

UNEXPECTED PATH TO FREE RANGE LEARNING

By: Laura Grace WELDON

Abstract

This is a condensed version of an interview with Laura Grace Weldon, author of *Free Range Learning: How Homeschooling Changes Everything*, by Rebecca Bohnman on *The Luminous Mind* podcast. Weldon discusses her family's shift from schooling to homeschooling to unschooling. She also describes using research to shake off a conventional school mindset, the benefits of diversity in homeschooling/unschooling groups, recognizing knowledge networks, and more.

Keywords: knowledge networks, instruction vs. discovery, free range learning, learning differences

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When I was growing up I was particularly drawn to the biography shelves in the children's section of the library, trying to satisfy my curiosity about how people grow into their possibilities. When I ran out of library books I read whatever was in the house, including my mother's parenting magazines and my schoolteacher father's John Holt books. It's revelatory to read about child development as a child.

Before my own firstborn was two years old, I began looking into alternative education options, even tried to get a Waldorf school started in our area. No luck, especially with our limited financial means. I hadn't met another homeschooling family in our small town, so that didn't seem like an option. When the time came for kindergarten, we put our firstborn in school as we did with our next three children.

I clung to the hope that institutions can be changed from within. I volunteered in classrooms, headed committees, worked with a parent group to bring artists to the school, and advocated to keep corporate influence out of the schools. But when you're stuck in the system, you end up enforcing the same structure you're railing against if your kids are to "succeed" in that system. Worse, school didn't really work for my kids.

Our five-year-old could read well but still had to complete endless pre-reading assignments along with his kindergarten class; our eight-year-old's teacher kept insisting he be medicated for ADHD symptoms we never saw outside of school; our eleven-year-old was expected to do grade-level busywork although she tested at high school and college levels; and our 14-year-old was bored by AP classes and one of many kids hassled by a few bullies at school.

Everything changed in a moment.

My oldest had been telling us all year about those bullies. He'd heard they assaulted a girl in the bathroom, broke another kid's arm, and threatened a parent. I took my concerns to teachers and the principal, only to be repeatedly told these were nothing but rumors. Then one morning, my son called from school to say he'd been shown a handgun and was told he wouldn't live through the day. I told him to run, run home immediately. I called the principal, begged him remove the gun-carrying boy from class and contact police. Instead he simply questioned the boy; didn't search him, didn't contact the police. When we called the police ourselves they told us all those rumors had been true. In my working life I taught nonviolence workshops to organizations including school systems. The next day I met with the superintendent to talk about this dangerous situation, offering to run nonviolence sessions for staff and students free of charge. He insisted there was no problem, but did agree my son might be safer out of the school system. That's the moment we became homeschoolers.

Early Days of Homeschooling

I thought I was leaping into this with fresh ideas but of course anything seems wildly radical when you're accustomed to a standard education model. Initially I leaned toward a project-based approach. To my dismay, I carried some school-like attitudes into the process. Although I thought I was encouraging my kids to follow their interests and explore related areas within that framework, it didn't go over all that well with my eight-year-old. The more I tried to advance my authority over his learning, the more I was seeing the exact problems the teacher had been talking about. He would repeatedly drop a pencil to crawl after it on the floor, or stare out the window instead of completing the project I thought he wanted to work on. It didn't matter if we

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were going to the park as soon as he was done, he just didn't want to finish. His inner voice insisted on a larger integrity. He needed to learn as he most naturally learned.

This was a boy who designed and built ever more sophisticated airplanes out of balsa, sketched pictures of airplanes, and pored over library books covering aviation science and the history of flight. He also played chess, explored nature, drew cartoons with witty captions, created elaborate make-believe scenarios, and cheerfully helped out with household and farm tasks. I wasn't quick to catch on, but gradually I realized he was already educating himself. My preconceptions about education were actually limiting my children's learning.

I realized that I had to step back, way back, and as I did I saw how much more depth and rigor young people apply when their own enthusiasm fuels the journey. We humans tend to resist (or at least resent) those who dictate how that journey should proceed. I see this in all sorts of areas in our adult lives—career, relationships, spiritual growth—yet it's something our children are right there showing us each day. If young people are passionate about cake decorating or surfing or string theory, we don't have to instruct them, instead we can facilitate their learning so they have the time, freedom, and resources to take their interest as far as it leads them.

