

Infants

As no infant is required to be in school, this isn't strictly about unschooling, but there are families in which the desire to unschool comes before the pregnancy or adoption, and so it's worth pointing out a few things.

La Leche League is many people's first intro to attachment parenting, and that has led many people to unschooling. The problem is generally that once a child reaches "school age," parents can justify dropping the attachment parenting idea entirely. Some drop it when the baby weans. The principles, though, are as true of three-year-olds and six-year-olds as they are of infants. And once a child and parent have a close and solid relationship, why dissolve that unless it's unavoidable?

Attachment parenting isn't "an unschooling concept," but it is something many unschoolers consider, although some come to it late. You can find more with a web search or asking at the library. There is an organization separate from La Leche League now, with a magazine and a great deal of literature.

Basically, they advocate holding babies as much as the babies want, letting them be with adults day and night, gently, and sweetly. If people can breastfeed they should do that instead of bottlefeeding. If people can sleep with the baby, they shouldn't use a crib.

From a learning standpoint, when babies are carried they see more, they hear and smell more. If they are given things to touch and taste besides just a few baby toys left in the corner of a crib or playpen, they will learn by leaps and bounds. They will spend less time crying and more time being in the real world.

The parents will know the child better, and the child will know the parents better. They will be building a partnership based on trust.

"Partners and not adversaries"

Although it might have been standard La Leche League rhetoric in 1986, one statement lives in my head in the voice of Carol Rice who was one of my first two La Leche League leaders. The other leader was Lori Odhner. I credit and thank them frequently for giving me beautiful new tools to use to be a better mother to Kirby than I might have been without their generous and creative volunteer leadership.

Carol said, "**Be his partner, not his adversary.**" She was speaking to the group, but it was like God was speaking directly to me. That was huge. Though the mothers at the meetings were sweet, others outside of there were treating their babies like alien invaders, like enemy creatures, or like evil grubs. Mothers were whining and complaining more than the babies about the cruel trick the world seemed to have played on them because they were "stuck" with this baby.

So what kind of partner did baby Kirby Dodd need? He needed someone to pay attention to him if he was uncomfortable, and to make sure he was safe. He needed someone to help him access the world, to see it, to experience it safely. He needed a quiet, soft place to sleep. Maybe it was on me or on his dad, in a carrier of some sort, or a sling. Maybe it was right next to me in the bed.

Because La Leche League is a volunteer organization, people's experiences with local meetings differ greatly, but I lucked out and had some phenomenal leaders who were also unschoolers. Although I wasn't considering homeschooling when I met them, knowing those families certainly made unschooling an easy choice four years later.

I am still my children's partner two decades later.

Saying Yes to Infants

If an infant can't even ask a question, why would a parent say "no"? But some of the first words many babies hear are "No!" and "Don't" and "Stop." Even without the words themselves, if a baby reaches out and the parent pushes his hand back or ignores him, that is a big "no." If a baby cries and the parent ignores him, or puts him down roughly, or leaves the room and closes the door, that is not even nearly in the realm of "yes."

When one of the partners is in pain, the partnership isn't doing very well. And it's not a fifty-fifty partnership; nor is anything in the whole world. In the case of a mother who can walk and talk, access water and maybe drive a car, she can't expect a newborn baby to do half the work. If she gives him everything she can, he will give back as much as he has, not just then, but for years to come if she doesn't screw it up.

What do babies *want*? They want to learn. They learn by touching and tasting and watching and listening. They learn to be gentle by people being gentle with them, and showing them how to touch hair nicely, and to touch cats and dogs gently. They want to learn which foods taste good. They want to learn how to walk, but you don't need to teach them. They'll want to know how to go up and down stairs at some point. They will eventually want to know how to get things off shelves and out of boxes. They will want to see what else is in the house, and in the yard, and you can help them do that safely.

A baby doesn't want to look at and touch the very same things day after day after day any more than you would want to watch the same movie every day for a year, or sit in the same place in your house all the time. Sing different songs with him. Play different finger games. Change what he can see in the bedroom sometimes.

A rich world for a baby is similar to a rich world for anyone else. A baby is a person. A lucky baby has an adult partner who understands that.

Communicating with Babies

Someone came to a discussion and assured us all that children under five were like scientists from an alien world. That sounds good at first, until you remember that they are natural parts of their own world. A sixty-year-old man is no more a human, no more a person, than a newborn baby.

Children don't need to be taught to speak, if they have a fairly normal range of faculties. Making the exception for children with deformities or who are deaf and blind, let me talk about the other children who can learn to talk.

The same mom wrote, "Not only have they never seen, touched or experienced anything in our world—they also have no way of communicating thoughts, feelings or desires with anything more than frustrated cries, screams and babbling."

I responded:

There is touch. There is gaze. Have you never just looked into the eyes of your child, communicating? Have you not touched them soothingly, and felt them touch you back sometimes? They can tell the difference between an angry look and a gentle look.

Parents who didn't know touch was a real way to communicate could practice on babies, and then use it with older children, and partners.

