

# Living Unschooling *with Sandra Dodd*



Beatrice Ekwa Ekoko

**S**andra Dodd is a writer who is frequently invited to speak at unschooling conferences all over the U.S. She lives with her three teenaged children – Holly, Marty and Kirby, who have never been to school – and her husband Keith in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

**Beatrice:** You have a fascinating concept called “strewing.” Can you talk about that?

**Sandra:** One day, someone who was very skeptical of unschooling said, “Well how do you get all those things in front of your children?” and I said, “I just strew it around. I just strew their paths with interesting things.” And the concept stuck. The idea is to just have things around your house that are interesting enough to pick up and turn over and mess with; and that can cover a whole lot of science and history and math all my myself. I find things at thrift shops: magnets, maps, books. I just put the things out there and periodically switch them around. I also think it’s worth looking in catalogs of things that you can’t afford because then when you are at the thrift store and you see them, you know what they are.

I got that idea [strewing] when I was studying education in the early 70s, which was the height of the school reform days; New Mexico was a hot bed of school reform. There was a book called *The Open Classroom* written by people in New Mexico. One of the things they taught us was that it doesn’t make sense

to drag a class of 30 kids through the same activity – just point the interesting things out and they’ll discover them and they’ll show each other, and they’ll ask you questions. I did that while I was teaching and it worked. And I did that with my children and it worked.

But before we had children, my husband and I were together for seven years and we did that with each other. We were involved in a medieval studies club. We made costumes, he made armor, we made tents together; that took geometry but we didn’t say so. Trying to go from historical paintings and trying to figure out with triangles and rectangles how they had made a tent with one center pole. So we had a lot of activity like that between ourselves. We had a lot of friends who were artists, interested in history, interested in music and when you have the information swirling like that you start to see that everything is connected.

Some of the things we have from when we were younger are in our house and the kids just pick it up. And they know things about that item or they will say, “How do they keep the patterns



straight on those Indian print bedspreads?" I'll say, "I don't know. Let's go find out." But we can pull up a sample of block printed cloth from the house. I know that some people live in houses that look like motel rooms and I don't know how they do. But it's been easy for us to just rearrange the things in our house so that the kids can always discover something new.

**Beatrice:** That's what I was going to ask next. The idea of the home as a sort of museum.

**Sandra:** I think everyone's can be. We went to a friend's house and he pulled out a bunch of pictures of a place that we were about to visit. People don't think to ask or pull off a book from a shelf and say, "Oh you know that author? It's autographed!" People think of museums as other buildings far away that belong to the state. And their house as just a house. But sometimes that word just gets in the way of seeing the possibilities and how rich each thing and each place is.

I don't ever say, "Alright! Attention everyone! I'm putting out the castle blocks!" They just appear. And then castles are made, and then people talk about things, or they talk about particular castles they are trying to do. And after it's not getting any attention, it goes away and something else might come out. I have a bowl of rocks, which look different when they are wet than they do dry. Sometimes when people are sitting around talking it's worth just getting a bowl of rocks and sticking them in the bowl – doesn't interrupt the conversation, and they can play with it or not as they want to.

We have jigsaw puzzles...for example, two are of the history of the kings and queens of England, and we've worked them not with the intent to learn anything but just to work them; but everyone involved in that, adult or child, learned something they hadn't known before. And as we were working them, we talked, not about kings and queens but about what was going on in our lives. I think there's an advantage to not saying, "We are going to work this puzzle because it's history." We just worked the puzzle. Some history came, some current social stuff, some personal stories, some questions totally unrelated. And if there's enough swirl of information and exchange, all kinds of things will come up. They don't need to come up linearly.

So we find that it's fun to discover things but it's easier to discover things when they are there to discover. Maybe strewing is a bit like hiding Easter eggs but not to that extent. There just might be three things out and about. It's like a conversation

piece. It's like putting out a pretty book on a coffee table, or an arrangement of flowers, only it's more likely to be a puzzle.

