

Unschooling Passions

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Abstract

Unschooling is about learning through living. As unschooling parents we want to open up the world for our children to explore. But what if your child is passionately interested in just one thing? Doesn't that close off his access to the world and limit his learning? I have two children who have discovered passionate interests. Instead of spending my time trying to convince them to try new things, I decided to explore their interests with them. I was amazed at how much of the world came to life when they were free, and encouraged, to immerse themselves in their deep, passionate interests.

Does your child have a passionate interest? A world that he would be thrilled to explore during all his waking hours? Does it worry you that he wants to focus so intently on one thing? Do you worry that he is limiting his world?

At first glance it seems logical. Unschooling is about learning through living. How can they do that if all they want to do is ... well, fill in the blank with whatever your child loves right now. The world is out there and you want to your child to explore it! But, while you're busy trying to convince your child to try new

things, you might just be missing another exciting way to explore the world: through their interest.

Learning is about making connections - connecting new information to something you already know. It helps to recognize that the best learning is really a byproduct of living; having a real, concrete reason to learn something is great motivation. With unschooling learning new facts and skills is more a side effect: bits and pieces of information they need to know along the way to accomplishing something. So whatever they are interested in at the moment will be the basis for the best learning. Not to mention the most fun and interesting!

I have two children who have discovered passionate interests and want to share with you the many interesting, and often surprising, directions that passions can take. I want to help you feel comfortable spending your time delving deeply into a passion with your child, instead of spending it trying to convince him to try other things. I want to show you that exploring a passion is not about closing off the world, but about opening it up.

My eldest son, Joseph, is 14 and passionate about video games, though even that is still too broad a category. He is, more correctly, passionate about one type of video game: RPGs or role-playing games. This passion developed quite early, around seven years old, and he has embraced it with enthusiasm since we began unschooling when he was eight.

When I saw how much joy these games brought to his life I decided early on to give him the freedom to embrace his passion, and be deeply involved with him. Unschooling is not about leaving him to find his way, but about being his

partner, about helping him in his quest. And I wanted to understand the joy I saw in his eyes.

When he needed information about a game, we researched. When he asked, I read the guide to him. When he asked to play alone, I respected his request. When he was looking for a new game, we searched. When he called me to come see the boss battle he was engaged in, I excitedly went to watch. When he offered me a try, I gave it a shot. When he was deeply engaged I brought him drinks or snacks or dinner. I learned about video games alongside him.

I soon realized it wasn't just "video games" he was learning about. There were so many different things he was learning. I began to see the many directions that his learning was taking and I realized how big the world really is, even through the filter of role-playing games.

We encountered reading constantly. Many games, especially RPGs, have a rich story environment. If your child isn't reading fluently yet, you can read the text for them as they play so they can enjoy and appreciate the storyline, not just the action. We found ourselves reading game guides and reviews; ordering a subscription to a gaming magazine (and keeping all the issues for future reference); searching online for walkthroughs and message boards; and eventually Joseph discovered fan fiction online: stories written by fans about the game world and characters. They certainly fuel the imagination.

In looking for all this information he has really honed his research skills. Finding and evaluating information sources were key skills he developed while searching for that one bit of information that would help him solve the puzzle, or beat the current boss. When he was younger Joseph would ask us to help him find the information he needed. Sometimes he'd be at our shoulder, helping us search; other times he'd be playing his game and we'd bring over what we found. After a while his experience and comfort level grew and he took over a lot of the research himself. And he quickly discovered that when searching the internet, spelling counts! Now he finds game fan sites as well and evaluates their reliability based on his current knowledge of the game. These skills developed naturally because he wanted information to help accomplish something in his game, but they are applicable to any research he may want to do in the future: how to find sources and evaluate their content.

This level of detailed research soon led to writing. Once he was comfortable on the gaming message boards, if he couldn't find the answer to his question, he posted it. And later he began to answer the questions of others. This is real writing: meaningful communication with an immediate purpose. And because he wanted to get his point across, it was important to him to write clearly and

If I were a bird ...

If I were a bird then I'd be free,
free to leave this misery.
Down the road and all around,
slip away without a sound.
To try to stem within my soul,
nothin' left, to make me whole,
to try to get this star in you,
to make the change to help it through.

