My Kid Goes to a Sudbury School

(http://threeblindwives.com/2013/04/19/my-kid-goes-to-a-sudbury-school/)

A couple of years ago, when my son Max was 8.5 or 9 years old, we saw a video about Sudbury Valley School. When the video was over, I looked at my son. He had tears in his eyes. He said, “Mom, why can’t all schools be this way?” I won’t argue here that all schools *should* be this way. I can’t presume to know what’s best for all children. I do, however, know that the public school model is not what’s best for Max for many reasons, which is why we chose to homeschool.

I love homeschooling. I love that we can make our own schedule, and I love the freedom to go where we want when we want. I love that we can spend as much time with our friends as we want, learning and playing together. I love that when all the other children are locked in doors, we have the world to ourselves from 8 AM to 3 PM, and usually at a discount price. Max loves homeschooling, too. However, he has said for years that he would rather go to his idea of the perfect school than homeschool. We didn’t know if this was his truth, or if his ideal school even existed. We just knew that we wanted to honor our son, and when we discovered the Sudbury model, we said that if ever we saw a way, we would try to get him to one.

Here we are, approaching school on Max’s first day.

Last fall, when my husband finished his degree and struggled to find a job in Kansas City, we decided to branch out. Keeping Max in mind, we said we would first only apply to cities which had a Sudbury school. When a friend informed us of a job in his town, Harrisburg, home of The Circle School, we thought it was meant to be, so we went for it. Jeff got the job, and though it was hard to leave our beloved home and all our friends, we moved to Harrisburg January 1st. (You can read more about The Circle School by following the link, and while you are there, check out the blog.)

> “At The Circle School and other self-directed, democratic schools, **agency in community** is the heart of our daily practice. Children come to school and live their lives — choosing, experiencing, reflecting, and choosing again — **mindful or reminded** of the community around them.” ~ Jim Rietmulder, “Agency, Attention, Mistakes, and School”

I must admit that I was hesitant to send Max to school, and even though we moved here largely for that purpose, I had a hard time believing that The Circle School would be everything we’d hoped. While the *idea* seemed good, we really didn’t know what to expect to see *in practice*. I was fully prepared to be disappointed at the tour and to go home and say, “Well, we gave it a shot. Let’s continue homeschooling.” However, when we actually arrived, what we found was pretty amazing.

We first had a meeting with Jim Rietmulder, co-founder and staff member, before touring the grounds. What struck me about Jim was how incredibly patient and attentive he was. Max can take a while to formulate his thoughts, especially when nervous, and Jim not only waited for Max to find his words, but he appeared to be genuinely invested in what Max had to say. And when he responded, he was thoughtful of Max’s concerns, and he treated Max with the same respect and regard as he would an adult. He didn’t dumb down his language, laugh when Max was “cute,” nor did he dismiss anything which may have seemed trivial to some. For instance, I believe the two of them spoke for at least 15 minutes about video game ratings, what constitutes “gore” and “violence” in a game, what type of gore or violence is allowed, and how the rules about the two can and do change based on the comfort levels of those in the community. This is *important kid stuff* that is often ignored by adults in institutional settings, or simply avoided by blanket rules which can be unfair or unreasonable.

During our meeting, several kids walked by and peeked in to see what we were doing. Most of them offered a friendly wave. When we toured the school, though the children all seemed to be doing something different, there was a unifying theme. They all appeared to be happy, and they were all engaged. Some were playing Minecraft in the computer room, navigating and negotiating the server they had created. Some were in the art room, some were eating or preparing food, and some were just chatting. We saw two teens lazily holding hands and gazing into each other’s eyes. (Jeff and I both assumed that was all those two probably do, but I later discovered that they are two of the most active students carrying much responsibility in the school.)

In the library, there was a little girl sprawled out on a sofa with a book. She looked up from it to say hello. I exclaimed at how nice of a library it was, and she said, “Oh yes, it’s my favorite place in the world. I spend most of my time here.” From the library, we stepped outside where a group of kids were doing an experiment with a stick, a leaf blower, and a roll of toilet paper. We stopped to watch. My four year old was mesmerized. In the music room, a kid slid over and allowed Jeff to duet with her on the piano. In the science room, we discovered snake skins and dried insects and bats. Then we found out they had lasers. *Real lasers*. Lasers that can cut through wood. Max was informed that only those with the highest level of certification may use the lasers, to which he nodded solemnly. It makes sense.

