

# What Happens When You Ask Unschoolers 'What Do You Want to Be When You Grow Up?'

My daughter is a baker. When people ask her what she wants to be when she grows up, she responds breezily: "A baker, but I already am one."

You see, with unschooling there is no postponement of living and doing. There is no preparation for some amorphous future, no working toward something unknown.

There is simply life.

## There Is No "After" in Unschooling

The question of what a child wants to be when she grows up is a curious one well-rooted in our schooled society. Disconnected from everyday living and placed with same-age peers for the majority of her days and weeks, a schooled child learns quickly that "real life" starts *after*. It starts after all of the tedium, all of the memorizing and regurgitating, all of the command and control. It starts after she is told what to learn, what to think, whom to listen to. It starts after her natural creativity and instinctive drive to discover her world are systematically destroyed within a coercive system designed to do just that. She must wait to be.

With unschooling, there is no after. There is only now. My daughter is a baker because she bakes. She is also many other things. To ask what a child wants to be when she grows up is to dismiss what she already is, what she already knows, what she already does.

Baking brings my daughter daily joy and fulfillment while also helping to nourish her family and friends. She writes a baking

blog, sharing her recipe adaptations and advice. She reads cookbooks, watches cooking shows (*The Great British Baking Show* is a favorite), talks to other bakers—both adults and kids—to get ideas and tips. She learned this all on her own, following her own interests, and quickly outgrowing the library children's room cookbook section to the adult aisles.

As unschooling parents, we provide the time, space, and connection to resources that enable her doing. She has unlimited access to the kitchen. She has abundant opportunities to visit the library and explore the Internet for real and digital information to help her in her craft. She has three younger siblings and many neighbors and friends who are eager to be her taste-testers. Her work is also incredibly valuable. I have never made a pie from scratch but she makes them all the time, bringing them as frequent desserts to gatherings and special events. The market price for her delicious, seasonal pies would be steep.

### **Who Children Are, Not Who They Will Become**

Will she always be a baker? It's hard to say. Will I always be a writer? I think so, but who knows? Will any of us always be who we are now?

We can certainly have goals and ambitions that we work toward. My daughter wants to open a "bakery-makery" someday that combines her dual passions of baking and making, selling her pies and dolls side-by-side. That may be her future goal, but it doesn't stop her from being a baker and a maker today, creating and selling her goods when and where she can.

With unschooling, learning and living are seamless and synonymous. There is no separation of one from the other. There is no segregation of children from the "real world." It is all real. The well-known educator, John Holt, who coined the term "unschooling" decades ago, wrote in his book, *Learning All The Time*:

*We can best help children learn, not by deciding what we think they should learn and thinking of ingenious ways to teach it to them, but by making the world, as far as we can, accessible to them, paying serious attention to what they do, answering their questions – if they have any – and helping them explore the things they are most interested in.*

Children are eager to explore and discover their world and to engage in meaningful work and actions tied to their interests and fueled by their limitless curiosity. Our job as parents is to listen to their interests and ideas, support and encourage them, and help connect them to the wider world around them.

Our job is not to prepare our children for who they will become, but to help them be who they already are.

*“I believe that education, therefore, is a process of living and not a preparation for future living.” ~John Dewey (1897)*

—

Kerry McDonald has a B.A. in Economics from Bowdoin and an M.Ed. in education policy from Harvard. She lives in Cambridge, Mass. with her husband and four never-been-schooled children. Follow her writing at [Whole Family Learning](#). Reprinted from [Whole Family Learning](#).

[Image Credit: Flickr-[CC BY 2.0](#)]