

THANK YOU, SANDRA

...for your help with our journey



Dear Sandra,

Our son, Orion, is nine years old and, until the beginning of the year, has attended various different schools. We have moved halfway around the world (from the U.K. to Australia, and then *across* Australia) in search of a school that would suit Orion. Having tried several we finally came to the realisation that what Orion actually needed was *no school* and respectful parenting! There was not something wrong with his learning abilities or personality, as was often suggested; his challenging behaviour was him communicating how life was making him feel.

It was a massive transition for us to go from our conventional educational and parenting conditioning to unschooling and we are very grateful for your extensive website and your *AlwaysLearning* list. They helped my family put an entirely new and better way of living and learning into practise.

Your incredible ability to read between the words of peoples' questions and to so clearly give answers which often are not easy but are exactly what is needed to create change. It is a remarkable gift.

My family and I are truly thankful for your dedication and passion, it is people like you who are creating the change society needs.

After almost a year of de-schooling (still early days) already our son's joy for life is returning and he no longer has challenging behaviour.

We are not controlling him to make him fit in anymore and for the first time in a very long time we are having fun exploring life together.

My husband and I have grown so much from the lessons that come from striving to be conscious people and taking responsibility for learning and cannot thank you enough for the support your work has given us. Our journey continues positively.

Huge appreciation,

Marloes, James and Orion

**“MY HUSBAND AND I CANNOT THANK YOU ENOUGH FOR
THE SUPPORT YOUR WORK HAS GIVEN US.”**



“THANKS TO YOUR INSPIRATION
AND ENCOURAGEMENT, I AM THE
MOTHER I HAVE ALWAYS WANTED
TO BE.”



Dear Sandra,

I had the distinct pleasure of attending my first HSC conference last weekend and attending two of your talks. I consider you the “rock star of unschooling,” and I was cracking up at how my heart was all a-flutter to be there with you in person! It was a joy and an inspiration to hear you speak and I hung on every word. My husband and I are still laughing about (and horrified by) the Hallmark Coupon Book.

The conference was perfectly timed for us. I had spent the week before the conference on a vacation with my not-so-supportive in-laws and, in retrospect, I can see that I had been thrown off the unschooling track. You got me back on the bus, sister! And I can tell you for a fact that, this week, thanks to your inspiration and encouragement, I am the mother I have always wanted to be. I’m saying “yes” more than ever, and my children are flourishing. Thank you!

With sincere appreciation,

Amy Edwards

P.S.

Sandra, you continue to be an inspiration to me on an almost daily basis. I love your sense of humor. I love your straightforwardness. I love your inclination to candidly share the stories of your struggles and accomplishments so that those of us that are just starting our process can learn from them.

I am amazed by the vastness of information on your website, on virtually every unschooling subject imaginable, and appreciate your willingness to keep it updated. I receive the “Daily Digest” version of the *Always Learning* message board and, on the days that I know I don’t have time to read ALL the posts, I still can’t resist clicking on YOUR posts because I know they will be concise and pertinent and/or might make me smile.

Thank you for paving the way for all of us and, beyond that, for being willing to STAY on the road with us, helping us over the hard parts.



| THE POLIKOWSKY FAMILY |

Dear Sandra,

I wanted to write this beautiful thank you note to let you know that you have made my life sweeter, more peaceful and definitely more joyful and happy.

There is more love in my life, in my kids lives, and in my marriage because of you.

I have tried to sit down and list all the changes in our lives that happened because of you dedication, your words, your work and your willingness to share your time and open your family life and experience with all of us.

There is so much I would like to be able to put into words that I am coming short. I wish I could write something beautiful and poetic.

I wish I could express all the gratitude I feel for all you do.

I am going to stick to a simple thank you.

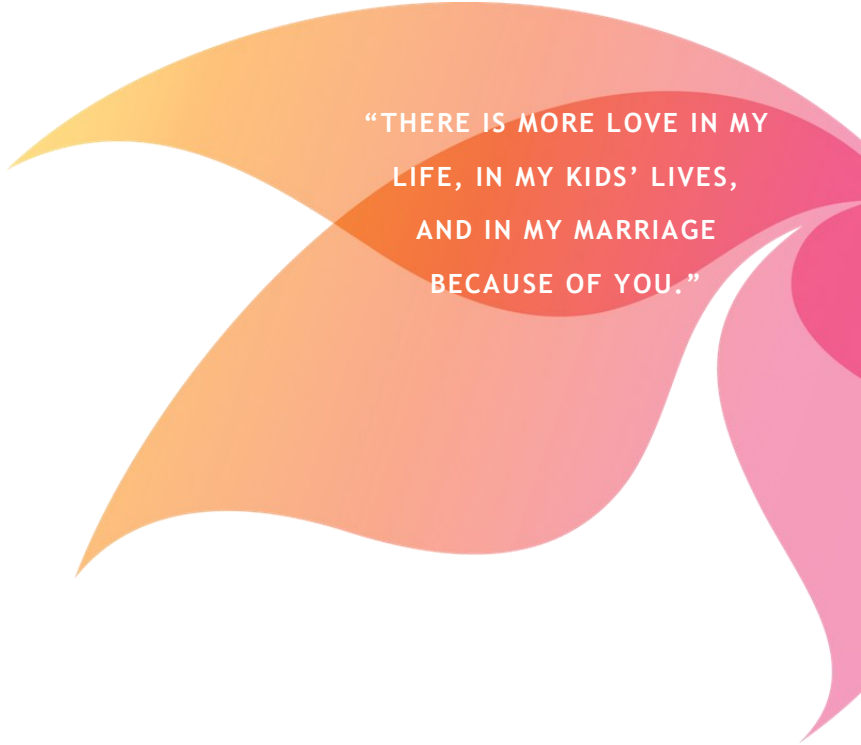
You are a wrecking force and I admire you. I want to be like you when I grow up.

Sandra, thank you from the bottom of my heart.

I will be forever in indebted and forever grateful.

Love,

Alex, Brian, MD and Gigi Polikowsky



“THERE IS MORE LOVE IN MY
LIFE, IN MY KIDS’ LIVES,
AND IN MY MARRIAGE
BECAUSE OF YOU.”



Dear Sandra,

Thank you, Sandra, for everything I've learned from you. Your *AlwaysLearning* discussion group is one of my favourite places on the internet. Your website too is an absolute treasure chest of wisdom and inspiration and a delight to explore. I'm a great admirer of what you have achieved as a parent and I admire the clarity and unwavering focus of your thinking on the topic of unschooling. Your *Big Book of Unschooling* is awesome.

Bob Collier

Publisher of the Parental Intelligence Newsletter

Dear Sandra,

I'm a homeschooling mom to two young teen sons, and have been a member of your *AlwaysLearning* Yahoo! group for about six months now. I'm currently following your suggestion to "read a little, try a little, wait a while, watch....".

I am thankful for Sandra.

Whenever I visit *AlwaysLearning* I do exactly that -- I learn a new way of looking at something in my own life. I come away with some new layer of myself revealed, some new perspective in my parenting to consider, some new light in which to view my children, my husband, my family and my priorities.

I love your honesty, your clarity in communication, your laser-like focus on topics and the multitude of ways in which you exemplify mutually respectful, peaceful, joy-filled relationships. I am especially thankful for your continued, active, daily presence online in your group. I appreciate the perspectives you share and the connections you makes.

If I get way behind with unopened emails in my inbox, I confess I have at times resorted to dumping and deleting en mass. But that has not been the case with emails from you. I always save your *Just Add Light and Stir* emails to read. And I always look forward to reading them.

Warmly,

Diana Bluthenthal

Dear Sandra,

Our journey into unschooling started out because of your website. We have since visited you and enjoyed the Monkey Platter Gathering at your home and you stayed with us in India. My son loved your home and gave it the "Raghu-Weasley Star for most interesting home". Our journey has been rich with input from your website and online lists.

With gratitude,

Hema, Ravi, Raghu and Zoya

Dear Sandra,

I have been touched by Heather Booth's invitation to express my thanks and gratitude for who you are to me and my family. My name is Lori, and I live with my husband Nick, and our 4-year-old daughter Bella in Sydney, Australia. I have been following the *AlwaysLearning* list since December 6, 2009 when my daughter was 2 years old. The ways in which you've changed my family's life are too numerous to put into a letter and many are beyond what words or reflective thoughts could capture. Your *AlwaysLearning* list and your website are by far the best resources I have found on challenging my fixed ideas on living, learning and parenting.

Whilst I cannot imagine the strength and conviction you have to be able to continue to stand for and provide the best possible resource available on unschooling despite the negative backlash from those who are unable to be open to consider what you have to say, I want you to know that your name is *it* in terms of my gauging how aligned my way of living, or at least my intentional or preferred way of living, is to others.

Those who engage in conversation about the ideas you put forward or stand for, without blindly rejecting or blindly accepting them, are the people I want to surround myself with. Unfortunately, in my local community they are few and far between. My husband and I have even spoken about the (very remote) idea of moving to the US to support us in finding a stronger community of like-minded families (or Sandra fans).

In the meantime and in the very likely case that we won't relocate to the US, your *AlwaysLearning* list is *it* in terms of where I gain my insights, inspirations, ideas and strength to believe in the real possibility of a peaceful and joyful way to live and learn and grow as a family.

Recently, I have experienced a moment of deep appreciation of how deeply true and wise your words are. We are currently choosing to let Bella try pre-school after almost a year of her expressing her wish to "go to her best friend's pre-school". Despite this not being my preference, it has been the best thing to actually go through (i.e., committing to preschool and enrolling her).



