

Podcast: Good Enough Homeschool

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Transcription by Keffy Kehrli

[00:00:00] [Sound of pages turning rapidly.]

Courtney: [00:00:10] Hi, I'm in my office, looking at the stacks of books on every surface. It's a sunny day and the light is all shining on all these books about history and math and science, and all the lab kits. So for the next two weeks, my goal is to plan my children's home school curricula for the school year. But unlike a whole lot of other people, it's not because of the pandemic. It's because I've been a secular classical homeschooler since 2014. And I'm not the only one. Jen Naughton, my co-host, has been doing this longer than I have.

Jen: [00:00:44] I began homeschooling way in the dark ages of June 2001. I thought, if we like it, the boys won't go back in the fall. We did like it. We all thrived at home. And here I am with four graduates, nearly 20 years later. Our oldest three boys are now 28, 26, 25. And our daughter is in college and she'll graduate next year with her BFA in Photography. My youngest is still at home, and he officially starts high school next month. And since we school year-round, we're all over the place in our curricula.

Courtney: [00:01:20] Now, Jen and I have never met in person, but we both share a commitment to secular, classical homeschooling. In this brave new world of pandemic homeschooling, we are the old guard. As experienced homeschool mamas, we don't want our listeners to get scammed by all these fly-by-night companies out there looking to make a quick buck off of newbie homeschoolers. We have the dirt on the best curricula and we're not afraid to share.

[00:01:50] In today's show, we're going to talk about our own plans for the upcoming school year. Now, Jen, your youngest, Declan, he's 14? Is that right?

Jen: [00:01:58] Yeah.

Courtney: [00:01:59] Yeah.

Jen: [00:02:00] Yeah.

Courtney: [00:02:01] And I have two kids. Gwen is 12 and Elena is six. So this means that between the two of us, we've got elementary, middle, and high

school covered. And not only that, this is Jen's fifth time. We've got your back.

[00:02:16] So, Jen, what are you and Declan up to this year?

Jen: [00:02:19] I can safely say, all the things. But not at the same time. Let's start with math. His seventh grade year, two years ago, we just stopped the progression where we were in math and we spent the year, and I bought Rod and Staff Math 4, 5, and 6. Now they're a hardcover—

Courtney: [00:02:37] Now, hold up. Hold up. You did these, 4, 5, and 6, all in the seventh grade year?

Jen: [00:02:41] Yeah. Because we just sped through, and if he knew how to do it then we kept going. I was looking to fill the holes because I wasn't sure exactly what he didn't get. Those three books introduce everything and they have very simple instructions, so I could hand him the book, and if I was doing something else, he could read the top part and say, "Oh yeah, this is... that's right. This is division. This is what I'm doing."

Courtney: [00:03:08] Oh, I love that for middle schooler. I don't know about Declan, but it's been my experience with the middle schoolers in my house that being able to hand them the book is huge.

Jen: [00:03:16] Well, that, and the books were so cheap. I think \$11 or \$13 for a big hardcover textbook. Let him write right in it. Obviously, in our case, we weren't going to use it again. And also, there was no way he could concentrate on learning the math procedure and copying the problems onto another piece of paper.

Courtney: [00:03:39] Been there... Because that's the thing about homeschooling that's so important to me. Is that I don't just want to do an adequate job, I want to do a really good job. Right? I want the best that is best for my child. I mean, everybody's child is different and their best will be different from what's best for my child. But I want the best! And so why not get the very best that we can get.

Jen: [00:04:01] Right. Right. I agree. We also used the Kate Snow multiplication workbook.

Courtney: [00:04:07] It's her math facts series.

Jen: [00:04:10] Yeah, it's her math facts series. So we did that.

Courtney: [00:04:11] I just bought that. And you liked it?

Jen: [00:04:14] I liked it because, remember, so Saxon K-3 really worked for him and this was kind of similar. There's a lot of oral, there's a lot of games. But it's a lot simpler than, say, RightStart Math. Couldn't figure it out.

Courtney: [00:04:30] There's a separate book, and I own the book, and I will tell you, I'm a huge RightStart fan. I use it with Elena. And I love the scripted nature of it. I love the—especially for the little kids, the hands-on manipulatives. I skipped the games, all of them.

Jen: [00:04:46] Of course.

Courtney: [00:04:46] I did not have time for that. Mm-mmm. Mm-mmm. I'm of the brute force approach.

Jen: [00:04:56] I know...

