

## DESCHOOLING OURSELVES: What, Why and How

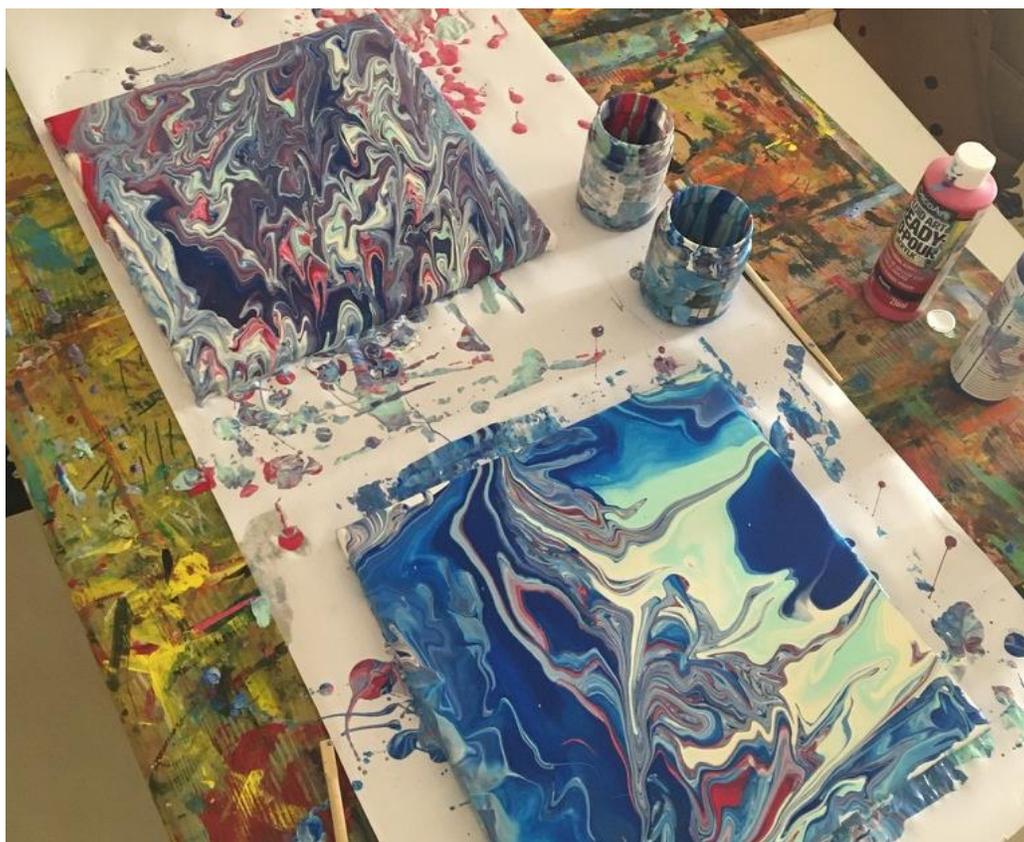


Conventionally, deschooling has been the domain of home educators and radical thinkers. I believe it can benefit everyone.

Even more conventionally, it has referred to the adjustment period for a child between taking them out of school and starting to home educate. This is valuable, and important. It is this concept that led John Holt to coin the term unschooling – hoping it would be a clearer term (debatable). In this post, I'm only going to look at deschooling ourselves (the adults).

I will give detailed, but also relatively succinct, information on what deschooling is, why do it and how to go about it. It is by no means a definitive account (that might be a book! In like, 10 years' time!), nor is it personalized to you – pick and choose the bits that work for you, and look deeper for what is missing.

## Deschooling, defined



What is deschooling and how do we define it? Many people have written on this, so I will offer up several opinions and theories, and link to things you can read, listen to and watch to take you deeper.

**As far as I'm concerned**, deschooling is the process of beginning to question the “education” we have received growing up and living in the world – from our families, friends, communities, school, society at large and online platforms.

It is a journey, not a destination. You are always deschooling, you are never deschooled. It is a dynamic process that shifts its focus and goes beyond the thinking and questioning stage, to a place where you start to work out how you want to live, and what you'd like society to look like.

It is a chance to heal and re-parent yourself, work on your relationship to yourself and others in your life, re-discover your own potential. It is a chance to find different ways to relate to your children and other people in your life that are compassionate, authentic and non-hierarchical.

