea of what unschooling was going to look like or where it was heading. My anchor through the whole journey was a promise that I made to my sons many, many times:

> “I will never force you to do anything that you don’t want to do.”

That was a promise I felt compelled to make by something deep within me. It was a matter of my own integrity rather than any philosophy or educational fashion. That promise was the starting point for a wild, fun and challenging family adventure that was primarily directed by my sons. They took me further off the conventional map than I could have imagined and it was wonderful.

2. Unschooling leading to conscious parenting.

Over the last twenty years we have helped and mentored many other parents who are on an unschooling journey with their children. We have found that as people let go of the school mindset with deschooling that there is a natural influence on parenting style.

A common pathway is for there to be an initial choice to homeschool, perhaps due to a child having unpleasant experiences at school. Many parents lack confidence with homeschooling and naturally think that they have to teach their children in much the same way as the school system does. They buy a curriculum or start doing their own version of “school at home”, only to find that after a short while their children start to complain and stop cooperating. That’s when the parents start to investigate unschooling as an alternative.

Once people start to let go of the school mindset and let their children follow their own interests, certain things start to happen. Invariably, children want to spend most of their days playing and exploring. Quite often children want to explore play that makes their parents very uncomfortable. They might want to play with toy weapons and have battles in the back garden or they might become fascinated with a certain TV program or Youtube channel that their parents see no “educational value” in. They might develop a passion for playing video games.

When your child’s interests stray off the path of activities that you consider educational (or even consider harmful); what do you do?

If the direction of your child's learning journey starts to make you feel very uncomfortable you might find all sorts of fears coming up; fears about your child being harmed by technology, or exposed to harmful content online, or not learning what you believe they should be learning at that age. Whenever fears about the future come up, it's easy to follow our old programming and go into control mode. You might also start to experience big emotional reactions and yell at your children or fight with them.

This is the point at which some parents realise that they need a new parenting approach to deal with these new conflicts with their child or children. They start to become very interested in a conscious parenting approach that steers them away from confrontations and daily stress and struggle and towards a more respectful, cooperative way of being in partnership with their children. Lots of parents make this transition and find that it brings them deep experiences of peace and greater harmony with their children.

Parents that start out with the intention to be respectful of their children and who consider themselves on a peaceful parenting or conscious parenting path still often find that unschooling brings big challenges. For both Freya and Baerbel, conscious parenting and unschooling blended together and required ongoing attention. For most families, deschooling is a long process. As children grow and change, parents are faced with new situations that might require new skills or the unlearning of old beliefs. Conscious parenting is very much an evolving process or attitude rather than a set of guidelines.

~ Freya ~

If I had expectations about how unschooling was going to look for my family, I ran a high risk of becoming frustrated, stressed and anxious when it didn't turn out the way I was hoping.

When I have expectations, I have an agenda. This can feel tight, heavy or pressured – and not fun to be around.

There were also times that I fell into painful comparisons between my family and those families who seemed to make it all look cool and easy.

Are you judging your unschooling family, or yourself as “Not good enough?”

It might not be video games that bring up this stressful thought. It might be that your child likes to watch movies on repeat or endless YouTube videos. Or they might be a daydreamer that doesn’t stick to any interest for long. Or perhaps they really like your attention and involvement in their day and they don’t seem to be “self-directed” enough for unschooling.

Whatever the problem seems to be, I’d like to invite you to investigate further. I’m not suggesting that you try and “fix” or change your child or your own approach to unschooling. I’d like to suggest that the problem is in the way you are thinking about the situation. This is where the process of deschooling comes in. For me, this has been a constant process of unlearning the school mindset and the old, conditioned beliefs I had about my role as a parent.

If your child is often happy, playful and engaged in activity then chances are they are learning. Some boredom, frustration and anxiety are to be expected; they are part of the journey. Your child’s learning may not be obvious to you and it may not be the type of learning that you had in mind, but it’s almost guaranteed that your child is learning something every day. It helps if you abandon the narrow way that learning is defined and measured in schools and look more broadly at the way your child’s conversation, relationships, self-expression, skills and knowledge are changing. It helps to zoom out and take a long view: natural learning doesn’t follow a clear linear pathway or sequential grades and it doesn’t run according to a timetable.