"I AM NOW FACING THIS NEXT
STEP MORE CONNECTED TO
MY DAUGHTER, MY FAMILY
AND MYSELF."

| LORI & NICK & BELLA |

I suddenly recalled that you recently wrote that people are not really unschooling until they hit and pass the magical “school-age” point when the pressure of being pulled into the mainstream way of learning is so strong.

I recognise now that whilst I have known about my daughter’s desire for almost a year, and we have continued seeing her best friend regularly, one day a week, and I tried to find new friends for my daughter, I haven’t really done much fundamentally to change the tide, if that is/was at all possible. She does have a very special bond with this friend developed over the last couple of years, supported by the fact that her friend’s mum and I get along great.

Without your list and your website resources, I would be going into the schooling system right now very unhappy, conflicted, bitter, feeling like a victim of the “school tide”. Because of my daily exposure to challenging, life-changing and life-enriching conversations on your list for the last two years, I am now facing this next step more connected to my daughter, my family and myself. I am creating a way of life (and work arrangements, as needed to pay the independent democratic school fees) keeping the option to return to unschooling alive for my daughter and our family.

I am way more peaceful about the impact that preschool will have on our way of life... I used to dread the idea of labels for everything a child takes to school, school lunch box, being anywhere before 10am, etc... I now see it as a choice my daughter has made, to fulfil on her greatest wish to be with her best friend as much as possible, and I am excited about getting my emotional baggage out of the way and really enabling that experience for her peacefully and joyfully.

So interestingly enough, it may be this very experience that has had me really engage in and with the process of unschooling whereas up to now I’ve more or less been flowing with it. I truly see this change in how I respond to life circumstances as fundamentally a result of my de-schooling process over the last couple of years and it will impact everything I do, from how I seek and engage with paid

work opportunities, family gatherings, friendships, interests as I have never really and truly peacefully and joyfully experienced any of those in the past. Thank you from the very bottom of my heart. You have been *the* cause in the change in the way we, as a family, live and learn at its very core.

With immense gratitude to you and your family and your committed circle of experienced unschoolers who keep your stand alive alongside you,

Lori & Nick & Bella

“YOU HAVE BEEN *THE* CAUSE
IN THE CHANGE IN THE WAY
WE, AS A FAMILY, LIVE AND
LEARN AT ITS VERY CORE.”

Dear Sandra,

Thank you for the spaces you create, the light you shine. It's made my life and my family better, brighter.

There really aren't words for me to express my appreciation for you and your collections of other unschooler's writings. Without them I don't know where we'd be, but I know our lives are immeasurably better because of what I learned.

I made a huge point this year about getting us down to ALL, in part because I think that seeing my happily learning kids is the greatest testament to you and your work.

Renee, Chris, Xander & XuMei Cabatic



| THE CABATICS |

Dear Sandra,

A little more than a year ago, I was sitting with my five year old daughter, trying to make her finish her handwriting assignment. She was bored and couldn't wait for our school day to be over so she could play *PBS Kids* on the computer. After less than a month of homeschooling with a schedule and curriculum, I knew it wasn't going to work. It was then that my mother-in-law suggested I read John Holt's *Teach Your Own*, apparently to encourage me regarding my ability to teach my daughter at home.

What I came away with was a bit more radical than she, a public school teacher, had envisioned. Not only did I firmly believe that my child didn't need to go to school, but I also found the novel (for me) idea that I could let her be the master of her own education. At that point I started researching unschooling, to determine if this was something we could really do. Thankfully, I found your website, and then I found the *AlwaysLearning* group. I read and read and shared with my husband.

We began our unschooling journey in October 2010, mostly thanks to the resources and encouragement that we found on your site. In January 2011, we bought your *Big Book of Unschooling*. Now we have fun every day, and we learn so much and share so much love along the way! Thank you, Sandra!

Attached is a picture of us on September 19, 2011 - *International Talk Like a Pirate Day*. We spent the entire day dressed as pirates, and we started a new annual tradition. :)

Amy Jackson



| THE JACKSONS |



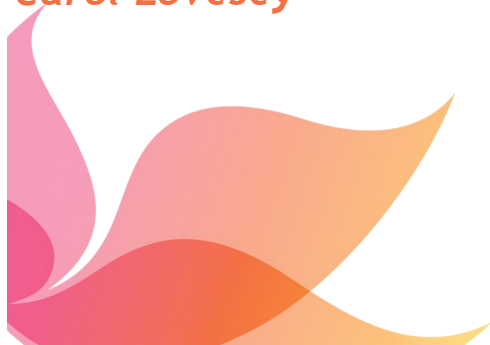
| CAROLE, ROB, TESS & BRODIE LOVESEY |

Dear Sandra,

I joined the *AlwaysLearning* list two years ago. Based on my first day's reading, I thought I'd stay on for a week and then quietly slip away. However, by day three, I was hooked. I realised that the directness and analysis of others' comments that I had found slightly shocking at first created an incredibly focused and rich resource for unschooling families. I am so glad to have found my way to *AlwaysLearning* and your website. They have made a huge difference to me and my family in all sorts of ways. The first - and very immediate - thing was that everything suddenly fell into place for Rob and me. Unschooling, as defined in your terms, brought together all the different strands in my family's life into one coherent whole. We were able to see why we were struggling or feeling uncomfortable about how we were handling some aspects or situations, and why other things we did - which seemed contrary to what everyone around us was doing - felt right. Reading the discussions and stories of how other unschoolers have handled different situations over the last two years has deepened my understanding of what unschooling looks like and I learn something from every thread. We have taken lots of ideas and adapted them to our family, and come to *AlwaysLearning* and your website when we are seeking advice. The list also has an uncanny way of throwing out just the right comments when I am struggling with a particular issue.

Finding *AlwaysLearning* and the online unschooling community lead me to seek out other unschoolers in the UK. As a result, we now have some good friends to meet up with who are on the same wavelength as us, which makes an incredible difference. This in turn lead to the creation of the *South of England Unschoolers* group, which has connected many unschoolers in this region and also helped a few more people discover unschooling. Reading on *AlwaysLearning* and hanging out with other unschoolers are my main support tools in staying true to our unschooling philosophy and in trying to find the better path in every moment. We are still a long way from being great unschoolers but your words are helping us to make good progress. Rob, Tess, Brodie and I all thank you for making our lives so much better than they would have been without you and what you have created.

Carol Lovesey





| THE STOPAS |

Dear Sandra,

Many years ago, I read your responses in *The Home-schooling Book of Answers*, and a light bulb went on. Over the years of reading your words of wisdom, the wattage has increased immensely.

This may be a bit melodramatic, but Sandra, you showed me a new way to live. An awesome, amazing, joy-filled way. I owe you so much; I appreciate all that you do to help unschooling families.

Jennie Neary

*Mom to Pearl and Casimir Stopa
Wife to Larry Stopa*

Dear Sandra,

The world is a better place because you have helped many families think, consider and choose a kinder, happier and more peaceful way of living. What you have shared in your books and talks have made a positive difference in our lives!

We are so lucky to live a happy, unschooling life and continue to learn and grow every day! Thank you from the bottom of our hearts!

Laurie, Jim, Katie, Li, Makana and Kanoa Wolfrum



| THE WOLFRUMS |



| THOMAS AND ELISE CAWTHON |

Dear Sandra,

The single most significant and meaningful resource for our building a more peaceful and happy family has been, without question, your *AlwaysLearning* list. Nothing else comes close.

I first became aware of you when I joined the *AlwaysLearning* list over five years ago, when my son was five (but not yet officially old enough for kindergarten) and my daughter was two. I was planning on homeschooling my kids and was still trying to decide on the best method. I was researching different kinds of homeschooling philosophies and I was curious about unschooling, so I joined a few unschooling Yahoo! groups that I found in hopes of getting more information.

Also at that time, I was reading a lot of parenting books to try to get some answers about how to better my relationship with my youngest child, whose personality was so different from that of my oldest that we were having negative results with our usual parenting style. I was desperate for some answers, both to the question of what was the best homeschooling method for our kids, and how to build the best relationships with them.

At first, the information I read on *AlwaysLearning* was scary and intimidating. The ideas presented there were so different than I had ever encountered, and required such a change of mindset and perspective, that it was almost like changing my worldview. But gradually I became convinced that unschooling was the best choice for our family.

Since that time, I have read dozens of books and articles on parenting, education, and homeschooling, but no other resource that I have found has been as powerful to me as your list.

I consistently find the advice I read on the list to be cogent and insightful, with several experienced unschoolers who are generous enough to craft thoughtful, detailed answers that rarely fail to help me expand my thinking. And one of the strongest voices is yours. I always read your responses eagerly, because you con-

tinually demonstrate an ability to cut through the confusion to get to the heart of the matter and lay it open with such clarity. I love your commitment to logic and clear thinking, and your undiluted focus as the list owner on keeping the topic on what makes unschooling work.

I have often found myself remembering your phrases, analogies or stories, when I have been in situations with my own children. I have often referred to your website to read advice on particular subjects that I'm having issues with. And more recently, your daily *Just Add Light and Stir* has often been a surprisingly powerful mental kick-in-the-pants for me, reminding me of what is most important *right now.* Your "voice" has been a familiar daily presence for over five years now.