The person who coined the term deschooling was Ivan Illich, in his book *Deschooling Society*, published in 1971. He claimed that schools, based on an antiquated system, were responsible for perpetuating a "schooled" mentality whose ultimate aim was obedient, unquestioning workers.

Whether you agree with this original view or not, I think deschooling can be a lot broader and far-reaching than that, both on an individual and societal level, as well as more nuanced, and supportive of school transformation rather than abolition, as Illich advocated.

## **Deschooling, what on earth is it**

Deschooling is ultimately all-pervasive and on-going to it's quite hard to pin down. And it can be very personal. In the end you will have to pick and choose the bits that serve you.

Here are some things others have said about it.

*"Deschooling is the work of adjusting to a new reality, one in which a young person now possesses an extremely high level of freedom and a correspondingly high level of responsibility"* **Blake Boles**, *Why are you still sending your kids to school?*

*"I define [deschooling] as shedding the programming and habits that resulted from other people's agency over your time, body, thoughts and actions."* **Akilah S. Richards**, *Raising Free People*

*Deschooling is “an intentional time to forgo any formal studies and give your child time to rediscover the love of learning, as they did when they were little” Ainsley Arment, The Call of the Wild & Free (this quote also applies to us adults!)*

***John Holt** on what a deschooled society would look like: “It would be a society in which there were many paths to learning and advancement, instead of one school path as we have now . . . a path far too narrow for everyone, and one too easily and too often blocked off from the poor”*

*“Education is a compulsory, forcible action of one person upon another for the purpose of forming a man such as will appear to us to be good; but culture is the free relation of people, having for its basis the need of one man to acquire knowledge, and of the other to impart that which he has acquired.. Education is culture under restraint. Culture is free.” **Leo Tolstoy***

*“Deschooling demands egalitarian relations between parent and kids – a family organization which accommodates the radical curiosity of childhood, even (perhaps especially) when it challenges authority. Parenting, in the deschooling family, becomes a revolutionary activity.”*

And..

*“Deschooling aspires to develop not only the free individual, but ultimately a free society” **Geraldine & Gus Lyn-Piluso***

*“Colonisation works to bring us all into line. It insists that there is one knowledge stream, one way of doing things, one value system for understanding success. It enforces this agenda to the detriment of all ancestral knowledge, all other ways of knowing and doing, and leaves us with a narrow vision of what life is and can be. An education that does not actively dismantle this process perpetuates systems of oppression throughout the rest of society.” **Adele Jarrett-Kerr***

**Deschooling, why do it**



I.  
The biggest reason why you should start on a deschooling journey, is because IT IS FOR EVERYONE.

It is especially for those who don't think they need it.

It is for school-going families AND home educators. For anyone who works for an organization or institution of any kind. For anyone who has ever felt diminished or put-down as a child or adult. For anyone who has felt oppressed, or is part of an oppressed or marginalized group, or has been the cause of oppression. For anyone who calls themselves a leader, teacher or parent. For anyone who has anything to do with children, in any capacity.

II.

It is not only about school. School is and was a huge part of most people's lives – so processing that and understanding the powerful dynamics at play are important. But, it is absolutely not limited to school.

Everyone's deschooling journey will be different.

III.

Deschooling is about questioning hierarchical structures of power, and the influence they wield on our lives. You may start with the adult-child relationship and the concept of adultism, and then find that this same dynamic is replicated in so many other spheres. Deschooling is about calling out and tackling oppressive systems, beginning (but definitely not ending) with your relationship with your child(ren).

IV.

It is about healing ourselves – from our childhoods, from trauma, from influences that may have been less than positive or constructive in our lives. With this, comes the realization that until we have started loving and accepting ourselves, it will be virtually impossible to practice unconditional love and acceptance with our children (and others, for that matter.)

V.

It is about relationships – the one with your children, but also the ones with partners, friends, family members and the wider community. What, ultimately, matters more than this?

VI.

Deschooling is ultimately about re-imagining what we would like the world to look like. I know, huge. But that is literally how big this is. It's political, and it matters.

## Deschooling, how to do it



There is no 'how-to' in deschooling, but this is more or less how I approach it.