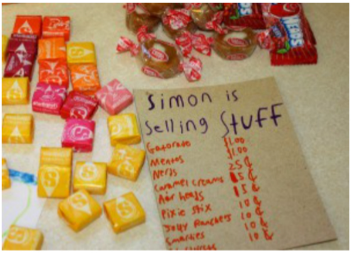
visualphotos.com

32tm0024rf [RF] © www.visualphotos.com

This isn't a picture from the school, it's just a random internet pic from visualphotos.com, but it captures the feeling of the library. I believe the girl was even shoeless. Either way, it couldn't have been more perfect if it had been written into a film script.

I suppose that aside from how happy the children seemed, what we were most impressed by was how much everything made sense. There are plenty of rules at The Circle School. A lot, actually, possibly even more than at other schools both public and private. The big difference is that at The Circle School, the rules are not made by one authority figure, or a committee of adults or "bosses." The rules are made by the community through the democratic process. There is a judicial committee made up of children and adults who run the school, and through the judicial process, enforce the rules. If a child, or an adult for that matter, breaks a rule, they will not be "in trouble." What happens is, someone (usually another child) writes that person up, citing which rule was broken. That citation goes to the judicial committee, or "JC," and the JC decides if it is indeed an infraction. If so, the child may plea guilty, or they plea innocent in which case they go to trial.

From what I've heard, trials may go quickly, or they can take up a full week with mostly everyone in the school getting involved. You can read more about The Circle School's democratic process here, but I will offer an example of what may happen if a child is found guilty. There was one case where a kid kept neglecting to wipe his feet and tracking mud into the school. There is no janitor here, the kids all have chores, so no one appreciates that sort of negligence. The kid was found guilty, and his "punishment" was to stay near the door for a certain number of days when the ground was wet, and make sure everyone else was wiping their feet. Or something like that. The point is that the kids are creative in their discipline, and the punishment fits the crime.



Also, there is a free market at his school. Students may sell goods and services at will. I borrowed this picture from the school's blog. Click on the picture to see it in the original article.

As I mentioned before, I was pretty apprehensive about the whole thing. During our trial period, I kept checking in with Max to see how he liked the school. I reminded him not to feel any pressure about his choice. We could extend the trial period by however long we needed before committing to a full year. I could tell he was annoyed with me, but I continued to ask daily. Finally he said, "Mom, when are you going to have respect for the fact that I want to go to this school?" That settled it.

Since then, Max has been so very happy. He wasn't unhappy before, not by any means, but he felt there was something missing, and whatever that something was seems to be fulfilled by his current attendance at The Circle School. Oh, and I am so proud to hear of the initiative he has taken. You see, in order to be able to do many of the activities, or to use much of the property, a child must be certified. Different certifications are run by different individuals or committees, and some only happen at certain times. For instance, to be certified to use the music room, you must attend the music committee meeting at 10:30 on a Tuesday (or something like that), and then you may begin the process. There is no one to make sure that you attend that meeting. It is all up to you if you want it.

It took Max a few weeks to remember to attend the music committee meeting, but then he wanted to play the drums badly enough, and he did what he needed to do. He has since been certified to use dishes, to check out books from the library, and has completed the basic certification for the science room. There's probably more. It's been a while since I asked. He's also been experimenting with selling different items as a side business, and from the reports I've heard, he completes his daily chores with pride and without complaint. I am so happy to see him take charge of his life in this way, to have agency and the freedom to make mistakes.

Oliver, my 4, almost 5 year old still homeschools. He *could* go to school with Max as kids may start as early as preschool, but he's not ready yet. Even when he is ready, it's possible that he may never choose to go. Max might decide after a year to go back to homeschooling. We are fortunate enough to have that option. However, for now we are happy with where we are. Max is thriving. For the first time in his life, he wakes up and gets ready without complaint, and is happy to go to school. I am still a bit shocked that we made this move across the country, following not only my husbands dream of a career in academia, but also Max's dream of attending a school without restrictions or conditions where he may grow, and that it is actually working out. I'm seeing my boys' dreams come true. I feel proud, and I feel inspired by them to pursue my own dreams. It feels good.

I'd be happy to answer any questions I can about alternative schooling options including Sudbury/democratic schools, homeschooling, unschooling, etc., as I'm sure would Lara and Charlie. Feel free to ask in the comments. And if you are a TCS (The Circle School) student, staff member, parent, or alum, and I've missed anything or I've gotten anything mixed up, or you'd just like to share a thought, please speak freely.

