



Episode #146:

**A Conversation About Unschooling with Self-Directed
Learning Advocate Blake Boles**

February 26, 2019

Debbie: Hey Blake, welcome to the podcast.

Blake: Thanks for having me.

Debbie: And I just, uh, just so listeners know that I'm recording this in the evening in New Jersey and I'm talking to Blake who is in New Zealand right now. So the audio quality sounds great and I just have to give a nod to Skype and modern technology.

Blake: I will also give a nod to communication technology. Thank you very much.

Debbie: Yes, thank you. So before we get started, I always like to just give guests an opportunity to introduce themselves a little bit about, you know, your personal why, uh, and I'm sure this work is very personal for you. So can you tell us a little bit about what you do and, and why you do it?

Blake: I've been working with teens who don't go to regular school for most of my adult career and I didn't get into this as a young person myself. I went to public school in California. I went to university because I thought I wanted to be an astrophysicist. And very quickly I was mugged by reality and instead got into alternative education and designed my own degree to study education full time because that just seemed a lot more interesting and relevant and important. And I started working at a summer camp after university called 'Not back to school camp', which is the preeminent summer camp for teenage unschoolers in the US and that's where I got to really meet a lot of these kids face to face. And it was so inspiring to meet them and to, to experience what it's like to work with teenagers in this more, I guess, authentic setting. And that inspired me to, to write books about them and for them and to start a company called Unschool Adventures through which I've taken teenage unschoolers on long-term international trips for the past 10 years. And that's how I've been making my money. And uh, that's the short story, Debbie.

Debbie: I just love how you designed a life for yourself that is, you know, I'm sure you're able to do the things that you love to do and you're serving kids at the same time. So it really seems like the ultimate win-win.

Blake: Yeah, it's been a great ride.

Debbie: That's awesome. So, well, let's just even look at the concept of unschooling. We were talking before I hit record and I haven't done many podcast episodes on homeschooling altogether. You know, a lot of our listeners don't homeschool, a lot are considering it. Um, and then there's a handful of us that do. So I've shared my experience with that, but we haven't even looked at this idea of unschooling. So can you explain what it is? How do you define it?

Blake: Homeschooling is legally the same thing as, as unschooling. And so there's no separate designation between unschooling and homeschooling. But unschoolers reject this word homeschool cause it implies school at home. And that conjures

this image of mom teaching Algebra at the kitchen table and the parent who has to be an expert in all these different subjects. And really most people who start out with traditional homeschooling, they migrate away from it. There's studies that confirm this. Within a few years, most families move towards something that looks more like eclectic homeschooling and some move straight into unschooling, especially with older kids. I think younger kids are much more adult and more parent oriented, but as soon as you hit adolescence they become more peer oriented and really like youtube becomes the better teacher than mom or dad. And so unschooling is really about embracing this whole idea of self directed learning and saying that my kid is a self directed learner and I'm going to support that and nurture it. I'm going to be their consultant instead of the boss of their education and we're in this together. And that's, that's pretty much as, as far as I can generalize unschooling, Debbie.

Debbie: Well that's interesting. I thank you for that definition. When I was living in the Netherlands, I was homeschooling my son there and there are very few homeschoolers in the Netherlands. The government makes it really difficult to get approval to do so. And the homeschoolers that I did connect with tended to be, you know, very much in the unschooling category, you know. I think I'm more the eclectic, and probably also have become less structured as the years have gone on. But, um, I think there is an idea maybe, and then I wanted to ask you about some of the myths. I'm sure that you get asked questions a lot about, you know, there's a lot of misinformation out there about what it means to be unschooled, you know. And the word on the street, at least in the Netherlands, is that those kids may not learn to read till they're teenagers or you know, the parents kind of are so hands off that the kids aren't learning I guess what would be considered more typical things, right? So, um, I'd love to just know from you what some of those myths are or when people have questions, I think this can be something that, that brings up a lot of confusion or again, the, those myths that are perpetuated. Anxiety, fear. Yeah. So what do you hear from people and what are some of your thoughts on that?

Blake: Well, some of the myths are true. You know, they're not myths. So, for example, kids who don't learn to read until later, I think teenagers would be a pretty strong exception. But definitely kids who don't learn to read at the normal age, but instead they're getting up into age seven, eight, nine. I mean, that freaks people out, right? And those kids do exist. And so it's not a myth. But the myth is that they will be irrevocably damaged by this experience. And the assumption is that when you look at that kid who didn't learn to read until age eight because that's when this kid got into Minecraft and all of a sudden decided, oh my gosh, I have to be able to read all of this stuff online to be able to, you know, participate in the world of Minecraft. The myth is that that kid will be somehow categorically different at age 15 from kids who were forced to read at the normal age.

