

What is Deschooling?

A guide for parents who are just starting out

From someone who's been home educating for ten years. You've got this.

If your child has just left school — whether that was their choice, yours, or simply the only option left — the most important thing you can do right now is not very much at all.

That probably sounds counterintuitive. You've just taken on responsibility for your child's entire education. Surely you should be *doing* something?

You are. You're deschooling. And it matters more than almost anything else you'll do in those first weeks.

Deschooling is the long, deep breath your child needs before they can start learning again.

SO WHAT ACTUALLY IS DESCHOOLING?

Deschooling is the period of decompression between leaving school and starting home education. It's the time your child needs to shake off the stress, the anxiety, the association of learning with pressure — and remember that curiosity is natural, and that they actually like knowing things.

The word comes from the writer and philosopher Ivan Illich, whose 1971 book *Deschooling Society* gave us the term — though he was writing about society's dependence on schooling, not a child's recovery period. The version home educators use — roughly a month of decompression for every year spent in school — is well-worn community wisdom rather than a rule from any single source. You don't have to follow it rigidly, but it's a useful gut-check.

WHAT DOES DESCHOOLING ACTUALLY LOOK LIKE?

- Sleeping in. Not having to be anywhere at 8am.
- Reading whatever they want — or being read to.
- Following an interest down a rabbit hole.
- Playing. At any age. Play is learning.
- Baking, building, gaming, drawing, watching docs.
- Just being at home. Feeling safe. Not being assessed.

None of this is wasted time. All of it is part of the process. A child who is regulated, rested and reconnected to their own interests will learn ten times faster than a child who is burnt out and braced for pressure.

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THE DESCHOOLING TIMELINE – A ROUGH GUIDE

- WEEK 1-2
Do almost nothing structured. Let them sleep, play, exist. Don't mention lessons. If they ask to do something educational, great — follow their lead. If they don't, that's fine too.
- WEEK 3-4
Gently introduce rhythm without routine. Meals at regular times. A walk. Some reading together. No pressure, no timetable — just a gentle shape to the day.
- MONTH 2
If they're ready, try a Study Week — a loose, interest-led week where they explore things that genuinely interest them. Watch and learn: this tells you so much about how they learn best.
- MONTH 3+
Start to introduce light structure if they seem ready. Follow their lead. Some children bounce back faster; others need longer. Trust what you see, not what the calendar says.

WHAT ABOUT YOU?

Deschooling isn't only for your child. You probably need it too.

If you've been watching your child struggle — fighting to get them into school, dealing with the fallout when they got home, fielding calls, attending meetings — you are tired. Give yourself permission to settle into it slowly.

Use this time to observe. Watch how your child spends their time when there's no pressure. Notice what they gravitate toward. You're gathering information that will shape everything that comes next.

The best thing you can do right now is create safety. Learning will follow.

WHEN YOU'RE READY TO START – REMEMBER

- There is no race. The school system's timelines are not compulsory.
- GCSEs don't have to be taken at 16. Kids don't need to be reading by 7.
- Home education doesn't have to look anything like school.
- You don't have to be a teacher. Your job is to facilitate.
- Changing your approach isn't failing. It's responding. That's good parenting.

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THINGS THEY'VE GRAVITATED TOWARD DURING DESCHOOLING

You don't need a subject list. Just a few lines each week noting what your child gravitated toward, what held their attention, and what they asked about. Over time this becomes your map.

WEEK 1-2

WEEK 3-4

MONTH 2

MONTH 3

MONTH 4-5

MONTH 6+

THINGS TO FOLLOW UP / WHAT I NOTICED

A NOTE ON THE LEGAL SIDE

If the local authority gets in touch early, a brief written description of how your child is currently learning is generally all that's needed. Your duty is to provide a suitable education, and that duty applies from the day you deregister — what you record here is usually evidence enough. The framework is changing under the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act 2026, so for what the law asks of you right now, see our up-to-date guide at <https://kitchentableschool.co.uk/changes-to-uk-home-education-law-what-the-2026-law-actually-means/>.

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