

HEALING THROUGH UNSCHOOLING

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Abstract

A parent of children with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD), this author began homeschooling one of her children when he was unable to cope in the mainstream system. When the supports that were working for the child at school were removed, he became violent and aggressive causing him to face multiple suspensions. Together she and her child explored homeschooling, then unschooling where they found hope and healing.

I am currently caring for a child who was both drug and alcohol exposed prenatally. He has been diagnosed with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) and Attention Deficit/Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD) as well as a learning disability. He has had many challenges since birth including neonatal withdrawal due to opiate exposure, organic brain damage caused by alcohol exposure, as well as attachment related difficulties. I have cared for many children with FASD and walked with them through conventional schooling systems. I have also disciplined my children for non-compliance at school. I was forced to try something different with this particular child because school did not work for him. He and I have been on a journey from homeschooling to unschooling, that has opened my eyes and has cultivated healing for both of us.

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When my child was in kindergarten, he was unable to cope with the demands of school. He cried a lot, had difficulty getting along with other children, ran often into danger, and had behavioural issues on the school bus. The School Board decided to pilot a specialized classroom for students in grade one who were living with FASD. He was one of the first students to attend. The goal of the program was to create an inclusive and nurturing classroom environment, one that fit the needs of each student and their family. The school board hand-picked (union exception was made for this program) a teacher and educational assistant who were seasoned, loving, and FASD informed. The class started small with only three students.

My child experienced a lot of success in this classroom. He had some bad days, but suspensions were never an option in the program. They understood that utilizing a rejecting and punitive approach had the potential to damage students' self-esteem as well as jeopardize the connections between the staff and students. Instead, he was provided with a quiet area, which included a blanket and a pillow, where he could go to rest when he was feeling overwhelmed. Emotional regulation and self-care activities were incorporated into the day. They played games, had sensory stations, cared for a pet, and used exercise equipment. They cooked together, brushed their teeth after each meal, and went on community outings. Sensory items and activities were provided to students, such as movement breaks, chew toys, and rocking or bouncing chairs. Relationships and service to others were at the center of all learning. They arranged regular gatherings for parents and support people to come to the classroom and enjoy meals and activities. Holt and Farenga (2003) had a dream of school being able to “introduce the natural,

effortless, and effective ways of learning of the happy home” (p. 163). In my opinion, this program closely resembled a loving family atmosphere.

After the original teacher retired and administration changed at the school, we were informed that they would be transitioning him out of the classroom. They advised that he was too old for the program and that it was never meant to be long term. This process reminded me what of a friend and fellow parent once said, “you don’t take a ramp away after a child [with a physical disability] is in a building,” why would you take support away from a child with an invisible disability? (Picture This: CC, 2008). I feel this was a case of meeting the needs of the school “at the expense of students’ lives” (Ricci, 2007, p. 50). We protested, fearing he would not be successful in the regular classroom setting; however, their decision was made. He was transitioned out of the program and within a month he was sent home due to extreme violence and non-compliance. He received many unofficial suspensions, likely to avoid the paper trail, over the course of the school year. I insisted on formal suspensions, so I had an opportunity to appeal each suspension. The following school year the police were called to assist in removing him from school property several times. We were missing work regularly to respond to the school when he was not complying, and we were all unhappy. We were punishing him at home if he had any incidents at school, so we felt like we were always in conflict. Around that time, I received a lay off from my employment, and we agreed that I should stay home and try to homeschool him.

Though I had never homeschooled before, I had many ideas about how it would look, and I got straight to work, on what I would now understand as the “banking” model of education. This included me as the “subject (teacher)” and him as the “patient,

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listening object (student)” (Freire, 1973/2018, p 72). The banking concept of education as described by Freire (1973/2018) is an approach to education that turns students into “containers,” into “receptacles” to be “filled” by the teacher. “The more completely [the teacher] fills the receptacles, the better a teacher she is. The more meekly the receptacles permit them to be filled, the better students they are” (p. 72). I originally thought that he would be successful at home because he had a healthy fear and respect for me and therefore, he would comply.