Individual Differences

I don't mean to imply that my son's example is the only way children naturally learn. Every child learns in ways that are unique to them and relevant to their circumstances. My daughter, for example, has always been driven to learn in more academic ways. The first year we were homeschooling she had pet rats that she dearly loved. She made mazes out of cardboard boxes

and charted their progress (kissing their tiny pink noses for each success). She decided she wanted to learn Latin, and happily studied Latin books and self-learning programs—sometimes muttering at us in Latin. She devoted herself to the pursuit of science: conducting various experiments, carefully noting and sketching observations of nature, and reading heavily academic materials (even contacting the authors of several books when she had unanswered questions). That year, the top item on her holiday wish list was a dissection set including scalpels and those poor little preserved animals floating around in jars. She was thrilled to find it wrapped under the tree on Christmas morning.

It is extraordinarily heartening to set your kids free in as many ways as you can, especially when you see that in doing so your family has become even closer and more connected. In our culture, especially before homeschooling/unschooling became more common, it also felt like a leap into the unknown. Much as I grew to embrace this way of being, I spent time lying awake wondering if I might be compromising my children's future. What if they wanted to go into the sciences, but were lacking some vital prerequisite?

When my kids ended up in college (which was not necessarily a choice they had to make) they came prepared by years of very hands-on, in-depth experiences. That their fellow students seemed so shut down, school-wise, was hard for them to understand. Like so many other young people coming into higher education from a background of self-directed learning, they were tuned in and eager to explore new ideas, having embraced education as an expansive process instead of an imposed, sequenced, standardized, and heavily evaluated process. All four of my offspring are now working in fields they enjoy, and where their expertise is valued. (And if it

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helps save other parents from lying awake at night, two of my kids did get degrees in the sciences despite no real academic preparation before college, both graduating with top honors.)

Research

I'm a bit of a data nerd so I like to dig into research. What I find over and over is that studies demonstrate too much instruction actually impedes learning. For example, when young children are shown one way to play with a new toy, their approach tends to be limited to the “right” way to use it while children who are not instructed are much more likely to discover novel uses as they play with it in a more creative, open-ended way. (Bonawitz et al, 2011) Children learn best by exploring, discovering, imitating the people around them, and challenging themselves on their own timetables. It's a very active process.

But nearly all of us went to school. Our formative years were spent in a place emphasizing that real learning, learning that counts, is the result of instruction. That school mindset has bled into the way children are raised. Parents are assured, especially by those marketing “educational” products and programs, that the more top-down instruction kids get the more they are learning. So parents, with the best intentions, think they're advancing learning by adding more of these activities. This starts early on and doesn't let up. Educational lessons, programs, classes, sports—all meant to give kids advantages —actually cuts away time for essentials like free play and family togetherness. All the money and hurry is probably not worth it in the long-term. Here are three interesting reasons why.

~Economists Steven Levitt and Roland Fryer analyzed U.S. government data that followed children from birth through grade school. As Dr. Levitt explains on the *Freakonomics* podcast,

It doesn't matter how many activities your kids do ... that at least in terms of academic success, [using] the biggest nationally represented sample of data that the government has ever collected, Roland Fryer and I could find no evidence that that sort of parental choices, what we've come to call the obsessive parents ... can be correlated at all with academic success. And my guess is if, and this is just a pure guess, that when it comes to happiness of kids that that kinds of cramming has got to be negatively correlated...like being rushed from one event to the other is just not the way most kids want to live their lives, at least not my kids. (2007)

~A study compared children's daily schedules. Some activities were considered "structured." This was defined as time outside of formal schooling in adult-run activities such as music lessons, sports practice, and homework. Activities considered "less structured" were those that gave children more freedom and included playing alone and with others; family time including social events; enrichment activities like visits to museums, libraries, and zoos; and entertainment such as movies, performances, and live sports events. Results? Researchers found that the more time children spent in less-structured activities, the better their executive function. The opposite was true when more time was spent in structured activities, which predicted poorer self-directed executive functioning. Executive functioning is a big deal. It has to do with flexible thinking, paying attention, controlling impulses, staying on task, making decisions, and dealing with emotions (Barker et al., 2014).