Courtney: [00:04:57] Like I want to be that kind, patient parent. We use Saxon $5/4$ and $6/5$ and then we skipped $7/6$ and she's doing $8/7$ this year. And they have those math fact worksheets which a lot of people skip.

Jen: [00:05:15] Yeah. And you can't. With Saxon, you need to do the whole thing.

Courtney: [00:05:19] You do. Don't do every other problem. Don't skip the fact practice work sheets. It's all designed to be one cohesive, interlocking curriculum. And it works!

Jen: [00:05:30] It does.

Courtney: [00:05:30] So you're using Saxon right now, though, right? Yes?

Jen: [00:05:34] Right. So yeah. So he used Saxon $8/7$ in eighth grade and we finished it end of May. We actually should have finished it in April, but the whole pandemic thing, really like... even at home, threw off the whole rhythm of things. But he did great in it. He got all A's on every single test all year. We did the whole thing. And now we're on test three of Algebra I and he still is getting all A's, so I'm assuming we're going to stick with Saxon all the way through high school.

Courtney: [00:06:04] Now you're using the third edition, year?

Jen: [00:06:05] Yeah. Homeschool 3rd edition. And if I didn't already own it, I'd be like, hey, send me some. But you know. I already bought them with my own money, so.

Courtney: [00:06:14] Here's how much I love Saxon. When I started homeschooling Gwen, I tracked down Algebra 3, used, on eBay. So I own it. Gwen and I are going to work through it maybe when she's in high school. Because it is that good a program. It stands the test of time, it really does, that one.

[00:06:34] All right. So we love math.

Jen: [00:06:35] We love math.

Courtney: [00:06:35] And we both love the Saxon, and Gwen has been using the Saxon and Elena has been using the RightStart. Let's talk about reading. Right? Reading, writing, arithmetic.

Jen: [00:06:46] Oh, I love reading.

Courtney: [00:06:48] Yeah. Give me all the books.

Jen: [00:06:51] Right, right.

Courtney: [00:06:52] Last winter was not great at my house. We discussed this last fall, right? And I was like, I need something that she can do relatively independently because I do not have time to hand curate all her literature.

Jen: [00:07:05] I know.

Courtney: [00:07:06] I'm too busy. We both decided that we liked Build Your Library, right?

Jen: [00:07:10] Yeah, I feel like that's the best year that they offer, is eight, because Declan is the same way, where he loves non-fiction. And he loves science. And so we're still maybe only halfway through that list. Still plugging away at it. I think, well, jumping ahead to science, I think what I'm going to do is let him finish it and give him, maybe a semester history of science elective credit.

Courtney: [00:07:34] That makes sense. It's really good stuff. Gwen, because she's precocious reader, has been doing the weekly reading as assigned almost totally independently. Every day she'll bring it to me. She's like, "Mom!" Apparently they were reading a book about Darwin. I don't even remember the title, and he married his cousin and she was appalled.

Jen: [00:07:53] Oh yeah. There's so much I didn't know about all these scientists. Declan has told everyone we know. He's like, "Did you know..."

Courtney: [00:08:04] I really like Build Your Library, that year eight. I think I like it so much, I'm going to have Gwen go back and do year seven, which is world geography when she finishes this up. She did medieval history with Mr. Caro at the Well-Trained Mind Academy. I'm going to 1600-1850, because that's the next step. I'm very much about the Well-Trained Mind style.

[00:08:24] On my to-do list for the next couple of weeks is to sit down and schedule all that reading for her for history and literature. She reads for me. And I don't think that I'm being a horrible person by assigning her reading. You learn to love reading because you're good at it and because you've been exposed to things. You can't talk about what you don't know.

Jen: [00:08:47] Yeah, I think that... I think that goes into the classical homeschool philosophy. I feel that way also. That's why, although unschooling can be done, and done well, I feel like if you're doing it super well, you're almost classical homeschooling anyway.

Courtney: [00:09:05] [crosstalk]

Jen: [00:09:06] All these philosophies collide.

Courtney: [00:09:08] Frankly, I do not have time.

Jen: [00:09:10] I know!

Courtney: [00:09:10] I have to cram what I work with, with the girls in around my teaching. I don't have time to coddle my children through learning to love stuff.

Jen: [00:09:22] No. And some stuff you just have to learn whether you ever like it or not.

Courtney: [00:09:25] Mm-hmm. Like, to be a functioning adult.