**First, the intellectual part.**

Read some books

[How children learn](#), John Holt (I recommend all his books!)

[Inner Child Journeys](#), Robin Grille (also his book Parenting for a Peaceful World)

[Changing our Minds](#), Naomi Fischer

[Everywhere all the Time: A New Deschooling Reader](#), Matt Hern

[Raising Free People](#), Akilah S. Richards

[Parenting from the Inside Out](#), Daniel J Siegel and Mary Hartzell

[Unconditional Parenting](#), Alfie Kohn

[Untigering](#), Iris Chen

[Daring Greatly](#), Brene Brown

(this last one, and all Brene Brown's books, are not really about education but a lot of the concepts in her books have helped me see myself and others differently, and ultimately informed my deschooling process).

[When Things Fall Apart](#) & [The Places that Scare You](#) by Pema Chodron  
(and all of her books!)

**.. and some articles & blogs**

[The School Wound](#)

[Unschooling for decolonization](#)

[Reparenting](#)

[Deschooling 101 \(by me!\)](#)

[Carol Black's essays](#)

[Peter Gray's column](#)

[Racheous blog](#)

[Happiness is here](#) – if you are home educating, I highly recommend this blog and Sarah's Instagram account

### **Listen to some good chats.**

[Grounded Families podcast](#) – I loved the episodes with Eloise Rickman, Nicola Rae-Wickam and Sas Petherick but they are all so valuable, and every time I listen I come away with new inspiration

[The Unschool Space on Deschooling](#)

[Fare of the free child podcast \(all episodes are worth a listen!\)](#)

[Revillaging podcast](#)

[Off-trail learning podcast](#) (also all episodes)

### **Watch some juicy videos**

Life without school Youtube channel:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m-l0Tctm\\_8E](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m-l0Tctm_8E)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aJulcZAqyO4>

[Kristin Folts TedX talk on inner child healing](#)

[Sir Ken Robinson's TED talk](#)

[Liz Gilbert TED talk](#)

**Are you sold yet?**

**Now is the hard part – the processing, healing and practicing part.**  
Also, the most revolutionarily beautiful part of all.

This part is in your hands. It is a long, mostly slow journey. And it is so worth taking.



There is no one way to do it, in fact there are infinite ways to go about it. It's going to look different for everyone.

I'm only going to speak about ways I have approached this personally, because it's all I can genuinely speak on.

**GET HELP**

- Inner Child journeys and reparenting. Consider seeing a therapist, counsellor or healer if you think it might help to process. I have at several moments in my life.
- Start or join a group you can lean on. Find someone who you trust that can hold you accountable without shame or blame. Share with friends and family. Community is important, most of us can't do this alone.
- Take a course. For unschooling I highly recommend Lucy Aitkenread's [DISCO course](#). Eloise Rickman offers wonderful [parenting and education courses](#).
- Figure out who you are. Staying true to myself – I realized after cancer that I had not done that, for such a long time (if ever). The first step was figuring out who I actually was, what I genuinely wanted and needed, and what I didn't. I loved Elizabeth Gilbert's book [Big Magic](#). I also needed the help of people – friends, therapists, writers and thinkers, my husband and my children. We can't do this alone.
- Meet courage, fear, vulnerability and shame – Brene Brown writes a lot about this (her quote below). These are big themes for me, they may not be for you. We talk about these openly with our children.



## MAKE TIME

### Create new habits.

- Following joy – finding joy in small things; making joy, rather than success and productivity, an integral part of every day.
- Journaling & writing: this is the way I express myself best, the way I figure things out. Yours might be something else entirely – painting, movement, time alone, time around others. Make time for whatever it is that helps you figure things out.
- Start a regular practice that helps you stay focused and grounded. Some things I have tried are: meditation, yoga, running, long walks,

being out in nature, affirmations, just a few minutes alone with no distractions.