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~Research does indicate how we can nurture learning, and it has to do with stepping away from controlling kids. One study followed nearly 200 middle-school students as they started playing a musical instrument for the first time. After five months, the kids who developed a passion for music were the ones whose parents gave them freedom to practice on their own schedules. Another study of nationally ranked skiers, swimmers, and musicians performing at the national level showed greater autonomy was linked to a positive relationship with the endeavor while people with little autonomy were more likely to feel obligated and even depressed, their self-esteem based on their most recent performance. Allowing kids to own their own passions lets them be who they are, not who we can pressure them into being (Mageau et al., 2009).

Trusting Children

I use research to fight back because the forces telling us not to trust kids are ever-present. It's strange, really. Our species has evolved so that each generation's young people will mature into whole, capable, contributing adults. This happens because children show us what they need over and over—things like closeness, connection, playfulness, worthwhile work, people to admire, and a sense of belonging. If we trusted children, we'd recognize they are whole beings in each moment as well as people growing into their possibilities. As we all are.

Children often force us to face what's hidden in us. If we let it, parenthood can teach us to trust children and trust ourselves. Most of us were not trusted as children. We were told to sit still and pay attention when all we wanted to do was get up and investigate. We were told to eat when we weren't hungry or compete when we wanted to cooperate or to be realistic when we wanted to

dream big. So we stop trusting our inner promptings and don't foster them in our children. We end up with a culture where people get to be 30 or 40 years old, wondering *why am I here?* and *what did I lose along the way?*

It reminds me of the poem "Cargo" by Greg Kimura. He writes that we are born with purpose and with gifts the world needs, yet we can't give them to the world until we discover them. "But the way cannot be found without knowing the cargo/ and the cargo cannot be known without recognizing there is a way" (Kimura, 2000, para. 3).

Labeling

We've gotten to a bizarre point of zero tolerance for children behaving in childish ways, with the standards much tougher for children of color (as they've always been). I got some perspective on this when I was first out of college. I got a job at a nursing home and the residents were all these people in their eighties and nineties. The stories they told me about growing up were unbelievable compared to today's standards. Many of them in their preteen and teen years did what we'd now call overtly criminal acts for fun. These were not "good old days" by any means. These people grew up in a difficult financial time and an era when there was very little recognition of children's emotional needs. Worse, there was a great deal of racial, gender, ethnic, and class discrimination. Despite all that, kids existed in their own realm outside of the adult world. When they got into trouble, it was assumed they would grow out of it. And they did get into trouble. They did appalling things like shoplift links of sausage to entice all the town dogs into a church, break into the school office to change grades, steal the mayor's car for a joyride, and set cornfields on fire. The very worst things they did might result in a trip home in the sheriff's car. But they were not arrested, weren't locked up, and received no criminal records.

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And every one of these people who had done truly outrageous things in childhood grew up to be productive citizens. They went on to raise children, work in stable jobs for decades, volunteer in the community, and in all ways be responsible adults. But if they had been hauled out of school in handcuffs for minor infractions, as we do now, the whole trajectory of their lives would have been different.

I'm not excusing outright vandalism, but I think we've kind of forgotten that childhood is a time to make mistakes, take risks, and express your indignation at what's messed up with the adult world. Zero tolerance for normal developmental behavior—toddlers' temper tantrums to teenage defiance—looks to me like brittle adults who can't bear to be around free people of any age.

Misbehavior

I grew up in a far less restrictive time. Even then, I violated my parent's rules as I assume every child does. For example, my older sister and I were supposed to go to a summer park program a few mornings a week when we were 8 and 10 years old. We rode our bikes there, signed ourselves in, then participated in crafts and games led by teenaged camp counselors. My older sister, a far braver soul than I, realized if she didn't sign in then the counselors wouldn't have her on their attendance sheets. That meant she was free to spend the morning as she liked. I was an anxious child and imagined all the worst consequences, but worked up my courage to skip going some days too. My sister went her way and I went mine. I'd ride my little pink bike for miles. I'd get lost all the time and fight back panic, afraid I'd never see my home or my

mother again. Each time I figured out my way back to familiar streets. I suspect now this exact misbehavior helped me develop ways to cope with my anxiety in the future.