Jen: [00:09:27] I mean, you need to have a well-rounded education no matter whether you're trying to get into Harvard or community college, or you're going to be an apprentice somewhere. Still, there's things you need to know. I mean, that gets into a little bit of cultural literacy, which is another one of my soap box issues. Build Your Library 9, the Spine, for science, is a short history of nearly everything.

Courtney: [00:09:52] Is that that Bill Bryson book?

Jen: [00:09:53] It is that Bill Bryson book, and we're listening to it as an audio book and it's quite good. So back to the science. Officially, I thought we were going to do Oak Meadow Environmental Science.

Courtney: [00:10:04] I remember you said you picked that up, yeah?

Jen: [00:10:06] Yeah, I have it and he wants to do it but we haven't started it yet because so in love with this history of science stuff, so...

Courtney: [00:10:15] Go Emily Cook!

Jen: [00:10:17] I know. I think we'll probably just start it in the actual Fall. So scheduling and planners is another conversation.

Courtney: [00:10:25] So thinking of curriculum, Elena, like I said, I did RightStart with her. But Elena also has a really serious hearing issue. So we're doing the Teach Your Child to Read in 100 Easy Lessons. And I don't care if people think it's boring. It is effective. There are fewer tears on her part and my part now that we've gotten past the halfway point in the book. So she's got reading and she's got math, and she has to learn how to write.

[00:10:49] I bought the Memoria Press's North American Cursive. They sell software, and it's not expensive. I think it was like \$25 or \$30. What's really cool about it is that it lets you make your own copy work. There's more of that in the Writing With Ease, which is also one of my favorite programs. Did you use that with your younger? Was it around then?

Jen: [00:11:08] Yeah, I really liked it. I liked having all the copy work ready for me. My... because I'm all good and bad. I can't just not say what I didn't like. Okay, what I didn't like was that the copy work wasn't coming out of books we had read. And so a lot of times, either it was a really good book and I was like, let's stop everything and read this whole book. But then there were sometimes where my kids were like, why am I copying this, I don't even know what they're talking about.

Courtney: [00:11:37] The theory is, I think with that teacher's book, right? The Writing With Ease, Teacher's Book, is that a thing? Do I remember that?

Jen: [00:11:42] Yeah. Yeah, I have the little... it's like a little hardcover, and it teaches you how to pull your own copy work out of things.

Courtney: [00:11:48] Right. I'm too busy for that.

Jen: [00:11:50] Right. Well, that's the thing. Everyone is either too busy or too clueless. I can see it would be very hard to be pulling appropriate

sentences. They would either be too hard or too easy. I'm actually shocked that they haven't sold a set of books to go with...

- Courtney: [00:12:05] She does use some great literature in that program.
- Jen: [00:12:08] She does.
- Courtney: [00:12:08] And we did the same thing where Gwen would be like, "I love this story, mama, what's the story?" I'm like, oh, well, since you ask...
- Jen: [00:12:16] Let's get it.
- Courtney: [00:12:17] Let's read that one. And then we also are using First Language Lessons, which gets so many knocks for the rote memorization, but I'm telling you what. It was fantastic for Gwen.
- Jen: [00:12:31] And it's so much easier to memorize all that stuff when you're younger.
- Courtney: [00:12:35] Actually, that reminds me. There is a book called The Teenage Brain by some neuroscientist. I want to say her name is Frances Jensen, maybe? And she had a co-author, Amy Nutt. N-U-T-T, if I remember this correctly. So at some point in the book, they talk about how learning changes in the brain over the years. There's this graph. It's this very simple black and white graph and it shows the different way that your brain operates at different ages. And right there, in black and white, is this curve about how memorization is actually easier at younger ages. This is not just some wacky classical educator thing. This is a neuroscientist thing. Which is kind of interesting.
- Jen: [00:13:19] That is interesting. I mean, that's part of the reason I stuck with Memoria Press for quite a few years was the memory work being built in. Excellent memory work. The catch-all with that is when you're talking K-1,2? You could just buy those memory lists off their website. You can download them, and they're like \$2.
- Courtney: [00:13:38] Did that! And I am not one of those people who thinks you should be memorizing stuff just for the sake of memorization.
- Jen: [00:13:43] Right. And my kids loved memorizing. It was never a chore.
- Courtney: [00:13:48] And that's the beauty of homeschooling, right? Is that you can do that. You can be flexible.
- Jen: [00:13:53] Oh yeah, you just tweak the heck out of everything.