As the rain begins to fall,
casting shadows on the wall,
close my eyes and hear the thunder,
break the spell that I've been under.
If all the world who cannot see,
all that's empty lies in me,
to try to get this star in you,
and make the change to help it through.
Makes me want to fly away,
the reasons left to make me stay,
to quit before I even start,
to leave this town and seek my heart.

Joseph

concisely, with reasonable punctuation and spelling so that the reader could understand him. He would get almost immediate feedback to his writing as others would comment on his suggestions, or ask further questions to clarify. He also learned how to figure out the tone of the messages. It is a very useful feedback loop, his writing improved immensely, and soon expanded into fiction. He has told me of the many characters and their backstories, as well as plotlines that he has fleshed out in his head over the years. He also shared with me a beautiful poem he wrote around his twelfth birthday, entitled "If I were a bird".

Typing is yet another useful skill that Joseph picked up through his interest in video games. He has never been interested in writing by hand, nor in the typical "learn-to-type" software that we picked up for him to try, but when he expressed an interest in online gaming we set him up, got him a keyboard, and within a couple weeks he was typing well! I remember him telling me at the time that he was surprised how fast he was learning to type. He told me how when he was in school they would go to the computer room once a week and the teacher would have them practice with typing software. He said that when she would walk by he and his friends would put the game on demo mode and pretend to be typing and she would be suitably impressed with their skill. But now with a real reason to learn it, he commented that it was nowhere near as difficult as it seemed back then.

How about math? There is a lot of math even in just the basic game play: there is often a time component; some form of money or bartering system; your characters health; and their experience level. These are typical variables that the

player has to deal with to progress through the game. And in the RPG game world being able to read a map is important, sometimes all you have is a compass to get your bearings and point you in the right direction. Often you need to simultaneously monitor your character's health and level, determine the most effective moves against the current enemy, as well as anticipate damage and experience points to figure out your chances of surviving upcoming battles and leveling up. And these calculations often must be done on the fly. Not to mention all the financial conversations you'll have with them as they save up to purchase new games, bargain hunt for used games, or place bids on eBay auctions. Numerical concepts abound in video games.

There is also lots of logic in game play. Many side quests in games require logic puzzles to be solved to get useful items or even to continue on to the next level. There's lots of logic in the approach to boss battles, determining weak areas and choosing attacks that take full advantage. There are often mazes to be solved as you move through levels. If you love logic puzzles try out a Zoombinis computer game some day!

Even algebra rears its head. For example, one evening when he was 11 Joseph asked me to help him figure out the formula in his game that would determine the max level an offspring digimon can achieve when two digimon DNA digivolve. It was an algebraic formula with 2 variables: the levels of each of the digimon parents. So, if X is the lowest parent's level and Y is the highest parent's level the formula to calculate the max level that their offspring can achieve is $(Y \text{ divided by } 5) \text{ plus } X$. This was a new level of game detail he was

exploring during this play through. We discussed the formula and went through the examples they gave. I mentioned that with the division by five there was often a remainder and that in their examples they were rounding down. And how with that formula it would take a while to build up to a high digimon level - he had said he was trying to get parents together to get an offspring with a max level of at least 21 but he'd had no luck so far. About a half hour later I passed him in the hall and he said, "Yeah, they sure do build up their levels slowly!" It was obvious that he had been pondering the formula and trying out various combinations since our brief discussion.

And RPGs are full of data. I have seen pages and pages of percentage charts in player's guides and walkthroughs talking about the parameter increases and decreases of statistical attributes for various character classes. By using these charts a player can build up skill in the classes and parameters they prefer, thus making their own unique characters and ensuring a well-balanced party. I've seen Joseph pouring over them in deep concentration. In fact, when he was studying the charts for one game he remarked that they were the most important part of the player's guide. The rest he didn't really need. These charts had six attributes that changed individually based on, from what I could tell, three independent variables for, on average, five possible subclasses. And there were 25 of these charts – one for each of the six default classes plus various combinations of classes to create complex classes. That's a lot of data to manage and make sense of.