And that's, in my experience, not true. And in the unschooling world, there's no great, you know, cover up of kids who, you know, can't learn to read or are permanently disabled by this, this early unschooling experience. And so I think we're speaking more towards the fear and anxiety instead of the myth. Um, I think socialization is another big one. And I'm sure if you've talked about

homeschooling, you've had to deal with this forever and ever. And again, I've met not just homeschoolers but unschoolers who do have challenges with socialization because they're relatively isolated, because they don't have opportunities to make many friends because their friends are online. And so that is a real challenge. But these kids still go on to higher education. They go on to get normal jobs. I think that for me, after being in this unschooling world for more than a decade, what I've seen is that unschooled kids don't face seriously different problems from other kids in their same socioeconomic demographic.

And so when people say, oh my gosh, if I don't force my kid to learn math right now, or you know, my kid is essentially in eighth grade and all these other kids are doing pre-algebra and my kid won't touch pre-algebra with a 10 foot pole. This idea that the kid will never be able to get into college. That's something I've been pushing back against for a long time because again, it's true. Yes, there are un-schoolers who don't know math when all these other kids know math. Uh, but when this unschooler decides that she wants to go to college, the same story happens over and over again. They figure out very quickly what they need to do to achieve this longer term goal. For example, I want to go to college so I can study marine biology because marine biology is cool. That's something that they've, they figured out in all of the, the freedom and self direction that you've given them. Then a kid has a serious intrinsically motivated reason to get their act together and learn math.

And this happens super quickly. Um, the Sudbury Valley School, famous Democratic Free School in Massachusetts, uh, has a wonderful story about a multi age group of kids at their school where no one is forced to learn anything. Um, who said, we want to learn basic math. And they asked one of the founding members of the school to teach them math. And the founding member was like, I don't think you really want to learn math, like somebody's putting you up to this right? And they said, no, we want to learn math. We want you to teach us. And he said, all right, I'm going to choose the most boring 1898 math primer, uh, you know, that I can find and we're just going to do drill and kill. You know, it's going to be pure math and you got to do your homework. You've got to show up on time.

And if you don't, then I'm not going to teach you. So they all said yes. And essentially these kids covered I think six years of academic, of school math in 20 contact hours. And so, yeah, so perhaps that's an exceptional story, but the principal, I call this the folk psychology of unschooling. The principle is that when the kid really wants to learn something and they have their own chosen reason to learn it, then they will do it rather quickly. And that's the power of self directed learning. That's why unschooling can lead to, to highly asymmetric kids in terms of their, their content knowledge. Uh, they might be really into Pokemon Go, they might be really into studying marine biology and they might be completely devoid of these other subjects. But you know what, so are most adults. Like I'm pretty good at thinking and writing and speaking about alternative education. My marine biology is in the tank and, and that's, that's a good pun. I didn't even try for that one. And uh, and but that has not been a major liability for me because the way that modern life works is we find

something that we're, we're good at that we can excel at where we can form a community and have connections and we focus on that. And that's what un-schoolers are doing. They're just practicing 21st century skills for survival a little bit earlier than the rest.

Debbie: Thank you. I love that answer so much. I mean one of the things that jumped out at me early in your response was just this idea that it is so respectful of kids' timelines. That's something I talk a lot about in the Tilt parenting community is because our kids are already often developing very asynchronously. They are maybe socially in one place and intellectually completely different stratosphere. And they may have some, you know, delays in a lot of areas. And it is really wrapped up in fear. But you know, I'm always trying to encourage people to respect our kids' timelines and know that when they're ready and they learn it and they, and they're ready to, to make that leap on their own, they can feel really confident about it as opposed to feeling like they're not meeting expectations. You know, which is a message they may hear a lot in a traditional system.

Blake: That's right. And when you take a kid who's been in the traditional system for a long time, and you do give them a little dose of freedom, maybe you're, you're thinking about dabbling with unschooling and you say, let's try this for three months. Most parents see their kids do nothing for three months because that is the first taste of freedom that this kid has gotten. You know, if you were in jail for a long time, you'd probably want to go and relax a bit too. And so there are these short term tests that, that parents do that often look like failures regarding unschooling. But what you're really seeing is the deschooling process, which the rule of thumb is for every year the kid's been in school, give them a full month to do absolutely nothing because they need to decompress, they need to experience boredom, they need to experience, you know, the reason why they should be intrinsically motivated because otherwise life is boring and pointless. And uh, yeah, that self direction tends to pick up.

