

Podcast: Good Enough Homeschool

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Transcription by Keffy

[00:00:00] [Sound of book pages being rapidly flipped.]

Courtney: [00:00:11] Welcome everybody to the Good Enough Homeschool podcast where we happily eviscerate popular homeschool curricula. In today's show, we'll talk about a common question: What is the best way to handle the emotional toll of teaching your child something your child really doesn't want to learn because it's hard?

[00:00:30] We've also found another problematic curricula list, and finally, we'll talk about the TorchLight curriculum and why we won't use it.

[00:00:38] Jen, let's start with the emotional toll question. How did you handle that so that you didn't end up feeling like a terrible parent?

Jen: [00:00:45] Honestly, the only time I felt like a terrible parent was when I let my kids off easy and gave into them not wanting to learn something. Parenting is full of times when kids are mad at you. Now, it's school and it's all on you.

Courtney: [00:01:01] It's one thing because they're mad at you because they don't want to go to bed. How do you know when it's appropriate anger versus when they really can't do it, or you're asking them too much? How do you deal with your feelings about that?

Jen: [00:01:10] All right, well the first thing I would say is make sure you're asking the child to learn something that is developmentally appropriate. That they can learn. That you're not overreaching. Just because it says in a guide that this is what you're doing today, it doesn't mean that your kid has the skills and the background to do that thing. So that's your first step. But then, yes. I mean, sometimes you've been homeschooling for ages and you know that last year, you went over all of this. And you know that two weeks ago, you introduced it again. And you know that last week you were building up. And let's say you're using an excellent writing program and you know that now your kid can write a sentence, put these sentences together, you've talked about how to write a paragraph. And the kid just doesn't like it.

[00:01:52] And you feel bad for them, but yet, I've constantly been looking ahead, thinking, you have to do hard things. You have to make sure they're prepared for adulthood. You have to hold a pencil or a pen and you have to fill out forms. It doesn't matter what you're doing the whole rest of your life, there will be paperwork.

[00:02:09] Yeah. I mean, honestly, one of the biggest life skills is how do you fill out a form. How do you adjust your handwriting for the very, very small line. Or the very long line. It's just—

Courtney: [00:02:19] So you're taking the long view.

Jen: [00:02:22] I try to take the long view. I mean, obviously, we're all human and there are plenty of times when I have been nearly as upset as they are, because you don't want to see your child struggle. Being completely honest. You're with your kids and you're not only doing the parenting things, but you're doing the teaching things. But the plus is, is that no one is going to care more about teaching your child these things than you are, and that's probably what actually gives you the emotional toll.

[00:02:48] And a lot of it, I think, is just being frightened, right?

Courtney: [00:02:50] Yeah.

Jen: [00:02:50] You don't want to think that you can't teach, and you don't want to think that they don't want to learn it. And there's just a lot involved. If it's an emotional thing where your kid just won't do what you say, that's a different thing.

Courtney: [00:03:03] But also, you said something that was really important. I want to touch base on that, which is: if they don't like it, it's not the same thing as not liking you.

Jen: [00:03:11] Right.

Courtney: [00:03:12] You have to separate yourself out. So just because this is really important to you and you know that in the long game they need this thing. Just because they hate it, even if they act like they hate you for, and I've felt bad about it. But on the other hand, as some of that tough stuff has eased off, my kids have gotten more even handed about it, and they have a little more maturity.

[00:03:32] Sometimes you just kind of have to be the bad guy.

Jen: [00:03:34] Yeah, and there are ways to make it a little easier. A lot of times when kids say they don't want to do it, it's that they feel badly, themselves, that it's hard for them. Right?

Courtney: [00:03:46] Mm-hmm.

Jen: [00:03:46] And they're children. They can't always communicate exactly their emotions at the moment. They just react however they react. And I have had good success a lot of times, just reassuring them that, listen, of course, you're not going to know how to do this. You didn't even know what it was two days ago, two weeks ago. This is just something we have to practice. The breaking it down into smaller steps, so that they get some success is helpful.

[00:04:13] You can say, I know you don't really want to practice your times tables. We still have to. But when do you want to do it? Do you want to do it first? Do you want to do it last? You know.