Left to develop naturally, the focus of your child’s attention will change over time, sometimes dramatically. For example, one of my sons went from being focused on video games and YouTube to being focused on learning to play the piano and to building knowledge and skills in “school subjects” in a short space of time – when he was ready. This shift arose from within my child. It was his idea, not mine, and I got to observe the benefits of his self-motivation. I didn’t see his new interests as “better” than the earlier ones, just different. My judgments of his learning had fallen away.

ⓒ Freya Dawson and Baerbel Fischer 2022

~ Baerbel ~

I find that the school system interrupts the natural internal drive to learn. Once children start to crawl, you can't keep them from exploring. They will try to get into EVERYTHING. You have to keep all of the dangerous stuff out of the bottom cupboards or put child safety clips on the cupboard doors. As they develop, their curiosity changes. They want to copy everything the adults or older siblings are doing, from hammering nails to doing the dishes. Then come the questions… "Why" is a word that gets used multiple times per day. Then comes the age where they go to school. The whole forward momentum of their inquisitive minds gets stopped in its tracks. Children have to sit still, listen to the teachers and answer THEIR questions! This means that not only did the curiosity come to a halt, but the momentum of the questions gets 'put into reverse' so to speak. If you imagine a car moving forward (symbolising the child's curiosity), then coming to a stop (entering the school system) and the car going into reverse (the dynamic of the questions being reversed from the child asking the questions to the teacher asking the questions). On a deep soul level I experienced a deep hurt in my intellect by the dynamic reversing. Most of us are so used to our intellect being institutionalised, that we don't question the dynamics. It is the norm everywhere we look. I read somewhere that the fish is the last one to notice that it is swimming in water. Deschooling can help to peel back the layers of institutionalised learning. It can help us to gain personal clarity and to enable us to support our children in following their natural curiosity.

My children never went to school during their childhood years. I had the privilege of witnessing what happens when curiosity does not get stopped in its tracks. It becomes more refined as the child grows up. The early "Why" evolved into: "Mum, I wonder if you can tessellate pentagons with equal angles, without there being gaps. Or do you have to 'squish' the pentagons for there to be no gaps?" There were many other questions about black holes, cell division and the like. By having been through the institutionalised learning process ourselves, most of us have lost trust in our children's innate drive to learn while being self-directed and the trust that it will lead to them gaining skills that will support them in leading a fruitful adult life. I love supporting parents in finding that trust again.

With unschooling the learning journey looks vastly different and doesn't adhere to a timetable. Learning is mixed with everyday life and that's where conscious parenting comes in. As we are living everyday life, children can present us with all sorts of things, from strong-willed 'No's' to far out ideas of what they want to pursue. How do we truly want to handle these situations? What does our conscience and integrity call us to do? How do we handle the triggers that might surface when we give our children that which we never received? What do we do when we act on autopilot under stress and yell or revert back to the authoritarian parenting that we received? I love supporting parents in finding their own unique way of conscious parenting.

3. Where conscious parenting and unschooling come together.

"When will my child learn …….?"

In a school setting children are expected to learn things in a certain time and sequence. We are all familiar with how that works, because we all went to school. When you choose an unschooling path it is quite likely that your children will not follow the same learning "timetable" as their schooled peers. This can lead to a great deal of stress and worry for parents if they expect their child to have reached certain learning outcomes by a certain age and that has not happened.

When the fears come up about your child's learning progress, it's understandable that you may want to try and do something. A conventional parenting approach probably involves trying to push your child into learning the desired skill. How would someone who is taking a conscious parenting approach tackle this situation?

Here are some examples from our own experiences:

~ Freya ~

My younger son showed little interest in reading or writing until he was 12 years old. Prior to that he'd learned the alphabet, some sight words and could write his name. He loved being read to, playing with Lego, watching movies and he spent a large part of every day playing video games.

Conscious parenting played a big part in how I chose to respond to this situation. I was certainly not immune to the fearful thoughts coming into my head about my son's lack of interest in learning to read. The practice that I found incredibly helpful in this situation, and so many others, was to question my thinking. I used a process of self-inquiry called The Work. The fundamental understanding I gained from doing The Work was that it isn't the situation itself that was causing my stress and fears, it was what I was believing about the situation.