There is a large artistic element to video games as well. The newer systems have the ability to use very high quality graphics and music. Gone are the 2D 16 colour square characters and the beeps and whistles of older games. Now we often have full orchestration with music developed specifically for the game and its story. Game music soundtracks are more popular than ever. There are often full colour 3D character animations with changing expressions and detailed backgrounds including rippling waters and moving clouds casting shadows. Many games are beautiful to look at and listen to. Joseph and I have had lots of conversations about graphics and music. I picked up Joseph a sketchbook and a set of drawing pencils and he has created some really beautiful character sketches. He has looked at fan art on various websites and has a good feel for what he likes and doesn't like. As for music, he will often call me to come and listen to his favourite music from certain scenes or levels and we'll talk about what he likes about it. The game designers understand the integral role of music and often allow the player to choose their favourite background music or have a place like a jukebox where they can choose the different music tracks to listen to. One day I came downstairs and Joseph had figured out how to get the video input from one system and the audio input from another so that he could listen to his favourite music while playing a completely different game. Very inventive!

There is so much going on in video games that you can discuss – it's like critiquing a book or a movie. We've had many of these discussions. Discussions of the game storyline and plot. Discussions about the characters and how they

develop during the game. How the music helps build the mood. What's the climax of the game and how is everything resolved? Or is it?

Joseph has told me that what he loves most about video games is a really deep story. Games without deep stories make him bored. Fast. For him these games are another level of immersion into a story. Books allow you to read a great story and imagine it. Movies take it another step and bring in the visual element. Video games take it yet another step and allow you to interact with the story. In many games how you interact determines the twists and turns the plot takes, so the replay value is amazing because you can play it multiples times, often times through the eyes of different characters, learning different pieces of the story each time.

Through our discussions he has come to realize that his passion is not really video games per se, but video games as a medium to immersion in a great, deep story. If I had limited his playing time and not been supportive, I don't think he would have realized this. And I would have been too busy trying to get him to do other things to see it myself. Now I realize that it would have been like me limiting the time he was allowed to read each day. It seems a little ridiculous when you think about it that way.

Introduced through gaming, Joseph has also developed a great interest in mythology. For example, Age of Mythology is a wonderfully detailed computer game, along with its expansion pack, The Titans. And all the details of the game were painstakingly developed from Bullfinch's Mythology. In fact, the collector's edition we gave Joseph for Christmas a few years ago included the Bullfinch's

Mythology book itself, a CD with the game music, and a DVD entitled “The Making of Age of Mythology”.

I have a quick story about how his interest in mythology has made many other connections. A couple summers ago my mom and I were camping with my kids and nieces and I brought along "The Magical Worlds of Harry Potter" book that I had just picked up. I knew they all liked Harry Potter and I thought they may find it interesting. After dinner one night I brought it out and started reading excerpts - the book is set up in question and answer format. Well, the mythology Joseph knew and related to what we were reading was phenomenal! He would often finish the sentence I was reading. And he would connect it back to some of the games he enjoys playing. And he would connect the games to each other. Even though the games themselves weren't related, they were all drawing on the same myths as their basis, or as a meaningful basis for naming their characters or moves and so on. He was so excited and kept explaining stuff to everyone. We were all enjoying ourselves so much that I brought the book in the tent with us and we continued until everyone else had fallen asleep. It was a really fun night.

Languages are another area of interest sparked by RPGs. In one RPG series he has enjoyed, the developers created a new language. As Joseph explored this language he learned about what makes up a language, the structure required, the types of words, and so on. He printed out a guide on how to translate between English and Al Bhed as well as the pronunciation guide and

spent quite a few hours with it. This is a great way to study the basics of language itself.

In his eagerness to learn about new games Joseph began perusing Japanese websites. And in searching for more information about a game he played and loved, he found out it was part of a series, most of whose games were not even brought to the North American market. This coincided with his decision to become more "professional" in his gaming, and he decided to order his first Japanese-language video game. He loved the experience and decided to order another. Fast forward a few months and I was unpacking the last of the boxes in his room in his room after our move and he saw the Japanese language learning CDs that we picked up when he first expressed an interest. At the time we installed one on the computer and he used it once or twice and put it aside; the other isn't even open yet. He commented how it was interesting that he has been learning the language, but not through the "educational" programs. I laughed and mentioned that's why we unschool ... because we often learn better by just doing. He's been learning Japanese by playing Japanese video games - and he noted he has 10 of them now - by immersing himself in the language through the game voice acting, the story text, and the many, many menus. By reading game translations, by watching subtitled Japanese anime, by finding some cool Japanese language web sites – he has learned in lots of ways that don't look like sitting down and learning something as daunting as another language. Yet again, instead of formal learning in preparation for doing, he just started doing. It never ceases to amaze how well that works.

