

**“THE COURAGE TO LET THEM PLAY”:  
FACTORS INFLUENCING AND LIMITING FEELINGS  
OF SELF-EFFICACY IN UNSCHOOLING MOTHERS**

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**Abstract**

Work and play are dichotomized in society and the conventional education system. Stepping outside of society’s educational norms and allowing children more free play/choice is not easy, but more parents are doing it by engaging their children in a homeschooling pedagogy called unschooling. What gives these parents the courage to walk down an unconventional educational path? This article will explore factors influencing and limiting feelings of self-efficacy in mothers who unschool. This paper provides an overview of homeschooling, focuses in on unschooling and its connections to play, provides an overview of Bandura’s (1977) theory on self-efficacy, and then interweaves this theory with the experiences of unschooling mothers.

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**Keywords:** unschooling, homeschooling, self-efficacy, Bandura, mothers

**Introduction**

Work (e.g. in paid work force, but also in terms of school/academic work) and play are frequently dichotomized in U.S. society. Our Puritan roots and Protestant Work Ethic have led us to believe that play is bad – in some interpretations, a manifestation of original sin (Miller, 1997). These contrasting beliefs about work and play infiltrated our educational institutions.

Ron Miller (1997) argues that colonial education's emphases on hard work — manifested through obedience, silence, stern discipline, teacher control, and memorization of facts — have been present in some form or another throughout the more than 200 years' existence of the educational system in the United States.

More and more people, however, recognize this work/play dichotomy as a false one and conclude that the hallmarks of most conventional forms of school are actually harmful to children and their learning (e.g. Gray, 2013). They argue that play *is* a child's work, and that we need to give children more opportunities to freely and playfully explore that which they are interested in (Liebschner, 1992; Paley, 2009). Many individuals who argue or agree with these points are choosing to step outside of our conventional educational practices to engage in pedagogy that allows their children more free play and choice in their daily activities. This pedagogy is most frequently employed in home settings, and is called unschooling, although it also can show up in alternative/progressive forms of education, such as free schooling (Miller, 2002; Morrison, 2007a), Reggio Emilio, and democratic schooling. The choice to unschool one's children (or send them to a free school) is often not easy, but more and more parents are doing it. What gives these parents feelings of imminent success that, in turn, gives them the courage to take the first steps down such an unconventional educational path? This article will explore the factors that both influence and limit feelings of self-efficacy in mothers who have chosen to lead their children and families into unschooling. This paper will briefly review homeschooling in general and then focus in on the unschooling approach and its connections to play, move into an overview of Albert Bandura's (1977) theory on the sources of self-efficacy, and then explore the interweaving of this theory with the narrated and observed experiences of unschooling mothers.

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## **Homeschooling in General and the Unschooling Pedagogy**

### **Brief Homeschooling Description**

Homeschooling is a phenomenon that has been growing in the United States over the past 30 years and more. Numbers of families who engage in homeschooling vary according to research (Princiotta, Bielek, & Chapman, 2004; Ray, 2006). Conservative estimates argue that 1 million children are homeschooling in current years, while others argue that this number is much higher, but difficult to determine because of the different state regulations that influence who is or is not counted in these totals. Regardless of consensus on the numbers, researchers have shown that homeschooling is gaining in mainstream acceptance (Stevens, 2003) as well as getting more attention from researchers.

Homeschooling is taken on by families with a wide range of motivations (some of which intersect and/or contradict with others). Researchers have identified two broad groups of homeschooling motivations — religious and secular. First are the ideologues or “believers” — parents opposed to the content of public school curriculum and who wish to have more religious (typically Christian) content in schools (Murphy, 2012; Stevens, 2001; Van Galen & Pitman, 1991). Many of these ideologues/believers feel that parents are commanded by God (or some higher power) to keep their children at home and teach them the centrality of the families’ religious values and beliefs (Murphy, 2012). Then there are the pedagogues or “inclusives” (Stevens, 2001; Van Galen & Pitman, 1991) – parents who believe the structure of public education is pedagogically unsound and who wish to “nurture children’s innate goodness and intelligence” through pedagogically progressive practices (including child-centeredness,

interdisciplinary examination of phenomenon, free play, minimal hierarchy and overt structure) and develop in them “a strong sense of self and the confidence that they can accomplish whatever they want in this world” (Kapitulik, 2011, p. 78-79).

In general, pedagogues [inclusives] promote homeschooling because they view public schools as inept and incapable of catering to the specific needs of each child. Ideologues [believers], on the other hand, fault schools for not teaching the conservative social values and fundamentalist religious beliefs that their families espouse at home. (Kapitulik, 2011, p. 3)

These groupings are not theoretically “pure” or mutually exclusive. Some believers/ideologues share (to a lesser degree) the pedagogues’/inclusives’ concerns about public school pedagogical practices. And some pedagogues/inclusives share the believers’/ideologues’ concerns about the values and norms emphasized in public schools.

The pedagogies employed by these groups vary as much as the motivations. Some families practice “schooling-at-home” in which many aspects of conventional public schools are utilized in the home (e.g. textbooks, workbooks, structured/purchased curricula, specific space in the home for learning, chalkboards, homework, etc.). Other families take a much more eclectic approach – perhaps using some purchased curricula or workbooks, but mainly following the needs and desires of each child. It is these more eclectic homeschoolers who often label themselves as “unschoolers.” This research is focused on these unschooling families, particularly the mothers (as they are most often the primary “educator” in the home).