For example, If I was believing that my son had missed the "best window" for learning to read and would never fully "catch up", then I felt really awful and I had a strong urge to put pressure on my son and to try and control his learning. When I used the questions of The Work to question my thoughts, I came to see that they didn't stand up to scrutiny. Deep down, I didn't really believe that my son had a problem. Instead, I knew that he was simply not ready and all the pressure went out of the situation for both of us.

When my son turned 12 he suddenly got the desire to learn to read. It happened virtually overnight. Unlike his older brother who taught himself to read (also in his teens – but that's another story) my youngest wanted to be taught by me. So we began the process of sitting down together every day with a pile of picture books, workbooks or flash cards and working out how he was going to learn to read. It was a process of try-it-and-see. We explored various approaches together and I was told very clearly when it "wasn't working" for him and what he found helpful.

Writing and spelling came a little later but we used the same approach. He asked to be taught, I found a range of resources for him to try and I gave him my

attention and answered his questions. He wanted me to sit with him while he practiced writing and to spell words out loud to help him learn spelling.

It was not an easy or a quick process, even with a wholly self-directed learner. I found it challenging at times. He sometimes experienced frustration and anxiety and projected it into me. As with the whole of our unschooling journey, I got the opportunity to investigate some more of my old patterns of thinking (the school mindset) and to question some of my fears, such as “This isn’t happening fast enough.”

By age 14 he was clear that he liked a structured approach to learning and he decided he wanted to go to school. I was very uncertain about this as I wasn’t sure he was ready for it academically or socially, but he was determined. He put pressure on himself and on me to improve his reading, writing and learning in all the “school subjects” so he could start school and not be “behind” his peers. He did weekly sessions with an English tutor for two months to build his confidence. Then at 15 he started at our local public high school in Year 9.

It was an interesting time; with two months of school followed by two months back at home because of the coronavirus. He was very happy to go back to school full time after that and see his new friends and teachers.

He came home a few weeks after that and gave me the results of his first ever in-class exam for English. He had to write an essay on two poems about World War 1. He was delighted to tell me that he was given an A grade. That’s one of many A grades he’s now received at school.

I’m not keen on the assessment system in schools for so many reasons but I know how happy he is to be where he is today and I’m happy for him. I’m also glad that I didn’t interfere with all those years of self-directed play that he enjoyed when he was younger. He was always learning. Every day. It didn’t matter if I couldn’t see or quantify all of it or if it didn’t follow the school curriculum.

Above all, I’m glad that I questioned my fears and didn’t buy into the role of education-controller. Questioning the school mindset allowed me to relax, trust and enjoy my time with my son. Give me happiness over achievements any day.

ⓒ Freya Dawson and Baerbel Fischer 2022

~ Baerbel ~

My older son was speaking full sentences as a toddler, when other children his age were saying single, one syllable words. So here we were at a mainstream playgroup. I watched toddlers waddle towards me, excitedly pointing to a ball and saying “Ball!” with ever so much satisfaction or pointing to a car in the sandpit exclaiming “Car!”, while my son toddled towards me, pointed into the distance and said: ”Look mum, there is a yellow flower with black dots behind the white fence!” (He loved colours at that age.) And he guided me to the fence…. The flower was a Gazania.

I remember that day so well. I did not know that he was autistic, but it dawned on me that I would have to be extra switched on with this one. Boy, was I right! When he was about 4 years old, we used to have fridge magnet letters on the fridge. My son used to line some of them up. I don’t remember how this game started, but I sounded out the line of letters to him, just for fun. As I sounded out random letters like GHKOIPLAD and made funny faces, he thought it was hilarious. He was lolling on the floor laughing and giggling, gasping: “Again! Again!” and he made another line. After a few days of this, he was able to read simple 3 to 4 letter words. I was SO not ready for this. For me, it had been a fun game that entertained him, while I was doing the dishes. I remember thinking: “Oh boy! …Really!?!.... Now?!