Joseph has also learned so much about himself and what makes him tick through his passionate exploration of RPGs. When he was looking to expand his social network, one thing that worked well for us was supporting his desire to get involved in online gaming. The wonderful thing is that it's a community of gamers with relatively comparable levels of interest and skill in video games. A couple weeks after he first went online to play we asked if he was enjoying it and he said it was like a dream come true. He's had his ups and downs but he's learning a lot about dealing with others, the social chitchat that goes on, and how he can comfortably participate in that environment.

He has also learned over the years how to deal with frustration. Games don't always go as planned. Some quests and battles are harder than anticipated. Learning how to manage himself without explosions of frustration and anger has come with experience. His self-confidence has grown in parallel. Having successfully completed many games he knows that it often takes patience and perseverance. He realizes that he can overcome just about any obstacle he encounters through research and just giving it another try. Sometimes he knows to take a break, maybe for 15 minutes, or for three months! He's done both. But what it has done for his self-confidence is helped him discover that he can analyze a problem, research possible solutions, come up with a plan and a backup plan or two, and give them a try; whether or not the problem is video game-related.

He has also learned a lot through using game cheat codes. Your first reaction may be "What a waste, where's the challenge then?" but look a bit

further. When you think of how most games are designed, you realize there are a number of variables that the player needs keep track of: health, current location on the map, weapons, enemy type and weaknesses etc. The player needs to be on top of all these things to successfully navigate the game. What a cheat often does is basically fix one of these variables so the player no longer needs to worry about it – he can concentrate on mastering the others. For example, a cheat may give you infinite health. Now they can concentrate on say, learning their way around the level using the map, or practicing battles with their weaker weapons to improve their skills. And they learn that sometimes fixing one variable can have unexpected effects. For example, in *The Simpsons Hit & Run*, some tasks require you to chase another vehicle and hit it repeatedly until it is destroyed. There's a cheat that destroys a car in one hit. That should save some time! So he applies it and all goes well ... until the next task. It requires him to chase a vehicle and repeatedly bump it to knock off items and collect them. But on the first bump ... it's destroyed; oops, can't complete that task! What a great way to learn about variables, logic, and consequences and explore ways to approach any problem they are presented with in life. To think outside the box and explore the range of possible solutions, they can apply the same logic they learned using cheats to improve their game skill. What are the variables I have to work with? Can I fix or set any of them? What effect does each variable have on the problem? Are there any unexpected consequences I can envisage where these variables are linked?

Other cheats bring the object-oriented code to life. For example, in another game there are cheats so that you can change the colour of the main character's tunic and his size. Simple and meaningless you say. Just to play around with. But no. They will likely notice that his tunic colour has changed even in the game intro, not just the game itself. How that bit (ok ... byte!) of data they changed is accessed constantly throughout the game. How when they enlarge him so that he is bigger than the gate, or even the building, he still cannot enter it when it's locked. How it hardly even looks like he's moving when he steps because he already takes up most of the screen but the code for walking still moves him the same short distance. And in The Simpsons Hit & Run there is a cheat so the car will bounce. "What on earth for?!" you think. But playing around with it you discover something interesting. When you bounce high over the houses near the edge of the level, you can see the other side. There is nothing there. You have reached the end of the code. The designers never imagined that a user would be able to see past the houses, so they didn't bother adding anything behind them. It is just empty space. Really cool. These cheats almost make the code visible and come alive before their eyes. They begin to understand how code works. How each game object is independent of the others. They may not be able to explain it, but they intuitively understand it. And if in the course of their lives it comes up, they'll understand the technical terms immediately because they have seen it in action. It will connect to their gaming experience and have meaning.