- Praying (the secular kind). I'm not a praying person, like, at all. But one extremely challenging day, I found myself summoning the strength to get through it, from somewhere – anywhere! So I came up with my secular prayer idea. I write this myself, and it's always evolving/changing. As soon as I wake up, I pick up my notebook and take a minute to slowly read this out to myself. It has helped.
- Radical self-love. This is not self-care, it is re-learning how to speak to and treat yourself in an unconditionally loving way. It takes time and conscious, daily awareness and effort.
- Rest – rest is radical. We are told we must be doing, producing, and busy all the time. If you're not busy there must be something wrong with you. Making time for rest is nothing short of revolutionary.
- Boundaries – Brene Brown writes eloquently about this. I've been working on expressing my boundaries in terms of my needs, rather than as limits that exist independently of me, and owning them. Boundaries are okay – we all have them, because we all have needs! It's time we honoured them. Learning to express my needs has been crucial (I loved [Non-Violent Communication](#) – it works for me, but I know there are issues with the method when it is championed as a one-size-fits-all method, or “the only way”. It is neither of those things.)
- Stop caring what everyone thinks, and start caring what a select few people think. I listened to [The Subtle Art of Not Giving A F\\*ck](#) by Mark Manson, it was fun and interesting)
- Make a commitment to your children: I wrote mine a pledge, and they are fully aware of what we are trying to do as a family, and as such they are invested in it, and hold me accountable. They also know that there will be struggles and failure, and that's okay. Make time to talk about these things openly; ask questions, solicit feedback, express feelings.

## Keep learning.

- I actively work to give back power to my children, and let go of control. A great book if you're starting off is [The Self-Driven Child](#) by Ned Johnson and William Stixrud. It's mainly aimed at school-going families and in my opinion, it doesn't go far enough, but it's a great start. If you're a bit further into deschooling, try [Anarchist Pedagogies](#) ed. Robert H. Haworth
- Start learning again – is there something you've always wanted to learn but never got around to? Or never found a compelling reason to? Now's the time. Do it just because.
- Anti-racism and decolonization work. I am not the person to speak on this, but if you are white, I believe it is important to tackle this stuff. There are several Instagram accounts I would recommend:

<https://www.instagram.com/fareofthefreechild/>

[https://www.instagram.com/hood\\_biologist/](https://www.instagram.com/hood_biologist/)

<https://www.instagram.com/intersectionalmotherhood/>

<https://www.instagram.com/ajabarber/>

<https://www.instagram.com/laylafsaad/>

<https://www.instagram.com/adelejk/>

[https://www.instagram.com/everydayracism\\_/](https://www.instagram.com/everydayracism_/)

<https://www.instagram.com/latinxparenting/>

<https://www.instagram.com/decolonizemyself/>

<https://www.instagram.com/untigering/>

<https://www.instagram.com/abromeed/>

- Fuck Beauty Standards. This is a big one for me, and I have only just begun scraping the surface of this. I enjoyed [Bad Feminist](#) by Roxane Gay a while back. Start questioning the things you do to conform to what we've been told is desirable. Practice mini acts of rebellion, that

defy these things. Learn more about Feminism – I'm currently on an really inspiring [Feminist Summer Camp!](#)

## REIMAGINE

- Re-image education – my focus is on normalizing home education, and also normalizing the concept of learning spaces that are not school, but are accessible to everyone. I also want to campaign for transformation in schools but I'm still figuring how to go about this. It has helped me to find a cause or purpose, and follow it, ever so slowly.
- Rethink Capitalism – start to reframe a lot of what we believe and do as a product of our economic system. This can be confronting, especially if you have benefited from capitalism (which, let's face it, many of us have).
- Rethinking concepts of freedom, autonomy, what it means to live communally – I read a lot of political philosophy at university, and I love talking and thinking about this stuff. Recently I've been listening to Talking Politics, History of Ideas podcast. Loads of food for thought.

## GIVE BACK

- Normalise that what you are doing (raising children) is valuable and important. The way you do it matters. Raising and educating children is political.
- Beyond my own family, it has helped me to make lists of things I can actually do to make a difference, however small. I get easily overwhelmed by the every-changing news cycle, and to avoid paralysis I prefer to jump in and figure out what I can actually do to help, however small (and it always, inevitably, feels small). Things

like donations (if you can, make a list of organisations you will regularly donate to), spreading the word, volunteering time or resources, writing to local and national representatives, signing petitions, talking to friends and families about the issues you care about.

There is so much more, and I could go on.  
Can you add to this list?

What will you be doing to deschool & heal yourself?  
I'd love to hear. Thanks for reading and come find me @bigmothering



