

The New York Times

Home Schoolers Content to Take Children's Lead

Sally Ryan for The New York Times



Gaby, 9, and Sydney Billings, 7, with their toddler brother, Dylan, make their own decisions about lessons. [More Photos >](#)
By **SUSAN SAULNY**
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CHICAGO, Nov. 23 — On weekdays, during what are normal school hours for most students, the Billings children do what they want. One recent afternoon, time passed loudly, and without order or lessons, in their home in a North Side neighborhood here.

Multimedia

Slide Show

Unschooling the Billings Children



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Sydney Billings, 6, one of four siblings in Chicago, is taught through unschooling. Her mother, Juli Walter, calls the process "child-led learning." [More Photos >](#)

Hayden Billings, 4, put a box over his head and had fun marching into things. His sister Gaby, 9, told stories about medieval warrior women, while Sydney, 6, drank hot chocolate and played with Dylan, the baby of the family.



In a traditional school setting, such free time would probably be called recess. But for Juli Walter, the children's mother, it is "child-led learning," something she considers the best in home schooling.

“I learned early on that when I do things I’m interested in,” Ms. Walter said, “I learn so much more.”

As the number of children who are home-schooled grows — an estimated 1.1 million nationwide — some parents like Ms. Walter are opting for what is perhaps the most extreme application of the movement’s ideas. They are “unschooling” their children, a philosophy that is broadly defined by its rejection of the basic foundations of conventional education, including not only the schoolhouse but also classes, curriculums and textbooks.

In some ways it is as ancient a pedagogy as time itself, and in its modern American incarnation, is among the oldest home-schooling methods. But it is also the most elusive, a cause of growing concern among some education officials and social scientists.

“It is not clear to me how they will transition to a structured world and meet the most basic requirements for reading, writing and math,” said Luis Huerta, a professor of public policy and education at Teachers College of [Columbia University](#), whose national research includes a focus on home schooling.

There is scant data on the educational results of unschooling, and little knowledge about whether the thousands of unschooled children fare better or worse than regularly schooled students. There is not even reliable data on how many people are unschooling, though many experts suggest the number is growing.

Here in Chicago, a group called the Northside Unschoolers has 100 families registered on its online list. There are similar organizations coast to coast, including the San Francisco Bay Unschooling Network, Unschoolers Unlimited in Guilford, Conn., and the Unschoolers of the Ozarks, serving Missouri, Oklahoma and Arkansas, although accurate figures for the number of families they serve are hard to come by. Adherents say the rigidity of school-type settings and teacher-led instruction tend to stifle children’s natural curiosity, setting them up for life without a true love of learning.

“When you think about it, the way they do things in school is mostly for crowd control,” said Karen Tucker, a mother of three boys who is an unschooler in Siloam Springs, Ark., and belongs to the Unschoolers of the Ozarks. “We don’t duplicate the methods of school because we’ve rejected school.”

Coming under the umbrella of home education, unschooling is legal in every state, though some regulate it more than others. The only common requirement is that students meet compulsory attendance rules.

In states with the most permissive regulations — many of them in the Midwest, including Illinois, Indiana, Kansas, Michigan and Nebraska — the idea of unschooling has flourished in recent years, with families forming online communities, neighborhood-based support groups and social networks for their children.

Members of such organizations form a united front against sometimes fierce criticism from outsiders.

“When you are in a subculture of a subculture, you often get painted as the freak family,” Ms. Tucker said, “and people believe that what the expert says is true, instead of thinking the alternative viewpoint portrayed has some merit.”

Ms. Walter, a natural-childbirth instructor, has had to assuage tense feeling from some of her peers.

“Sometimes people take it personally, like, ‘Oh, school’s not good enough for you?’ ” she said. “No, no. It’s just that this is what works for our family.”

Only 25 states have testing or evaluation requirements for home-schoolers, so it is difficult for researchers to get a representative sample of students to even begin to answer their most basic questions about unschooling. And among home-schoolers, unschoolers bristle the most at the thought of standardized testing.

Ms. Tucker has allowed her son Will, 13, to be tested, but she refuses to look at the scores.

“They’re meaningless to him and me,” Ms. Tucker said. “If you attach a number to your child, your opinion of the child changes, good or bad.”

The Billings children are not graded. Weekends are no different from weekdays, summer from winter. They draw or read or play outside, or go on family outings to libraries, museums or the gym. They also attend activities and take lessons familiar to pupils in traditional schools like [Girl Scouts](#), swimming for Gaby and piano — if they express an interest — but none has seen the inside of a regular classroom.

"I don't really know what that's about because I don't go to school," said Sydney, who says she likes her life just the way it is. If she had to go to school, she said, "I'd be at school all day and not have time to be with my mom and do fun things."

Unlike the more familiar home-schoolers of recent years, unschoolers tend not to be religiously motivated. They simply do not approve of ordinary education, and have decided to rearrange their lives around letting their children explore their worlds, unencumbered by the usual pupil-teacher relationship.

If Will wants to pick up a book, Ms. Tucker said, that is fine. But the decision to do so will be his choice, she said.

"The important things that you need to know are important because they're useful to know," Ms. Tucker said. "We all desire to get up and learn to walk because it's a useful skill to have. It doesn't take a brain surgeon to see that, just an infant. Will had never been given a lesson in reading, but he read at 7. I tell people it took him seven years to learn to read because all of his experiences added up to learning how to read."

Much of the basic mathematics that Ms. Walter's daughters have learned so far, she said, sprung from their desire to calculate how much allowance money they would have to earn to buy dolls featured in their favorite toy catalog.

Each child gets a small weekly allowance that is deposited directly into her own bank account, then the adding and multiplying begins. The lessons have inadvertently, and painlessly, extended to taxes, shipping fees and postage, which she sees as another benefit of unschooling.

"It's more real-world stuff," Ms. Walter said. "How many kids get out of high school and don't know how to balance a checkbook?"

The United States Department of Education last did a survey on home schooling in 2003. That study did not ask about unschooling. But it found that the number of children who were educated at home had soared, increasing by 29 percent, to 1.1 million, from 1999 to 2003.

Experts assume that the upward trend has continued, and some worry that the general public is unaware of the movement's laissez-faire approach to learning.

"As school choice expands and home-schooling in general grows, this is one of those models that I think the larger public sphere needs to be aware of because the folks who are engaging in these radical forms of school are doing so legally," said Professor Huerta of Columbia. "If the public and policy makers don't feel that this is a form of schooling that is producing productive citizens, then people should vote to make changes accordingly."

Pat Farenga, an author and advocate of unschooling, said the fears were unfounded.

"One criticism I hear over and over is that children won't be ready for the real world," Mr. Farenga said. "That's ridiculous. We're saying get them out of the classroom and into the real world. It's not about isolating them and drilling them."

Peter Kowalke, 27, was unschooled as a child and went on to earn a degree in journalism with a concentration in math three years ago from the Scripps School of Journalism at Ohio University.

"You don't know everything, and there are definite gaps in most unschoolers' backgrounds, but you cover most of what you need," he said. "And if you find out that you need something that you haven't studied, you'll have much more drive to actually learn it."

"But it can be tough," said Mr. Kowalke, a magazine writer who is married to a woman who was also unschooled. They met while he was filming a documentary about his educational experiences. "It's always harder to forge your own path without someone telling you what to do."