## **Unschooling**

Briefly, unschooling is a form of homeschooling pedagogy in which the student is primarily self-directed. The child is able to decide what is studied, when, and how (of course, parents suggest and facilitate, but if a child shows no interest in a particular area of study, there is no compulsion of the child to engage in that topic). One mother in Mary Griffith’s (1998) work

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described unschooling as “mindful living, free play, and exploration. It is letting go of schoolish ‘shoulds’ and ‘oughts’ and measuring sticks” (Laura D. in Griffith, 1998, Chapter 1, no page numbers provided). And Peter Gray and Gina Riley (2013) described unschooling in the following way:

Unschoolers do not send their children to school and they do not do at home the kinds of things that are done at school. More specifically, they do not establish a curriculum for their children, they do not require their children to do particular assignments for the purpose of education, and they do not test their children to measure progress. Instead, they allow their children freedom to pursue their own interests and to learn, in their own ways, what they need to know to follow those interests. They also, in various ways, provide an environmental context and environmental support for the child's learning. Life and learning do not occur in a vacuum; they occur in the context of a cultural environment, and unschooling parents help define and bring the child into contact with that environment. (Gray & Riley, 2013, p. 7)

A mother in Gray and Riley’s study (2013) stated that, to her, unschooling is an approach in which “We value a spirit of wonder, play, and meaningful connections with others. We seek to experience ‘education’ as a meaningful, experiential, explorative, joyful, passionate life” (p. 8).

End goals of unschooling parents seem to include helping to nurture in their children a desire to be life-long learners who enjoy and embrace the process of learning (even when it results in failures); raising children who know and love themselves; raising children to be “free thinkers,” curious, playful, not easily manipulated, open to new experiences, peaceful, strong, confident, and honest (Martin, 2009; Morrison, 2007b). Such goals are certainly not unique to unschooling parents, but it is the manner in which these parents approach these end goals for their children that is unique. Unschooling parents create home educational environments characterized by a great deal of personal freedom and play, autonomy, cooperation, and partnership (as opposed to authoritarian hierarchy). Children are encouraged to find and explore their interests and express themselves in myriad ways.

As one can see from these various definitions, unschooling is a freedom-based pedagogy, practiced in the home. And freedom-based education is very much connected to play. Play is what children want to do and is what they choose to do when they are given the freedom, independence, time, and space to regulate their own behavior (Gordon, 2010). For example, A.S. Neill, founder of the Summerhill School “free school” in England, observed: “Every child under freedom plays most of the time for years” (1960, p. 116) and he defined Summerhill as “a school in which play is of the greatest importance” (p. 62). Peter Gray, author of *Free to Learn: Why Unleashing the Instinct to Play Will Make Our Children Happier, More Self-Reliant, and Better Students for Life*, argues that self-directed learning (the hallmark of the unschooling approach) allows children to learn, grow, and develop naturally and positively. And the Children’s Play Information Service defines play as including “a range of self-chosen activities, undertaken for their own interest, enjoyment and... satisfaction” (Lindon, 2002).

### **Methodology/Development of Research Question**

Data sources for this research include

- Ten one to one and a half hour narrative interviews of self-identified unschooling mothers (who responded to a call for participants). Of the women interviewed, most were from the Southeast part of the United States, two of them had one child, five of them had two children, two had three children, and one had four. Some of the women interviewed were currently unschooling their children, while others of them were partly or fully “empty-nesters.” The majority of the women interviewed were college educated;
- unschooling parents’ blogs, any research literature that exists on unschooling, as well as more mainstream literature on the practice of unschooling; and

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- field notes from a weeklong unschooling conference (Life Rocks! Radical Unschoolers Conference, North Conway, NH, April 2013).

The names used to identify the mothers are all pseudonyms.

Data was collected for the purpose of open-endedly exploring the lives of unschooling families, their motivations for adopting and experiences in the unschooling lifestyle. Data was reviewed to uncover themes (common experiences, phrases, etc.) and one theme that emerged was how mothers frequently encountered resistance (from within and without) to their unconventional education choice for their children. A preliminary question thus organically emerged of: What is it about these women that helped them persevere in their educational “deviancy” of allowing their children to engage in a self-directed activity/free play pedagogy within a society that negatively connotes play with laxity and over-permissiveness? What were the unique conditions or characteristics that gave them the courage to not only step away from conventional schools (public or private), but even try to eradicate nearly all vestiges of schooling practices (e.g. compulsion, age segregation, mandated curriculum, grading, dichotomous beliefs about work and play, standardized milestones for learning to read, etc.) from their children’s lives?

### **The Research Gap**

As mentioned earlier, at least one million children are being homeschooled by their families in the United States. Factors such as average homeschooling parents’ ethnicity/race, social class, religious affiliation, and marital status have all been examined by other researchers. Further research has also been done on motivations to homeschool. But relatively little research exists on those families in particular who choose to take part in the homeschooling pedagogy

called unschooling. Only a small amount of research exists on what factors go into these families' decisions to take on this highly unconventional educational task (Gray & Riley, 2013). This author wished to probe further into these decision factors to understand what gave these unschoolers the courage to radically challenge education norms. What contributed to their confidence to go down an educational path that was not only different from most families who sent their children to schools, but was also drastically different from families who chose to homeschool in more conventional ways?

### **The Research Question**

These questions led the author to exploring self-confidence, and ultimately theories of self-efficacy. Bandura's (1977) framework helped to organize the emergent theme in the data and led to the framing of the ultimate question to explore: *Within the framework of Bandura's social cognitive theory, what are the sources of and constraints to unschooling mothers' feelings of self-efficacy?* This research will add to the small knowledge base that exists on unschoolers. It will also, perhaps, provide fodder to advocates of this approach to homeschooling and/or advocates of providing children more play opportunities in their lives. If they see what factors promote and limit unschooling, they can perhaps work to provide/facilitate an increase in the influencing factors and a decrease in the limiting factors among more families.