Update: I was wrong about the lasers. They do not have any strong enough to cut wood, but they are certainly open to getting some. Perhaps someone will read this and donate one, or maybe enough students on the science committee will be interested enough to raise the funds. I'd certainly like to "play" with it! After going through the proper certification channels, of course. 😉

Daniél

35 thoughts on "My Kid Goes to a Sudbury School"

1. *Julie*
   April 19, 2013 at 8:45 am Reply

   The school sounds wonderful! I'm so happy for your family!

    - SunnyD
      April 21, 2013 at 11:03 pm Reply

      Thanks, Julie. =)

2. *Rikke Knudsen*
   April 19, 2013 at 12:19 pm Reply

   Such a great story. Thanks for sharing! My kids attend a Sudbury school in Denmark http://www.dendemokratiskeskole.dk and are equally thriving 😃

    - *SunnyD*
      April 20, 2013 at 12:41 pm Reply

      Thank you! I wonder if any of the international Sudbury schools ever do an exchange program. Hm… Something to think about when Max gets older.

      ~Daniél

3. *Small Girl Big World*
   April 19, 2013 at 1:04 pm Reply

   I am not an alumn from the Circle School, but I went to Alpine Valley School in Colorado. It's interesting to hear about the school from a parent's point of view, since I was a student in the thick of things. I wish there were a Sudbury school closer to where I live so I could volunteer there. I have thought about starting one, but I know it's a lot of work with very little pay, and I live in a very expensive city (Vancouver, BC). Anyway, this was a great article. I hope it inspires more parents to check out Sudbury schools for their kids 😃

    - *SunnyD*
      April 20, 2013 at 12:38 pm Reply

      Love your blog. Alpine Valley is one of the schools we were looking at. I would love to live in Denver. I'm happy for you that you got to have that experience.

      Thanks for reading!

      ~Daniél

4. *everysensory*
   April 20, 2013 at 1:48 am Reply

   It sounds really wonderful *beams*. It must be terrifying for you, but I'm proud of you (and your family) for being so open, willing, and able to do whatever it takes for your children's education, happiness and mental well-being. Your medal is in the mail 😃 (if I had one, though, I'd send it!). P.S, the blog changes look really nice, tidy and easy to read. I miss your faces though, but love the font!

-
  SunnyD
  April 21, 2013 at 11:02 pm Reply

  Thanks, Ami. <3 I miss the faces, too. We're not set on anything yet, just experimenting with ways to keep it going in the midst of all of our crazy, busy lives.

5. *Sid*
   April 20, 2013 at 9:51 pm Reply

   Hey, i just wanted to give you props on your open-mindedness. My grandparents run Sudbury Valley School, so this is from personal experience of people not understanding the model. I wish Max all the best and hope your experience there is good.

   -
     SunnyD
     April 21, 2013 at 11:01 pm Reply

     Thank you, Sid. So, did you attend Sudbury Valley? It looks absolutely amazing. We plan to visit sometime to check it out.

6.
   stwaz
   April 21, 2013 at 1:32 pm Reply

   Nice post! Our son Elliott has been at the Circle School for ten years and our daughter Emma for 6. The school has been and continues to be a huge part of our lives. I've been percolating a blog post about it myself. Elliott has chosen to attend CASA this fall to study film & video, so perhaps him leaving will inspire a post.

   -
     SunnyD
     April 21, 2013 at 10:58 pm Reply

     How exciting! Let me know when you write about it. I'm always interested in hearing about what kids do after Sudbury. Plus, as a new to the school parent, it would be nice to read about your experience at TCS.

7. *Kaye*
   April 21, 2013 at 2:13 pm Reply

   My son started at Alpine Valley School in Colorado at age 10 after an extremely frustrating experience with conventional schooling. Almost 16 now– I couldn't be more pleased with this school. The decision was a major crossroad in his life and mine. Everything turned around for him. My only regret is that I didn't know about Sudbury when he was 5 years old. This model works and anyone needing "proof for comfort" can simply talk to graduates of the school to see how it served them.

   -
     SunnyD
     April 21, 2013 at 10:59 pm Reply

     I totally agree, Kaye. I've had the pleasure of meeting several alumni, and the proof is in the pudding, as the saying goes. =)

8. Rikke Knudsen
   April 21, 2013 at 3:21 pm Reply

   Well, we had exchange students several times. Last time form Clearwater school.