Courtney: [00:04:23] M&Ms. M&Ms are good.

Jen: [00:04:24] And M&Ms. Oh my gosh. M&Ms work for me.

Courtney: [00:04:28] Right?

Jen: [00:04:28] Half the time, I'm like, great, you got it right! I'm having an M&M.

Courtney: [00:04:31] We're done. It's okay to stop. And be like, okay, this is not being successful right now, we will come back to this.

Jen: [00:04:37] Yeah, well, think about yourself. If you didn't get a good night's sleep, and then you go to work and someone asks you to do something that you don't like, is hard, whatever, you don't think it's your job. You don't know why you even have to do that. Even adults have bad days.

Courtney: [00:04:52] Yeah. So there are three things, I guess, we've kind of identified. One, take a look at the long view. Two, make sure it's developmentally appropriate. Three, remember it's not necessarily about you, they're allowed to be upset. And I guess number four is bribery is a valid option.

Jen: [00:05:09] Yeah, and number five would be give yourself a break and just permission to feel sad about it. You don't want to be the one that your kid hates.

Courtney: [00:05:18] Yeah.

Jen: [00:05:18] I mean, that's not a good feeling. If you can't talk to a friend, because a lot of times, if you open up to a friend who isn't supportive of homeschooling, they're going to say, well, then why are you even doing this. Send this to the professionals.

Courtney: [00:05:27] Right, right.

Jen: [00:05:29] So maybe, you'll know. If there isn't anybody safe to vent to, don't do that. Go online. Over at SIC, we will surround you with virtual chocolate and commiseration—

Courtney: [00:05:38] We'll give you all of—

Jen: [00:05:39] Or advice if you want it. You know, but it's always fine to vent.

Courtney: [00:05:44] It is. Find a safe place and vent. You know, my husband was actually really good about being supportive about the fact that it hurt so much that he was the favored parent. So that helped a lot. Spousal support really helps.

[00:05:57] So, as you probably are aware, a whole swath of the country are starting to contemplate homeschooling and one of the very first questions that new homeschoolers ask is: "What curriculum should I buy? What textbooks should I buy?"

[00:06:09] Some experienced homeschoolers have put together different kinds of lists. Here's a list I found in a local Facebook group as being "complete curricula." So they are: Abeka, BJU, Christian Liberty, The Good and the Beautiful, Guest Hollow, My Father's World, Sonlight, and Bookshark. And these were the free recommended curricula. These are: Ambleside, Discovery K12, and Easy Peasy.

[00:06:34] And Jen, I think you probably see what I see and the issues we might have with that. What do you see?

Jen: [00:06:39] Well, the first I notice is that they're mostly Christian curriculums, even if they're saying they're secular. The owners and writers of the curriculum are Christian.

Courtney: [00:06:48] It's definitely not #ownvoices, we'll put it like that.

Jen: [00:06:51] It's not #ownvoices, at all, and it may or may not be evangelical in a reaching out to those that have no religion, approach. I

mean... But putting all that aside, that's a lot of money. And it's a big package.

Courtney: [00:07:06] Yeah. These are easily several hundred dollars, a lot of them.

Jen: [00:07:10] Yeah, and you don't know. Your kid was in third grade last year. You're like, I'm going to order fourth grade Abeka. But you don't know if your kid is in fourth grade level Abeka. And then you've got this box and some stuff is way too easy and some stuff is way too hard.

Courtney: [00:07:24] Mm-hmm.

Jen: [00:07:24] You're stuck with this big box and then you're trying to, what? Resell parts of it? And re-buy the other part. That's not the way to go.

Courtney: [00:07:31] My other thing is, when I think about this. Because it is so predominantly Evangelical Christian. While many homeschoolers are very religious. If you make this kind of recommendation and you only include one or maybe two secular curricula, and those are actually not fully secular, is that you give people the impression that their only choice is to use a religious curriculum, that there aren't any other choices out there. And what it does is it shifts the Overton Window. Where the discourse of homeschooling shifts because what's available to talk about shifts.

[00:08:10] And that's something I think a lot about in homeschooling. I just happen to be a really stubborn person, which is that I'm homeschooling not for religious reasons but for secular reasons for purely academic reasons. It's not that I don't use religious curricula. I use whatever I think is the best available.