For children to learn language, they need opportunities to hear words, and for people to pay attention to the sounds they make. Mimicry is good, with babies. Even before they can articulate consonants, they can probably copy your voice going up or down, and you could copy them back. Singing little made up two-note songs can be a good tool for communicating with babies. Copying touch is good, too. (Don't return rough touch with rough, though.)

Let them hear you speak, and find opportunities for them to hear others speak. Although there are justifications and theories about what babies like and respond to (high voices and sing-songy voices seem to appeal to babies), don't revert to a whole babytalk language with them. Some is fine, but talk to them about real things, too. Tell them what you're doing with them, and what they're seeing, when they're out and about. Don't quiz them, just talk. It's fine if they can't understand you for months and months. They'll be learning your tone and your moods and the speech patterns of the language even before they have vocabulary. You will be building a relationship that is not based on the meaning of the words, but on the sharing of the time and attention. You're paying attention to what the baby sees and touches and hears. The baby is paying attention to you.

If you can keep that up for eighteen years, you've got unschooling!

Co-sleeping

Part of gentle parenting is being available. If children can sleep with the parents or at least in the same room, there won't be as much panic or sorrow.

There is a book called *The Family Bed* by Tine Thevenin you might want to get if you need encouragement or ideas about this.

This isn't "part of unschooling," but many unschoolers have found it helpful in maintaining or re-building relationships with their children.

Some older children are as happy to sleep with a brother or sister as with a parent, but please don't require one of your children to comfort a sibling all night, nor to be responsible for the safety of a younger child. It's too much to put on a young person, and it will move you away from, rather than toward, parent/child bonding with both of those children.

Babies need parents all the time, not just during daylight hours.

Sometimes parents think they won't get as much sleep. It's easier for a nursing mom to roll over and nurse the baby than to get up and walk and be wide awake to pick up a baby who's been wide awake and crying even longer. That's too much disruption of peace and sleep for everyone.

If the dad has to wake up in the morning, the mom and baby could sleep in another room on work nights. Some families put more than one bed in the same room. Some use mattresses on the floor so babies and toddlers can't fall. It can help to have different covers for different people, too.

Some families never got the chance to sleep as a group early on but it might be worth considering, even later or occasionally, depending on your temperaments and situation.

Toddlers and Young Children

Younger children (sometimes called "preschoolers") are not really being "unschooled" unless the parents would absolutely have put him or her in school without the unschooling intention or philosophy. When a child is below the age of compulsory schooling, there are ways to encourage his curiosity and to strengthen the parent/child relationship, even if he attends school.

If you don't intend to send your child to school, the less you do to him, the less you have to undo. The more you do *with* him, the closer you'll be to seeing what natural learning can do in and for his life.

Instead of teaching him the colors or the alphabet, play games and sing songs and speak casually about what color things are, or what's bigger or smaller. Instead of buying him only "age-appropriate" toys, consider other real-world things that would be safe for him to play with. Let him touch some of your things, in gentle ways, rather than keeping them all up high. (Hide the truly fragile things for a while.)

Let him help decide things about his own environment or the family's plans. Don't make it his responsibility, but get his input. Take an "I don't care," for what it is. He might not care! The more a child trusts parents to make fun decisions, the less he will feel he needs to whine or cry to ever get "his way." Avoid things he doesn't enjoy when you can.

When you're talking to young children who are figuring out their new language and their new world, avoid saying "always" or "never." Instead of making rules for him or dire predictions, explain your concerns and thoughts. Give him some "why" to go with his "what" and "where" and "when." Even give him some "why" to go with his "who." Don't forget that he won't know what "aunt" and "cousin" mean. He won't automatically figure out "neighbor" or "co-worker."

You're like a docent in the Museum of Everything.

Guests in your home, and in your life

Some people enjoy the idea that we choose our parents when we're in some incorporeal waiting room somewhere. Others get a kick out of the idea that they will meet the same souls they "knew before" to work things out. Sometimes those beliefs become justifications for bad parenting or slack friendship, because one can always say "Well this is the way it was fated to be." I'm not interested in helping anyone justify the mistreatment of others, so if the beginning of this paragraph is the way you see your relationship with your child, please skip to the next page.

If you're still here, this is what helps me when I am stuck for how to act: I think of my child as a guest in my home. He didn't really choose to come here; I brought him here myself. When there were siblings, he didn't choose to have them. Even a child who says "I want a sister" rarely knows what he's talking about; by the time you can produce one he's on to wanting a motorbike or something. No child has a nine-month attention span, and by the time a newborn is a playmate, a year or three have passed. Don't ever blame a child for having a sibling regardless of how much he expressed a fantasy wish for a playmate who lived there.

Being new to the world, and you being his host (and partner), any light you can shed on the mysteries of the world, and any clues you can give him on what's likely to happen and what's expected of him would be good for all concerned. Advise him what might happen at a wedding reception, or a birthday party, or at a place he's never been to before. Show him how to eat a new food he hasn't seen. Help put him at ease if he's nervous. Provide him all the coaching and reassurance he wants, and no more than he wants.