   Rikke

9. Pingback: A view from a new family | The Circle School

10.
    Bruce Smith
    April 22, 2013 at 10:22 am Reply

    I've been involved with Sudbury schools (mostly Alpine Valley) for about sixteen years, and I want to thank you for such a well-written, heartfelt account of the critical transition from "Really, there's a school like this?" to "This seems too good to be true" to "Oh, so this is how it works." Seriously, for as long as I've been writing and talking about Sudbury (including at my blog: http://writelearning.wordpress.com), I greatly appreciate the skillfulness of this tangible, concrete glimpse into what it's really like.

    On a side note, I've known a number of families who moved cross-country to enroll at a Sudbury school, so thanks for modeling that as well. I only wish more parents valued their children's happiness enough to trust their ability to find their own path.

    Bruce

    -
      SunnyD
      April 22, 2013 at 7:39 pm Reply

      Thanks for reading and for the kind words, Bruce, and thanks for sharing your blog. I poked around a little, but will read more, particularly your posts on your experience as a facilitator at Sudbury school, when I have a little more time to focus.

11. *shanna filizzi*
    April 22, 2013 at 10:42 am Reply

    Gavin bought one of those Izze drinks from Max last week… he wanted to use the can to go with his new soda can robot (because we don't drink soda at home) but realized too late that the can was too narrow. I'm pretty sure he just wanted to drink something 'naughty' but I read the ingredients and had to tell him it wasn't really too bad for him, all things considered. 😀

    -
      SunnyD
      April 22, 2013 at 7:34 pm Reply

      Haha! Yeah, I left the ultimate decision to Max, but have tried to discourage him from selling complete "junk."

12. *Marisa*
    April 22, 2013 at 2:39 pm Reply

I've attended open-house at The Circle School, spoke with several parents whose children attend and spoke with Jim and the staff on a couple of occasions. We received a postcard in the mail about The Circle School. I had never heard of it. We have tossed around the idea of enrolling them in private school at some point down the road. As a child, my husband was home-schooled, attended a private Christian school and a Montessori school. I attended public school and barely knew anything else even existed. Postcard in hand, my husband encouraged me to attend the open-house and so I did. He was not able to go with me due to his work schedule. Needless to say, I was skeptical. To my pleasant surprise the staff, current students and parents of students actually welcomed my skepticism. I'm happy to say that upon leaving the open-house, I was impressed and not nearly as skeptical. I'm sold on the concept and theory of Sudbury schools. Why all schools aren't like this is a mystery to me. However, the part that I continue to grapple with is this: All the parents I've had the pleasure of speaking with and all the articles and blogs I've read start essentially the same – their child just didn't fit in at public school. I have a son in 1st grade and a daughter getting ready to start kindergarten this fall. My son "fits in" well at his school. I suspect my daughter will be the same. Neither of my kids are "gifted" or have an extremely high IQ. They are typical kids. They have friends, they play sports, they've witnessed bullying, they've learned tolerance (from us and from teachers) they do well academically. With that said, as their parents, we would LOVE for them to attend and experience The Circle School. But could The Circle School be a mistake for them because they "fit in" at public school? As a parent, how do I / will I know if this school is right for them? Thank you in advance for your feedback.

- *Robin*
  April 22, 2013 at 8:38 pm Reply

  Dear Marisa,

  I am a TCS alum, and I went to public school before I went to Circle School. I did very well in public school and was a typical kid. I was near the top of my class, but def not at the top, and I was on the basketball team, went to dances, etc. Very normal, I'm not "gifted" (I know, I was tested 😛), I fit in, had friends, all that normal stuff. I absolutely thrived at The Circle School, and had no difficulty transitioning. And I liked public school ok, though not the everyday bullying. Disclaimer: I would say that you CAN'T know if The Circle School will be right for your kids before they try it. But if they want to give it a shot, I say go for it! They can always switch back no harm done if they don't like it.

  Feel free to contact me with further questions.

  -Peace

  - *Marisa*
    April 23, 2013 at 7:11 am

    Thank you, Robin!

13. *SunnyD*
    April 22, 2013 at 7:31 pm Reply

    I think that is a great question, Marisa, and I'm glad you brought it up. I can totally see where you are coming from. I am personally not the person to tell you Sudbury is the right fit for your kids. I do believe in this model of education, but only you can decide what's right for your kids. I would encourage you to attend another open house or event at The Circle School and talk to some more people about their experiences. There is a Spring Gala on May 11th from 12-4 pm. There will be music, food, and a silent auction. I encourage you to go. If you do, look for me there. I can introduce you to some folks who may be better equipped to answer your question.