Debbie: You just answered one of my questions. I was wondering if there is a detox period, but you call it deschooling, which I like. So that's pretty standard then I would assume. And maybe again for differently wired kids who may be leaving the school system feeling especially depleted or you know, not in a great space because of high anxiety or things that have happened, even trauma that may have happened at school, they might need even more time for that adjustment period.

Blake: Yeah. And this happens with kids who are, might be neurotypical, but, uh, are, are stereotyped as the good students. This happens for kids who are stereotyped as the bad students. Like the amount of labeling that we take with us from school lasts a long, long time. Uh, to the extent that many parents push their kids to, to do a certain thing in school because of their own labels that they have been, you know, kind of not dealing with. And so I was one of the good students. I got A's in school, I was good at pleasing my teachers. I was good at picking up academic work and figuring out how to play the game. And, you know, that's a very satisfying thing to be the person on top of the pile in this, this kind of weird false hierarchy that we've created called school. But I remember at some point, maybe

in high school looking to my left and right and seeing the kids who, who were on the, in the middle or the bottom of that hierarchy.

And really, you know, what have I done to earn this place as the star student? Um, I really feel like I just sort of stumbled into it kind of because my personality matched the kind of personality that school demanded. And to be one of the other students who is constantly being chastised and reprimanded and being told either explicitly or implicitly that they are dumb. They are stupid and really worthless year after year. Yeah, that's a traumatizing experience. Uh, I'm working on a new book right now and the premise, uh, for the introduction is that one day we're going to look back on institutional schooling the same way that today we look back upon child labor and we look back upon foot binding of women in China, which happened for almost a millennium. Uh, slavery even. It's going to look like this thing where we're, we're going to think, oh my god, how did most people just accept this as like the normal default, okay thing to do. Almost everyone was complicit in it. So that's, that's the gravity of the situation in my eyes.

Debbie: Sounds like a revolution that you want to start or probably already have started.

Blake: Hey, many other people started it a long time before me. I'm just picking up the pieces and trying to put them together in a new and interesting way.

Debbie: Yeah. Well I'm excited about that book. Um, so I want to talk a little bit more about the self directed learning. I love the example that you shared about the kid who, you know, may decide all of a sudden they want to apply to this school or maybe a certain program and they need something that they don't have and they can very quickly get the knowledge that they learn and it's at their own request. You know, they, they are self directed. In your experience, do you feel that kids who are unschooled you know, launch into adulthood being better equipped to be self directed in their, in their lives in general?

Blake: Yeah, definitely. And I think we need to be careful about, uh, kind of cause and effect here because it might be that unschooled kids succeed as highly self directed adults because they were born that way. They were just born wanting to take a more creative or entrepreneurial path or just being more nonconformist in general. And so what we see as success really might just be a selection effect. So it's hard to tell whether that's true or not. There's no good research, there's no good data on unschooling. There are some surveys of those who have been unschooled for a long time and those surveys look a lot like, yeah, these kids go on to do normal things, normal, relevant, relevant to their, their sort of socioeconomic brackets. Um, there are also surveys from these democratic free schools and other sorts of learning centers where you're essentially doing unschooling, but you're doing it in a community center. And those say that yeah, all the kids do fine also. I think there is a good measured tilt toward being a little bit more creative, being a little bit more entrepreneurial, uh, when you're a grown unschooler. Uh, so again, whether that produces that skill or it's just fostering their preexisting attitudes, I'm not sure.

Debbie: Okay. Thank you. So I know that you've written about going to college, you know, higher learning as an unschooler. In your experience, is that a hard transition, you know, if a child's never been in a formal school setting? And are there limitations in terms of what schools are available to kids who have been unschooled?

Blake: Sure. I'll answer that second part first. There is no formal restriction. There's no institutional barrier against unschooled kids. Uh, you know, kids who have never spent a day in school and have never used a formal curriculum at home, there's no barrier that will stop them from enrolling like there is in other countries where there are actual pretty serious barriers to homeschoolers, homeschooling all the way through high school and then going into university. And so we're pretty lucky in the United States in that regard. Essentially colleges hold unschoolers and homeschoolers and alternatively-schooled kids to the same standard as everyone else. And so you still have to play by the rules of the game. You know, they have to take the SAT. If you're going to get into a really competitive school, you have to take SAT subject tests. Some schools might do ACT instead. You have to show that you've covered the bases.

Blake: And so what a lot of un-schoolers do is that they enroll in community college classes. You know almost every community college will let you enroll starting at age 16, many of them you can start younger and you take, most unschoolers I know take a few part time community college classes. And if you end up with a class in English, and a class in math, and a class in history and you have decent grades in those classes, then essentially most four year universities are convinced that you can handle college level work. And anecdotally speaking, the kids I know who have gone on to universities are, their number one comment is like, wait a second, I thought this was supposed to be harder. There's a lot of people here who aren't taking this very seriously.