I started with a strict and often harsh approach to homeschooling because my goal was to get him back to school, equipped to submit to the school environment, as a nice, tidy, and compliant boy. I also needed—my need—this to happen quickly so I could go back to work. I insisted that he get up at 7:00 am, be at the table for 8:30 am and start with the schoolwork immediately. He did pages of math drills; spelling words and tests and I delivered a regimented reading recovery program. The rule was that he could not do anything he wanted to do until his schoolwork, dictated by me, was done. Child welfare workers and school administrators were so impressed.

He hated it, I hated it, and because it was so inflexible it made him angry and caused him to cry, take long bathroom breaks or become verbally abusive toward me. He remained the same emotional, angry and uncooperative boy he had been at school. Why wouldn't he, school was still in session (C. Ricci, personal communication, December 15, 2019). Holt and Farenga (2003) advise that “children don't need, don't want and couldn't stand six hours of teaching a day, even if parents wanted to do it that much. To help them find out about the world doesn't take that much adult input (p. 52), and “school makes children feel (. . .) stupid, incompetent, ashamed” (pp. 26-27).

Needless to say, I became controlling and anxious, but remained determined to “break him” so he would be ready for school. Ricci, Gauthier, Baster and Neault (2009) advise that “through rigidity and control, adults continually try to domesticate children. However, in telling children what to think and how to feel, we only limit their individuality and ability to think critically for themselves” (p. 58). Many people feel that children can’t make good choices on their own, and that they need adult control and manipulation (Holt & Farenga, 2003), I certainly felt that way. Holt and Farenga (2003) also acknowledged that:

there is a tendency toward kindness present in children to which they respond, and that working with that tendency, rather than ignoring it, quashing it, or distorting it, can make a living and learning with children easier for us all. The chances that good behavior, character, and morals will take root in the atmosphere of kindness are much better than if we assume the worst in children and use kindness only as a reward for good behavior, rather than the norm for our relationships. (p. 85)

I learned that his negative reactions to educators, including me, was his response to domination and oppression. It was also triggering his attachment issues. So, I started reading everything I could find. I was left feeling terrible because as Freire (1973/2018) points out, “No one can be authentically human while he prevents others from being so” (p. 85). I was ashamed to realize that I was abusing him just like the school had been.

Ricci (2011) advises that:

If we have love we no longer need manipulation, coercion, and violence. Learning can happen in very gentle and powerful ways if learners love what they are learning, are in a loving place, and if they love themselves, the world, and all beings

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and things within it. The problem is that learners are often forced to learn things that are externally imposed, that they have no interest in or motivation to learn about. (p. 47)

Dianne Malbin (2002) is one of my mentors and has taught me a lot about FASD. She says that we need to “try differently” with children who have FASD and “not harder.” And the truth is, the harder you try the more mistakes you make (p. 10). She encourages people working with children who have FASD to try to understand the meaning of behavior and think about brain function in order to best respond to a child who appears to be misbehaving (Malbin, 2002).

I committed myself to working with him to create an environment that looked like home and not like school, by making our classroom the world (Holt & Farenga, 2003). I realized that my child has a good heart, loves people and is sensitive to injustice and that I needed to trust him. “The most important thing, besides love, that you can bring to your home school is trust in yourself to help your children learn and the trust you have in your children to learn in their own way” (Holt & Farenga, 2003, p. 243). Ricci (2011) notes that:

We need to trust that young people can decide what they want to learn. In fact, they are the only ones who know best what their inner being craves, desires, and what within them is waiting to unfold. Not only must we trust the learner, but the learner needs to trust us and most importantly her/himself. Unfortunately, far too many adults believe that young people cannot be trusted to make these substantive decisions, using the poor choices made by some youngsters as proof. They forget

that such behavior often reflects the negative effects of their mainstream educational experiences. (p. 47)