### **Bandura's Theory on the Sources of Self-Efficacy**

According to Albert Bandura's (1977) analysis, there are four primary sources of feelings/expectations of self-efficacy. A person is more willing to take on certain tasks, expects to be successful at them, and generally *is* more successful at these tasks if:

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1. S/he has had *performance accomplishments* in the past in which s/he has experienced mastery of the same task or task similar to the task involved in the mastery experience. For example, an author may have feelings of self-efficacy about being able to finish writing an article because s/he has finished journal articles in the past.
2. S/he has had *vicarious experiences* of the task being successfully mastered by others. This is where the person has viewed/observed someone else performing “activities without adverse consequences [which then] generate[s] expectations in observers that they too will improve if they intensify and persist in their efforts” (Bandura 1977, 197). For example, one can have feelings of self-efficacy about laying laminate flooring after watching multiple YouTube videos of the task being successfully done by other novices.
3. S/he has experienced *social/verbal persuasion* that s/he will be successful at the task. “People are led, through suggestion, into believing they can cope successfully with what has overwhelmed them in the past” (Bandura, 1977, p. 197). For example, one can have feelings of self-efficacy about changing his negative eating habits if he experiences encouragement and persuasion that he can successfully do so.
4. S/he has experienced certain forms of positive *emotional arousal*. “Individuals are more likely to expect success when they are not beset by aversive arousal [e.g. fear, anxiety, and stress] than if they are tense and viscerally agitated” (Bandura, 1977, p. 198). For example, one is more apt to have feelings of self-efficacy toward doing a task if s/he is calm and not fearful or stressed.

Bandura further discusses that feelings of self-efficacy/expectations of success at a task vary on three different dimensions:

1. *Magnitude* – what level of difficulty of similar such tasks does one feel confident about doing? For example, if one experienced success in the past at getting through a 30-minute workout, he might expect that if he increases the magnitude of his workouts to 45 minutes, then he will also be successful.
2. *Generality* – how many similar such tasks does one feel confident about being able to do? Depending on the task and its components' generalizability/applicability to other tasks, one may have more or fewer feelings of self-efficacy. For example, if one experiences personal success at following a recipe, she might generalize that to expectations of success at following other sets of instructions to, say, build a bookcase. Or one may generalize based on the characteristics of someone she observed doing a task. For example, if a woman observed 20 women of varying body types each lift 100 pounds, she might then generalize that she, too, can lift those 100 pounds.
3. *Strength* – how strong are one's expectations that s/he can do these tasks? For example, a person will have more strength to his feelings of self-efficacy if he has directly experienced mastery himself in the past versus just watching someone else experience mastery or has heard persuasive words from others about his likely success. Or he will have more strength to his feelings of self-efficacy if he sees someone who is like him on multiple measures have success at a task he is about to undertake.

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### **Interweaving Bandura’s theory with the experiences of unschooling mothers**

The following sections detail how unschooling mothers’ experiences (documented through the data gathering described in the methodology section earlier) interweave with Bandura’s theory of what leads to feelings of self-efficacy in undertaking a new task.

### **Sources and Limiters on Feelings of Self-Efficacy in Unschooling Mothers**

#### **Performance Accomplishments as a Source**

Examination of the data revealed that many unschooling mothers felt confident that they would “succeed” (meet their ultimate end goals, detailed earlier) at unschooling their children because they had performance accomplishment experiences. In other words, they felt a sense of confidence in their abilities to unschool because they had experiences in the past which confirmed the “rightness” of the educational choices for their families. These experiences fell into three distinct categories – past personal educational experiences (as both a teacher and a student), past successes at practicing deviance, and past/early experiences in unschooling.

#### **Performance accomplishments as a source- past education experiences as a student.**

When I was in school I felt like I was almost always wasting time. I was one of those kids who kept a book under my desk so I could read the book when nothing else was happening which was often.  
(Kathryn, mother of two)

When I was ...in high school... I was bored out of my mind...I was so bored in school and ...I went ahead and found a correspondence class to finish up my high school and found a job to pay for it, and went to my parents and asked if I could drop out and finish in the correspondence class. Which I did, I finished it in six-month’s time my last years of high school...If I had ... children in the future I didn’t want to put them through the torture that was public school.(Gayle, mother of one)

From my whole school experience I was always trying to please my teachers, please my parents... To this day I don't know what I did for me. What I did was for someone else, and I think that really helped me learn that I didn't want my daughter to live that kind of a life. (Marian, mother of one)

While comments such as the above do not exactly describe performance accomplishments with unschooling, they do illustrate that a number of unschooling mothers have developed a sense of confidence that unschooling is the better choice for their children because their children won't have to experience what their mothers did in being conventionally educated. While this is certainly a form of counter-factual thinking (as there is no way of knowing that the child would experience conventional school in the same unengaging or alienating ways), the mothers are drawing on past performance experiences — while not performance “accomplishments” in the true Bandurian sense, they are “performance failures” that seem to have similar effects on feelings of self-efficacy.

**Performance accomplishments as a source- unschooling mothers' teaching experiences.**

The data revealed (and other researchers such as Gray & Riley, 2013; Lois, 2013; McElroy, 2002; Neves, 2004; Rudner, 1998'; “Why Teachers Choose to Homeschool,” 2000; and “Why We Chose to Homeschool,” n.d. have confirmed for the homeschooling population in general) that many unschooling mothers have backgrounds in teacher preparation programs in college or as professional educators in public schools. These experiences gave them confidence in their abilities to introduce topics in an engaging way and facilitate their children's learning in more child-directed/play-oriented ways. Their understandings of learning theories, developmental theories, and pedagogical best practices gave them faith that their efforts with their children would be successful.

Initially I was confident because I had the training and ...the background. I... was a tutor, I taught camp, I taught all kinds of things. I was constantly told my whole life, well you should be

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a teacher, so I think I had that already, it's like, umm, some crutches to lean on. (Marian, mother of one)

I got my teaching certification too and I student taught out on the Navajo reservation and I read a whole bunch of .... educational philosophy and theory books, and so, so I was a person who was ready to say that it would be really fun to not send your kids to public school. (Kathryn, mother of two)

Performance accomplishments as teachers or teachers-in-training also gave these women some of the “performance failure” experiences detailed earlier. In other words, many of these women could recount the problems they experienced in their teaching years —with not being able to personalize instruction, with standardized tests and other emphases on assessment, with lack of play and/or creative time, and with bullying, to name a few. These women seemed to gain confidence about their decision to unschool their children because they knew their children would not have to go through such negative experiences.