So it is not too strong a statement to say that it is thanks to you that our two children, now ten and seven, have always been unschooled, and that our family life is as peaceful as it is. I have often thought about sending you a note to thank you personally, but have always been too shy. This is my chance: Thank you, Sandra, for all that you have done and continue to do. My family is immeasurably better off because of you.

Sincerely,

Deborah Cawthon



Dear Sandra,

We started homeschooling six years ago and unschooling three years ago and it has changed our lives. I really wasn't sure it would work for our family. My husband had a hard time when we pulled the kids out of school, but was it okay because we were homeschooling and following a curriculum. Four years ago, I took the kids to Mexico for a month. It should have been the time of our lives, but I had also taken a suitcase full of school work. For the first few weeks, I made the kids do their work before we could go to the beach or any other kind of exploring. We fought everyday and at one point I wanted to put my youngest back on a plane to California, he was not following my rules and getting work done. I remember crying and calling my husband daily.

I got on the internet one day and looked up another way to homeschool and found your site, with links to other unschooling families and ideas. I realized I was so focused on school that I was missing the whole idea of the trip, to have fun with my boys and watch them learn from the world around them. I shoved all the homework into the suitcase and threw it in the closet. The rest of the trip we played, boating, snorkeling, hiking, swimming, getting lost and had the time of our lives. When we got home we changed our lives and started living. For the next year I fell back into school sometimes, it was hard at first to make the changes, and my husband wasn't totally understanding. My oldest son went back to school, he is very structured and wasn't sure about unschooling. He was also missing friends from school.

My mom was the most critical. I sent her links to every site I could. I also lost some friends, but made new ones who were really committed to life learning. I attended your workshop a two years ago in Santa Fe with a friend and I loved it. Seeing the unschooled grown children really helped me see that my kids would be okay. I came back with a new confidence and shared it with everyone who questioned our lifestyle. My husband is now totally onboard, he attended a workshop two years ago at the HSC conference in Sacramento. He came out of the class raving about unschooling and why weren't we doing it. Um we are, I guess he needed to hear it from someone else. My oldest son came home and is totally loving our new life. He has tons of friends now and is finding his passion in computer game design. I started getting your daily email, *Just Add Light and Stir*. It is the first thing I check in the morning. Sometimes I laugh, sometimes I cry and sometimes a light bulb switches on. Aha! I just wanted to thank you for everything you do, especially now that your kids are grown. You are a wealth of knowledge and I love that you also include other families on your site. Their stories are very important too.

One last thing, this past September I took the kids for a trip around the Western US. This time there was no school work, no pushing, no fighting. We worked together as a family and learned so much about ourselves and our country in a month. I would not have found this place without you and others like you that live in the real world and treat children as people not just little kids with no ideas.

Thank you from the Nixon family.

Denaire Nixon



Dear Sandra,

I have to apologize and then profusely thank you for being so awesome. When I first started my, and now my family's, un-schooling journey, I zipped from page to page, and into books, and gravitated more to the theory, and some nicely formatted blogs and pages.

That's where I have to apologize. I didn't like the formatting and, to an extent, judged a book by its cover. I also felt a bit defensive at just how plainly you challenge assumptions and ideas that I was still de-schooling. I read a few of your pages, but the collective stream of consciousness from chat sessions and e-mail exchanges didn't connect to me right away. A few of your letters or more how-to pages did have some impact, and some recordings of you speaking at different conferences were cool.

But now that I've been through Holt and others extensively, and read a ton of blogs, and now have a 2.5 year old guy who is loving this journey with us, with another one due in 3 months, I'm back to your page again and again via the *AlwaysUnschool*ed Yahoo! group. And your collective wisdom is so awesome. It's perfectly set up for this purpose— practical reinforcement of particular aspects, or helping us de-school ourselves by really challenging the why behind everything embedded in our subconscious about these school and control related topics.

When the student is ready, the teacher will appear, and the student will actually listen. Thank you from the bottom of our hearts!

Cheers,

Jamie, Monica, Alex and 3-week-old Duncan Maltman

P.S.: While I got back to your site through *AlwaysUnschool*ed, it's *AlwaysLearning* that helps me now more than ever, while Monica follows *Just Add Light and Stir* to topical sections of your site. It helps us so much to read, think, discuss and apply a little bit every day to the joys and challenges of adding another delightful little boy to the mix, and helping Alex through that complicated transition respectfully and lovingly.

The passion to help people that comes from you and the rest of the wonderful parents that you quote and participate continually in the discussions is such a blessing for all of us. Duncan and especially Alex are here to say thanks!



Dear Sandra,

In my former life, I was a mediation teacher. I had some stuff all together and was doing pretty well. And then we decided to start a family and I had child number one, Joshua. I had all kinds of wonderful ideas about how important respect and individuality were, and lots of plans to be the magical, sparkly kind of parent that every child wants to have. And then the reality hit. My past hit my present, and tied my future into a pretzel.

My sweet little special boy wanted to do things like run away from me indiscriminately, and didn't want to get dressed when we needed to go somewhere, and on and on. He seemed to want to thwart me at every turn. And there were times *gasp* when he took a toy away from another child, and wasn't the perfectly loving, sharing two-year-old that he should have been, having such wonderful "role model parents".

The reality was that I had NO idea about how to be with a child. I expected him to fit into my world and behave in a "rational" manner. That obviously wasn't going to work, so I began to read everything I could find. Unfortunately, I found the latest versions of traditional parenting and learned how to be really good at giving time outs and being "consistent."

After a few years and another child, I found myself in a Bev Bos workshop, and she opened the doors to my playful side and taught me that I could play with my children and have fun. That was a small miracle, and got us headed down the right path, setting me up for my friend telling me about unschooling and Sandra Dodd, to which I replied, "Are you crazy?!?". Hee hee. But I persisted, and it all started to make so much sense. The message that was, amongst so many important messages, the most important to me was to be present and to make *this moment* better and happier and more joyful. That is the message I'm the most grateful for, Sandra.

I'd heard the message to "live in the present" so many times, in so many adult

spiritual contexts, but I couldn't apply it to my life with children. I had been the center of my universe before children, and once they arrived, I wanted them to be in "my" present. You demonstrated repeatedly how to find the present with my children, rather than in spite of them, and how to create connection that is real in the moment. After that, figuring out how to be in a partnership with my children came very easily. Now they feel like I'm totally on their side rather than their adversary, and I feel connected to myself at such a deeper level.

So thank you, Sandra. You helped make my children's lives better. And I know for a fact that their children's lives will be better as well, because they've each talked about how they will be raising their own kids, and it's in partnership and connection. What a gift to the planet you are!

With love,

*Joanna Murphy
and Family – David, Joshua and Caroline*



Dear Sandra,

I count myself lucky that I came across your thoughts on unschooling in 1999. I lurked on the forums that were around at that time, soaking in the philosophies you presented like sunshine. My only child was three at the time, and as a pretty radical attachment-parenting family, unschooling became a natural progression for thoughts and feelings we were already living. By the time my daughter was “school-age”, our immersion in the radical unschooling lifestyle was fairly complete so we never experienced anything but joy and enthusiasm for being together as a family.

As more children joined our family, I moved away from reading the unschooling forums. I was happy living the joy; every time I'd check in the same questions were being asked. The same angst being lived by other families on a different part of the continuum. It felt distracting and frustrating to me to hear how hard it was for some families to just relax into the ease of a family who respects one another in a way that makes being together a delight. To so many posts, I just wanted to shout, *“Stop making it so difficult! Drop your expectations and just live in joy!”* And then I'd read your eloquent and patient responses and feel grateful that those seekers had found you and not me.

When your *Big Book* came out, I bought a copy because I wanted to support you. I didn't think I'd get much of anything new out of it, having lived the life pretty intuitively for so long, but I was so wrong! I devoured each page, feeling affirmed and supported, and I **did** get something new out of it! I didn't even know I needed a new viewpoint about household chores, but when I read your advice to look at tasks such as washing dishes as a gift to the family, I SOAKED that into my heart and feel it that way everyday, even now, a couple of years after reading it.

Experiencing this family life has been unbelievably healing for me, as someone who had an emotionally abusive and fairly terrible childhood. My four kids have had a relaxed and joyful childhood and experience respect in a way I never did as a child. This is a generational change that will effect their kids, too; this changes the whole world, one family at a time. We may have found some variation of this lifestyle intuitively on our own, but maybe not! I can only say that I am deeply grateful that you put yourself out into the internet ether when you did, because it changed our lives for the better.

I send you gratitude and blessings for all you've done and continue to do,

Kelli Lincoln



Dear Sandra,

Tomorrow my daughter Helen turns ten years old. When she was five and her brother, Henry, was two, I joined your list. At the time, I didn't know how much this simple act of joining a Yahoo! group would change my life! For five years now, I've been learning and growing as a mother, as a wife and as a friend from your list. I've been reading, trying things out, waiting and watching. I am happy to tell you that the lives of everyone in my family has been improved and affected in a positive way by your list. In fact, if it weren't for *AlwaysLearning*, I can honestly say that my children and my husband and I would not have the rich and joyful lives that we so fortunately have today.

I have read, researched and even completed my Master's thesis on homeschooling. However, I want you to know that in all of that meta analysis, in all of the reading and educational research, nothing has proven to be more valuable to me than what I have learned from reading your list, *AlwaysLearning*.