He loved being read to, especially, when I gave different characters different animated voices. He also wanted to try out his skill in reading. It was quite a challenge to find books that he liked. He was not interested in the typical young children’s books. I found early readers in the library that covered topics like space or flight. They had one image and one simple sentence per page. He took to them. He also loved speech bubbles, but most of the comics were too advanced for him. So I bought a large whiteboard and we created our own simple comics on that. We took turns creating and narrating stories together. Sometimes neighbours’ kids joined in. The stories were hilarious. We drew the images, showing people falling off a cliff (roadrunner style), hair flying… with a speech bubble saying “HELP” and another person running after them, waving their arms and a speech bubble saying ”STOP!” This was more than 20 years ago. There was nothing on the market then that would have fitted his learning style.

With our homemade storytelling, drawing and speech bubble writing, he advanced quite quickly, in both reading and writing. By the time he was 5, he was devouring ‘Asterix and Obelix’ and ‘Tintin’ graphic novels and later ‘Star Wars’ Comics.

Even though speech and reading & comprehension came easily to him, this was not the case with spelling, grammar and punctuation. I am so glad we decided to unschool. He would have been bored in a school setting when it came to reading & comprehension and learning to write, but he would have been ‘behind’ and struggling when it came to spelling, grammar and punctuation. I love that children can learn at their own pace with unschooling. My son got a grasp on punctuation in his very late teens, past school leaving age, and that is fine with me. I love when learning happens organically, when the mind, body and emotional maturity are in sync and ready to take something in… of their own free will. And, being autistic, some grammatical concepts might never ‘click’ for him. That’s ok, too. That’s when you can ask for help, which is a very human thing to do.

My son is still passionate about reading and writing. He is in a Young Writers Collective and has been on stage, reading aloud one of his short stories at the local Writers Festival, which is an offshoot of the Sydney Writers Festival.

Screens and Gaming

There is a pervasive attitude in our society and amongst home educators that screen time is bad for kids and that taking their devices away or imposing strict rules about technology use is the way to go. We’d like to present an alternative approach.

This involves having a connected, respectful, cooperative relationship with your child.

To have this kind of relationship means focusing on trust, support, encouragement and play. It also means being willing to question those scary stories about screen time.

We're not saying limits are wrong, but we didn't want to impose those limits unilaterally. When issues involving screen time came up, we preferred to work cooperatively with our children to find solutions that everyone was happy with.

Here are some examples of how we each handled our children's love for screens and gaming:

~ Freya ~

Both of my sons decided that playing video games was going to be their number one passion at ages 6 and 3 years old respectively.

I was WAY out of my depth. I had a head full of judgements about how bad video games were for children and my fears were being triggered on a daily basis. I was worried about the violent content, about the effect of being in front of screens for many hours every day and about their lack of interest in what I saw as "educational" activities.

My beliefs and fears around gaming were pushing me to control my children, steer them away from the video games and impose limits on their screen time. But my children were outraged by this and they were willing to fight for what they wanted. There were no compliant or obedient children in my house!

It was either going to be a constant battle and struggle, or I was going to have to find another path.

What emerged after years of working on this issue was a system for dealing with my stress and worry and solving any problems that arose over gaming in a cooperative way.

I found a way to be true to my dream of being a peaceful, respectful parent and living in harmony with my children as they explored the world of video gaming.

Here are three elements of my peaceful approach

1. Get closer and observe more clearly.

I didn't turn a blind eye or let my sons become isolated in their virtual worlds. Instead, I got even closer to my children and became involved in their new passion. I had no prior experience of gaming but my children wanted help as they explored new games, so I was learning alongside them as they figured out how to play Minecraft, World of Warcraft and countless other games. It was a very steep learning curve for me as well as a very steep unlearning curve. To be fully present with my sons and to accurately observe what was going on with their gaming I had to unlearn the prejudices and judgements that were the filter through which I saw and which were causing me stress. This took a lot of research, observation and willingness to change my ideas.

2. Investigate and question my fears.

A huge part of my conscious parenting path was learning how to deal with my own fears rather than projecting them onto my children. I learned to be more honest, open and vulnerable with my children rather than try and pretend that I was fine and always "in control". I also learned a process for investigating and questioning my fears rather than believing that they were all true. To be able to live with my children without being controlled by fearful thoughts made a massively positive difference to our lives. It was a long process to get there, that took me on deep search for my truth and required a whole lot of honesty and courage, but it was worth every step.