[00:08:25] But that for people who are coming from the public school system to be told that their only option is essentially to use Evangelical Christian, Protestant curricula, really might not give them the full impression of what's available in homeschooling. I have a problem with that.

Jen: [00:08:42] Well, and I have a feeling, and I'm obviously generalizing. But I have a feeling many public schoolers who maybe are avid church goers would be shocked at what is a Christian curriculum. What that includes. The fact that there are bible verses at the bottom of every math page. I remember when I was a new homeschooler, I had pulled my boys out of a Catholic school and a public school. I used a Catholic curriculum and I thought to myself, man, we are not Catholic enough for this.

Courtney: [00:09:11] It makes you feel isolated and it makes you feel lonely, and like you're the only person who feels the way that you do. Which is hard—

Jen: [00:09:19] It is hard.

Courtney: [00:09:19] —and I kind of feel like homeschooling is hard enough. We don't need to make people feel like they're isolated because their beliefs don't match. I also tend to think, which I think was kind of what you were getting at there, is that I respect people's choices. And their life choices, and their religious choices, and their cultural choices. I feel like it's not respectful to insist that your worldview be so thoroughly integrated into academics. Actually, I have this problem with some secular curricula, too, is that I don't feel it's respectful. People should be able to use academics. We do not need to be talking about one specific point of view in a math textbook. We just don't. There are appropriate places to talk about it and inappropriate, and when you insist on being inappropriate it's disrespectful to people's choices.

Jen: [00:10:07] Oh, I agree. I agree.

Courtney: [00:10:09] I mean, you have a community. A religious community that you're a member of, and that you feel vibrantly about, then you shouldn't have to compromise those beliefs in order to use a homeschool curriculum. Those are my two cents. Other people clearly feel differently.

Jen: [00:10:24] Yeah, and we're going to eviscerate all these curriculums one-by-one, episode by episode. Homeschoolers today, they don't have time to get into the whole history of all these companies.

Courtney: [00:10:34] Mm-hmm.

Jen: [00:10:34] We've experienced it in real time. We've watched it happen. When we hear a brand name, we go, oh yeah, them.

Courtney: [00:10:41] We knew those people.

Jen: [00:10:42] I mean, that's why you can't just buy a box, being new. I mean, whether you're homeschooling, you know, for pandemic reasons or not.

Courtney: [00:10:49] I'm going to say that boxes are not necessarily a bad thing if they come with those day by day schedules, but at least be more ecumenical in your box choices. And tell people that they should test their child. Because what you think your child can do in a school might not actually be what they're capable of. And call up the vendor, because very often, they will swap out different parts of the grade level. So, for

example, if your kid is a fifth grade reader but a third grade mather, very often they'll swap that out for you. I mean, these are things that you can do. You can get a customized set and go that way.

Jen: [00:11:24] Oh yeah. Yeah. Most of them will swap out math for you. I would say almost universally, math can be swapped. But also, keep in mind that just because they sell a whole package, know that almost always you can search the components separately. With a literature-based curriculum, you can buy the instructor guide for the level of history and then buy an instructor guide for the level of reading that is different, and you can put it together yourself. They don't always link you to those, but if you take the name of the product and type it in the search box, you're going to find it. Then you can Frankenstein your own perfect package.

Courtney: [00:12:01] And I am a huge fan of the Frankenstein approach.

Jen: [00:12:04] Oh, me too.

Courtney: [00:12:05] I want what I want, what is good for my individual child, which might not be the same as somebody else's individual child, and that's part of the beauty of homeschooling, right?

Jen: [00:12:14] Right.

Courtney: [00:12:14] Is that we can do that.

[00:12:16] Speaking of evisceration, let's talk about TorchLight. Now, I don't think it's fair to talk about a curriculum that I don't own, so I bought it! I bought level one because that would be what would be suitable for my youngest child for next year. It was \$40 and what I ended up with was a schedule, a book list, and some discussion questions. Which, considering it's beautifully graphically designed and they clearly did a lot of work putting that schedule together, I don't think that's an unfair price. I would pay \$40. I'd probably pay \$50 or \$60, to be honest. I like it when people do all that work for me. I'm there for that.