These kids are going to college because they have made you know, a more serious, more informed, more consensual choice to go there instead of what a lot of kids do, which is just, you know, they're checking off the next box. And so unschoolers tend to do very well in college. And you know, they're not going to ivy leagues in droves. You shouldn't unschool if you have this, this hidden wish to, you know, ensure that your kid will get into every top college. If you want to do that, then send them to the best prep school that money can buy. That's what wealthy families do. And so unschoolers do go to college, they go to all sorts and all ranges of colleges. Um, there's no big barriers there and they don't have problems integrating or socializing or handling the academics as long as they have had a little bit of exposure to formal academics before that.

Debbie: Okay. So I wanted to go back to self-direction a little bit. I was poking around on your website and I found a great post about giving kids more control. You reference the book, *The Self-Driven Child*, which I loved. Uh, I've been talking with Dr. Stixrud to get him on the show. I think it's such a relevant fantastic book. So as a homeschooling parent, this question is partly for me, but also I know that it's something that my audience will want to know as well because this is kind of a common thing and I'd love to know your thoughts. So after reading *The*

Self-Driven Child, I was really feeling this kind of desire to give a lot more control to my son Asher who's 14 and trying to, you know, give him that, that freedom to kind of make his own decisions about what you know, which he always, it's always been a collaboration, but I still was hounding him a lot about things.

And so I took a big step back. Yet I'm also as his homeschooling administrator, I feel responsible, uh, you know, in a way that I'm responsible for his education. So, even in asking that question, maybe I'm not, but I, I'm wanting to know your thoughts on that balance between, it feels like a little more if he was in school, I'd be like, hey man, it's your thing, you know, figure it out. I would maybe have an easier time. But because I sometimes am also his teacher or you know, I feel like his coach or consultant, I never know what that balance is.

Blake: One of my favorite lines, which I can only paraphrase from *The Self-Driven Child* is when they're talking about the parent acting more like a consultant than a, than a boss or manager of the kid's education. And if I think specifically about homework, uh, they say if, if your kid's not doing homework, not doing their homework, you know, you can make all these offers and incentives and suggestions, but fundamentally you, you have to let them fail. And the counter to that is, well, um, you know, but what if my child will then fail in their life? And their rebuttal was, well, it's your child's life. It's not yours. And so the message, one of the messages I took away from that book is that there is this, this kind of fundamental decoupling between parent and child and often this means between mother and child that needs to happen in order for this kind of parent as consultant ideal to flourish.

And really what *The Self-Driven Child* is striking against is the whole philosophy of intensive parenting, which doesn't, you know, it's not even a phrase that's popular in the lexicon because it's the air we breathe, it's the water we swim in. It's just the standard way of parenting that's been developed ever since the 80s and now it's not just for upper middle class families, it's the standard, the gold standard for, for everyone in which a parent is highly invested in the life of their child. And again, it's more often the mother than the father. And there's a high degree of identification between parent and child. One of my favorite authors who writes about this is William Deresiewicz who wrote the book *Excellent Sheep*, which is a must read book for anyone who is kind of really obsessed with making sure their kid can get into top colleges.

It, it, it's like a nuclear missile directly aimed at that assumption. And what Deresiewicz says is that we have these two phenomenons in modern life, one of which is, is over parenting or helicopter parenting. And that's, you know, I think we're all kind of familiar with what that looks like. And then he says there, there's over indulgent parenting, which looks like the parent who's way too lax and hands-off. And he says there's really, uh, a connection between these two that they're actually one and the same. And it's all about the, the over identification of parent with a child and the projection of parental needs and kind of desires for, you know, maybe unfulfilled objectives for our own lives, uh, to be projected onto children. Essentially, children are here to be our saviors and they are the primary kind of spiritual purpose of our life.

And it's such a radical departure from how parenting was conceived just in the 70s but definitely, you know a hundred years ago where children were essentially looked on as economic assets and you go back even farther and it's, there is no single parent with an intense relationship with their kid. The kid has been raised by all sorts of extended family and alloparents, you know, non family or extended family. And so what we consider normal parenting nowadays is actually a recent invention, which is called intensive parenting. And it's, I think it's at the root of the anxiety and concern that you described.

Debbie: Wow. It's so fascinating. And now I want to read that book and that I'm not the the core audience, but I love the, the concept for it. And I love this idea of decoupling because I think that is, you know, it's pervasive and it's to not be enmeshed with your child socially can be really tough too right? Because there's so much judging that goes on.