I loved working with the kids, I loved the process oriented aspect of what I was doing; however...it was very product oriented in the public schools, creating art, and grade oriented. (Laura, mother of two)

The element I wasn't prepared for [in teaching in public schools was] the amount of control I would have to exert over them [children]. (Robin, mother of two)

When I was learning to be a teacher, experiences I had which is just kind of whoa, of just for example, just learning all these techniques for discipline in the classroom, you know. My first two semesters of the student teaching, we didn't talk anything about learning even though I was in the classroom. We talked more about the classroom politics and, and keeping control of your students and all of these weird little tricks that keep them quiet, and I'm just like, where is the stuff we learned about helping kids and, you know, making a difference? (Marian, mother of one)

### **Performance accomplishments as a source — past successes at practicing deviance.**

Another source of feelings of self-efficacy to unschool seems to be unschooling mothers' performance accomplishments in other areas of lifestyle deviancy. Deviant educational practices apparently weren't the sole form of these mothers' differences from the mainstream. Some

mentioned how they broke out of norms in other areas of their lives and felt really good about these. These mothers seemed to be generalizing from these performance accomplishments to their unschooling practices. For example, many of the mothers spoke about their experiences as deviants from the consumer culture (in terms of growing food and preparing meals from scratch), and other mainstream practices (e.g. many were devotees of homebirth and Attachment Parenting, or had careers in holistic medicine/acupuncture, and the arts, or were autodidacts). These mothers argued that such deviant choices led to a lot of personal satisfaction, their children learning, and physical and emotional healthfulness, and thus they concluded that if these deviancies are “successful” for their families, then surely their unconventional educational choices for their children would be successful too.

**Performance accomplishments as a source- past/early experiences at unschooling —**  
**“The proof is in the pudding.”** A last form of performance accomplishments which lead to mothers’ feelings of self-efficacy to unschool comes in the form of early unschooling successes. While the previous forms of performance accomplishments might have led to mothers’ confidence to embark on the unschooling path, the early “successes” at unschooling gave these mothers the gumption to continue along this path even when faced with self-doubts or criticisms from others. These successes took two key forms — personal characteristics and academic-related accomplishments of their children. In the personal area, mothers cited their children’s positive character traits and relationships with others as evidence that their unschooling efforts were/are successful. For example, mothers claimed that their children tended to be extremely tolerant of others different from themselves, inquisitive, confident, less concerned (than their conventionally-schooled peers) with what others think of them, sociable, engaging, creative, inventive, well-spoken, active, adventurous, and focused. These mothers felt that the children

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had better relationships — both with family members (e.g. the children actually seemed to like being with the parents) and with friends.

Regarding academic accomplishments, mothers spoke about how advanced their children seemed to be as compared to public school counterparts. For example, one mother’s own mother was a public school teacher. The two of them often compared the public school children in the grandmother’s classroom with the unschooled granddaughter, and the unschooling child seemed to be reading at a much higher grade level. Other parents had their children tested and the results showed that the children were performing above grade level for their ages.

Parents also spoke of how sometimes, through the children’s free play and self-directed activities, their children “just started” doing certain academic tasks or applying academic skills to the “real world.” The interview excerpts below are illustrative.

[My son] had no interest [in reading], would happily tell people he couldn’t read when he was five and then we went to a bookstore and he was kind of annoyed because there was nothing for him there and [his sister] handed him a *Magic Treehouse* book, which is a chapter book, and you know an easy chapter book, but he sat down and read for an hour. And we kept thinking, is he really reading? Haha, like what is he doing if he’s not reading the book? And then I asked him what it was about and he told me and it was... It seemed like a miracle but it was just it kicked in and he was ready, just like walking: one day they’re not walking and the next day...(Ruth, mother of two)

He is a brilliant Lego robotics designer. We ...went to state championships with that. He had a lot of strengths, so people are looking at him saying he just loves building. (Olivia, mother of three)

### **Performance Accomplishments as a Limiter**

While “performance failures” (as detailed in the personal education experiences section earlier) often led unschooling mothers to have confidence in their ultimate success at unschooling (because unschooling was assumed to be better than the alternatives), there were a few occasions when these mothers had performance failures that decreased their feelings of self-efficacy. For example, some mothers discussed how their self-doubt increased when they

sometimes reflected on their own successes in the conventional system (e.g. getting multiple degrees which opened up multiple career paths). Others discussed how they sometimes felt they were ruining their child's chances in life by not allowing professional educators to be involved. For example, one mother discussed how one of her sons was delayed in his reading skill acquisition. She assumed that this was "normal" and that he would come to reading on his own developmental trajectory. A bit later, she came to discover that her son had a learning disability and lamented that her son was "falling through the cracks" because she had not seen the signs of this learning disability nor attended to it earlier.

### **Performance Accomplishments - Conclusion**

Performance accomplishments (and failures) seemed to have played a large role in the studied mothers' feelings of self-efficacy toward the unschooling task. In most cases, the direct experiences they had strengthened and encouraged their unschooling decisions.

### **Vicarious Experiences as a Source**

Continued examinations of the data revealed that many unschooling mothers felt confident that they would "succeed" (meet their ultimate end goals, detailed earlier) at unschooling their children because they had vicarious experiences of such success. In other words, they felt a sense of confidence in their abilities to unschool because they had observed things in the past which confirmed the "rightness" of the educational choices for their families. These experiences fell into three distinct categories, categories which parallel the performance accomplishment experiences detailed in the previous section. The unschooling mothers studied had 1) observed

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others (families, friends, etc.) having negative experiences within the conventional education environment, 2) observed others practicing deviance successfully, and 3) observed others having success (meeting end goals) with unschooling their children. The studied mothers generalized from these vicarious experiences that they would also have success at their own unschooling efforts.