[00:12:55] However, right in the first paragraph, it talks about ancient history and that pings a little radar in my brain, because, you know, we've been around for a while. And anyone who's starting ancient history in the first grade, I go, hmm. So I went and checked the other levels. And yes, it actually, they have the chutzpah to follow Susan Wise Bauer's Neo-Classical history cycle without crediting her. So yeah, they do ancients in first grade, and medieval in second grade, early-modern,

and I don't think the fourth grade is quite out yet, but from the photos on the website it looks like, yeah, they're going to do modern, there.

[00:13:27] So I don't know about you all, but where I come from, we call that getting about your raisin'. If you're not going to appropriately credit people who came up with ideas.

[00:13:36] Furthermore, TorchLight is missing a timeline. Any memory work, at all, any visual reinforcement other than all of those many, many books. So there's no math work. It's just playing with a globe. I can't help but think that they saw the excellent results that come from a classical education, but they didn't actually look into it enough to grasp the reasons why it works.

[00:14:01] So last time, we talked about how the young child's brain is actually more suited to memorization. You want to take advantage of that. You want to use visual aids to demonstrate time and distance and so on, and they didn't do any of that. I mean, did you see any of that, Jen?

Jen: [00:14:17] I didn't see anything. In fact, it took me a good long time. Almost an hour, to figure out how it all worked. It was a lot. I mean, it was fine that it came in different files. I mean, that's useful, especially when you're printing out later, but it seemed very hard to implement on the teacher side, and yet, somehow light. It was a complicated system of not really classical homeschooling. And I don't know if... do they say they're classical?

Courtney: [00:14:43] No, they don't at all.

Jen: [00:14:45] Oh, so maybe that's why. Maybe they just took what they liked from classical. I don't know what they categorize themselves, and if you guys are new, homeschoolers love to put ourselves in a box, you know. We're all outside—

Courtney: [00:14:58] And then claim we have the one true way. Especially, if you're a public school teacher, what you might not realize is that the water that you swim in as a public school teacher is but one very small tributary in the whole world of educational philosophy. As a public school teacher, and remember, I'm certified, we're taught that constructivism is the default mechanism. That inquiry-based education, where children construct education for themselves is where it's at and what you should do. The ethical way to go.

[00:15:32] But homeschoolers don't necessarily follow that path. There's a lot more out there, and a lot of people don't realize it. They've never been exposed to it. It's not just that we put ourselves in boxes, it's there are more boxes to have.

Jen: [00:15:45] Yeah, and I just think it's so funny that we embrace them. Here we are in our own community. I mean, you go to any homeschool park day. It's either the name of the curriculum you use, or if you don't use a box, then people will say, well, what do you follow.

Courtney: [00:16:00] I've actually been asked to leave groups, play group, because my daughter could read and our academic bent was harshing their mellow. And I've been disinvited to homeschool mama book clubs because I wasn't sufficiently with their particular philosophy there, although I could appreciate it. And then I've had that experience where I've taken my girls out into the world, and oh, aren't you excited about school starting next week. And my daughter's oh, well, actually I'm homeschooled. And the woman wrapped her arms around her children and backed away like we were contagious. It's not always for the faint of heart.

[00:16:39] So back to this TorchLight. If we're doing ancient history in first grade, we're reading creation myths, because that's kind of the...

Jen: [00:16:45] Yay! I love mythology.

Courtney: [00:16:47] Yeah, absolutely. And that is what's on deck for level one in TorchLight, and it uses, again, here we are with the classical ed. It uses the famous people of ancient times approach, although it uses this Curiosity Chronicles as a spine. And this is just me. I'm sure it's perfectly fine. But I just hate, hate hate hate, with all the passion of a thousand firey suns, this faux cutesy dialogue style. I didn't like it when Elemental Science did the Sassafras Science Adventures, either. I just don't like it. I feel like it's patronizing to our youngest learners. That they have to be tempted in with kids their own age. Yes, they can sit still and they will happily engage in well-told stories. They don't need this.