Blake: There is. You're fighting against a whole culture. It's an extremely hard thing to do. I think it gets a little bit easier when you opt out of the school system, but you're still there, you're still surrounded by all these other parents. And I know many unschooling parents who are still practicing intensive parenting and so it's, it's not easy by any stretch.

Debbie: It's a work in progress I'm sure. So if there are people listening to this and they are, their interest is peaked. Again, a lot of listeners I hear from are considering homeschooling because for whatever reason school is not working well for their child and maybe this feels like a match for what might help their child thrive. Do you have any tips for getting started if they have been in a traditional school system besides that deschooling period you mentioned

Blake: There's lots of great writing out there. A few places to start is with the works of John Holt who was kind of the, the father of the unschooling world. His book *Teach Your Own* is good and it's, he's not a radical unschooler. He's more like an eclectic homeschooler and so he's, he's a pretty solid intro to the whole world. There's a website to go to called The Alliance for Self-Directed Education and they have a lot of resources, not just about self-directed learning and unschooling but also about, um, learning centers and alternative schools where these, these principles are put into practice. Because a lot of parents just write off unschooling immediately cause they say, well we need one parent to be at home to do that or any other version of homeschooling and therefore it won't work for us because, you know, I'm a one parent family or both of us work.

And so you know, don't write it off so quickly. Unschooling might not be in the cards for you practically speaking, but if you can send your kid to a democratic free school, uh, an agile learning center, a liberated learner center. These are all over North America and increasingly in other parts of the world too. And so that can really enable self-directed learning for families that can't do homeschooling per se or are just not interested in it. Um, yeah, those would be the first places to go. And I think of the stuff that I've written that's been most helpful to families that are brand new to this, probably my first book *College Without High School*. That is also a nuclear missile directly aimed at this assumption that if you don't

send your kid to regular high school then they can't go to a four year college. And so I've got like a basic introduction to the ideas of self directed learning and unschooling and then like a step by step process for like how you prepare for going to college. And you do it without having a coercive relationship with your kid at the same time.

Debbie: Not having a coercive relationship with the teenager sounds perfect. It sounds like what we want. So okay, you have your *College Without High School* book and then also um, *Better Than College: How to Build a Successful Life Without a Four-Year Degree*. And then your most recent book, *The Art of Self-Directed Learning*. So and great resources that you just shared Blake, thank you so much. So I will have links to all of these on the show notes pages, everything that Blake just suggested as a starting point as well. So just go to the show notes pages to grab those. But is there anything that you'd like to leave us with or a way that people can connect with you and follow, I know you're very active on social media, what's the best way for people to stay connected?

Blake: You know, I'm only active on Facebook cause that's where all the homeschooling moms hang out.

Debbie: That's true. This is true.

Blake: That's right. That's right. And not on Snapchat I tell you. The one place to find all my stuff is BlakeBoles.com and that's like I've got my email newsletter. And so that's the easiest way to find out about like my next book coming out. I've got my podcast also called Off Trail Learning. So all of that stuff and the articles that I'm writing for The Alliance for Self-Directed Education, which are free. That's all on BlakeBoles.com and yeah, I'd love to see you there.

Debbie: Well thank you so much. This has been a fascinating conversation. I'm sure it has lots of people thinking. I've just added at least half a dozen books to my night table virtually.

Blake: I'm so sorry to do that to you Debbie.

Debbie: It's okay. It's exciting, but I'm a really slow reader, so it could take me awhile. But thank you for all of this and thanks so much for taking the time out of your day around the world to talk with us.

Blake: It's been my pleasure, Debbie. Thanks for asking good questions.

RESOURCES MENTIONED:

- [Blake Boles' website](#)
- [Unschool Adventures](#)
- [Off-Trail Learning](#) (Blake's podcast)
- [*The Art of Self-Directed Learning: 23 Tips for Giving Yourself an Unconventional Education*](#) by Blake Boles
- [*Better Than College: How to Build a Successful Life Without a Four-Year Degree*](#) by Blake Boles
- [*College Without High School: A Teenager's Guide to Skipping High School and Going to College*](#) by Blake Boles
- [Not Back to School Camp](#)
- [Subdury Valley Democratic Free School](#) (Massachusetts)
- [*Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite and the Way to Meaningful Life*](#) by William Deresiewicz
- [*Teach Your Own: John Holt Book of Homeschooling*](#) by John Holt
- [Alliance for Self-Directed Education](#)
- [List of Democratic Free Schools](#)
- [Agile Learning Centers](#)
- [Liberated Learners](#)