Joseph has also developed an interest in game design. We have picked up several versions of RPG Maker and he has spent many hours with them. It is not for the faint of heart though. The guide reads like a computer manual. You have to create the world map, events and their placements, script controls and logic for every event, the characters, the enemies, the visual effects, and all the character and battle stats. And much more. He has more than once commented on how you have to code for every little thing. How game development is a lot more detailed than he imagined. He recently figured out how to create cut scenes, basically short movie scenes that advance the plot or further develop a character. He's learning more about programming as he tries to get his games to do more and more complicated things.

In "High Score Education - Games, not school, are teaching kids to think" James Paul Gee, a reading professor in the School of Education at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, asserts that "Learning isn't about memorizing isolated facts. It's about connecting and manipulating them." He explains that a good game skirts the edge of the players' level of competence, each new level pushing them to the limit of what they can do, enticing them to learn more. They are immersed in the game world and experience the flow of all their attention being powerfully focused - their mind working quickly making the connections needed to meet the game's challenges. After spending many hours with his students immersed in video games Gee concluded that "Young gamers today aren't training to be gun-toting carjackers. They're learning how to learn."

In another article, "Does Easy Do It? Children, Games, and Learning", Seymour Papert, author of *The Connected Family: Bridging the Digital Generation Gap* and founding faculty member of the MIT Media Lab, recognizes that "talking about games and learning is an important activity" and "encourages parents to engage in conversations with their kids about learning". That comes naturally for unschooling families! And in his rebuttal to a comment sent in regarding his article, he says "The most important learning skills I see children getting from games are those that support the empowering sense of taking charge of their own learning." This is a basic premise of unschooling.

I am always amazed when I look at the many different places that Joseph's passionate interest in video games has taken him. The many things he has learned along the way. Some he learned directly through playing video games like reading, math, research and problem solving skills, and others he learned pursuing his interest in gaming into many diverse areas: writing, art and music, mythology, Japanese language and culture, programming, social skills. His world is not small; it is big and full and wondrous.

Are you getting more comfortable with the idea that delving deep into a passion may not be as restrictive as you imagined? Let's try another one. Alyssa, my 12 year old daughter, has been passionate about all things Harry Potter the last few years. Let's see where it has taken her.

It was a big part of her road to reading. It all started when she was almost seven and left school. Although up to that point she had read the basic early readers they sent home without much complaint, she did not want to pick up a

book once home. She could often be heard to declare "I can't read" and nothing I said would convince her otherwise. I mentioned that if she was interested in reading a book herself, she could just ask me any words she came across that she didn't know yet and I'd tell her. No thanks, was her reply.

Her older brother had been given the first Harry Potter book a few months back, so I started reading it to the kids. Everyone enjoyed the story immensely and we soon worked our way through all four books that were published at that point, numerous times, eagerly anticipating the release of book five, Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix, and then powering through it together in three days. Eventually the boys had had their fill, and coincidentally that summer we found the Harry Potter books on CD at the library, so she would cozy up in her room and listen to them regularly. Sometimes I would bring her food, or tea and she'd smile and say thanks and continue listening.

September came and after listening to all five audio books a number of times she started writing down things that were interesting to her: Umbridge's speech, the prophecy, the Sphinx's riddle, listing the names of the centaurs, clues she found that matched up with other books etc. I noticed her notebook filling up and one night while I was out I picked her up a new one I thought she'd like. She really appreciated that and she used it for her "good copies" - she said sometimes she's writing so fast it's hard to read.



This writing led to her looking things up in the books since at times she couldn't quite figure out the words from the CDs. She took all five books up to her

room and placed them beside the CD player so she had quick access. Not long after that she mentioned that she was sometimes following along in the book while listening. I thought that was cool.

Then one afternoon a few days later she came down from her room to show me that she had read the first two chapters of *Philosopher's Stone*! She was very surprised that the words weren't nearly as hard as she remembered (I imagine from looking at the books when I first started reading them). And she pointed out that many of the words in the Harry Potter books are harder to read since they are made up words that she doesn't see elsewhere. Cool observation! The next morning she spent in bed reading and made it to chapter four. She was very pleased with herself. For the next few days she read in bed every morning and at various times during the day and night. One night she brought her heating blanket in the backyard to the swing, ran the extension cord, brought out her pillows and a flashlight and settled in to read ... until it started to rain! She was so excited; she brought her book everywhere and was constantly saying, "I want to read" and finding a quiet place.