3. Learn how to solve problems cooperatively.

To build strong relationships based on trust, respect and open communication requires learning new skills. What my parents taught me as a child was that it was OK to use force, coercion and fear to keep children "safe" and to get them to do what you wanted. As I didn't want to follow in their path, I had to learn some new problem solving skills. What do you do when what you want and what your children want comes into conflict? How can you find solutions together that everybody is happy with? I discovered that it's possible, with practice, to find solutions that everyone is willing to accept about such thorny issues as turning off screens in the evening, getting outside for exercise and choosing age-appropriate games.

My course Making Peace with Screens and Gaming is my response to the stress, worry and self-doubt that I've witnessed among parents that have dared to let their children explore the world of TV, movies, YouTube and video games. I share

the details of my story and my system for living peacefully with my game-loving sons. It's an opportunity to meet together and investigate the fears that bring us into conflict with our children and to find fresh ways of approaching technology use.

~ Baerbel ~

In a lot of households, screen time is seen as a recreational activity to be enjoyed after the 'work' has been done. This might be going to school, doing homework or parents coming home from a day of work and enjoying some screen time to decompress. Or, on the other hand, screen time is seen as acceptable, if it is used for the purpose of academic learning via educational programs and online study.

For our unschooling family there was no divide between serious learning and play, curiosity, passions and interests. There was some very 'serious learning' happening while my children followed their passions. Video gaming and other screen related activities were a big part of their lives.

By the time our children were interested in video games, Freya and I had become good friends. Our children were close friends as well. They were playing World of Warcraft, Minecraft and a host of other games. They had created a Minecraft group together. We were meeting weekly at each other's houses, the kids bringing their laptops along, or they were playing virtually from home. They created some amazing Minecraft Worlds. Freya and I had cups of tea and were on stand-by for tech support. It was a steep learning curve for us, all about deleting temporary files and defragging hard drives to make the games run smoothly. Yes, this was 10 or so years ago and defragging did not happen automatically. You had to get into the bowels of the system. We were on the phone to tech support when a mod had crashed the game, or certain parts of their Minecraft world glitched.

We were the kids' allies in pursuing their passions. Because of that, my kids let me into their world. We gamed together. My younger son bought me a Minecraft

account for my birthday, paid for by his hard-earned pocket money. My kids and I created a Minecraft World in which they taught me how to play. At one stage in the game I carried a diamond in my backpack. I was hopeless at looking after the diamond. My kids couldn't stop laughing at their mother's lack of gaming skills and declared that I was not allowed to carry our hard-earned diamond again.

By playing the game alongside my children I got to see first hand, the immense educational content in the game. The maths that is involved to mine resources and to build tools and weapons is amazing. There is orienteering, the use of fictional maps and more. Through Minecraft my kids became interested in geology. They researched how diamonds are formed, how to extract iron from ore, and we ended up going fossicking. For us, screen time has not been the enemy, but a very helpful tool.

As I have mentored parents regarding homeschool registration with an unschooling style I have been asked about the educational content of games and how to include those games in the educational plan.

Instead of looking up the educational content of each specific game, I can give you a general overview of the Key Learning Areas that are being covered.
I am based in NSW and will use the terminology for the NSW syllabus.

- Setting up the electronic device (Playstation, PC, Xbox, etc)
  - Reading instructions = text type, English
  - physically setting up the device = IT (Information Technology) which comes under 'Design and Technology'

- Understanding the concept of hardware and software = IT

- If you are setting up an avatar and designing their features, clothing, weapons and other gear, or if you are customising a vehicle = Visual Art and Design

- As you are setting up the game, you will need to read words like, player, back, mode, menu, etc = English

- The game might be designed in a 2D world (example Terraria) or in a 3D world (example World of Warcraft). 2D and 3D concepts are part of Maths and also Visual Art and Design

- If there are in game quests in written form or signs to be read = English

- If there is a scoring system or in game monetary system = Maths

- If the game features maps, real or fictional = Geography.
  Some games also feature a compass rose in which case you are dealing with cardinal directions = Orienteering, Geography

- If the game has a story line that is set in a historical setting.= History & Geography. Age of Empires, for example, guides you from prehistoric times through to a futuristic world. Throughout the game you can choose different armies, from Romans, to Greeks, to the Ottoman Empire. This game sparked a keen interest for history in my sons.