Many of today's leading entrepreneurs, scientists, musicians, and athletes were considered "difficult" children who struggled at home and at school. Misbehavior may serve a vital purpose. Maybe it's a pushback against restrictions or an expression of strong emotion. Maybe, too, it's a way we stretch ourselves in a direction we need to grow.

Mentors

Early in our homeschooling/unschooling days I looked for a group to join. In our mostly rural area there were two homeschooling groups. The largest group was highly structured; offering a band, choir, and weekly classes. Potential members had to be approved after signing a Christian pledge of faith that effectively eliminated many people, including many Christians. The other group was small, lively, and inclusive. That's the one we joined. This group had regularly scheduled programs for the kids plus lots of field trips, clubs, and co-op classes. It felt like a community. Inclusiveness made the difference. People with all sorts of approaches to education became close friends and collaborators. It was interesting to watch, over time, the way insight and experience was inevitably shared. School-at-home parents asked unschooling parents for advice and vice versa. People who got started homeschooling via online charter school programs took the leap into freer forms of learning thanks to support they found in non-judgmental homeschooling friendships. I'm sure the kids got a lot out of the group activities and the friendships they formed, but I suspect the adults got even more out of it. These people, adults and children, were then and remain now some of my most important mentors.

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Stepping Back

Early on a group of us formed a science club. The kids who were interested were boys who were somewhere between seven and 10 or 11 years old. When we first started it, the adults were way too over-involved. The kids would go to each other's houses and the parent who arranged it would have a project all laid out and the kids would follow prescribed steps and if there were mistakes, as there often were, the parent would try to help them figure out, okay, why didn't that work? They did things like mousetrap cars and chemical reactions, fun but more fun to hang out and play afterwards. As the boys got older and the parents got more laid back, the kids started coming up with their own projects, figuring out their own resources, and running their science club with a playful spirit.

When their projects didn't work out, they used that as a springboard to come up with all sorts of other ways to try it. And they weren't eager to get it over with, instead they would turn the project into three more projects and use the whole day or continue it for several days. They also didn't limit themselves to the small stuff that parents pulled together. They did things that were far more challenging than we ever would have come up with. They made things like a 12 foot tall trebuchet and tennis ball cannons. They made a hovercraft that actually got off the ground. (They were disappointed because it couldn't carry a passenger.) No adult talked about the scientific principles they were supposed to be learning. They were free to delve into science as they chose. I'm not sure if we can assume years of science club were the inspiration, but quite a few of the boys went on to work in the sciences.

Wisdom There for the Asking

Kids watch and imitate others from their earliest days. By the time they're walking and talking, they're eager to help out and take on self-chosen responsibilities, longing to make a real contribution. Just a few years later they're drawn to spend time with self-chosen role models, questioning and talking and working side-by-side. But we short circuit this when kids are mostly around adults whose main focus is the kids themselves—educating them, entertaining them, or taking care of them.

I found it astonishingly easy for my kids and other homeschooling/unschooling kids to spend time with adults doing interesting things. We just asked. I've been calling these people our "knowledge networks." This simply means the people we know and the people they know. We spent time with dozens of adults whose careers or hobbies the kids wanted to know more about. People like artists, chemists, business owners, search and rescue experts, dancers, and folks who had taught themselves things like quilting, playing the stock market, and making drums. It's powerful to spend time with people who love what they do.

I found it helps to ask "Can you share a little of what you know with some interested kids?" or "Can you show them what you do?" It's important to avoid asking anything that sounds like "teaching" or "doing a demonstration" because they back away from what sounds like having to structure something school-like. Just as kids are drawn to learn from people who interest them, I think adults are drawn to share what they know with kids who want to know. Surely there's an ancestral tendency to pass along skills and wisdom to the next generation.

Beyond our own knowledge networks is the wider community full of resources. I know there are museums and recreation programs with all sorts of things to offer youth, which we generally

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couldn't afford. I'm talking about other organizations that may be less obvious, like ethnic societies, service organizations, and hobby groups. These places want to share their mission. We found that, say, an ethnic club may not have something ready-made to offer kids, but if you contact them to say you've got a group of kids who want to learn something about Polish folk dancing or how to make perogies, they may very well have the space and the person with time to make that happen. And there are all sorts of clubs based on particular interests—rock hunting or model railroading or herpetology, for example—that want to pass along their enthusiasm to kids and would love junior members.