[00:17:31] But, just like the Well-Trained Mind, level one is bio, level two is earth science and astronomy. They split off at level three with the scientific connections through inquiry, which is of course that BFSU, it's a whole separate thing. But they begin by saying that Socrates' philosophy held that students should never be fed the answers, instead that they should be taught to ask questions. Well, I don't know about you all, you know, I've done some of that research, and we're not 100% sure what

Socrates actually said because he famously didn't write anything down. That was kind of his schtick.

Jen: [00:18:01] It's sort of an ancient game of telephone.

Courtney: [00:18:04] It is. And so what we know of Socrates, we mostly know from Plato. In *The Republic*, Plato said, we should tell our children stories but only the right stories. I didn't see anything in *The Republic* about teaching kids to ask questions. I don't know, maybe I overlooked it. So I'm feeling kind of skeptical here. I'm like, err, maybe they were really trying to say that they were going to use the Socratic method, which... and I'll see this repeated in edu world all the time. That you can teach them to solve any problem if you teach them critical thinking skills. Which, actually, is how education does not work.

[00:18:43] And it's not just classical educators who think this. Go find your local university, find your local cognitive scientist, knock on their office door and they will guaranteed tell you that you cannot solve problems in a domain that you know nothing about. If you want to read more on this, go check out Daniel Willingham's book *Why Students Don't Like School*.

Jen: [00:19:07] I just started that last night, and that's actually what kept me up late was reading that. It's so good.

Courtney: [00:19:13] Oh, I'm so proud. I'm so proud. So, TorchLight recommends *Logic of English Foundations* to go with, which is fine. Whatever, I understand it's a really good program. I bought the *Essentials* program a couple months ago. I can see why people are fond of it, but it's got way too many moving parts and flashcards for me. And so, I don't like that it's an integrated English / Language Arts program. My children have asynchronous development. They're radically more accelerated in one area than another. For example, I gave Elena the *Let's Go Learn Dora* test at the beginning of June. Now Elena, of course, has a hearing impairment. Learning to read is very painful for her. So her blending phonics is really good. Her sound substitution, you have bat, b-a-t, and you put a d in front, what would you get, you would get dat. Right? She has a very difficult time with that because she has a hard time hearing sounds.

[00:20:10] But they also test oral vocabulary, and her oral vocabulary is grade level 6. This integrated English / Language Arts program, detangling that for her would be a nightmare. So I always buy separate components. Like, I buy a grammar program and I buy a composition program, and I buy a penmanship program. I separate all that out.

[00:20:34] Yay Logic of English, not my thing. They recommend Right Start for Math, fine, great. Love Right Start. I'm really not fond of it where they claim to explicitly teach character building. We touched on that earlier. I think that should be a personal judgment built in the context of your own family and your own religious community. I don't want somebody else teaching my child right from wrong.

Jen: [00:20:57] Well, and I believe there was, through all the editions, there was a whole chapter on that in the Well-Trained Mind. You know, you can add religious studies in of your choice.

Courtney: [00:21:05] I think you should have religious studies as part of your curriculum, but that should be a personal choice. Then, if I've counted correctly, the curriculum goes on to list 211 books. That's 2-1-1, you would use with your child over the course of the year. There are not one, not two, not three, not four, not five, thirteen spines. And at least one of them has been custom written for the curriculum.

[00:21:33] Beyond any of the other philosophical differences I have with this program, I'm out at the book list. There's no way on earth I'm collecting that many books. Plus, they list some that they know aren't even available in the United States. This is a US company. I can do Story of the World Volume 1 in two books and a library card for \$35. This is going to be a really pricy curriculum.

Jen: [00:21:56] Yeah. I'm pro-book, and I'm pro owning books, but I can't get behind that. When I've done a literature based curriculum, I've always done a separate language arts program with it. A lot of years, I only bought the spines. Usually, there's one, maybe two. Thirteen is a lot.

Courtney: [00:22:16] That's overdoing it. I'm sorry. [Makes a buzzer sound].

Jen: [00:22:17] Yeah, and I don't know how you'd even keep track of all that, even if you were going to be using the library.