**Vicarious experiences as a source- observation of others having negative experiences within conventional education.** Like the performance accomplishments’ mirror of performance failures leading to confidence to unschool (detailed earlier), vicarious experiences do not have to just be of positive things. In other words, people can observe negative things happening to others and thus wish to go another route, and have feelings of imminent success at this other route because the alternative (what they perceive as negative) route is just so unattractive. Unschooling mothers reported seeing a number of bad things going on in conventional schools that led them to feel that unschooling would be the more successful educational path for their children. These bad things fell into two categories — observed social interactions and observed academic experiences.

In terms of social interactions, some mothers had observed, either while being a K-12 student themselves or when older, the bullying/degrading of children by peers as well as adults in conventional educational environments. These observations led them to generalize that their own children might experience being bullied or degraded if placed into conventional schools.

For example, one mother stated that,

I do know that if [my son] had gone to regular school he would have thought of himself as stupid and he would have had a much tougher emotional time... He was born with a sign that says pick on me. I don't know why. (Vivian, mother of two)

Another mother framed her whole decision to unschool as being around what she observed as degradation of her child at the hands of the teachers in the school during his first days of kindergarten.

[Where] we were living .... [the kids each had a school] lunch number [which was] probably about seven or eight digits or something... They had taken a black sharpie and written it on the back of his hand... just huge, you know. And it just didn't sit right with me. I mean it really bothered me and I just, I just laid awake and just thought, I mean this is my baby, you know, and they put this on my kid's hand. So I went down to the school the next day and asked if they could, like please, was there anything else they could do? Could they give him like a little badge or ... hat this was degrading. This is sending them a message.... You know I tried to talk to them and the response that I got was, "Until he memorizes his number we will be writing it on his hand with the Sharpie." So I was like, I have a decision to make. Because I felt like that was probably just the beginning. And then the next day and [my son] was a very conscientious little boy, ... was meticulous, typical first born... never had an accident you know, potty trained and he was perfect... I came to pick him up on the second day of school and he's holding up an extra-large pair of, like, checkered pants, that he had to hold up because he had had an accident in the pants. And from what I understand it was a big accident, not just, you know, tinkle. So um, I was upset by that... They didn't call me to ask me to bring clothes, he's five, you know. They have extra clothes but they weren't the right size, they were falling down... And, it was, he was degraded. I could tell. I could tell by looking at him. Of course he can't communicate that to me. (Christie, mother of four)

In addition to social interactions with peers and school personnel, mothers worried about how their children would experience the academic world of school. A number of interviewed mothers mentioned that they had observed how children with different learning speeds and styles were ill-served by conventional education. For example, one mother spoke about her conventionally-schooled nephew's experience of being a slower reader, how he was identified as needing special education services because of this, and how she believed his self-concept suffered because of that designation. Another mother mentioned that

My son... is a real oral learner, he remembers everything he hears, so I knew that, that sitting down at a table for him would be just torture, and he's also, you know, he likes to be doing something while he's listening, which some people take to mean he's not paying attention or, you know, in school they would be like "Stop doing that and listen!" Well, he is listening! Hahaha. But he's just doing this other thing too, um, in fact he'll absorb it better if he's not made to sit and pay attention without doing anything else. (Ruth, mother of two)

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### **Vicarious experiences as a source—observation of others practicing deviance**

**successfully.** Just as some unschooling mothers took confidence from their own successful experiences of deviance, some mothers also generalized feelings of imminent success at unschooling from their observations of others practicing various forms of deviance. The most common deviants observed were the unschooling mothers’ own parents. The parents’ deviance might have been in terms of political action, lifestyle choices, or parenting styles. For example, at the unschooling conference, the main conference organizer and a featured speaker were doing a panel discussion. When introducing themselves, they both detailed having had parents who parented them in deviant ways (e.g. with minimal punishment, no “chores” in the conventional sense, etc.). Apparently they had observed (and experienced) that this deviance from societal norms “worked” in raising productive, happy people and concluded that their own deviance and educational choices for their children were bound to result in the same ends.

**Vicarious experiences as a source— observation of others’ unschooling success.** The most frequent vicarious experience that the data revealed for unschooling mothers’ feelings of imminent success at unschooling was that of observing other families’ successes with unschooling. Again, success is defined in terms of the end goals detailed in an earlier section (e.g. development of critical thinkers who love learning, are productive, playful, etc.). Community unschooling groups, general personal interactions with unschooling families, as well as more formal conferences provided unschooling mothers with opportunities to observe unschooling successes in others.

At the unchooling conference there were numerous presentations/workshops in which former and current unschooling family members (parents and children) reported on their lives – their

passions, accomplishments, etc. These workshops were all well-attended (particularly well-attended and energetic was the panel presentation by unschooling children ages 10 to 19) and the Q & A that generally ended them often involved audience members lauding the families for their unschooling results. There were times when audience members expressed relief, saying, in effect, “As I hear you speak or see your kids and how they’ve interacted with adults here, I have so much more faith that my unschooling will work too.”