I began this journey to unschooling five years ago naively thinking that it was mostly about the best way for the learner to learn. I knew I wanted to homeschool and as a former teacher I knew I didn't want to do school at home. To me, unschooling sounded like the best approach to learning. I didn't know at the time that unschooling would overflow into my family's emotional lives, into our hearts. I feel so fortunate to have been a part of your list and to continue to learn and grow as a person from unschooling.

Some days as I sit at my computer and read *AlwaysLearning*, I imagine that you must get tired sometimes. I know that you already know this, but please let me remind you of just how much you are helping families live fuller, happier, richer and more meaningful and joyful lives.

Thank you so very much for keeping your list going for all of these years. Thank you for archiving, blogging and sending daily inspirations through *Just add Light and Stir*. Thank you for doing the chats and the conferences. Thank you for sharing your family's experiences. I remember that Holly was about 13 when I joined your list and in three short years my daughter will also be 13. I am so grateful to have the relationship I have with her and with my sons. If it weren't for reading *AlwaysLearning* with my morning coffee, I shudder to think about the kinds of lives we would have. Traditional, conventional, ho-hum lives. Today our lives are full of curiosity, adventure, compassion and joy.

I've never posted to the list in five years, but I feel like I know you as a friend. I'm still growing and always learning how to be a better mother, wife and friend. Thank you for helping me clarify my thinking about the kind of life I want to live. I wish you and your family the best of health and good times this holiday season.

Thank you from the Nixon family.

You are appreciated so very much,

Carolyn Neves



Dear Sandra,

I do admire and am thankful for what you do. Your no-fluff, no-nonsense replies to messages on the *AlwaysLearning* board have really challenged my own thought processes and got me to change a lot of the way I treat my son, as well as other people. I have endlessly discussed the *AlwaysLearning* board and your thoughts and views with my boyfriend. This has challenged both of us and our discussions have led to greater harmony in our family.

I have learned to trust my son and let go a lot. It is wonderful to observe and see how much son learns, what choices he chooses to make with regard to movies, games, food, going out, etc. It is wonderful to watch when you simply let go. It is only through your responses on the *AlwaysLearning* board that I have been able to do that and I am very grateful for it too. I have a long way to go still and many challenges to face but I am enjoying the journey and enjoying being challenged by what I read. My son is enjoying it too— and is really trusting of us now. He is only four, but I sensed he didn't fully trust us and was suspicious with some things to an extent. Now it seems he trusts us completely and knows we are honest with him.



Kelly, Matt and Bob

Dear Sandra,

I saw this quote by Henry Adams and thought of you: *"A teacher affects eternity; he can never tell where his influence stops."*

Your writing has helped me become a more peaceful partner to my children and husband. You have encouraged me to be kinder and more mindful, to bring more light and joy into our lives and to make better choices. You have encouraged me to be brave at examining my thoughts.

Your influence has made an incredibly positive impact on our family and all our lives will be sweeter because of you. Thank you for doing what you do - sharing your stories, experiences and insights and working tirelessly on the Always Learning list. May your life and the life of your family be blessed with all the goodness that you put out into the world.

Love,

Rippy, Graham, Gianluca and Gisele





| KIM & LEWI HOUSSENLOGE |

Dear Sandra,

I have to say that, without a doubt, you were the inspiration for my decision to unschool my son, Lewi.

When Lewi was about three years old, I began agonising over the decision about where to send him to school. As a primary school teacher myself, I had hesitations around sending Lewi to a state school and my own attachment parenting struggled with the idea of having to “hand him over”. So began a long search for the right education for my son.

I found myself wading through website after website of all of the possible education options. I flicked right past the state system and moved onto some other options that my local area provided. Two that I grappled with for a little while were Montessori and Steiner school education. Eventually I narrowed it down to the Steiner system and went to visit the school at an open day. I liked what I saw and the environment certainly seemed to be one of nurturing and care. That was key for me.

At around about this time I happened to fall across homeschooling. I became intrigued. Keeping my child at home rather than sending him off for someone else to look after him really appealed. But, I felt the fear. The “*what ifs*” flooded my mind. Then one day, this Godsend of a woman appeared out of nowhere. Sandra Dodd. “*Who the heck is she?*”, I wondered. Some how my homeschooling Googling had flung up the name “Sandra Dodd” and the unfamiliar term of “unschooling”. With a desire to know a little more I started flicking through the pages of your site. My head felt like it was about to fall off from all of the nodding I found myself doing; I could breathe again. I felt so at ease with this learning style. This was it! This was what I would be doing with my son. The relief was incredible. I could keep my little boy at home, with me. We would learn together and continue on the journey that we’d already begun. Bliss.

As time went on, I joined your Yahoo! Group, *AlwaysLearning*. That place has

been my number one support spot. No pussyfooting around, just good, clear attached advice and encouragement. Thanks to all of this wonderful help I then started an unschooling group in our local area.

Every one I come across who is even remotely interested in home schooling gets the Sandra Treatment. It goes something like this:

“Have you heard of unschooling?”

“I have a link to the most fantastic source of information based on unschooling. The link: www.sandradodd.com”.

Let’s just say I spread the Sandra Treatment everywhere I go, and I’m so thankful to be able to do that and help those parents and children who seek this sort of life for their families. You are always my first point of call and, if they never find another website on unschooling, it wouldn’t matter because I know they will find it all from the words of this wonderful woman and unschooling guru.

Skip forward a few years: my Lewi has just turned 12. He has never been to school and has unschooled his whole school aged life. If it wasn’t for you, Sandra, that sentence may not have been ever printed. I have also had the absolute privilege of interviewing you on my blog, *Feather & Nest*. That was such an exciting moment for me. I was so nervous— I felt like I was meeting Brad Pitt or the Queen. What a treasure it is for me to have that interview and I remember that time so fondly.

Sandra, you have been an absolute inspiration to my life and my parenting. I love the care and concern that you have toward children and your never ending passion toward unschooling, even after your own children have grown up. The unschooling community in Australia thanks you, lovely lady. Our children thank you. What an advocate! What a treasure of a woman!

All of my kindest, heartfelt and thankful wishes to you,

Kim Housenloge



Dear Sandra,

I live in Ecuador and have been unschooling my eight- and six-year-old daughters for about three years now. We live in a pretty rural area with no other homeschoolers around. Reading the *AlwaysLearning* list has been key to creating and maintaining an unschooling lifestyle in this kind of isolated situation. I feel like I have my virtual community to consult, and constant companionship through all the reading I do.

I try not to let one message slip by me— it is usually something I can learn from. I know my children have benefited from your words of wisdom because today they see a mother who is open to all different ways of doing things. Thanks to you I have loads more patience and understanding with my children, and my husband to boot! Our life is more peaceful, happy and fulfilling thanks to you, the *AlwaysLearning* list and Pam, Joyce, Alex, Meredith, Deb and the many others dedicated to sharing their unschooling experiences with us newcomers. Keep it coming!

Molly Brown



| MOLLY, EFRAIN, DIVINA & SABINA |

“OUR LIFE IS MORE PEACEFUL, HAPPY AND FULFILLING
THANKS TO YOU”



| MERYL, LOGAN (5) AND PAUL RANZER |

Dear Sandra,

There are many ways you and the group of wonderful moms and dads on the *AlwaysLearning* list have helped and inspired my family.

Here is one: About six months ago I got a “concerned” email from my sister about the way my husband and I are raising our four-year-old son.

She and I have always had a roller coaster relationship, but it was on the mend and I was heartbroken when I read the email. From my sister's point of view, she was offering me guidance as a mom herself, and doing this out of love for my son. She was upset that he would not come to her, she felt I kept him too close and we did not say “no” enough. She thought I might feel threatened by taking advice from her or my mother, since I never asked for it, or took the advice she offered unsolicited.

I wrote to the list and got so many wonderful and thoughtful replies. You gave me the simplest advice. You suggested that I do not respond to the email at all.

It had not occurred to me, and once I read your words, I was filled with relief. I just let it go; let go of my hurt and moved forward. My sister never asked why I did not respond— maybe she was glad I didn't. I truly believe following your advice salvaged my relationship with my sister, and as my son gets older, on his own, he goes to her, talks to her, and has become more outgoing.

He is a happy, confident, sweet and compassionate boy, and thanks to you and *AlwaysLearning*, my husband and I are enjoying parenting in ways that I think most people don't.

Meryl Ranzer

Dear Sandra,

I wish I had discovered you before my son, Duncan, was born. But better late than never.

Our family's story starts out happy. We naturally had an unschooling approach to life before Duncan was of legal school age. My husband and I loved exploring the world with him and learning together about whatever interested him -- construction machinery, superheroes, dinosaurs, insects, rocks and minerals, birds, Greek, Egyptian and Norse mythology, and more. He loved to learn! He had so much energy and enthusiasm, so much zest for life.

He was a seeker, an explorer, a dare-devil, a talker and a questioner. He crawled and then walked early and from that point on he moved A LOT. We thought he was amazing! We were learning so much from him and were amazed by how smart he was.

But then, when Duncan was four, we started him in nursery school. He was expected to sit at a table and copy capital and lowercase letters every day; after the class made their way, day by day, through the alphabet they started having to copy words and then sentences. He wasn't allowed to go and play with the other children until he finished his copy sheets. No exceptions were ever made. After a few weeks of this, he started getting nervous habits, such as biting his fingernails down to the quick.

The teacher started calling me over when I came to pick him up to say, in front of him, that he was “behind” in his fine motor skills, or that he was “slow” in his motor skills— she really used the words in quotation marks— and that I needed to work with him on “proper” pencil grip and finger strengthening exercises. I thought those things were strange for

her to say. How could a child be “behind” in something that he was just trying for the first time, at only four years old? That teacher engaged in other cruelties which I will not go into.