- If the game has a fictional story line = fiction, English

- If the game is multiplayer, players will communicate in game or via a platform like ‘Discord’. The communication might be verbally or via text messages.
  - Verbally = talking and listening, English
  - Via text = writing text for a specific audience and purpose. Covering text type, spelling, in game slang, English

- If the game is multiplayer, you are navigating team work, friendships, in game etiquette, etc. This comes under the personal Development part of PDHPE (Personal Development, Health and Physical Education)

- Troubleshooting tech problems = IT
  - researching troubleshooting, reading and following instructions = text type (instructions), reading = English

- Recognising when to ask for help = Personal Development in PDHPE

- Internet safety, not to give out personal information online, having an in game name instead of your real name, etc = Personal Development in PDHPE

As gaming took up such a big part of my children's lives, we also looked into concerns like:
- Sitting for long stretches of time. We talked about bodies needing movement.
- Being indoors for long stretches of time. We talked about bodies needing Vitamin D and sunshine.
- Gaming with friends in another time zone and being up at night. We talked about the circadian rhythm.
- Eyes focusing on the screen at close distance. We talked about healthy eye movement and eyes needing to focus on a variety of distances.

I spoke to my children with the same respect I would afford an adult. The tone of voice was neither patronising nor pushy. I gave the information, which I had gathered to the best of my ability, in child-friendly language. I did not try to sway them one way or another. I gave them the information in a neutral way and asked them what they would like to do with this information. I trusted that they would want to look after and care for their bodies. We brainstormed together until we came up with solutions that suited all of us.

In practice, this looked like my sons wanting to be asked by me whether they wanted a break at certain intervals. If they were in a game that couldn't be paused at that moment, but only at certain stages of the game, they wanted to be reminded to have some outside time when I noticed that they had reached that stage in the game. We went for more bushwalks, which catered for body movement, fitness, focusing eyes into the distance and vitamin D by being in the sun. My sons chose wisely, which games in different time zones were most important to them, and declined the less important ones.

Any limits on screen time were chosen by my kids. My role was to support them. These limits were never set in concrete. They could be changed at any time if they turned out not to be helpful anymore.

Screen time has resulted in some amazing achievements, now that my sons are young adults. My older son has a YouTube channel and is a wiz at video editing.

My younger son decided to go for a HSC and ATAR score. At 17 he attended a local highschool. The teachers commented on his vast vocabulary. English is my second language. He did not get that vast vocabulary from me. Instead he watched very well-spoken YouTubers. The same son is studying Visual Art and Graphic Design. His skills in the field of photo editing are something else. He is currently working for a local artist, scanning her art works and editing them, so that they are suitable for printing on fabrics.

Food

Learning about food and how our bodies respond to different foods is an essential part of any child's learning journey, and yet in school this is often taught in an abstract or theoretical way. Unschooled children have the opportunity to learn about food and their bodies from direct experience, with the support and guidance of their parents.

Where conscious parenting and unschooling come together is in the way that parents choose to regulate what their children eat, or not.

~ Baerbel ~

When I was a child, my parents limited sweets but not lemonade. My father purchased lemonade through a wholesale supplier and we always had crates of lemonade in the cellar. As a result, I was witnessing first hand what happens when food is limited and when it is not limited.

When something is limited or forbidden, it has the element of temptation to it. Humans in general want the freedom to make their own choices. When that choice is 'fenced in' by someone else's opinion, there is a drive to push at those limitations and to try it out to its full extent when the chance presents itself.
I was able to have lemonade at any time. It was no big deal. As a result, having lemonade soon lost its appeal, as I noticed that my stomach felt awful when I had

too much. Soon I self regulated, having the odd glass of lemonade when I felt like it. Most of the time I preferred orange juice, which made my stomach feel much better than the lemonade. When neighbouring kids were over, they were amazed that I had free access to lemonade any time I wanted. We went into the cellar and I told them that they could have as much as they wanted. They went overboard! Every one of my friends went overboard, when the opportunity presented itself. They felt awful in the stomach afterwards.

I remembered this scenario when I had children. When the time came and they were old enough to come to supermarkets, they were, of course, curious about sweets. We made a deal that they could buy one food item each shopping trip. This could be anything, no matter the ingredients. At first they went for the most colourful sweets that caught their eyes. Marketing departments really know how to lure in customers. And ‘yes’ they did get the odd sore tummy, which caused us to discuss natural ingredients and artificial ingredients, additives like colours and preservatives. After a while, their tastes became more refined. They chose high quality chocolates. They didn’t want anything to do with the ‘cheap stuff’. As sweets became less and less of a ’big deal’ they self regulated more than I ever could.