Throughout that October she was still going full steam ahead on her reading and writing ... she was immersing herself in words. It hadn't taken her long to finish reading *Philosopher's Stone* and she soon started *Chamber of Secrets*, but after a few chapters said it was pretty boring because she knew it all. She said at least while she's listening to the audio books she can do other things: sewing costumes for her stuffed animals; sewing pillows for sale; creating wire and beaded jewelry, designing and creating her own clasps; repairing couch

pillows, pajamas, and Christmas stockings. Her interest in props, in one particular case, the house scarves, led to learning to knit. She spent a number of fun hours with her great-grandmother, the most accomplished knitter in our family, over various visits. She also moved on to more writing. She marked all her favourite places in the books and wrote out many of the signs, letters, and songs that she found in the storyline. Sometimes she wrote them by hand, sometimes she typed them. More playing with words.

In November she pulled out our Magical Worlds of Harry Potter book and for the next few days she read that regularly. Gently stepping beyond the Harry Potter books themselves to one that would likely have the vocabulary she was already comfortable with, and feeding her passion at the same time. Now and then she read some passages aloud to me and at other times she would tell me what she had read. Then a couple weeks later she was reading all her email from her conference friends - up until that point she had always asked me to read them to her. Then she took a Nancy Drew book from our library at home and started reading it. She was now definitely getting more comfortable with her reading and expanding beyond her initial "Harry Potter" zone.

We started exploring the internet world of Harry Potter and found quite a few interesting fan sites to read. We discuss theories in depth, analyze the plot, including all those small clues she leaves behind, and talk about character development (Is Snape really evil?). One day Joseph mentioned fan fiction to her and she pulled her first all-nighter that night reading Harry Potter-based fan fiction. Nowadays reading just flows through her everyday life naturally. She has

read many books, websites, and magazines. Collecting books is a great interest of hers - wandering through a bookstore is definitely her idea of fun.

Did you notice how many different areas came up, even as I was just describing her Harry Potter reading journey? Connections everywhere! Let's look at computers. As I mentioned, we started surfing Harry Potter fan sites. Here again research skills came up. Which sites were the most accurate? She is great at evaluating a site's information because she knows those books backwards and forwards! Which web search tools worked best? Soon she was searching all on her own. Not long after that she decided to develop her own fan site. I gave her a quick tour of FrontPage and she was off. With something concrete to dig into, she learned a lot about web page development and her Wireless Wizarding Network site was great with at least half a dozen pages.

Remember those conference friends I mentioned briefly earlier? She met them through a Harry Potter funshop and they put together a skit for the talent show which led to her taking a drama class the following year. Recently many in the group started creating their own pages on MySpace to keep in touch and share their interests and Alyssa really enjoys personalizing hers. She has learned quite a bit of html through this, the basic web language. Seeing the many different animated icons that people were posting on their pages led her to learning more about graphics and me showing her the photo editing software I had. Not long after that she was giving me tips about using it. One night before going to bed I brought up the software I had for creating animated gif files and left it open for her. By the next morning she had already figured it out and had

created a number of moving icons. She uploaded dozens of them to share. In playing around with her page layout she learned a lot about html formatting and now has a page of layouts for other users to copy and use. She now often finds her layouts, icons, and gifs on others' pages as she surfs MySpace, and regularly gets requests to design new page layouts.

Her time reading bits and pieces of the Magical Worlds of Harry Potter sparked an interest in mythology and mythical creatures and she perused a number of books we picked up from the library, as well as some of the books we have on the subject. She delved into Egyptian mythology, Greek mythology, and dabbled in Joseph's favourite, Norse mythology. It also sparked a deep and continuing interest in names. Many of the names JK Rowling uses in Harry Potter have mythological connections to their character's personality and a number of those connections were described in that book. I remember the day she first asked about names and at her request I found the one baby name book I had picked up when I was pregnant with Joseph. Since then she has collected many name books, and they spent months piled on the end table in the family room, right by her usual spot, where she could quickly reference them. They are very well used. She much prefers the books with pronunciation guides and full descriptions of the history of the name; not just a line-by-line listing of names. She has a number of notebooks filled with her favourite names, and she is the person we most often go to when searching for a name to use for a game character or town: we'll describe the personality traits or overall theme we're looking for and she'll come up with any number of related names for us to choose

from. She thought it was interesting when we read on JK Rowling's website that she too has a deep interest in names, starting back when she was a child and kept notebooks full of her favourites. That would explain why her characters' names are so interesting to investigate!