Courtney: [00:22:23] I don't know, a, you have an unlimited fundage for buying books. And maybe you have a personal assistant, maybe your college kid is home, and you're like, here, honey. Take the credit card, go track down all these books, ship them to my house. Okay, fine. In this hypothetical scenario, TorchLight still uses a constructivist, inquiry-based lesson philosophy, which asks questions of six-year-olds like, "What might the climate be like this close to the equator?" "In this climate, what kind of clothes do you think the residents might wear?"

[00:22:56] Okay, I have a six-year-old, and she's got a great vocabulary. But I'm not guaranteed that she actually knows what climate is. In fact, I dare you to go out on the street and ask a dozen people, and I bet a lot of them don't actually know what climate is. And I teach it to middle schoolers when I teach world geography. So the second problem is that they need to explain the equator and how the tilt of the axis affects the amount of solar radiation available at the equator. And this is actually a really tricky concept given that nearly 25%, or one in four US adults believe that the sun revolves around the Earth.

Jen: [00:23:34] Yeah.

Courtney: [00:23:34] These are not child-appropriate questions. And then the six-year-old is going to have to extrapolate from that to the type of clothing that people wear when it's hot and why people would need that particular clothing. And maybe this is my experience, but a lot of people in the United States live in houses with air conditioning. July, when we're recording this episode. And a six-year-old raised in air conditioning may not be able to make that intuitive leap from really hot to less clothing. It's not in their world experience.

[00:24:06] So this is all requiring implicit background knowledge that first graders aren't usually going to have. And asking them questions about something they don't know is a waste of time. Just tell it to them, preferably with a demonstration using a flashlight, a pencil, a dark room and an orange. If you want to know where that comes from, pick up BFSU.

[00:24:27] TorchLight explicitly warns against asking specific comprehension questions. "It will feel like you're testing the student." Uh, hello. The testing effect is how you learn things. So check out How Learning Happens by Kirschner and Hendrick. It's \$26 on Amazon, worth every penny.

[00:24:47] In other words, all that matters in TorchLight is the child's opinion. We're just asking opinion questions. Now maybe this is just me. I think encourages kids to be self-centered. Gets them off the hook of paying attention. Golly gee, honey, was that a good choice? And your kid is going to go. Uh, sure mom. Or, I don't know. And then you say, well what do you think will happen next? Now catch that, this is an opinion question. Golly gee, ma, I think they'll hop on a train.

[00:25:15] And then, my favorite of these style of questions is, "What do you think?" I know what I think.

Jen: [00:25:22] I don't know if this is in the TorchLight plans, but I've read other lesson plans where the question for the student is, "What do you think?" And then, in the teacher's guide, it says, "Answers may vary." This is not helpful to me at all.

Courtney: [00:25:35] Well, it doesn't require the student to listen attentively. It doesn't require them to report back with correct answers. It makes it seem like their opinion is the only thing that matters when you listen to a story. And that's just... it's not fair to them. It's not how the world works. And sometimes, there are actual correct answers in life.

Jen: [00:25:54] Yeah. And you know what? Kids like knowing facts.

Courtney: [00:25:57] And they're good at it.

Jen: [00:25:58] They always want to tell you something. Science or history related.

Courtney: [00:26:02] Absolutely. Their little brains are wired for it. They're so good at memorizing things. Let them know. Let them listen. Let them pay attention. Let them shine.

[00:26:12] On the other hand, TorchLight has a meticulous attention to detail, I really like that. They've worked really hard on this, I can tell. They have a huge dedication, obviously, to seeking out books that correspond with their politics. And there's of course a very long book list. So if anybody can appreciate a good book list, I think it's us, right?

Jen: [00:26:32] Oh yeah.

Courtney: [00:26:33] So if you're feeling politically progressive, you have some serious money to spend on books, maybe you don't go with our educational philosophy that jives with cognitive science. Maybe you really want this constructive, inquiry-based education. Go for it. More power to you.

Jen: [00:26:47] For sure. Enjoy all those books.

Courtney: [00:26:49] Absolutely. Make sure to join our Facebook group, Secular Inclusive Classical Teachers, if you haven't already, where we talk about homeschooling all the time with lots of veteran homeschoolers.

[00:27:00] Thanks for listening to Good Enough Homeschoolers. Before we go, show some love for your favorite podcast by leaving us a review. And then stay tuned for next week where we will show some love and hate for yet another homeschool curricula.