Interviewed mothers also reported that seeing other families’ successes with unschooling gave them a tremendous boost of self-confidence to continue or even start unschooling. For example,

Sometimes you doubted whether you were doing the right thing. Especially as an unschooler, I really drew from other families. (Olivia, mother of three)

We started out, um, before we had kids, we had friends who were unschoolers... they had three kids and these kids were . . . I was just astonished at their, the ease at which they dealt with people of all ages and backgrounds, that was really the main thing that stood out to me, so I pretty much decided I was going to homeschool before we even had kids. (Ruth, mother of two)

### **Vicarious Experiences as a Limiter**

Just as with performance accomplishments, not all vicarious experiences led unschoolers to have heightened feelings of self-efficacy toward their schooling decisions. There were times when the mothers observed things that made them worry about the ultimate success of their unschooling efforts. This mostly had to do with these mothers comparing their unschooled children’s academic accomplishments with non-unschooled children’s (either those who attended conventional schools or those who were homeschooling under more rigid pedagogies). At these moments, the unschooling mothers seemed to lose their faith in the power of play as leading to positive ends. For example, one mother stated,

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It is actually really hard to not feel anxious and to not think, ahh, he’s not actually learning to read right now and and I think everyone in public school is learning to read, when is he going to learn to read? Is it [time to] start to take him to a specialist or, umm, you know, and so, so a lot of people I think start homeschooling in a, in a kind of a casual unschooling way maybe and then as they become more anxious they do more, umm, they do more, more typical schooling things. And I.. I mean we unschooled but every year I actually looked at the standards of learning for math and language arts just to see what everybody at school was supposed to be learning and whether I thought my kids actually were sort of more or less learning that stuff. (Kathryn, mother of two)

Overheard conversations as well as presentations at the unschooling conference confirmed that these sorts of comparative observations sometimes caused crises of faith for unschooling mothers.

### **Vicarious Experiences — Conclusion**

While certainly not as strong as performance accomplishments in raising feelings of self-efficacy, vicarious experiences definitely played a role in helping unschooling mothers develop the courage to go forward in their educational choices.

### **Social/Verbal Persuasion as a Source**

Beyond performance accomplishments and vicarious experiences, social/verbal persuasion serves as another means of strengthening beliefs in one’s capabilities to achieve sought-for ends (Bandura, 1997). Unschooling mothers received and reacted to multiple forms of social/verbal persuasion to unschool – from media, which includes written resources (web logs/blogs, articles and books in mainstream press), audio/video sources (radio, TV), conferences, and informal conversations with friends and family.

**Social/verbal persuasion as a source — media.** One of the first things discussed with mothers in the interviews was how they came to unschooling. And at the unschooling

conference, many conversations or workshops began with this question. All mothers cited various books, authors, magazines, blogs, articles, and radio, and TV programs.

First and foremost, John Holt and his magazine *Growing without Schooling* were mentioned. Holt is credited with coining the term unschooling, and thus his name being mentioned first might be no surprise. Other authors included John Taylor Gatto, Ivan Illich, Alfie Kohn, Dayna Martin (the coordinator of the conference attended), Scott Noelle, Sandra Dodd, Matt Hern, Grace Llewellyn, Sarah McGrath, Peter Gray, Nicole Olson, Joseph Chilton Pearce, and others. These authors have written either directly about unschooling or have heavily critiqued the pedagogical approaches in conventional schools and suggest alternatives that are in line with unschooling beliefs. A review of a number of these written sources reveal that they contain a great deal of persuasive/encouraging verbiage (e.g. “You can do it and here is how...,” “Unschooling is what is best for kids, to do otherwise would be bad and here’s why...”). An example of this is “Open your eyes and see how brainwashed we truly are in our culture about what we think education and parenting are. It’s time to embrace the paradigm shift and evolve as a parent. Your children deserve it” (Martin, 2009, p. 17).

Those who write directly about unschooling almost invariably include lists of resources — other places people can go to get tips and encouragement about unschooling (such lists are often repetitive of each other, which makes sense), as well as how to work through any legal requirements regarding homeschooling in this particular way (e.g. “With a little creativity, you can translate your unschooling children’s learning activities into the institutional language and forms that schools and government officials understand and prefer.” The author followed with some examples of how she has done this translation in the reports she has to file) (McCarthy, 2010, p. 49).

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Audio/Visual media resources include radio programs (e.g. Free Domain Radio), and TV programs in which unschooling families are featured/interviewed (e.g. *Dr. Phil*, *Jeff Probst Show*, *Wife Swap*, etc.). These programs all include moments in which the unschooling families encourage the listening/viewing audience that they too could embrace this approach to life and education.

Many of the online and radio resources have had opportunities for back and forth between the unschooling advocates and the audience. Blogs and online articles frequently have a comments section in which unschooling mothers relate their self-doubts and worries and radio programs sometimes have call-in elements. The authors/featured program guests typically respond with encouraging answers that serve to persuade the commenter that “she can do it” and that she is making the right choice with unschooling.

**Social/verbal persuasion as a source— conferences.** Conferences serve much the same resource-sharing and persuasive elements as the media sources of social/verbal persuasion. A quick Google search reveals that there are a number of unschooling conferences offered nationwide throughout the year. Assuming the other conferences are similar to the one the author attended, then there are countless opportunities within the conferences for a great deal of social/verbal persuasion — from presenters, from fellow attendees, even from conference hotel staff (on this latter point, the author overheard some hotel staff commending some unschooling parents for their children’s behaviors and told them to “keep up whatever you are doing!”). Topics for presentations and workshops frequently had a “you can do it and here’s how” persuasive overtone to them. For example:

- Replacing Punishments/Rewards with Peaceful Parenting and How to Transition Smoothly from Mainstream Parenting to Unschooling.
- Unschooling: Rock the Love, Ditch the Fear!
- Unschooling Rock Stars: Dayna Martin & Scott Noelle share their personal stories of parenting and advocacy.
- How to Use Peer Problem Solving and Nonviolent Communication to Nurture Healthy, Positive Sibling Relationships
- Attachment Parenting and Unschooling Teens
- Get Your Groove On: Parenting that Rocks for the Whole Family
- Unschooling and Authority
- Letting Go of Limits around Food and "Screen Time"
- Unschooling the Introvert
- My Journey To Freedom
- Bedtime/Family Co-Sleeping/Maintaining Intimacy with Your Spouse
- Unschooling a Sensitive Child

The content of conference presentations also illustrated this sort of persuasive/encouraging talk.