Find ways to accommodate his everyday needs. Step stools, low drawers and shelves, a low hook for his coat and hat, a small chair and table, some snacks he can get to without asking—consider those to be requirements rather than luxuries. Be courteous and generous.

Attentive Parenting

Some families operate as though from a script, by default. The parents deal with the children as though they are generic, interchangeable children, or bad children, or irritating strangers. The children deal with the parents as little as possible after a while, having given up on actually being heard or respected.

If you are part of a disconnected relationship, or if you remember one, or have such examples in your life, think of the elements that created those sad situations. Make that your checklist of things not to do.

What is "attention"? Attending. To attend means both to be there, and to take care of someone. Tending a garden. Attending to a child. Being present in a focused and meaningful and useful way.

Sometimes a child is trying to get help and an adult says, "Don't interrupt." In such a case the adult has been inattentive two ways. Years ago I stopped hanging out with friends who wanted me to put my children second to them.

Sometimes a child wants to discuss or explain, and a parent says, "It doesn't matter what you think," or "I don't care why you did it." That would be a good move to be able to take back. It's not too late for you to do something different, from now on.

Sometimes attending to someone means giving them space and quiet and waiting until they have rested or calmed down or thought about what they want to say before you press them to listen or speak. Inattentive parents miss those cues sometimes.

If a child has to say "I'm hungry," it's likely the parent wasn't paying much attention half an hour or an hour before to how long it had been since food, and how much energy the child had been using. If a child is thirsty, parents shouldn't stall or argue; they should probably apologize as they get that child something to drink.

Saying Yes to Toddlers

Children who can walk and talk feel powerful and they love their new ability to affect the world. As a parent, you probably were eager for them to speak, and you probably took notes and photos when they walked, and ran, and climbed. Now what?

Children need to explore the world. Don't go to the same park, the same grocery store, the same movie theater every time. Change it up. Take a different route. If you walk the dog, maybe go the opposite direction on the loop, or leave early and go more slowly. Go at sunset so the child can be outside for the transition from daytime to twilight.

Find safe places for him to run, and things to climb. Be right there. Help him. Cheer him on. Be patient and encouraging.

Avoid "no" when a situation isn't actually harmful or dangerous. Even if "yes" isn't the answer, try variations on "Let's see if we can," or "I'll put it on the list," or "I wish we could, but let's try this instead." Be positive and cheerful as often as you can be.

When your young partner is tired, find him a comfortable place to rest. When he's afraid, help him feel safe. When he's sad, try to be sympathetic and comforting. It all sounds obvious, I bet, but you won't have to look far to see parents doing the opposite things and being angry with children just for being children and for expressing their physical and emotional needs.

Practicalities with toddlers

Always have snacks with you.

Whenever possible, let children wear something they could sleep in. Or let them sleep in something that wasn't really for sleeping. Put sleep above tradition or appearances. The purpose of sleep doesn't require special equipment or costumes.

If baths are scary, let kids play with toys in the tub without the stopper in. Find a plastic dishpan and fill it with sudsy warm water and let them wash their toy dishes, or some other toys. Put in another pan with rinse water. Somewhere in all that, the kid will get cleaner, and be a little less afraid of the water next time. And every day he gets older. If you think back to a single argument over a bath in your life or anyone's, it probably seems silly from a distance.

Ice is a good tub toy. You don't have to wash it or store it later. It's a good toy for a warm sidewalk, too. It's fun to pull around in a wagon. Ice cleans itself up. (Have water nearby to pour on in case ice sticks to a child; ice is safer wet than not.)

A tent made of a sheet over a table or some chairs should not be rare or unusual.

Offer food and water more than you think they'll need it; don't forget sunscreen or shade; have something soft to lie on and maybe that sheet, for a tent, to hide under. For the child to hide under, I mean—though you might want to hide *with* him.

Heroics

Protect your child from bad guys. Anyone who wants to break up your team or bring your relationship into question is a bad guy. Be your child's protector and defender. Be a hero.

When your child does sweet and tender things for you, don't brush her aside. Pay attention to nurturing gestures. Acknowledge them. Let your child be your hero sometimes, too.

Holding hands in parking lots

A common question is how to "make" children hold the mom's hand. It helps to live in such a way that the child wants to hold the mom's hand. "You have to hold my hand" is both a "have to" and a rule. If the purpose and intention is to be safe, there are other ways.

Instead of requiring that my kids had to hold my hand in a parking lot, I would park near a cart and put some kids in right away, or tell them to hold on to the cart (a.k.a. "help me push", so a kid can be between me and the cart). And they didn't have to hold a hand. There weren't enough hands. I'd say "Hold on to something," and it might be my jacket, or the strap of the sling, or the backpack, or something.

I've seen other people's children run away from them in parking lots, and the parents yell and threaten. At that moment, going back to the

mom seems the most dangerous option. Make yourself your child's safest place in the world, and many of your old concerns will just disappear.

End of selection.

Pages 57-67 *The Big Book of Unschooling*, by Sandra Dodd, 2009, sections on infants, babies, toddlers.