**Beatrice:** Incidental learning!

**Sandra:** And although it's incidental, the core of my method if you want to call it that, is to just keep our lives so busy and so varied that incidental learning happens all the time. If friends of mine, my own age that is, come over and visit, they sort of get caught up in what's happening and if the adults here are being



*Sandra Dodd's three teenagers – from top, Holly, Marty and Kirby – having fun in the backyard of their home in New Mexico.*

curious and playful and open, then visitors are more likely to be that way too. We do things that are just fun. You can hardly walk by without picking it up and messing with it too.

**Beatrice:** Can you talk a bit more about what makes unschooling work?

**Sandra:** Almost any piece of routine damage school can do to a child, parents can do at home. Parents can make their kids hate math. They can make them never want to read a book again. They can make them want nothing more than to grow up and get away. So with unschooling, when people ask me what I think makes it work, I tell them the kids have to have a choice. There's a learning curve that I see with unschooled kids and that is that they seem to be ahead [of their peers in school] for the first few years and then there's a period of time, roughly from about nine



to 12 years of age, when they can seem behind. And then after they are 12 or 13, zoom! They look ahead! They seem to be ahead again. In school, there is a period when children are 11 or 12 when they've just been crammed full of math facts, and geographical facts, and science terminology, and they just seem full to bursting with knowledge, and the kids at home might still be playing with Pokémon or coloring books, and they look up and the school kids are naming places and things that they don't know, they're reading text books and doing long division or writing in cursive – things that you can see from across the room. "What are they doing? I don't know what they are doing. I can't do that!"

But then what seems to happen with the unschoolers I have met and talked with, is that when their kids got to be 13 or 14, a kind of maturity comes upon them and they say, "Oh! I guess if I want to learn cursive, I'll just practice it. Is this it?" And they do it! They look at something and they say, "Is that all?" And they figure out on their own how to do math. They start to develop their own map of the world and history of the universe and stuff; all of their facts are starting to gel into a model of the universe. They are understanding a lot of things and making a lot of connections. And about that time the kids at school get all burned out and realize that all the facts they are learning are only leading to another year of facts. It's like Rumpelstiltskin: "Oh you turned that straw into gold? Next room. Bigger. More straw. Oh and by the way, you don't get to keep the gold." While the unschoolers are saying, "Oh yeah! This is cool. I'm glad I didn't go to school!"

Another thing I've noticed is that when they get to be 13 or 14, they've either gotten a job, gotten a really cool volunteer position, become involved in a hobby they have so that they are in a position of teaching whether it's karate, or horseback riding, or ice-skating. They've gotten to the point where they know enough that they are a senior student and they are given a position of responsibility. If they are given something real and they are given the kind of responsibility that is given to an adult, in a way, it makes them an adult. They feel that shift of not being one of the kids anymore. And you see a change in their posture and their bearing and the way adults treat them.



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the gaming store." And the kids in school don't have any of these options. So at the same time that they are made small, the unschoolers have been made large.

If families can make it through that rough hump of, "Oh my kid doesn't know anything. He doesn't have cursive, he doesn't know the times tables and he's 12 and starting to get whiskers,".... Because it's just before a lot of the kids in school are saying, "This is crazy. Why am I doing this?"

**Beatrice:** Learning for fun?

**Sandra:** One of the studies on how people learn done in experimental schools in the 60s and 70s was what is the optimal state of mind for learning? Schools try to get everyone very still and very quiet. And that's not optimal! People don't learn very well when they are sitting still, not moving their hands, not moving their feet, someone talking at them. That's the optimal condition for taking a nap! But the optimal condition is also not when you think a tiger is going to bite you and you're running away screaming and you get so full of adrenaline you want to puke. Somewhere between those two is the right place.

One way to get that mental state of alertness or curiosity is to hum or make music, have fun. And school can't afford to do that. Because if 25 kids at the same time think something is really neat and cool, they start to make noise. So school is set up to keep everyone at a low mental wavelength so that they can't really learn. But at least they are quiet. So at home, if things can be fun and interesting and cool, then it's easier to learn!

I know for sure that you can't pour information into people. I know for sure that you can't command that somebody learn something right now and have that work. Fear doesn't work. Maslow's hierarchy of needs is something that all teachers learn



and then they promptly forget. Maslow's hierarchy of needs says that you can't learn unless you feel safe, loved, fed. And yet there are still schools and families where kids are told, "Do this or you can't eat lunch. Do this or I'll hit you."

