

Contributed by a parent from Deep Creek Learning Center, an Acton Academy
and shared by Erin Decker, Administrator

“We had escaped the trap of obsessing about homework, PTA policies, and grades on tests. Like freeing birds from cages, we were loosening our grip on our children and they were learning to fly.”

Laura Sandefer

Courage to Grow: How Acton Academy Turns Learning Upside Down

Loosening my grip on my children? Yes. Learner-led? Yes, I like the sound of that.
Letting go of control? In theory, yes, In practice, well, it's pretty hard.

Questions I have asked myself at certain points over the last few months since having our 5 year old daughter Blake start at Deep Creek:

1. What does she actually do all day?
2. How do I know that she is learning?
3. What if this approach is 'too much' for her?
4. I want to reach out to the guides, but aren't I supposed to be getting info from Blake?
5. I like the idea of no tests/grades. But how do I know there is progress happening?
6. Do I really have to go tent camping ? 😊

I knew when we heard about Acton Academy through our friend who lives in Austin, TX, and then read the Courage to Grow book that founder Laura Sandefer wrote, that the approach spoke to my heart.

Years before Blake was of school age, and before her younger sister Mia was even born, I had an idea that I wanted something different than traditional school for our kids. When my husband DJ came home from a conference he attended, and talked about how cool it was that an attendee had his son with him as part of a homeschool project, I got excited that we may actually pursue something other than a traditional path.

While exciting, I also knew that this would be a different kind of HARD than traditional school. This kind of hard requires us to put our daughter into a situation that we knew would stretch her in ways that would frequently be challenging and sometimes even painful. (And there were a lot of tears over the first few weeks of school. The transition was tough for her.) Historically she has been quiet, a rule-follower, an observer in groups or new situations, and she feels things deeply. DJ and I knew... we either

choose hard now, or hard later when she's in high school, college, or out of our house and has to navigate all of these things anyway. We chose hard now.

Lessons I've learned so far:

1. Reaching out to other parents when I have questions, or need to know if I'm crazy, has brought me peace of mind. Is it awkward sometimes to make new friends and say- "Hey, I'm worried about my kid. What's your experience like?" Yes. Have I been welcomed with open arms and solidarity the few times I've done it? YES!
2. I've gained a lot from coming to the social events. (Yes, even tent camping 😊 Which is not my jam.... But Blake still talks about it as an awesome memory we made together.) And I had campfire conversations with some parents who I now feel comfortable reaching out to. I've realized the social aspect for parents is thought out and intentional. It's not just for a fun time- which it always is. It's to provide us access to each other and to form real relationships that we can lean on when this road feels tricky or lonely.
3. When doubt creeps up for me about the school, the process, Blake's abilities, whether she's making friends, or whatever my worry du jour is, I have learned a valuable tool. To ask myself... "Is this about Blake, or is this about me?". 9 out of 10 times it's about me. My worries, my insecurities, my performance-driven self needing to know that Blake is 'on track' and thriving.. I reflect on my worry for a day or two, or sleep on it, and if something is still bothering me, then I will act on it by talking to my husband, another parent, or to Blake directly.
4. With this type of learning approach, and less school-led communications coming home, I've struggled a bit. I learned I had to experiment with my question asking skills of Blake. Some practical tips that I've learned by trial and error that work for us (sometimes!) are:
 - Trying what I call 'throw away ?'s'- meaning I'm more casual about it, and not heavily invested in getting them answered. – asking in the car, or at bedtime in the dark, while I'm cooking dinner, or while she's playing and focused on other things. It seems to take the pressure off her. And I really had to learn to be ok with her not spilling the beans when I decided it was a good time for us to talk.
 - We've also been asking her more targeted things like- what are you enjoying in Core Skills? Or what friends did you talk to today? What did you do outside? What felt hard today? We tend to hear more from her this way than asking "How was your day?" - it's just too broad.

- There are things she perks up about when she mentions, and then we try to ask about those things more often. Core Skills and accruing points seemed to be something she's into. So we often ask "What did you do in Core Skills today?" or "What's something new you're practicing in Core Skills?"
4. Sometimes it feels lonely to have made this choice. Like when I pass the bus stop at the end of our street and see our neighborhood friends and their kids all gathered where the public school bus picks up, I feel like I'm on the outside looking in. I know some of them wonder what we think is wrong with the school they all send their kids to.

I feel totally solid in our decision. Yet I also feel lonely sometimes that we're not in the neighborhood elementary school clique. But when Blake tells me that you're supposed to be challenged in school, or that she climbed a tree for the first time (after months of watching other Sparks do it), or that she knows you learn by making mistakes.... I know we've made the right choice. We made the choice that best aligns with our family values, rather than going with what everyone is doing.

Well friends, probably time to wrap this up. If this were in person, I'd be getting signs to land this plane! I just wanted to share with you that you are not alone. We are all coming in with different kids, and different perspectives, but the path we're traveling is really quite similar. We all have some hesitation and doubt from time to time. We may question the process and wonder if this path will lead where we think it will. We value freedom of learning, we want our kids to grow as kind and loving humans, not just to pass tests, and we're willing to be in uncomfortable situations for our own growth and that of our kids.

And I think that's a pretty awesome community to be a part of. I hope to get to know you if we haven't yet met at a social event or Exhibition, and reminding you that- WE CAN DO HARD THINGS!!

Signed,

Blake's Mom

DJ's wife

Recovering grades obsessed student

