

## Defining Unschooling

by Helen Hegener

Over the past few months there has been a lot of discussion in homeschooling circles about unschooling, what it is, what it isn't, and how one does it - or doesn't. Workshops on unschooling have become standard fare at homeschool conferences and conventions, and several homeschooling publications have tried to define the word. There are even derivatives now, like Christian unschooling and structured unschooling and radical unschooling.

Unschooling is an interesting word, or at least I think it's a word. How many people need to use a word, and more or less understand and agree on what it means, before it officially joins our language - as in it gets added to our dictionaries? I don't think the word homeschooling was around for more than six or seven years before it showed up in a major dictionary. Maybe with a few more years of useage unschooling will join the ranks of publicly recognized and respectable words.

But to be included in a dictionary, a word needs a definition, and unschooling is a particularly difficult word to define. Just last month there was a long and involved discussion about what it means - and doesn't mean - on one of America Online's homeschooling forums. There were those who felt unschooling totally precludes the use of school-type materials, and those who said the materials don't matter, it's your attitude that counts. From the online discussions, one could gather that unschooling generally seems to refer to the act of not learning in the same ways we were expected to learn in school, i.e. with textbooks, workbooks, lesson plans, drills and all the rest. But many avowed unschoolers said they do use these handy educational tools, just not always in the ways they were originally designed for.

Most unschoolers agree that it goes a little further than that, tho, and can mean the entire process of shaking off schoolish habits, patterns, and expectations. Of course others will say that it's not a process at all, but just what they do with their kids every day. It's their interactions, their interconnectedness, their very lives.

In the Dec/Jan 1995 issue of *Growing Without Schooling*, editor Susannah Sheffer had some interesting comments on the history of the word 'homeschooling,' and I was surprised to learn that unschooling was actually the predecessor of that word. For a long time now I've thought it was the other way around!

Susannah noted that John Holt had used the word 'unschooling' in GWS #2, noting "at the beginning Holt simply used it as a synonym for what we now call homeschooling." She adds "By issue #12, which I'd date at June 1979, you can see that the magazine was using 'unschooling' and 'homeschooling' pretty much interchangeably, and gradually the term 'homeschooling' became the more common one."

Grace Llewellyn gives our term an interesting spin in **The Teenage Liberation Handbook**. Throughout the book she prefers the term unschooling, explaining early on that it has fewer negative connotations than homeschooling. But in Chapter 11, on Legal Issues, she writes: "I am shifting my terminology a little. In this chapter, I will mostly use the euphemism 'homeschooling' rather than 'unschooling.' 'Unschooling' is not a legally recognized term, and probably never will be. Don't use it when you talk to schools, courts, or legislators; it will confuse them."

Well, maybe we shouldn't get our hopes up about getting it into the dictionaries.

For that matter, do we even want official dictionary-style recognition of the word's meaning?

Unschooling means many things to many people... that became quite obvious in the America Online discussions. And that's part of its appeal. Each family, each individual, can decide what they want it to mean for themselves within a loosely-accepted larger context.

There's an odd dynamic at work in that once a word is defined, it begins to lose its meaning through overuse, overpopularity. The word homeschooling, officially recognized for some time now, has been showing up in some strange places, most notably as what parents do with their children after school and on weekends. Because the term is widely recognized and accepted, it's being used to stretch the meaning of other activities, with the very real danger that the word's own original meaning will be completely lost.

This has already happened with the term 'alternative schools.' Where that once meant schools which functioned outside the educational bureaucracy, it now also means special public schools for kids who don't fit well into the usual regimen. If one uses the term alternative schools but means free schools, or student-participatory schools, or any of the other originally accepted definitions, the distinction needs to be made clear.

Unschooling is still a wonderfully nebulous term, subject to individual interpretation. Homeschoolers can argue themselves in circles about what it means, and that's as it should be. We need words that are vague yet descriptive, changeable while unchanging. In much the same way that homeschoolers have taken leave of the educational bureaucracy, we've taken leave of the English language bureaucracy and are exploring new options in communication. We're unschooling in the best sense of the word.