Now let's look at fan fiction in more depth. I mentioned it as an area of reading interest she discovered through her brother. After reading for a few weeks she got comfortable enough and began posting comments to authors. She figured out how to set herself up to receive emails when her favourite authors posted a new chapter. Eventually she decided to try her hand at writing. I know at least one of her stories reached the 30,000 word mark - I was there when she did a word count. She learned a lot about critiquing writing; what she liked, what she didn't like. This sparked an interest in grammar and spelling as she explored the whole writing process, with many notebooks and papers strewn around her room containing character and story synopses and plot outlines. Her interest in names was fed as she searched for the perfect names for her characters. And not the least of the skills she developed around this time was typing. She is now a very proficient typist.

Her Harry Potter fan fiction interest also spread in another interesting direction. One author in particular that she enjoyed reading would post an excerpt of song lyrics at the beginning of each of her chapters that in some way related to the plot or characters. This was the beginning of a deep and ongoing interest in music. Soon Alyssa was searching out those particular songs to hear them in their entirety. It was a very eclectic mix. Then she went through our

music collection, finding quite a few of the songs she knew. Then she began exploring more current artists and came across her most favourite band at the

moment: Simple Plan. This tied in with her growing computer graphics skills and many of her newest icons, animated gifs, backgrounds, and MySpace layouts have a Simple Plan theme. In fact, my computer is



currently sporting a wonderful background she developed based on their song "Perfect". Through them she's learned more about the music scene, behind the scenes information about putting together albums, and the ins and outs of touring. We have enjoyed their songs together and have discussed many of their song topics, which often explore the powerlessness of youth. I have mentioned to her that they often sing about precisely the reasons why we have chosen not to treat our children the way that society typically advocates.

Coincidentally, Alyssa's older cousin recently contacted her through instant messenger because she had been given a school assignment to pick two songs and explain how they reflect society's values and she wanted Alyssa's advice on which songs to choose and why. From her last few visits to our house, she knows that Alyssa is very interested in music at the moment. She took Alyssa's advice; they found the lyrics they were looking for on the internet and discussed what she could write. My niece also told me, as I was in and out of the

conversation, that she had “tricked her teacher”, saying she was choosing songs from the bands Reset and Simple Plan, laughing that he didn't know they were basically the same band - most members of Reset had moved on to Simple Plan. Later that afternoon I thought about it and was yet again thankful that Alyssa has the freedom and time to think about and discuss the meaning behind the lyrics of many songs, and is not forced to pick just two and write about them. And I felt sad for those students, and I'm sure there are some, who are not very interested in music, and for whom this will be yet another meaningless assignment that takes their time away from pursuing their own passions.

Another area of interest that was sparked through her passionate Harry Potter interest is languages. Many of the spells are based in Latin and she spent quite a few months interested in that aspect. She would carry around the English-Latin dictionary she received for her birthday around that time, and immediately look up any spells or names she came across and would often be rewarded with a bit more insight into the story. She also worked the other way; thinking of prominent character traits for her story characters and translating those to Latin to come up with meaningful names. And she picked up more useful skills along the way: alphabetizing, pronunciation abbreviations, and spelling. I remember that during this dictionary interest I also showed her the oldest dictionary we have at home, Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary, which was published in 1956. It's old and interesting-looking, and almost five inches thick with well over 2,000 pages. We spent quite a bit of time exploring the tree diagram on the inside cover which shows the relationships and

development of the Indo-European Family of Languages, seeing where Latin fits into the grand scheme of language development, and middle English, and modern English; even just reading the names of older and newer languages was so interesting for us. And, when I was writing this and went to get the dictionary to check the tree and the book dimensions, it was busy pressing a flower for her, a rose she received the week before at her cousin's bridal shower to celebrate her recent birthday. Books have so many uses!