I should have had the good sense to remove Duncan from that cruelty, but I did not have the good sense then. I left him in that preschool, and then put him in other cruel school situations after that because I doubted myself and listened to other parents who said they loved the various schools, and that their children loved them, or that those schools were the best in town, and because I thought I was making the best choices possible. My formerly sunny child started crying at night and saying he wanted to die.

My husband and I decided that we would pull him out of school and homeschool him, because the only way we could go was up. I wish I could say that we discovered unschooling right away when we decided to homeschool, but we did not. At first we did school at home, although it never felt right to me. My son reluctantly participated in that structured approach at first. When he started locking himself in the bathroom for hours at a time (reading or drawing or meditating) to avoid math worksheets, I started looking for a better way.

Thankfully, I found your blog, and Joyce's blog, and *AlwaysLearning*. Although I was excited about unschooling as soon as I began to learn

about it, I also felt overwhelmed at the thought of making so many changes all at once. But then I listened to the *Peaceful Parenting* audio excerpt, where you mentioned the importance of seeing choices and making the better choice in each moment. Of all your wise words, that idea has been and continues to be the most important and useful of all for me. That idea lessened my anxiety about becoming a better parent and person all at once and helped me to improve little by little, one better choice at a time. I have witnessed my family growing more peaceful because of each of those better choices. Thanks to the wisdom you and Joyce and Pam and others have so generously shared, I have started becoming my son's partner again, and his friend again. I bought your *Big Book of Unschooling* and devoured it and have read and re-read sections of it since.

You wrote to a mom on *AlwaysLearning* recently that “*the things we know that you could use knowing are difficult to find.*” That statement is so true. I am so grateful for *AlwaysLearning* and I can honestly say that the words I have read there have helped me to learn more about myself and how I want to parent than any other source. *AlwaysLearning* has helped me to clarify and simplify my thinking (in a good way — I am an over-thinker). It has helped me to become calmer. Although you do not know me, you have helped me greatly, and your words and wisdom have become an important part of my life.

Thank you for giving your time and energy every day to help us nurture and encourage peace and kindness within our families. Thanking you for helping me clarify my thinking and focus on what is essential in the moment and in my lifetime.

I wish I had discovered you before my son was born, but better late than never.

All best wishes to you and your beautiful family,

Patricia Platt



Dear Sandra,

My husband and I have been unschooling our boys (now ages 14 and 11) since my oldest was six years old.

Both my husband and I grew up in a “traditional” middle-class family situation, with dads working outside the home being primary bread-winners, and moms staying home, caring for the family home and taking on the majority of the domestic responsibilities. We were both publicly educated, both went on to college and graduate/post-grad levels of education.

Overall, we felt loved by our respective families. We felt secure and cared for. We were also fearful of our fathers— and authority figures in general. We were taught to respect authority, do what we were told, and to follow a certain prescribed “path” through life. If we decided we wanted to try piano lessons, there was no option to try them for a few sessions or a few months. If we started something we had to finish, even if we were miserable. Breakfast cereals and orange juice could only be consumed at breakfast time. Bedtimes were strictly enforced. There were many seemingly arbitrary rules— though at the time we did not know anything different so it seemed “normal”.

Fast forward to now: When we decided to keep our oldest son home, it was primarily my decision. I had sent my son to preschool and a year of kindergarten because that was what families *did*. It was the expected. The only problem was that I was miserable sending my baby off to be in someone else's care every day. I did not want him to be away from me. It felt unnatural and ripped my heart out. I read an article about homeschooling family in a women's magazine. Believe it or not, I did not even realize people homeschooled their children until that moment. Once I

had the idea in my head there was no turning back. I convinced my husband that we should keep our son home. The original idea was to have “school at home.” I tried desperately to have my son (then six years old) sit down and work on his language and math skills with me every day. He was very resistant to this and I was terrified that I would not be able to keep homeschooling him. After a few weeks of trying the school-at-home approach, I gave up and did nothing, fully expecting to have to put him back in school the following year. I then started to read more about homeschooling approaches on the internet, and discovered the term *unschooling*.

The ideas resonated with me— particularly since I felt we were following that approach out of default anyway. I decided this was a way we could continue with our happy family life at home. I started joining some of the Yahoo! lists of homeschoolers, particularly unschoolers.

Sandra, your list was one I lurked on for quite awhile. What I didn't *get* initially was that unschooling isn't a *method* of educating children. I liked the ideas of allowing children to focus their attention on things they naturally enjoyed. I was still, however, falling victim to the old ideas of child-rearing that I was raised with. The rules, however arbitrary, and the punishments. At that time, I thought was being very open-minded and progressive in my parenting because we had timeouts instead of spankings.

I recall posting on an unschooling list many years ago about the difficulties I was having with my boys with regard to getting ready and leaving the house in the morning (they were probably five and seven at the time). I was expecting to get ideas about how to make them do I what I needed them to do. What I got instead was a much needed

wake-up call about respectful and peaceful family living. I remember feeling initially hurt and indignant that I did not get a “show of support” from the other moms on the unschooling list. I felt *flamed* and did not read their posts after that for quite awhile. I continued trying to control my children as I felt a good parent should. But that early flaming and the ideas that were imparted to me slowly seeped into my brain. I WANTED to be a thoughtful, respectful parent. I didn't want to follow in the footsteps of my parents— however well-intended and loving they thought they were being. I wanted to say yes as much as possible, and respect and enjoy my children for who they are, not who I thought they should be.

It took a full year (maybe more) for me to really begin to get it. Sandra, your list has been SO helpful to me. I still read it daily. I have your book, and have spent hours on your website. You and the regular contributors on your website (Pam, Meredith and others) have been an invaluable resource for our family. There are still moments when I freak out about what my kids are going to do with their lives. Will they go to college? Will they be able to support themselves financially? Will they resent me because I didn't make them do school? Should I teach them math? But then I go back and re-read your wonderful ideas and I feel a great sense of reassurance that we are on the path we want to be on. I feel so blessed to be walking this path with my family and am grateful that I finally *got it*.

As the years go by I struggle with fewer moments of uncertainty and I see all of the many wonderful benefits of this lifestyle. I only wish all families could find a way to know and enjoy such a peaceful family life. So thank you, thank you, thank you, for opening my eyes— and those of countless other parents!

Warmest regards,

Paula Fontaine and Family



“SO THANK YOU, THANK YOU,
THANK YOU, FOR OPENING MY EYES”

Dear Sandra,

You have helped me become a better mother, a nicer person, to have more love in my heart and less hate and anger. You have taught me to think before I speak and I am now, finally, starting to really be able to do this instead of just understanding it. You have taught me to breathe when I feel angry or a negative emotion, instead of speak. I shout less; I am more gentle, kind and understanding with my children and husband. My relationship with my husband has been transformed; we treat each other with love, respect and kindness, which is totally new for us! Our family dynamics have changed massively. It is now a warm place of love and kindness and understanding instead of fear and anger. Our children are happy and glowing and feel confident with their parents. I see my older daughter (age five) blossoming into herself more every day as she relaxes in the warmth and love she now feels more of. I hope we can continue on this pathway 'til the hurt and pain is erased for us all.

We had such a lot of hurt and unkindness in our childhoods. Reading your words every day helps me to not let that infiltrate my children's childhoods any more.

Because of you I am a better friend, mummy and wife. I am working on becoming a better daughter, sister and granddaughter. I thank you with all my heart, for my children and husband too, as it is them that most benefits from the effects of you, on me. I hope one day to be able to look, as you do, at my grown up children who have blossomed into happy, balanced adults without holes.

From the bottom of my heart and soul, I thank you for everything you have done and continue to do for unschooling and to help all these families out here that receive your words, love, kindness and wisdom. Because without your relentless help, I know I would easily lose my way.

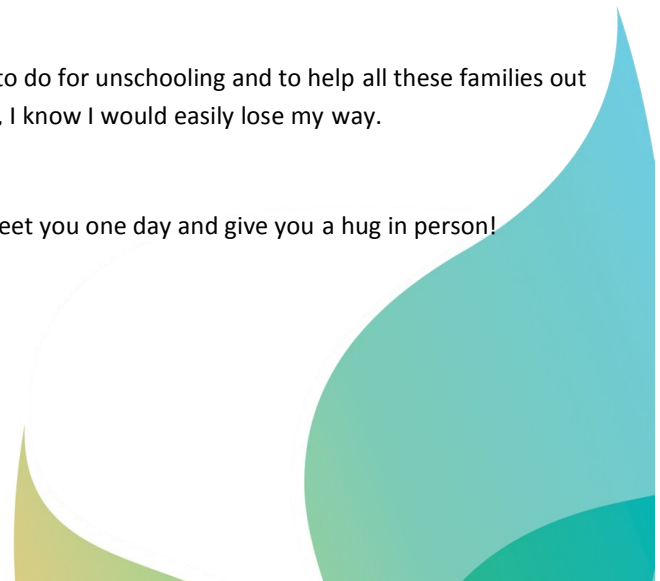
THANK YOU FOR ALL THE CHILDREN THAT ARE SUFFERING LESS BECAUSE OF YOU.