Courtney: [00:13:55] I don't know anybody who uses stuff... speaking of tweaking the heck out of things. I'm going to pick up Building Foundations of Scientific Understanding for Elena this year.

Jen: [00:14:05] Good luck with that.

Courtney: [00:14:06] I like it. I like it so much. It is the worst best program ever. To me, it's about those conversations and having those really good, really thoughtful questions. At least at the younger end. And then we're going to do Artistic Pursuits. That's where I'm at for curriculum for the year.

Jen: [00:14:26] I'll just speed through what we're doing. In the Well-Trained Mind sequence, we're in the red grammar workbook, so.

Courtney: [00:14:32] We have owned it and loved it as well. Two thumbs up.

Jen: [00:14:34] Yeah. So we're doing that. We're doing Writing With Skill 2, and I don't know why I always want to call it writing with style. History, we've always done a dual track for history. I read this book, The Latin Centered Curriculum.

Courtney: [00:14:48] AJ! AJ!

Jen: [00:14:51] Yeah, AJ Campbell is the best. Totally the best. I loved it. So I have the first edition, I have the second edition, it's now out of print.

Courtney: [00:15:04] You know, that Well-Trained Mind first edition is enough different that if you, our listeners are out there, it is well worth laying your hands on a copy.

Jen: [00:15:11] Especially if you don't have a lot of money, because when she wrote, when Susan Wise Bauer wrote that book, there was not a lot of secular homeschool curriculum out there and so she explained how to do it with books at the library.

Courtney: [00:15:23] A library card.

Jen: [00:15:26] And so, and don't worry about—like, when she says, for history, get the Kingfisher History this year. No, just get the current Kingfisher History. Don't go searching for the, you know.

Courtney: [00:15:36] Yeah, whatever you get is fine. Don't panic.

Jen: [00:15:37] For the—

Courtney: [00:15:39] Buy, like the absolute cheapest, because your kids are going to use it every day and beat it up.

Jen: [00:15:44] My kids really liked that. And that's what several of my kids used for middle school because there was—

Courtney: [00:15:50] Not a lot...

Jen: [00:15:50] Really nothing. There was Story of the World for 1-4, and then you were like, in this dead zone.

Courtney: [00:15:56] You still are, actually.

Jen: [00:15:57] Yeah, you still are.

Courtney: [00:15:59] Which is why I'm putting this together myself.

Jen: [00:16:00] So, anyway. Back to that whole thing. We're going to just try and do straight American History this year—

Courtney: [00:16:06] Really.

Jen: [00:16:06] Because we never have and it just seems like it might be the right time.

Courtney: [00:16:10] And so, what are you using?

Jen: [00:16:11] Okay, so I'm using the Hakim books. So he loves the Story of Science books, same author. Right? So when he saw it was the same author, one, he was excited. And if you have a teenage boy that is excited and—

Courtney: [00:16:24] Go for it, man.

Jen: [00:16:25] So yeah, so we're using that. And then I'm throwing together, of course, a lot of books I've read.

Courtney: [00:16:30] Well, you are the book queen over there. For those of our listeners who don't know, Jen is also a book reviewer. You have skills.

Jen: [00:16:37] I am. I am. I've been doing that since 2015.

Courtney: [00:16:42] So you're going to have to give us Declan's book list, right?

Jen: [00:16:44] Yes, I will. Yeah, I will post it. I will post it.

Courtney: [00:16:48] So then this leads us really nicely into the idea of what people should choose for their curriculum, because that's on everybody's minds right now, right?

Jen: [00:16:58] Right.

Courtney: [00:16:57] If you're attracted to this idea of classical education, that's rigorous, that's focused, that is high quality, that will make your child a functioning adult, I hate to tell you this, not even Jen and I agree on everything.

Jen: [00:17:11] No.

Courtney: [00:17:11] So even in that thin slice of homeschooling that is classical, secular, homeschooling. We don't all agree.

Jen: [00:17:17] There's something for everyone. How to choose? That's a whole thing, I mean...

Courtney: [00:17:21] I will tell you, what we have both agreed that we dislike, is this list from the Illinois Board of Education.

Jen: [00:17:27] I am not a fan. I live near Chicago. I don't know who compiled this list. Whoever compiled the list definitely didn't even click on the links they provided and/or do they not want you to homeschool? I would say, heck no to nearly everything on this list.