I came to TCS as an "unschooler," so aside from the separation and adjusting to the compulsory attendance, the transition was fairly seamless. However, years ago, before discovering unschooling and the whole child-led/non-coercive/trust-based/non-results oriented learning philosophy, it took a while for me to feel that paradigm shift. The thing that helped me the most was hearing story after story, account after account of people who were living the lifestyle, and all the varied experiences they had. Also, reading lots of books on the subject helps a lot. Books like *Teach Your Own* and *Free Range Kids* are a good place to start, and I've been told that *Free to Learn* by Peter Gray, which just came out last month is excellent. It's on my must-read list. I think when you look at education differently, as something that is more of an organic process rather than something that must be metered and dispensed, then you're less likely to think your kid must be a certain "type" for this to work. It's really all about what resources are available in my opinion and how much you are willing to participate, as much as it about trusting in the process.

All that said, I have met a few different kids who did well in traditional school, but thrive at TCS. One young woman actually left TCS because she felt she wanted more of the structure of public school. She did great in public school, but after a year she was bored with it and was back to TCS. Then there was an alumnus who came to the school in high school. He very much enjoyed structure and responsibility, and so he became active in the JC (judicial committee), and with other students and staff as facilitators was able to get all the structure and academics he felt he needed. This kid (he's in college now) seemed very much like someone who "fit in" at public school. I would bet he was even fairly popular (just a guess), and I know he got good grades. The thing that's nice about the school is that the sky is pretty much the limit for what a kid can do there. The aforementioned kid organized a field trip to Europe for crying out loud!

I could go on and on, but in the effort of not writing a novel, I'll stop for now. If you have any more questions, I'm happy to continue the discussion, and hopefully others will weigh in as well. But like I said before, continue reading accounts and talking to different people. I don't know if you'll ever feel fully "prepared" though, 'cause at first it can be a pretty big leap of faith! Just remember that nothing is permanent. You can always go back to what you were doing, or try something else if it doesn't work out. I hope I see you at the Spring Gala!

~Daniél

14. *Marisa*
    April 23, 2013 at 7:13 am Reply

    Thank you for your reply and for the suggested reading. I'm going to see if the library has any of them. Thanks again!

15. *Carol*
    April 24, 2013 at 9:49 pm Reply

    Hi,
    Thanks so much for the post. I live in Camp Hill and visited The Circle School last year. The only thing that held me back from registering my kids there was the cost. However, I am really considering sending my 9 year old daughter there next year. She is doing just fine in the public school, however, I am the one that is struggling with the "system." It seems to be lacking so much common sense! I recently read the book "Free at Last" (about the Sudbury model) and I thought, "Yes! That is how it should be!" I was so impressed. I think it might be worth the financial pain to get her into a school I really believe in. I think we would BOTH be better off.

    - *SunnyD*
      April 28, 2013 at 12:03 pm Reply

Yeah, we don't have a lot of money, and it is a sacrifice, but for us it is 100% worth it. Luckily, we don't have a car payment anymore, so that helps.

16. *JD*
May 25, 2013 at 7:23 am Reply

You asked for corrections from students and staff… I'm sorry to say we do not (yet!) have lasers that can cut wood in the science room. We have a helium-neon bench laser that's more powerful than a laser-pointer, but is no danger even to bare skin. Someday…!

- *Daniél Minton*
  May 26, 2013 at 3:03 am Reply

  Yes I did ask for corrections! Thank you for clearing that up. Jeff and I have argued about it since the day we took our tour. I bet what I heard was, "We don't have any lasers powerful enough to cut wood or anything…" I think it was wishful thinking on my part. We need to fix the this! Perhaps a "powerful laser fund." 😉

17. *notagoodexperience*
June 6, 2013 at 7:17 pm Reply

We also moved several states to attend (hopefully) The Circle School – from Kentucky to Harrisburg. Maybe our kids will meet up next year if we are able to afford tuition. Last year we loosely homeschooled but my daughter is so social (we socialized an extreme amount) and as an almost only child (only one at home) We are drawn to the community part that I can't give with just two of us at home. Well, she's drawn to "the school where I can take my shoes off". But, we all have our interests. And that's some of the point, I think 😀

- *Daniél Minton*
  June 14, 2013 at 4:51 pm Reply