Some of these experiences are interesting. Sometimes, though, they are downright electrical when both the adult and child's eyes light up with shared enthusiasm.

Screen Time

I know I'm in the minority in the unschooling world when it comes to our screen time practice. Handheld devices were pretty new when my kids were growing up, and we couldn't afford them, so screen time for us specifically meant time in front of the TV or desktop computer. When my kids were small we had a family rule that applied to adults as well, we simply didn't have screens on during daytime hours. In part this was due to what I now understand is my own sensory processing stuff; I'm fine with the chaos of children playing but truly can't deal with background noise like television or gaming. I also often provided daycare for other children and access to screens during the day would not have pleased their parents either.

So we were outside or fooling around in the kitchen or reading books or doing whatever and because screens weren't an option, the kids didn't ask to have them on. In our home, I found the lack of screens seemed to foist kids more onto their own resources than when entertainment was easily switched on. I'd see them making homes out of sticks in the backyard or taking apart the broken appliances their grandparents found for them to deconstruct or quietly humming while staring out the window in some peaceful childhood daydream.

I've since learned the term "worldplay." This is highly developed make-believe that's common in children who have lots of free time, especially uninterrupted time alone or with another child. They might draw maps of alien planets, act out the adventures of traveling elves, or talk about the exploits of imaginary athletes. Or there may be no outward evidence of their make-believe world at all. When highly creative adults were asked about their childhoods, many of them talked about worldplay. (Characters and adventures that later became *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* both were imagined during author J. R. R. Tolkien's childhood.)

This doesn't mean that kids aren't just as resourceful and creative with free access to screens. In our family, the no-screens rule was gradually relaxed to open access once we no longer had young children. As my kids got older, they spent much more time online looking up strange facts, watching obscure videos, and gaming with friends around the world. Moving from limited screens in the early years to unlimited screens later on worked for us.

Advice

~Nurture a wider village. It doesn't have to be entirely composed of people who align with our parenting or political philosophies, however tempting. When we include people very

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different from us we add richness and diversity to our days, and give our children the skills to live beyond divisions.

~Try to leave space in the day for contemplation and daydreaming. Sometimes it helps to make this a ritual daily—sketching time after breakfast in one’s own chosen spot or the habit of going out to look at the phase of the moon every evening.

~Remember that who you are is a How to Be Human manual for your kids. So let yourself, as much as possible, lean in the direction of what makes you come alive. Let your playfulness out. Challenge yourself to try new things. Welcome mistakes as teachers. Dig through your sorrows and fears as a way of excavating more light in your life. Cherish everything.

~Trust your children and trust yourself.

Resources

When we were well into our homeschooling/unschooling journey, I started writing a column for *Home Education Magazine*. This was the largest and oldest such publication of its kind (and I’m still sorry it’s no longer around). Although it leaned well toward the unschooling side, it included articles by people with a variety of approaches—always with an emphasis on respecting young people. The questions I got from readers were very much like the questions I heard from homeschoolers I met everywhere I went. “How do you know kids are learning if you don’t use a curriculum?” or “What do you DO all day without a curriculum?” So I started giving examples of what my kids and their friends were doing, in hopes people might see all the possibilities beyond pre-planned lessons.

These open-ended examples make up the second half of my book *Free Range Learning*. For some families these are fun ideas to try, for others they're a useful bridge to get beyond more rigid approaches to education. The first half of the book is a deep dive into natural learning at home and in the community, with the second half as helpful inspiration for those who need it.

I continue to write articles and am finishing another book. I post about life and learning on my site at lauragraceweldon.com with an archive of 450-some posts, and have an active Free Range Learning page on Facebook.

Note : This piece came out of an interview with Rebecca Bohman.

Laura Grace Weldon is the author of *Free Range Learning*, a heavily researched and resource-packed handbook of natural education. She lives on Bit of Earth Farm where she'd get more done if she didn't spend so much time reading library books, cooking weird things, and singing to livestock. Her background includes raising four self-directed learners, leading nonviolence workshops, writing poetry with nursing home residents, facilitating support groups for abuse survivors, and teaching classes in memoir and poetry.

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