Some threat and some deprivation...learn first then reward. Oh, they're going to learn. They are learning a lot. They are learning to get the heck away from there as

soon as they can. They are learning to sneak food under the table, they're learning to tune out adults, they are learning to cheat and lie. I don't want my kids to learn these things. So I keep them happy. I keep them fed. I let them sleep when they want to sleep, I let them say, "I don't want to do that right now," when they don't want to do that right now. And it makes a big difference because then the level of arousal when they are excited about something is real. They don't have to fake being excited; they really can get excited. Because they know they really can say no. That level of freedom and choice is unusual in our society.

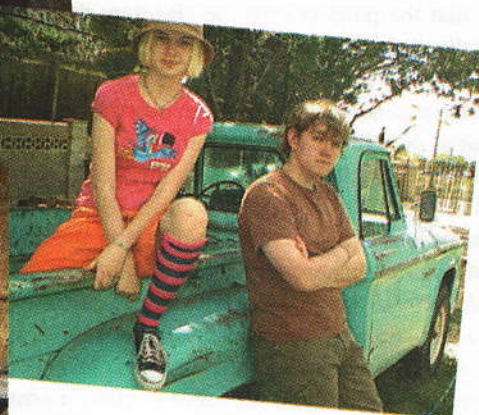
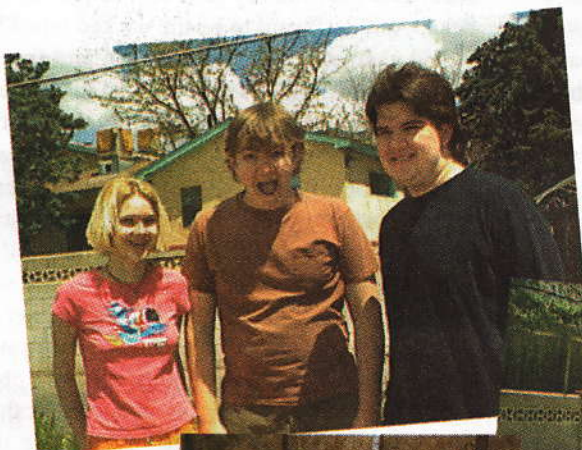
**Beatrice:** What is spiritual unschooling?

**Sandra:** I have a page on my website called spiritual unschooling. People don't become really good at unschooling without changing the way they see themselves and the world. At the core of it, I think there is a philosophical shift that has to happen. Because if people want to overlay unschooling on same old business-as-usual life it doesn't really fit very well; you have to remodel the house a bit.

What do the new building parts have to do with spirituality? It's just being aware of what your child actually is doing, not what the book says he ought to be doing; look directly at the person you're dealing with. But then some people would say, "Okay fine. I don't need to know anything about child development or cognition. I'll just look at my kid." You'll look at him with *what?* There needs to be a balance of both. I think people who are going to take responsibility of their children's learning life, need to know what stages people go through – Piaget's stages of development are very helpful for people who know it but that doesn't mean they should live by that in a moment-to-

moment way.

There are no hours in which we are teaching and there are no hours in which the children are not learning. So it changes the fabric of our life. Sometimes when I have described unschooling, people have said it sounds like unit studies and I said no, no. Because although we might go on a binge with a week where everyone really cares about Monty Python



"I just keep our lives so busy and so varied that incidental learning happens all the time."

or whatever, then we get tired of it and we are done. It wasn't a unit study because no one said, "Starting next Monday we are going to do China. And on Friday we are going to

be through with China."

When people plan a unit like that, not only is it artificial, but you don't get that excited joy and curiosity which makes it work. But what if you are studying Japan and a hot air balloon lands in the vacant lot behind your house.