Courtney: [00:17:46] Same. And I have real ethical issues—

Jen: [00:17:51] Yeah.

Courtney: [00:17:51] With the State Board of Education recommending religious curriculum.

Jen: [00:17:55] Oh, I know.

Courtney: [00:17:55] Because we may have some international listeners. Hey folks? Here in the United States of America, we do not put public funds towards private religious institutions. This is a thing. And we do not teach religion in the schools, except occasionally, very rarely, as part of a Religious Studies, and you don't promote one world view over another. And here we are on this list, with several explicitly religious curricula. If you want to use that for your child, by all means. But the public school should not be recommending them.

Jen: [00:18:29] And in Illinois, if you're homeschooling, you are considered a private school. You must teach in English. They have a list of subjects. It's your basic subjects.

Courtney: [00:18:38] [crosstalk]

Jen: [00:18:38] Yeah, language arts, math, science, social studies, fine arts, and physical development and health. And you must offer education that is at least equivalent to that that is offered in public school.

Courtney: [00:18:50] Interesting. We don't have that caveat. I also am not required to teach art or PE.

Jen: [00:18:54] When you get to the list of what materials, resources, recommendations, or other help can ISBE provide, and then they've got a list of providers that the Illinois State Board of Education, although they do not provide recommendations—

Courtney: [00:19:09] They're recommending!

Jen: [00:19:10] So, it's on their website, so although they're not, they are. Penn Foster is basically if you're laid off at a factory and you need to retrain to get another job as an adult, then you could use classes there. So I don't see how that would be homeschooling.

Courtney: [00:19:25] And if I see one more person say that they're just going to sign their kids up for Time for Learning and have that be all the homeschooling they're doing, I will scream.

Jen: [00:19:35] Yeah, would you like to describe what Time for Learning is like?

Courtney: [00:19:38] It is basically somebody scanned in a whole bunch of workbooks and work sheets and added the occasional video. And it's very childish. For all our Edu folks out there, all right? Y'all familiar with Bloom's Taxonomy? You've got the little triangle with the pointy end at the top that you're supposed to be aiming for in terms of children's learning? So, like, assume that the whole curriculum is made out of that bottom side of the pyramid where it's all memorize and regurgitate. There's no critical thinking. There's no extension. There's, the sky is blue. Now, multiple choice question: What color is the sky? Red, yellow, purple, blue? That level.

[00:20:17] That is not okay.

Jen: [00:20:18] Yeah. It's bad.

Courtney: [00:20:21] It's really—

Jen: [00:20:21] I mean, it's really bad. I would rather see you go to Barnes & Noble and pick up all those grade level workbooks before you do time for learning.

Courtney: [00:20:29] For sure. And those grade level workbooks, as far as I'm concerned, don't even constitute an actual curriculum, they're just for practice.

Jen: [00:20:34] No! No, and they're for reinforcement. They're like, oh, if you still can't figure out where commas go, here, do five more pages of it.

Courtney: [00:20:43] Mm-hmm. Just need to squeeze through a couple, few months. That's one thing. But to stake your child's entire education on it is an entirely different ball of wax.

Jen: [00:20:52] Oh yeah, there are seasons of homeschooling. I am definitely in the camp of we've had some very bad years.

Courtney: [00:20:59] Mm-hmm. I've been there. But that doesn't mean that we're going to just leave it.

Jen: [00:21:03] Right. Well that's where the "good enough" comes in. You want to strive for the best, but sometimes it's good enough. But then also, I'm not, well, it's hard because now we're in pandemic world. But normally I would say, if you can't do good enough, then you do send your kid back to school. I'm not a, you, everyone must homeschool, and homeschool is the only way.

Courtney: [00:21:26] Not everybody is temperamentally suited to homeschool their children.

Jen: [00:21:30] Yeah.

Courtney: [00:21:30] That's all fine. There you hear it, guys. On our next episode, we will talk about, we will eviscerate some more lists.

Jen: [00:21:40] Yeah. I have more complaints.

Courtney: [00:21:43] We have more complaints. Make sure to join our Facebook group, the Secular Inclusive Classical Teachers, if you haven't already, where we talk about homeschooling all the time with all the snark.

[00:21:53] Thanks for listening to Good Enough Homeschool and before we go show some love for us by leaving us a review on SoundCloud and

then stay tuned for next week where we will show some love and hate for some really common recommendations for newbie homeschoolers.

Jen:

[00:22:08] Sounds awesome. I can't wait.