Dayna Martin, in one of her presentations, firmly stated, “You need to be proud and keep moving forward with love. You don’t realize the ripples you’re having on others by just doing what you’re doing” and “We are going to be looked at as a generation of pioneers.” And another presenter said, “Face your fears [about unschooling] and embrace them!”

In addition to the “you can do it and here’s how” type of language at the conference, there was also a lot of other persuasive talk about how an unschooling parent can successfully

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respond to her critics — e.g. how she might “finesse” explanations about what unschooling is and put things into a language that the normative person might better understand and appreciate.

Parents were persuaded that “there’s an ambassadorship to what we do.”

The in-person conference seemed to have a very powerful effect on attendees. The author observed multiple conversations in which people stated that while written and audio/visual resources were good, the personal interactions from the conference helped to persuade them even more that they were making the right choices. Apparently the interactions as well as the vicarious experiences of observing others and their unschooling successes at these conferences served as a form of social/verbal persuasion as well.

#### **Social/verbal persuasion as a source —informal conversations with friends and family.**

“It is easier to sustain a sense of efficacy, especially when struggling with difficulties, if significant others express faith in one’s capabilities than if they convey doubts” (Bandura, 1997, p. 101). Significant others can include family, friends, and community members. Interactions with people such as these were frequently cited by unschooling mothers (in interviews, writings, and conferences) as sources of persuasion to keep moving forward with unschooling decisions. Unschooling mothers most frequently cited their spouses and own mothers as some of the best verbal persuaders that what they were doing about their children’s education was worthwhile; but others came up as well (e.g. fellow unschoolers in homeschooling groups, co-workers, and fellow church members). For example, one mother stated,

This year I had a little crisis of faith at one point and I almost enrolled my daughter into kindergarten and all of them, all of the educators I know, were instrumental in keeping me on the path. My daughter has a high IQ, and she is gifted, she’s already reading at the 6<sup>th</sup> grade level and, they were informing me how she would not be, she would not be well received in a typical kindergarten classroom as many schools would not make accommodations for a kindergartener in the gifted program. And I was told by my mom I was doing the right thing, you could see [my daughter] thriving so I should stick with it because the schools do not honor the sort of learning that [she] wants to do. (Gayle, mother of one)

### **Social/Verbal Persuasion as a Limiter**

In the quote that begins the section directly above, Bandura indicated that it is difficult for one to sustain a sense of efficacy if significant others convey doubts about what one is doing. The doubts can be conveyed from family members, friends, and people in the community (whether known or not). These doubts send a powerfully persuasive social message, and many unschooling mothers spoke about how debilitating such conveyed doubts can be. Many mothers, especially at the unschooling conference, discussed how they questioned their choices to unschool their children after hearing doubts and judgments from other people. For example,

We don't live a traditional life. It's been very easy for us...except when family comes. They say things like, "Are you still doing that unschooling thing?" (mother at conference)

I think the biggest challenge that we face might be with our own family sometimes and maybe the community itself when we get judged for what we do and people make assumptions about, you know, just letting the kids be crazy free all the time. I mean people will come over sometimes and my daughter ...[will] be doing something that she's really interested in and they're like "Why aren't you doing worksheets or something?" That's kind of a challenge...[Also], I think usually, I mean it sounds kind of funny, but usually it's in the new homeschoolers, who are just coming to us and they're wanting some support, they're wanting advice on what curriculum to choose and as soon as they hear I don't have a curriculum, umm, they get a little, like, kind of, I don't know just uncomfortable, well how do you know she's learning, you know? And I will say well, how did you know your child was learning when they started to walk or talk? ...I stay calm and I don't get defensive anymore; I used to. (Marian, mother of one)

The first person in their family to try homeschooling [has] a big hurdle...grandparents and, and aunts and uncles find it hard to accept, umm, and you know and spend a lot of time saying, "Are you sure you're not ruining their lives? I mean how are they going to get to college?" (Kathryn, mother of two)

Since these mothers were either attending the conference or had agreed to be interviewed as an unschooling mother, they clearly were not ultimately persuaded that what they were doing was wrong, but the wounds that these judgments and criticisms left were palpable.

Interestingly, some social/verbal persuasion against some unschooling mothers came from other unschooling families! At the conference, a number of mothers spoke about their hesitancy to speak up with questions because they would feel judged by others in the audience, that

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perhaps somehow they were not doing unschooling “right.” Apparently, they had had experiences in the past in which other unschooling mothers had conveyed doubts to these particular mothers about their efficacy in unschooling. One mother even mentioned not liking to read unschooling blogs because things seemed to “come off as so perfect and that there’s only one way to unschool.”

### **Social/Verbal Persuasion - Conclusion**

While social/verbal persuasion is a much weaker source of feelings of self-efficacy than, say, performance accomplishments, it is nonetheless extremely powerful, perhaps more powerful than vicarious experiences. The personal feedback and judgments that are part and parcel of social/verbal persuasion hit home potentially much harder than simply observing outsiders’ experiences.

### **Emotional Arousal as a Source**

“Because high arousal can debilitate performance, people are more inclined to expect success when they are not beset by aversive arousal than if they are tense and viscerally agitated” (Bandura, 1997, p. 106). Thus, if unschooling results in lowered levels of general stress/agitation, then unschooling mothers are more prone to feel that they are being successful at this effort (and vice versa, but that will be brought up in the next section — emotional arousal as a limiter). For many of the mothers studied, unschooling resulted in lower overall stress — both in terms of day-to-day stress and long-term worries about their children.

**Emotional arousal as a source— day-to-day stress.** Mothers reported feeling lowered day-to-day stress after they made the decision to unschool. Most importantly, they felt freedom from conventional schedules — to do what they wanted during the day (e.g. go to museums and other places when less busy), to travel when they wanted (not limited by school vacation calendars), to adjust family life around parent work schedules (e.g. make later bed times for children so they could see father if he worked late), to not be burdened by the interpersonal stress of making children do their homework, and to not have to deal with children’s stress of transitioning from the school world to the home world.