Are you going to shut the window because it's not about Japan? That's the danger of unit studies – you doggedly move along the path that you've set regardless of what's happening in the world. And if someone wants to learn about Japan, what's the hurry? If they are going to move there, there are some things they really need to know now. If they are not going to move there, if it's just something they are interested in or even if it's their burning passion and they collect Japanese art, and they decorate their house Japanese, still what's the hurry? They'll be learning about it for the rest of their lives. The more they like something the more they will never stop learning about it until the day they die or Alzheimer's takes them. I don't think there is a hurry and I don't think telling children, "Come on! Come on! There's more about Japan that we haven't learned yet, hurry," helps them like Japan, or learn more. It's counter to all that.

Where the spirituality comes in... that is partly the trust that your child is an organism that wants to learn, that that's how people grow. There is physical growth that takes water, food and rest. There's mental growth, which takes input – ideas, things to think about, things to try, things to touch. And then there's spiritual growth and that takes more and more understanding. And awareness that it's better to be sweet to other peo-



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ple than not, it's better to be generous with your neighbors than hateful, better to pet your cat nicely than to throw it around. At first it's a practical consideration but later on, as the children are looking at the world through older eyes, they start to see that, no matter whether the neighbor noticed or not, it made you a better person. So I think there's a spirituality of respect being given to the children and being passed on.

As for spirituality and unschooling, the relationship a parent builds with the child, if it's going to be a really good one, a really close one, has to go by a different model. Because our culture says basically that the parents own the children, that the children will be obedient, that parents can do what they want to and when the children are 18 they can leave but until then it's the parents' house and the parents' money and the parents can say what happens. That's an extremely adversarial relationship. And it really can lead to no good except the future justification of other adversarial relationships. And it's not much investment in two or three generations down, to teach your kids that the powerless lose, that older or richer people get their way. If the parents can say, "Well this is your house too. What do you want to do?" Or give yourself a range of choices to offer the child. If your child is bored, you could offer her three or four really cool things to do. Whereas, my mom and millions of other moms would say, "If you are bored mop the floor. If you're bored, you can go and pull weeds." That is punishing a child for communicating with you! I see my children as whole people whose lives

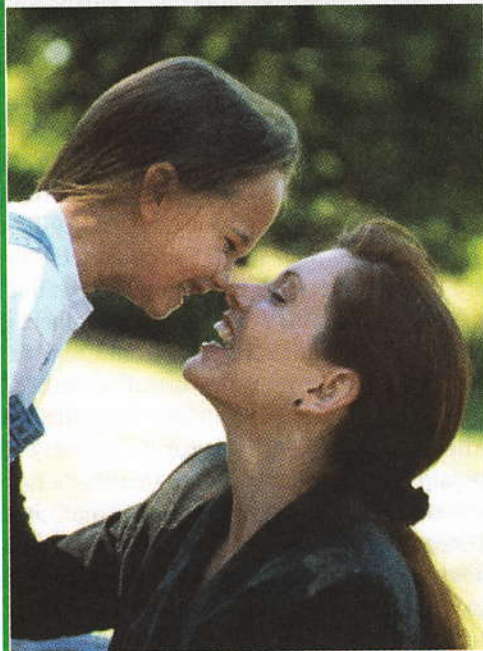
are unfolding now. They may have memories as vivid as mine. And what I do and say now will be part of their lives after I'm dead. And do I want to be the wicked witch? Do I want to be a stupid character that they grow up and live in reaction to and avoidance of? And so if I see them as whole, then I see that as they grow bigger, I grow smaller in their universe.

There's a traditional put down which is, "You're not the center of the universe." And I think, well then what is? Are you talking astrological universe or personal universe? Because I am the center of *my* universe. I see it out of my eyes. I remember it from my memory. And when I die, my universe ends. And each of my children is the center of his or her universe. I see that as a spiritual difference in how you define your child in relationship to yourself. I see spirituality more as a philosophical stance. Some people who ask me for advice, I ask them to pretend they only have 300 "no-s". They have a little ticket they have to spend every time they say no. And they better save some because some people use them up before the kid's three years old.

What if your kids grow up and you still have 150 tickets left that you can throw in the trash? That's pretty cool.

*You can read Sandra Dodd's articles on her website at [www.sandradodd.com](http://www.sandradodd.com). She will be speaking in St. Louis, Missouri in October 2005 at the Live and Learn Conference. She plans to talk about the unexpected benefits of unschooling. -LL-*

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