So, I asked him what he wanted to learn about. At first, he was afraid to be honest because “we live in a culture where we are discouraged from speaking against the system” (Ricci, 2007, p. 51), and he had come to see me as part of that system. We started to talk about what questions he had about the world and we began learning about the things that interested him. He needed “a chance, sometimes for honest, serious, unhurried talk; or sometimes, for joking, play and foolishness; or sometimes, for tenderness, sympathy, and comfort (Holt & Farenga, 2003, p. 48). “Schooling should encourage children to use their innate skills such as play and imagination so that they can make meaningful connections with their experiences and interactions” (Ricci et al., 2009, p. 58). I also make him a cup of tea in the mornings, if he wants one, let him sleep in and never ask him to get dressed if we are staying home (he loves his pyjamas).

My child has an interesting nick name, that he got from his father and I, because we had a favorite television show growing up, and he is named after the main character. We have been watching the show together since we started our journey, and it is really funny. I was pleasantly surprised to discover that the show actually deals with a lot of serious injustice issues like the overrepresentation of black men in the prison system, and how IQ tests are written for white middle class people. It tackles racism, sexism, addiction, poverty, child abuse, and suicide. We watched it every morning—because he wants to—and he was able to pick out very important details and asked a lot of questions.

We made a weekly menu to reflect what we would have for dinner and then planned by making a list and getting the groceries. We made dinner for the family daily,

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and this made him really proud. While we were cooking, he has learned to multiply, divide, and understand fractions and because we had a big family, we needed to double or triple recipes. We experimented with two different pie filling products, then did a survey to see which one each family member liked best. We started talking about the environment and paying attention to unnecessary use of plastic. We then made laundry soap out of items that did not come in plastic containers and it proved to be economical as well. We composted and recycled, and also planted a garden. The garden is his sanctuary in the summer. At harvest time we canned pickles and salsa, which he enjoyed gifting to people.

I worked at the airport part-time and my schedules came to me in the 24-hour clock. It felt like learning a new language for me and was very frustrating. He translated my schedule for me every month, and it was so helpful. He paid the monthly bills online, and there was some math involved when we had already made a payment, and the next bill came in not reflecting the previous. He didn't mind that math, because it means more money for us. He fixed things around the house like the vacuum cleaner, toilet, and my car door. There was a chore list on the refrigerator, and he was welcome to do extra chores to make money for things he wants to buy. He cleaned his room, did his own laundry, shovelled the decks and showered without prompting, because he liked to do it, and he was not being told.

We made and then brought chili and bannock downtown to feed people who don't have a place to cook warm food. We met all kinds of interesting folks and he forged meaningful relationships. This is an activity he would have been happy to do every day

and he felt we should have done more. We have also made soup for a cold weather drop in center and volunteered for the pet shelter in town.

We went on a field trip to the Canadian Museum for Human Rights in Winnipeg. Much to my surprise he really enjoyed it. He was interested and saddened to learn about the injustice faced by Nelson Mandela and all the years endured in prison. He could not understand why there would be separate facilities for Black and White people and pays attention to injustice now. He learned about Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women in Canada and felt that more should be done to protect Indigenous Women and solve some of their cases for their family's peace of mind. He was fascinated by the story of Viola Desmond, who was a woman convicted of tax fraud after she was found in the White section of a movie theatre. Viola was of Black Nova Scotian decent but very light skinned and often experienced privilege because of that. Viola died in 1956 with a criminal record but was officially pardoned in 2010. She is now featured on our \$10 bill and he shows me her picture every time he gets a \$10 bill. It really impacted him because he is biracial and if he wanted to, he could pass as White, though he could not understand why someone would want or need to. That made for interesting discussion.