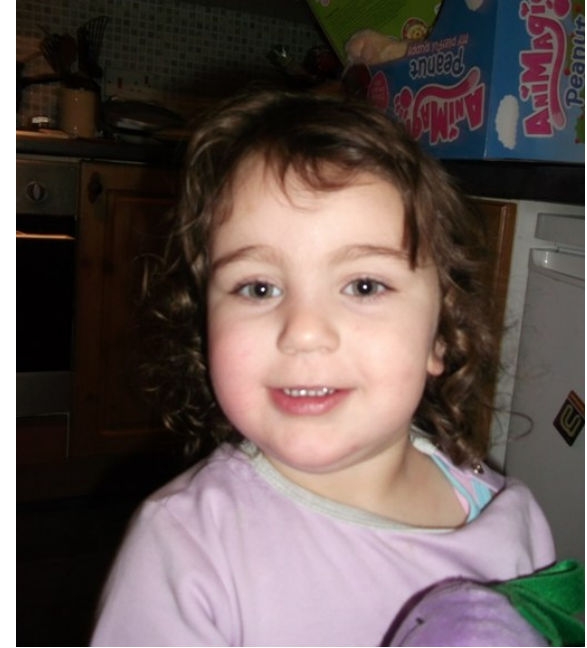
You are a beautiful, amazing, kind, kind woman, and I can safely say that I love you. I hope to meet you one day and give you a hug in person!

Thank you! XXXXX

Lots of love,

Sam, Enver, Jazzy (5) & Ayla (2) Stockport





| SAM, ENVER, JAZZY (5) AND AYLA (2) STOCKPORT |

“THANK YOU FOR ALL THE CHILDREN
THAT ARE SUFFERING LESS
BECAUSE OF YOU”

Dear Sandra,

Today, my fifteen-year-old daughter offered to help me bring in the groceries and my seven-year-old daughter offered lots of spontaneous “I love you”s throughout the day!

All of the ideas and suggestions from Sandra and others in her book, website, blog and the *AlwaysLearning* list have made such a difference for our family. Our home is much more peaceful and we laugh a lot together.

Oh yeah, and there’s a lot of learning going on too!

Thank you, thank you, thank you, Sandra, for giving so much of your time and experience to help others find this joy. And thanks for not sugar-coating anything!

Renee Hutchins



“OUR HOME IS MUCH MORE PEACEFUL AND WE LAUGH A LOT TOGETHER.”



Dear Sandra,

I had an opportunity to have emails conversations with you many, many years back. I think you responded to something I wrote which you felt was not applicable for your list, and you had informed me that you removed it (in a very positive and friendly manner). Somehow, a few emails went to and fro and I had the chance to get to know the person behind that name Sandra Dodd. Needless to say, I was VERY surprise to find you so friendly and you didn't bite my head off! I think I did hint to you that a couple Yahoo! groups who call themselves "true unschoolers" (members spun off from your group, if I remember correctly), when challenged about their really unfriendly and aggressive responses to unsuspecting newbies use you as a yard stick to measure and justify their manner as toned down and not as aggressive as you and your list would be.

I did think that was so unfair, but I didn't know you and your list enough to judge. Hence when I had the chance to exchange emails, I was very surprised to find a friendly spirit behind it. But I did find the straight-forward manner too much to handle for me, therefore I never went far with your group. But I have to say thank you! For your websites formed the foundation of my understanding and journey into our unschooling. It gave me good understanding enough to venture out and I eventually found groups that I'm comfortable with.

And my all time favourite of your sayings— which has served parenting my son really well. I remember reading on your website something to do with labels and special needs. I remember you writing to the effect of: *"having a label does not give that child a right to steamroll everyone in his or her path"*. This advise still stays with me till today. I became very conscious how the world outside will view my son, and how society's perspectives will have an effect on my son. And how my son's behaviour will effect the society around him. And I agree with you, having a label does not give your child the right to steamroll everyone and anything in his or her path.

Thank you for your courage, strength and determination in highlighting unschooling an viable option for anyone. And though I don't know you well, I do recognise you as a trailblazer that makes unschooling possible for many. Like for me... your ideas and perspectives gave me a good start into unschooling.

Best Wishes,

Sharon Bugs

Successfully unschooling Greg, age 11. Diagnosed with Asperger.



Dear Sandra,

Thank you for all of the work you have done, and for all the work you are doing!

My husband and I are the parents of a boy (7) and a girl (3). They have not been to school, save a short three-month stint in preschool for our son when he was two-and-a-half. All the kids we knew were signing up, so we did too. It seemed like the thing you do when kids are that age. That experience did not work out, and it was the catalyst for us to begin our homeschooling life.

In the beginning, I did what many parents do: I joined all the groups, signed my son up for tons of classes, bought every educational supply I could find— and tried to re-create a more schoolish environment at home. Seriously, the first thing I bought was a laminating machine. Because I thought “*all teachers have laminating machines*”.

I bought all kinds of different curriculum packages. Those packages were the most frustrating thing! I tried so hard to make them FIT into our life, to make my son FIT into them, to make me FIT into the role of teacher. Some of them had DAILY SCHEDULES, so I could figure out how to wake my family up, have breakfast made, do our morning *circle time*, then out by 10am for a nature walk that builds on the Theme of the Day, etc. I couldn't do it, my son couldn't do it. He WOULDN'T do it! And I spent a very long time worrying and pacing and fretting and searching. I didn't know about unschooling yet.

I didn't know what to do, and I kept thinking my son was *different*. He hated going to all the gatherings and park days, didn't like classes, had no big need for lots of friends or social contact. He was perfectly happy looking at books and going to various museums with his mom. But we didn't “do school”, and this scared me. He was very small still, so I thought, “*Next year, for sure, we will start...*”.

And I would find websites of typical courses of study for various grade levels and then FREAK OUT because we weren't doing... whatever. Learning about the various roles of members of our community; of course we totally were learning about the mailman, and the fireman, and the local farmer, because we were seeing them every day in real-life, but I didn't understand that. I thought it needed to be couched in a lecture, with a book, and maybe a dress up production, and then like a quiz or something. I didn't understand that you could learn by just being, I thought learning was “me passing knowledge to you”. Via PowerPoint, if possible.

I would push curriculum and plans and organized structure, and my son would push back. I talked to other homeschooling parents and they looked at me incredulously. My



| THE PELTZIES |

job was to teach him, he *has* to submit to schooling of some kind, in whatever form. He can't just *not do* anything. I thought this was true, but I also knew something else; whatever we did, and however we learned, I wasn't willing to damage the relationship I had with my son. I knew I couldn't force him to "do school", because I knew it would put a separation between us, and that seemed like an awfully steep price. So, even though I felt we were in a free-fall, I knew what I DIDN'T want, and I guess that's where it all started.

Later I found unschooling, but it scared me. Horrified me, actually. I was on a couple of unschooling Yahoo! groups, and the conversations were too extreme; kids watching porn, staying up all night, etc. I had a 4-year-old. He wasn't watching porn. And I had been infused with the whole natural parenting/Waldorf thing that looked so pure and simple and like this fantasy childhood. The idea of letting your kids watch ANY media, let alone UNLIMITED media, was totally outside my zone. Wooden blocks! Felt! Natural watercolors made from plants! I thought unschooling was bonkers. Unparenting we called it! Ha!

But then, somehow, I found you, Sandra! I don't remember how I came across your site, but I did, and I started reading. And then I started reading a LOT more. At the same time, I had another baby, and the few things that we used to do that I considered educational fell by the wayside. It was too hard to read for hours like we used to. It took me a long time to get back on my feet and start hitting the museums again, and when we did, it wasn't the hours and hours of following my boy around endlessly. We had another person, with other needs now, and we had to make compromises. So there I was, feeling like we were doing NOTHING, that I was failing him. And meantime, all his other friends were going to school, learning to read, coming home and talking about Christopher Columbus and global warming. *Aack, what was I doing!?* It was like every door had closed on me. How could I make this homeschooling work? How were we "schooling" at all?

And then I took a HUGE step back, and I started to really think about what you wrote. What you write. It was really hard. It was a total paradigm shift, and I'm still working on it. I follow your threads and your Just Add Light, and everything Joyce and Pam write, and I think, and I watch, and I wait, and I read, and watch,

and try, and wait some more. I guess maybe it's a long process. So I took this huge step back, and I looked at everything my son was doing, and everything he loved, and I finally started to see the value, and the REAL LEARNING that was happening. I finally noticed those connections being formed. I didn't see it before, but thanks to you, I do now.

I was listening to an interview on NPR recently with a scientist who just won the Nobel Prize for something in physics, or maybe it was astrophysics. He and his team figured out that the universe is expanding with greater speed—speeding up, not slowing down, as had been presumed. It's a huge paradigm shift in the field. There is some force out there that is expanding our universe faster and faster, and they don't know what it is. They call it dark energy, for now. Anyway, he said working in this field, dealing with such vast distances and epic amounts of time means having to "*get used to having your mind regularly boggled*". I liked that. He was really comfortable with being *boggled*, it was just part of the job description. I feel like that is unschooling for me. It is so different from how we were raised, from what we see, how we were taught, from our friends and neighbors, from everything I thought I knew about parenting and education. When I read about unschooling, I'm often thinking, "*Wait... what? Really? Um, ok...*" mainly because my kids are happier for it, and our home is more peaceful for it.

I'm still working on peace. I'm still working on calm. I'm still working on trusting all of us, and trusting the process. But I know you've got my back. I know that I am growing and exploring along with my kids in a way that I wholly and entirely would never have imagined before.