**Emotional arousal as a source — long-term worries alleviated.** The decision to unschool also alleviated a lot of the mothers’ worries about their children’s futures. They felt better within themselves (calmer, more at peace) about the decision they made because they felt they were doing what was best for their children. When they spoke about their own experiences from conventional schools and what they saw as others’ experiences in conventional schools, many of the women expressed agitation and frustration. Their decision to unschool meant that they did not need to relive such stressful feelings vicariously through their children.

### **Emotional Arousal as a Limiter**

While these women studied felt low emotional arousal around their decision to unschool and thus had feelings of self-efficacy about their ultimate success, they did express how emotional arousal would sometimes lead to lowered feelings of self-efficacy. In other words, unschooling occasionally caused them stress, which led to feelings of self-doubt about their decision.

When mothers reacted to the judgments and criticisms from others (social/verbal persuasion), their stress increased and they began to doubt their decision. Or when mothers felt loneliness or

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fatigue or frustration at an overly-messy house, their stress increased and they began to doubt their decision to unschool. Most importantly, if they compared their children unfavorably (vicarious experiences) to other, non-unschooling children, their stress increased and they began to doubt their ultimate success. For example, two mothers’ comments illustrate their occasional emotional agitation,

At times it can be frightening because you don’t always know that your child’s process is where they need to be going ..... [My daughter] was really struggling with [reading]...and I, I thought oh, I’ve ruined her... I did exactly the thing I didn’t want to have happen, you know, in public schools. I pushed her ... and said, you know, it’s time to do this and she wouldn’t do it, so first major head-butting struggle and then she wouldn’t do, she wouldn’t even look at a book for 6 months.... And, um, I started freaking out, I was like oh my god I let it go this long, she can’t do it. (Laura, mother of two)

The very difficult thing for most people is our own having gone to school backgrounds and thinking that that’s the only way that it can work and it is actually really hard, umm, to not feel anxious...And so, so a lot of people, I think, start homeschooling in a, in a kind of a casual unschooling way maybe, and then as they become more anxious they do more, umm, they do more, more typical schooling things. (Kathryn, mother of two)

Apparently these stressors connected to unschooling were common enough for there to be just as much support at the unschooling conference for this emotional work as there was for the how-to’s of unschooling. Presentation topics on this included:

- Unschooling: Rock the Love, Ditch the Fear!
- Becoming a Life Balance Rockstar
- Reality Check
- False Identity
- Partnership Power: It's Not Just for the Kids!
- Tap Into Your Inspiration & Redesign Your Life
- Creating and Nurturing an Unschool Support Group
- Meditation

## **Emotional Arousal - Conclusion**

Bandura states that each person cognitively processes emotional arousal uniquely.

The information conveyed by physiological states and reactions is not, by itself, diagnostic of personal efficacy. Such information affects perceived self-efficacy through cognitive processing. A number of factors – including cognitive appraisal of the sources of physiological activation, its intensity, the circumstances under which the activation occurs and construal biases – affect what is made of physiological conditions. (Bandura, 1997, p. 107)

Clearly, the women studied each worked through their own emotional arousal in different ways, but all of them maintained that despite the negative emotional arousal they felt, they still had enough positive emotional arousal to make them feel effective at the unschooling process.

## **Overall Conclusions/Limitations/Implications and Future Research**

While Bandura's theory on the sources of self-efficacy has seemed to play out well as relates to unschooling mothers, there are still some limitations to the findings of this study. First and foremost is the bias that comes with doing a voluntary call for participants, reading pro-unschooling sources, and attending an unschooling conference. All people who engage in these are already prone to feeling successful at this alternative educational paradigm. What of the women who never tried to unschool or tried it and abandoned it – were the same sources/limiters of self-efficacy working on them in the same ways as the women reported herein? And there is also an overall limitation to Bandura's theory in general (which he acknowledges, 1977), which is the limited predictive ability to how different people cognitively process the various sources of efficacy information. While this particular group of women did, in fact, have performance accomplishments, vicarious experiences, social/verbal persuasion, and emotional arousal that supported their feelings of self-efficacy, there is no way to know if these

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same sources would act on all women in the same way. Issues of social class, race, marital status, and sexual orientation might influence how they all interpret these sources as well.

However, the above being said does not fully delegitimize the findings of this work. Clearly, there *are* things that can be done to both support and limit mothers’ feelings of self-efficacy to undertake the “deviant” task of unschooling. Advocates for unschooling and for more play in the lives of children can use this research to pursue their end goals. Future research might follow such lines — for example, empirical/comparative studies which examine the effects on feelings of self-efficacy for women who experience more or less social/verbal persuasion to unschool, or who are exposed to more or fewer positive vicarious experiences. Not only does more research need to be done on unschooling mothers’ feelings of self-efficacy, but perhaps, too, more work can be done on father’s feelings of self-efficacy, as well as the process of unschooling in general.

The Life Rocks! Conference coordinator, Dayna Martin, stated “We are going to be looked at as a generation of pioneers.” This may well be true and thus developing a research record on these unschooling, pro-play pioneers is a worthwhile endeavor.

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<http://www.goddessunplugged.com/articles/teachers.htm>

**Resources used to get a general sense about unschooling include:**

Books by John Holt, as well as the *Growing without Schooling* magazine

Books by John Taylor Gatto

Books by Alfie Kohn

*Journal of Unschooling and Alternative Learning*

Selected blogs including:

- [Daynamartin.com](http://Daynamartin.com)
- [Unschooling.com](http://Unschooling.com)
- [Unschoolers.org](http://Unschoolers.org)
- [Holtgws.com](http://Holtgws.com)
- [Psychologytoday.com/blog/freedom-learn](http://Psychologytoday.com/blog/freedom-learn)