Not surprisingly, quite a few religion conversations have also been sparked through Harry Potter. Book banning has been discussed, and we've critiqued the typical religious arguments against Harry Potter. She has also investigated the pagan tradition, comparing and contrasting it with modern religion, and many of the different types of divination; all fascinating bits of information about the world around us.

The Harry Potter movies have also given us many connections, leading to many hours of discussion. She's learned about the movie-making process by following the progress closely. We've talked at length about the screenplay adaptation process, and the differences between telling a story through different mediums: books and movies. What the visual element brings to the story in comparison to the relatively strict adherence to the main plot to accommodate the time restrictions of a movie. Both have their advantages and disadvantages. We've talked about the director's interpretation. With different directors now for the last three movies, including the one in production right now, it's really interesting to see how each of them handles the franchise, bringing their unique

and different places? Even if your child's interest is just one TV show, it can open up the world.

How about *The Simpsons*? I could create another big set of learning connections just through our interest in that show, which started with Joseph but has grown to encompass our whole family for the last few years. A vast number of conversations and connections about songs, cultural influences, stereotypes, parenting, religion, comedy, history, classic literature, and so much more have been sparked by *The Simpsons*. On one of our excursions to the local bookstore Alyssa picked up the Complete Works of Edgar Allen Poe after having heard *The Simpsons* do their interpretation of *The Raven*. They have enjoyed watching *The Reduced Shakespeare Company* performing “*The Complete Works of Shakespeare – Abridged*” many times, the first time paying particular attention to the Hamlet skit to see how closely it aligned with *The Simpsons'* skit. And it did! They have explored at various times vegetarianism, Buddhism, England, even learning itself through the running school commentary. We often make connections with the guest voice actors that regularly appear in the show. Even JK Rowling has made an appearance on *The Simpsons*. It's a veritable spider's web of connections!

My point is, instead of spending your time worrying that your child's passionate interest is narrowing his view of the world too much and trying to get him interested in other things, use that time and energy to delve deeply into his passion with him. Follow it, explore it, turn it over, play with it. Keep your mind open to all the possibilities and suspend judgment. Not only will you begin to see

all the wonderful things he is learning, your relationship will grow stronger as you share the joy that your child exudes while discovering all he wants to know about his most treasured interest. Whether it is trains, video games, collectible cards, Harry Potter, horses, or a TV show, I am certain you'll be amazed with where the journey will take you!

And after you've experienced the joy and depth and breadth of learning through pursuing both passions and fleeting interests, you will not need to trust that your child is learning every day, you will know it. And once you are comfortable with that, you will still want to stay deeply involved and connected with your kids and their interests precisely because you will have discovered that they are wonderful, amazing human beings who are lots of fun to hang around with and to know intimately!

References

Additional Reading About Unschooling:

Here are some recently published unschooling resources:

Joyce Fetteroll's site: <http://www.joyfullyrejoicing.com/>

Sandra Dodd's site: <http://sandraddodd.com/unschooling>

Pam Laricchia's site: <http://livingjoyfully.ca>

Danielle Conger's e-zine: <http://connections.organiclearning.org/>

Rue Kream's book: Parenting a Free Child: An Unschooling Life,
<http://www.freechild.info/>

Sandra Dodd's book: Moving a Puddle and other essays,
<http://sandraddodd.com/puddlebook>

Valerie Fitzenreiter's book: The Unprocessed Child: Living Without School,
<http://www.ubpub.com/>

Grace Llewellyn's book: The Teenage Liberation Handbook: How to Quit School
and Get a Real Life and Education, published by Lowry House Publishers.

And then there's the classic unschooling references: John Holt's books (How
Child Learn, How Children Fail, and Learning All the Time), and A.S. Neill's
Summerhill.

Biography

Pam Laricchia and her husband have been unschooling with their three children for five years. A nuclear engineer in her "previous life", she has embraced this wonderful journey initially inspired by her eldest and is learning as much today as she ever did. Living in Erin, Ontario on five beautiful acres dubbed "Alternate Universe" courtesy of her daughter, she enjoys reading, writing, hiking, and exploring life with her family.