Sandra, we may never meet in person (although I did see you speak twice at the CHN Expo, and you were AWESOME), but you have to know, your work has changed - IS CHANGING - our whole life.

Sarah Peltzie

Dear Sandra,

Your writing has changed our lives in a thousand small, important ways. I can honestly say that I would not be the same person, or the same mother, without you.

It's so easy to be impressed by big philosophical ideas, to make sweeping declarations about changing your life — but life is made of the little decisions. I'm not sure I would have really realised that on my own.

I couldn't count the number of times that I have been kind when I could have snapped at my children, when I have been generous instead of stubborn, when I have said “yes” — as a direct result of reading what you have written.

My sons are only six, four and one, so I'm not an advert for how things *turn out*, but I see such compassion and kindness in them. There was a day, a few months back, when I was ill and tired. I had just finished putting away a heap of Legos that we had been searching through, when the box slipped out of my hand and the Legos spilled out. I kicked the box out of frustration; and it fell to pieces!

Jack (age six) calmly put down his iPad and came over. He said “*take a deep breath, Mummy, and go and sit down, I'll tidy up the Legos*”. I wasn't proud of myself, but I was very proud of him. I got the toolbox and we fixed it together.

On a less philosophical level, it was a great pleasure to have you here to visit last year. Thank you for the bubbles and for introducing us to Adam and family. They have become very dear friends.

Sarah Dickinson

“YOUR WRITING HAS CHANGED OUR LIVES IN A THOUSAND SMALL, IMPORTANT WAYS. I CAN HONESTLY SAY THAT I WOULD NOT BE THE SAME PERSON, OR THE SAME MOTHER, WITHOUT YOU.”



Dear Sandra,

When I first found Sandra's website my oldest was two years old and I remember clicking around and reading and thinking, "This is crazy!". I had just had our second child and had decided to quit my job and become a stay-at-home mom because childcare was so expensive for two kids. My two-year-old had been attending a Montessori school and so I was looking up educational things I could do with her at home since she would no longer be at school.

As the months passed I think all those "crazy" ideas percolated a bit and every now and then I would go back to your website and read a bit more. I signed up for the *AlwaysLearning* Yahoo! group and then things really started to make sense. I started talking about the ideas with my husband, and started to change some of the ways I interacted with my kids. Now and then discussions came up on the list about interacting with your spouse, and I started to change some of the ways I interacted with my husband.

I don't post frequently on the list, but in the almost-two-years I've been a member I've read nearly everything. So thank you, Sandra, for all the work that you've done to set up and maintain your website, and for keeping the *AlwaysLearning* list such a great forum for discussing unschooling. I know that it has made things sweeter, happier and more peaceful in our house and for that I am so thankful.

Melissa Yatzeck



| THE YATZECKS |

Dear Sandra,

I live in Belize, Central America on a tiny island called Caye Caulker. My three-year-old son has been “always unschooled.” Because we are here in this microcosm, we have no community/friend support for our radical unschooling lifestyle. Locals all lash their children and the ex-pats are pretty mainstream in their parenting and schooling. Without your website, YouTube videos and community forums, I would be lost. I am not a consistently active online participant, but anytime I start to question myself or just need some support, I tap in to all you have shared. I use it for refocusing, re-energizing, education and even just little pick-me-ups. I pass it along to my husband and it helps strengthen our resolve to be peaceful parents who respect Egan for the human being he is. I am so very appreciative of all that you share! You are an inspiration and a wealth of information and support. Thank you, thank you, thank you!

With love,

Sara, Tommy and Egan

Dear Sandra,

I love your voice, your precision with words and the way they challenge me to expand my own thinking. My family is so very grateful to you for continuing your list. Your wisdom and generosity have made my home (and doubtless many others) a much more peaceful, rich and happy place to be.

Warmly,

Tamara Shand



| TAMARA SHAND |

Dear Sandra,

As a lurker on the old AOL homeschooling forums, I “met” Sandra when Kat was four. On the days Kat went to preschool, I plowed through everything written in the homeschooling forum, from the most structured curriculum to unschooling. The only ones who seemed to be enjoying both their kids and what they were doing were the unschoolers. I was so drawn to their enthusiasm that I downloaded -- during the days of pay by the minute dial up -- the archives reaching back four years. So by the time I finally posted my first question, I knew four years worth of Sandra and several other vocal spokespersons for unschooling. And I also knew very well to choose my words carefully because Sandra in particular would scrutinize my post for ideas that didn't hang together.

Back in the early days, every time Sandra disappeared for a few days, those who were “unschooling within their comfort zone” would come out of the woodwork to post about what they “had to” do. The atmosphere would fill full of fears and self-righteousness. Then Sandra would return with her drive for clarity and truth and call them on their mushy thinking.

All along it's been Sandra's ability to keep the discussion tightly focused and free of nonsense that I've found invaluable. It helped me think more clearly. And she's created an atmosphere that has made it far easier for me to help others over the years. I give her a great big humongous thank you for that. My family wouldn't have found the ability to unschool as quickly or clearly for 15 years without Sandra. :-)

Joyce, Carl and Kat Fetteroll



| THE FETTEROLLS |

Dear Sandra,

Thank you for your openness and sharing about your life with your children. I have learned so much about areas where I can grow that I hadn't even noticed were there before.

It's weird, in our town, there's lots of support and a big community for being in relationship with our kids before they are school-aged, but once they reach five or six, it seems like there's a big shift for a lot of the parents and they're done having that symbiotic relationship with their kids and it makes sense to send their kids to school. And that even though it's a radical change to the whole family structure and family relationship, it's a good fit. It wasn't a good fit for us when my oldest started Kindergarten, we subsequently withdrew him, and I've been flailing in this situation, that feels like a huge inconsistency, for years now and trying to find a good fit for me and my family. We've found resting spots and places that fit us for a while, but nowhere that's been a long term solution. It's been hard and I've felt lonely and alone on my journey, just spinning, searching for foundation and like-minded families.

I have spent time exploring energy work and spiritual connections and they have provided channels for personal growth and continued connection with my husband and children, but they haven't met my need for support and guidance regarding educating our children. I had a friend who suggested, when my oldest was tiny (he's ten now), that I read some John Holt and John Taylor Gatto. I've kept picking it up and putting it right back down over the years. It just never hit me or stuck with me. It was like what they were talking about was all theory and heady-stuff, I just did not get it. That's just the beginning of my searching for *something* that fit our family in terms of life-long learning.

Then earlier this year, a sweet friend let me borrow her copy of Sandra Dodd's *Big Book of Unschooling*. Oh my goodness! I finally had a book in my hands that made sense to me. A book that gave real world examples to which I could relate! I discovered that I could only read little bits in a sitting because I needed time and space to digest what I'd read. It's been life-changing for me! After each snippet, I walk away with food for my mind, space in my heart and ideas for shifting my life. It's exactly what I've been looking for all these years!

I've recently joined your *AlwaysLearning* Yahoo! group and it moves so fast that I haven't figured out how to keep up just yet. But the days I do get to read it, I absorb so much. One of the things that sticks out to me is the place of strength and grounded-ness from which you talk. I appreciate your point of view and I'm thankful that you willingly share it and all of your experience with this group of people. It gives me plenty to ponder when I walk away and resume my daily life.

All of this is just to let you know what a huge impact your sharing your life and experience has on me.

Thank you, Sandra Dodd!

Mary Klain





| SUSAN MAY |

This is my public thank you to Sandra Dodd and the experienced "regulars" on her yahoo group Always Learning:

The idea that we do not need to take very little children OUT for socialization/ activity very much (if they don't want it) and working more to make home a rich place— my daughter has been my guide in this as she very much loves being home. I didn't know how HARD it could be to be home with my two babies for days on end. It has been a HUGE stretch for me. But I am doing it, and the kicker is I'm really starting to enjoy it—in large part because I'm getting better at it!

TV has been a huge stumbling block for me, ironically. I say ironically because I was so EXCITED to find a philosophy that actually didn't advocate limiting children. I embraced in the "doing" (allowing my daughter to watch as much as she wanted) from the start, but internally and with my husband, we have struggled with HOW MUCH she watches. I felt guilty that I was not OFFERING enough other things.

Which leads to the fact that I have been feeling lazy and guilty, but not enough to change. I would make "rules" in my head such as "each day I will do A,B and C", but even as I made them I knew that I wouldn't keep them. They were broken before I could even try to implement them! (Proof that principles are much better than rules!) I felt stuck and kept thinking about some of Sandra's words/ideas - of unschooling being like a pump that needed to be primed. I knew I had to get the flow going for us somehow. I didn't post to the list because I thought I knew what I had to do... I just had to take action. Stop feeling guilty and DO something! I was partially right. I am starting to do little things each day, little projects, crafts, building on Marisol's fantasies. More importantly I am working on just BEING with my kids. It is easier said than done, even for someone who LOVES to be home and doesn't necessarily even want to go back to work (teaching at least!).

I thought part of my "laziness" might be part of my deschooling myself. After all I went to public school for 13 years, the University for four, then got my Masters in Education while teaching (which I did for four years). I'm enjoying being home with my kids and doing whatever I want! What I didn't want to do was let my

"deschooling" be an excuse for not doing a good enough job with my kids. Plus I couldn't bring myself to admit that I was being lazy because "hardworking" is such a part of my self-perception and how I think others think of me.