At one stage we had Easter chocolates still sitting there, untouched, by the time Christmas came around. My children each had an Easter basket, which was sitting on their bedside table. When neighbours’ kids came over, they were astonished that the chocolates hadn’t been eaten. When they asked if they could eat some, my kids answered: “Sure, knock yourself out.”

Most of the time my kids went for homemade sweets, which were nutrient dense, like cupcakes baked with wholefood ingredients, healthy fats or oils and honey. I am so glad that I navigated the topic of food WITH my children, instead of being an opposing force. I think it was worth the odd sore stomach or a heavy feeling in the body, to find their own self-regulation and to be in tune with their bodies.

ⓒ Freya Dawson and Baerbel Fischer 2022

~ Freya ~

I love food and I love caring for my body with the best food that I can provide. Until I had children, I thought that I had no real issues around food. It wasn't a big deal for me. Having children changed all that. Not straight away, of course, but over a couple of years I gradually felt myself descending into a nightmare of anxiety and conflict that I had never experienced before.

Like many parents, I wanted to make sure that my children ate a healthy diet. I had clear beliefs about what was healthy for children and what was not. I believed deeply that it was my responsibility to provide healthy food and restrict access to unhealthy food. I read books about nutrition and tried all sorts of new recipes. I read about all the foods that should be avoided and the list just kept getting longer and longer. I was keenly aware of the dangers of additives, preservatives, sugar, processed fats and highly refined foods. I talked to my friends about food and keenly watched what they were feeding their children. The more I worried about my children's diet the more stressed I became. It grew as an issue for me as my children grew.

Apparently some parents feed their children with minimal stress and conflict. That was not my experience. Perhaps it would have been different if we lived on a farm or an island and my children weren't exposed to the vast offerings of a modern supermarket. But it wasn't like that for us. We live in suburbia. When my first child was very little it was not difficult to limit the foods that he was exposed to. If certain foods were not given to him then he did not miss them. As he got older his environment expanded. He noticed the food that people around him ate. He came to the supermarket and the local shops with me. He went to preschool, visited friend's houses and went to birthday parties. He gradually discovered what was available out there. He also developed his own desire to explore, experiment with new foods and to work out what he liked.

What I didn't realize at the time was how excited and determined children can be about exploring the world of food or how strongly they can be attracted to sugar and processed food. As my child grew into his own tastes and desires I experienced a dramatic surge of stress and conflict in my life. The most stressful issue for me was how much sugar he wanted, although I also worried about other "unhealthy" foods too. My anxieties built up even more momentum when I had

two children to feed. Trips to the supermarket were very tense. My children asked me to buy them lollies, ice-creams and chips. This wasn't mild interest on their part. They were passionate about their exploration of food and their desire to eat all sorts of foods that I didn't want them to eat.

I know what you are thinking. I know what I was supposed to do. I should have just said "NO", right? Well, I did that and it didn't work out so well. One particular afternoon will be etched into my memory forever. It was the classic scenario at the supermarket checkout. In retrospect, I think the tension had been building long before we got there. And this was before they had invented the "lollie-free" checkouts they have now. I dutifully followed my beliefs about parental responsibility and healthy diet. I did what I thought I should do and I said "No" to the packet of lollies that my child wanted at the checkout. The resulting meltdown was intense. I can't begin to describe how intense it was. I didn't relent. I didn't say anything. I just clamped down hard on my own intense feelings and got us out of the shop without the lollies. I got halfway home before it hit me. It was like a tidal wave of emotion. I was completely overcome by waves of anger and embarrassment. I felt utterly humiliated by the public spectacle I had been part of. I cried so much that I had trouble driving the car. I had done my best and yet it felt dreadful. It was not supposed to be this hard or this painful. To make matters worse, I blamed my child. I was furious and I believed in that moment that it was all his fault. This was a true nightmare.