We have taken him and our other children to Shingwauk Hall, which is a former Residential School in Sault Ste. Marie, ON. This year he took a big interest in residential schools and he joined a women's group on September 30, 2019 for their Orange Shirt Day walk. He asked to learn more about residential schools, so we watched the movie *Muffins for Granny* (2006) where survivors speak of their experiences in Residential School. He realized that he knew some of the survivors and it was evident that their stories were very important to him. He helped the Lions Club with Kidsight Eye

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screening at three schools this year. He gathered and greeted students and when they were done their screening, he gave them stickers. One of our screeners was his former teacher and had been his teacher for 4 years prior to retirement. They have a deep connection to one another, and they enjoyed spending this time together. Unschooling also allowed us to spend more time with other people we love.

He helped with this year with the federal election. He put up signs and helped check election stations. He met the Federal Candidate, Rudy Turtle, as well as the MPP Sol Mamakwa, at the campaign office. He was very invested in the election and stayed up late to get the results. When I was asked to facilitate FASD and Child Welfare Training, he traveled with me to urban centers and northern fly in communities. He was more comfortable talking about his life and was developing public speaking skills. He met many people in training who he developed relationships with. He helped with and attended a two-day FASD conference in our town. He met two amazing men living with FASD who had a message of hope, success, and victory. We hoped to travel to Vancouver to the International FASD Conference where he would be included in conferences and activities for young people living with FASD.

We tapped into his heart for people and enthusiasm to learn about injustice, and many other things, and we started having fun! What I realized was that even though he had been diagnosed with a learning disability, he had many curiosities and passions that would make him a great person—who would change the world—if we let him. So now we continue to feed that and in “transforming ourselves and how we act we necessarily transform the world because we are a part of the world” (Ricci et al., 2009, p. 64). Holt and Farenga (2003) believed that:

People are best able, and perhaps only able, to cross the many barriers of race, class, custom, and belief that divide them when they are able to share experiences *that make them feel good*. Only from these do they get a stronger sense of their own, and therefore other people's uniqueness, dignity and worth, and therefore, with much less need to despise and hate others. (p. 26)

Holt and Farenga (2003) advise that most families wind up adapting a position between “school at home and unschooling” (p. 227), and we have moved in the direction of unschooling. Ricci (2011) refers to unschooling as a “learner-centered democratic approach to education” (p. 45) with the foundations being “love, trust, respect, care, and compassion” (p. 47). I was no longer riddled with anxiety and the need to control him and started to genuinely enjoying his company. I was “modelling what it means to be accommodating by being accommodating” (Ricci, 2011, p. 47). He was rarely crying or becoming angry and verbally abusive. Our relationship was stronger and more loving. And he started learning to do many things on his own (including reading without teaching). John Holt believed that children “fail because they are afraid, bored and confused (1982, p. 5) and that (Holt & Farenga 2003):

What makes people smart, curious, alert, observant, competent, confident, resourceful, persistent—in the broadest and best sense, intelligent—is not having access to more and more learning places, resources, and specialists, but being able in their lives to do a wide variety of interesting things that matter, things that challenge their ingenuity, skill and judgment, and that make an obvious difference in their lives and the lives of people around them. (p. 279)

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Homeschooling can be hard, especially with a child who is angry and dysregulated. There had been days when I wished I had my freedom. I mostly enjoyed my work with him and enjoyed it so much more once we began focusing on learning “just by living” (Holt & Farenga, 2003, p. 41). The biggest challenge was explaining myself to school officials or child welfare workers, who wanted to see his progress on paper. The biggest joy was tucking him into bed at night knowing that he was not abused by a system that didn’t want him and could not meet his needs

Freire (1973/2018) wrote, “Problem-posing education, as a humanist and liberating praxis, posits a fundamental that the people subjected to domination must fight for their emancipation” (p. 85). I believe that he was no longer angry and abusive because his rights and liberties as a person were being honored, and in turn he was learning to honor the rights and liberties of others. Furthermore, unschooling has done more than just enable learning, it has also facilitated healing from his early traumas, as Holt and Farenga (2003) wrote, “with enough kindness, tenderness, patience and courtesy, one can make up for much of their early loss” (p, 83). He has taught me as much as I have taught him and together, we continue to become more fully human.

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