I have found two ideas REALLY helpful in moving myself and our family in a direction that will hopefully lead to unschooling. One idea is choices. And I'm talking about myself, not my kids! I have not been feeling guilty at all the past week and have not made any more rules for myself. In the morning I think of things that I might like to do that day. Then as the day goes on I make conscious CHOICES about what to do next. If I'm having a stuck, "blah" day and feel like I've been on the computer too much and not "doing" enough for the kids I remember to make the next MOMENT a better one. This way I help get myself out of a rut, do something nice for my kids, and I'm not feeling guilty!

I participated in a chat about a week ago: Sandra mentioned that you can have 180 or so sparkly days in a year, and that is a lot. They don't all have to be spectacular. That has helped the perfectionist in me. I am learning to focus on what we actually are doing instead of what I think we should be doing. I have oscillated between thinking that I am being too hard on myself (after all, I just had my second baby 6 months ago), comparing myself to others too much and thinking that I need to up the ante. I guess maybe it was both. I want to make sure that home is a place my kids want to be. So far I'm lucky that my daughter wants to be with me and loves being home, but I want to start changing my way of thinking and being as much as possible now.

And I feel like I am starting to really unschool myself -- I am discovering that I actually DO enjoy cooking and am actually pretty good at it! And I am also finding that writing is turning out to be a great outlet for my overactive brain.

Marisol challenges me in many ways— not wanting to brush her hair or bathe the way we think she should, not having a very regular sleep schedule, not wanting to see friends or go places very often, and just generally having very strong opinions and needing me a lot. I often think I am glad she is my first because I am learning so much from her. I'm glad that my love of reading led

me to unschooling because it has been so helpful in helping me become the mother I want to be for her and for Gerry and any other future children. It helps so much to read other people's experiences and know that there IS a choice (or lots of them). I don't have to punish or force MY way; there is a peaceful way to be with my child.

Two years ago I would have said you were crazy if you told me that I would be considering homeschooling. My mom thought I should. She is a teacher! I was a teacher. Both of my grandmothers were teachers. We support public education! It was good enough for everyone in our family so far... yada yada yada. Plus, since I am a teacher by training I know how much work it is!

Then I came across the word unschooling in the biographical blurb of one of the books I read and thought, "*What the heck is that?*". I Googled it and the rest is history. Now I can't imagine wanting to live any other way. In the beginning I wanted to shout it from mountain tops, but I have learned that a subtler approach is almost always better.

I am looking forward so much to many years of discovery and partnership with my children and husband, the most important people in my life; without "planning" and "grading". I have to agree with this quote of Joyce Fetteroll's, "*Unschooling is *much* harder than school at home because it takes a great deal of self-examination and change in ourselves to help our kids and not get in their way!*". Lucky for me I kind of specialize in self-examination! I also see all the ways that unschooling is going to make life easier but, even more importantly, **better**.

Dear Sandra,

This winter marks four years since I discovered the word "unschooling" which pretty quickly led me to your website and then the *AlwaysLearning* list. Your list has been the most valuable source of information I have EVER discovered. It has

helped me become a better mother, wife and person. I respect you, your writing and your dedication to sharing. I often can imagine what you would say now and your voice is officially in my head (in a good way!).

I am actually surprised sometimes now when people are "hurt" on the list. I have been reading there so long now that I usually can spot what is going to get picked apart in a post. It is especially surprising when someone claims they have been reading for a long time. I'm not saying that I do things 100% perfectly all the time now, just that I am much better at spotting my weaknesses and recognizing possible ways to improve myself or help my kids and family. Often it is a shift in perspective or attitude. Examining words and ideas is a daily part of my life. I rarely post on the list anymore because I don't need to as much - like I said, I'm at a point now where I can often problem solve in a healthy way on my own. I do still read often for inspiration though and to make sure we are staying on the best path for our family — for learning and for building positive, loving relationships. And when we get stuck, posting on the list is one of the first things I think to do!

There is always more to learn; always room to improve! It's quite amazing. On my path, I have found many sources of inspiration and information. What I find remarkable is that you and the people that regularly write on *AlwaysLearning* offer, for free, what most of the other sources I have found (and love!) are charging for. It doesn't make me love the other sources less - I actually find it powerful to find these positive messages in multiple places. But like I said, it **does** make what **you** do that much more special!

So THANK YOU. Again and again, and I'm sure I will say it again in the future!

I hope to meet you in person some day, but in lots of ways I already feel like I have.

Warmly and with Much Love,

Susan May

Dear Sandra,

I think it was 1998 when I read your column in HEM. It would be about two years before I'd get online to read your thoughtful contributions at the unschooling.com message boards and email list.

HEM published six issues a year, I think. And if I remember right I got online in July of 2000. So I figure I owe you a minimum of one *thank you* per column and one per day of your online writing which means I owe a *thank you* for something like *four thousand fifty-seven* bright and helpful ideas. How do I begin?

There was the copy of *Golden Dance Hits of the Renaissance* and tips for playing recorder. There was *Ship, Captain, Crew* and a dozen other games that brightened our days. There was the profound idea I could be my child's partner and that one bad mom moment didn't have to mean a whole bad day for everyone. There were the life changing ideas that a family's peace could lead to healing for my husband and more learning for my son; that a wife beating up her husband with words was as bad as a man beating up his wife with fists.

If I have my dates right then Dylan would have been six when I started reading your big ideas. He's nineteen now. I'm grateful every day for your willingness to help others, for your unwavering dedication to unschooling and for your bravery. I'm not sure how you do it, but I'm glad you do.

Thank you,

Deb Lewis, mom to Dylan

Dear Sandra,

I have never met you personally. I have emailed to ask you questions related to homeschooling and unschooling, and something that impresses me is your wisdom. Whenever things become unclear to me in this journey, you seem to have the magic word. You have added something special to my family's homeschooling journey without knowing. My daughter is enjoying reading and writing thanks to the advice that I got from you. Someday you will be remembered as much or maybe more than John Holt. I just know it in my heart.

Letty Moran

Dear Sandra,

Thank you so much for sharing your unschooling journey with us. I am a mother of two gorgeous boys and wife to a fantastic husband. We live in Brisbane, Australia. When we first started looking into homeschooling, we very quickly came across your website. It didn't take long for us to decide that natural learning and unschooling was the path we wanted to take. I feel so fortunate to have been able to read what you have written. We bought *The Big Book of Unschooling* and that too was fantastic. It has changed our lives, changed our lives for the better, and opened us up to a whole new way of living.

Thank you, thank you, thank you.

Nicole Reardon



Dear Sandra,

Thank you so very, very much for the work you do! You were the gateway to unschooling for our family.

I found you on January 5, 2007, by Googling resources related to John Holt's *Teach Your Own*. After reading his book, I was so enthralled with his ideas, and I wanted to delve in more deeply. I created a local discussion group around it and, in preparation for the gathering that day, I compiled a list of informative links to share. Your name kept coming up in my searches, which led me to your unschooling website, as well as *AlwaysLearning*. I included them in my list, and I joined your email group that day!

Your words, the way you've pulled together other people's words, your willingness to challenge or clarify other people's words when they come to you wanting feedback, your openness about sharing your own experiences...all of that time, effort and thought you put out online and in your books...you have helped our family immeasurably.

You were the name we encountered when we had just discovered this fabulous way of life. You shared the resources we pored over when we needed so much support to move forward. You had the ideas we gravitated toward when we questioned why our beliefs didn't feel in alignment with our actions in our parenting and our family life. The first link of yours that I forwarded to my husband was *How Unschooling Kids Watch TV*. I can still hear my giddiness in my January 2007 email to him: "This is so exciting!".



Thank you for your impact on our family when we first "met" you five years ago online, as well as when I excitedly MET you almost one year ago, up in Albany, NY — I was thrilled to personally make a monkey platter for YOU that day! Thank you for then, thank you for now, and thank you for all of the years in between.

Sincerely,

The Chase-Salerno Family
Declan, 8; Quinn, 5; Erica, 42; Michael, 43

Dear Sandra,

If I set about listing all the important things I've learned from you, this book would not be big enough to include everything. In fact, I did start a list. But then I realized that, more than anything, there is a quality of fierce honesty, creativity and unsentimental compassion informing everything you write and say. You gave me the courage to listen to and follow my own heart in matters of parenting, family life and everyday living. In endless posts and articles on unschooling.com, the *Radical Unschoolers* lists and other forums, your patience with struggling parents (and, sometimes, impatience with those too quick to judge or decide or give up), practical outlook and willingness to share your own experiences helped us through bouts of fear and uncertainty for over a decade.

I first found my anxious way to unschooling when our son was seven and we decided school was not the best place for him. Now 17, Blaine is confident, endlessly curious and self-motivated. He's an active contributor to our community and the activities he is passionate about. Adults respect him and enjoy working with him. And through these teen years which seem to have brought such a painful disconnect to some families, we find more ways to appreciate and enjoy each other. There is no doubt in my mind that our family life and connections have been enriched by your work.

We are deeply grateful,

Thea, Eric and Blaine LaCross



| BLAINE LACROSS |



Dear Sandra,

You surely know how much knowing you has meant to the Sorooshian family.
Nobody has had more positive impact on our lives! Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!

- Pam



| HEATHER, MONTY & AUSTIN |

Dear Sandra,

You have enlightened our lives and made us a more peaceful and happy family. You are stellar! Thank you for the time and effort, for the kind words and the guidance.

I know I will continue to grow as an unschooler, a mom and a person thanks to your presence in my life.

Heather

THANK YOU,
SANDRA