I assure you, this was not my only experience with saying "No." I kept up the battle for a few years. I tried all sorts of different tactics. Food became the focus of a quietly seething war. There were outbursts of conflict but these were like the tip of the iceberg. The simmering tension in my relationship with my children was subtle but ever-present. I was filled with anxiety about what my children ate and wanted to eat more of. I knew that I needed to heal this. It took me a long time to really come to peace with it.

Finding a radical solution to my radical problem

I started to question my thoughts by reading parenting books, websites and online forums that suggested different approaches to feeding children. I knew I needed a radical solution. I had a pretty radical problem. I found some amazing resources that helped me find a new way of being around the issue of what my children ate. I questioned all my thinking and beliefs about feeding my children. I

realized that what I wanted more than anything else was peace and harmony in my relationship with my children. I also wanted freedom from my own anxiety and self-criticism. I eventually found a new way of being.

This is the solution I came to: *I no longer control what my children eat.*

Yes! I mean it. I no longer control what my children eat. It sounds simple, but it felt very radical at the time. We had to ease into it gradually. Now, if they want packets of lollies at the supermarket I say “Yes.” If they want McDonalds for dinner I say “Yes”. If they want ice cream for breakfast I serve it out for them with a smile and a blessing.

This does not mean that I do not provide them with a healthy diet. In fact, I still give this quite a lot of attention. Creative ideas about how to support their health have flowed into the space left by my old beliefs and anxieties. I share what I know about nutrition with my children without a controlling agenda. They are much more willing to listen. I get ideas about new foods for them to try and new ways of preparing their food that bring nutritional benefits. We have tried various supplements and sugar alternatives. I find and offer additive-free versions of foods that they like. We continue to experiment and explore.

My children are learning how to care for their own health. They learn from observing and listening to me and other adults. They are also learning about their own bodies from direct physical experience. They have experienced the effects of their own choices, whether this be an upset stomach, constipation or tooth decay. I have supported them when they needed trips to the dentist or a health practitioner. I have sat with them when they had toothache. We have visited the dentist without me lecturing or blaming them. These are powerful learning opportunities.

They are learning how to self-regulate with food. They no longer crave foods that were once restricted. They have no need to hide or stockpile. They trust that they can have what they want. At times they have made their own decisions about avoiding or limiting certain foods that have really surprised me. They have demonstrated self-control that many adults would envy. At other times they eat whole bags of lollies and enjoy them to the full.

When it comes to sugary, processed and additive-rich foods I have adopted this guideline for myself; “*Don’t offer, don’t refuse*.” When my children say that they

are hungry I offer the “healthy” options first. When they come with me to the shops or the supermarket they get to choose what they want. We read labels together. When we have a budget to stick to, the purchases are open for collective negotiation. There are no struggles or arguments and it is usually an enjoyable experience for all of us. My beliefs about what food is healthy and what is unhealthy have become a lot more flexible. I choose to focus on the wonderful nourishment my children receive every day rather than on a fear of harm.

We are on a journey together and it is pretty delicious. Bringing peace to the issue of food has been such a wonderful gift for our family. (This is an edited extract from my book Joyful Parenting: The Five Skills to Take your Family from Conflict to Connection.”)

New LIVE Online Course!

Conscious Parenting and Unschooling Course

- Meet other parents that are on a similar path
- Hear more details about how we worked through the challenges that came up.
- Find your own unique blend of conscious parenting and unschooling
- How to get registered and stay registered as unschoolers.
- More support and information about Screens and Gaming, Food, and supporting your child’s unique learning journey,
- Learn how to solve problems together as a family and find solutions that everyone is happy with.

Starts 16 March 2022. Enroll now:
https://openmindunschooling.com/conscious-parenting-and-unschooling-course/

ⓒ Freya Dawson and Baerbel Fischer 2022

Further Resources

Mentoring

Baerbel Fischer and Freya Dawson both offer mentoring sessions. To book a free 30 minute mentoring session with either Baerbel or Freya please send us an email:

Baerbel Fischer: baerbel.fischer111@gmail.com

Freya Dawson: freyadawson02@gmail.com

Courses:

Conscious Parenting and Unschooling: Freya Dawson and Baerbel Fischer
For details and to book go to
https://openmindunschooling.com

Parenting Course • Freya Dawson

The Deschooling Course • Freya Dawson

Making peace with screens and gaming • Freya Dawson