

Podcast: Good Enough Homeschool
Episode Number: 5
Episode Name: Book Lists, Dr. Kripa Sundar and BYL
File Length: 00:28:22
Transcription by Keffy

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

Courtney: [00:00:11] Welcome listeners to the Good Enough Homeschool podcast where we cheerfully eviscerate popular homeschool curricula. In today's show we'll talk about common question: how do I make a book list for my child? Also today, we have a special guest, Dr. Kripa Sundar, talking about distraction in curricula. Finally, we'll talk about Build Your Library and what we love and what don't love.

[00:00:34] Let's begin with our question of the day: how do I make a book list for my child? Jen, this is definitely in your court.

Jen: [00:00:41] Picture me sitting here rubbing my hands together like a villain. I'm going to give away all my secrets. Also in the shownotes, I will link to all the lists I've already compiled for different subject matter that are on our Amazon shop where we do receive pennies for every book that you buy, which helps support our podcast. I'm so excited about this because I adore a curated book list. It's one of the "chores" that I look forward to each year.

[00:01:09] Curl up, I make my extra strong tea, like PG Tips. I have my laptop and I pull out all the catalogs and I look to see what other people have added.

[00:01:18] Point number one. Don't reinvent the wheel. There's a lot of companies that are literature based and they have wonderful book lists. There may be a ready-made solution out there for you. I'll list some of my favorites in the show notes. For example, you can create a book list for your child based on American history. Look and see, what does Bookshark use for American history? What does Build Your Library use for American history. There's no need to discover brand new books. You can even think back to what have you read or what have you seen at Barnes & Noble. There's a lot of resources out there.

[00:01:53] My old world go to was the library, if your library is still open. By the way, what kind of reality has me uttering those words?

Courtney: [00:02:00] 2020 [inaudible] what's up.

Jen: [00:02:03] If your library is open, simply go to the section of the subject matter, grab a stack of books, sit down on the floor, and start flipping through them. If you're online with your library, you can use Amazon as a bookish search engine.

Courtney: [00:02:17] That extension.

Jen: [00:02:18] Yeah, you can use that on Amazon, and it will tell you if your library has the book and whether it's in stock or not. Is it an audio book, is it available in hardback or paperback.

Courtney: [00:02:27] It's literally called Library Extension.

Jen: [00:02:30] Get that, that's super important. I use that all the time. You can also just use Amazon to just get the ISBN and then order it from your indie bookseller if you don't believe in using Amazon.

Courtney: [00:02:42] I'm a huge Thrift Books fan.

Jen: [00:02:44] Oh, that too. And I think they have a really good coupon if you're a new customer, as I remember.

Courtney: [00:02:48] They do. It's 15% off.

Jen: [00:02:50] Then you have to figure out how to search for books you want. It's easy if you have the title. But if you're creating a new book list for a special interest that your child may have or even just middle grade history or science, where, again, there's a not so many choices. You're going to want to add middle grade or YA to your search term. Then you can add nonfiction or historical fiction.

Courtney: [00:03:15] What's the difference between middle grade and YA?

Jen: [00:03:17] Middle grade is meant to be read by children that are around the ages of 9-12. They are grades four through six. And YA is for 12 and up, which is 7th grade and older. Middle grade titles will often have a character that is around 12, and YA often has characters that are 15 or 16 or 17. Children like to read about someone slightly older than themselves. YA themes are almost adult. You're going to find things that teenagers run into in real life. They're going to include romance, experimentation with drugs and alcohol. Characters exploring their sexuality, where middle grade really won't have too much of that.

[00:04:01] There's a really great middle grade book, Barbara Dee wrote it. A great book for middle graders explaining the Me Too movement. It's a 7th grade girl who has some boys harassing her in school. There's

nothing truly inappropriate or shocking, although this behavior is accepted middle school behavior, it's not right.

Courtney: [00:04:19] Is this the Barbara Dee, *Maybe He Just Likes You*?

Jen: [00:04:22] Yes, that is exactly the right book, thank you. Middle grade would approach things like that in a softer manner. They're not going to be very graphic.

Courtney: [00:04:31] It's important when you make your book list that you are making wise choices about which two of these directions you can go in.

Jen: [00:04:37] Just because your child is testing at the high school level for vocabulary does not mean that your child is ready to read YA books.

Courtney: [00:04:49] This is about what they're emotionally ready for. It's a very tricky balance to the homeschooling parent to find the right book. Which is why we love that Jen offers this service. Jen will find your child a book.

Jen: [00:05:01] Yes. You can join me at TheBookishSociety.com. If you've got your list and you haven't read any of the books, it's a daunting task. I have the luck, the time, the pleasure, of having read nearly all books in the middle grade and YA historical fiction. Anything that could possibly tie into homeschooling, I've read it or I am aware of it. But I am the outlier on this. You're going to want to use the preview function, you're going to want to read the reviews. If you actually scroll and don't just look at the star system. Unfortunately, some people still think reviewing the packaging the book was in is the review.

[00:05:35] Also, you can check Goodreads, which is owned by Amazon—

Courtney: [00:05:39] They let it run pretty independently.

Jen: [00:05:41] They do. Then, if you're building this book list, what ratio of fiction or nonfiction should your reading list contain. I'm a big proponent of nonfiction written at or just under the grade level of your kiddo. That doesn't mean a board book for your eight year old. It does mean that your high schooler shouldn't have to struggle with a dictionary to get through a college level text. I'd aim for a 60-40 split. The larger end should be what your child prefers to read. Some kids love nonfiction, so give them a little bit more nonfiction than fiction. But you want to have a balance because the whole purpose of having them read a lot of books that go along with a particular subject that they are studying is to get different perspectives. You want to have some nonfiction, so you hear in science what was it like for the scientist studying that particular concept

during those years. It's also great to read a historical fiction novel set during that time so you can see what regular people were doing.

Courtney: [00:06:41] I love history in part because of historical romance novels. I've learned a lot of history from reading romance novels. I think a lot of women did.

Jen: [00:06:51] I, too, have read a lot of historical fiction. Then, when I come across an actual scientific fact or a historical fact, I automatically talk about those hooks.

Courtney: [00:07:03] But there is a caveat to this. Just because a book is old or just because it's set in an older time does not mean that it fairly represents the time. An author named Jennifer Hallock, she talks about historical chronotopes, the sort of generally agreed upon fiction settings.

[00:07:19] Surf over to the romance section on Amazon for historical romance. The vast majority of bestsellers are going to be, number one, set in Great Britain, number two, overpopulated with nobles, and number three, selective in historical accuracy. That literature is representing, as Jennifer Hallock says, time and space, but it's really limited.

[00:07:41] They're almost always Regency romances. If there were enough actual dukes to populate all of the dukes that are listed in historical romance novels, like 50% of the population—

Jen: [00:07:56] They're all royal.

Courtney: [00:07:58] We need to be aware that those things are limited. It's sort of like if you read fanfiction, commonly agreed upon AU or alternate universe. You need to be aware of that when picking up those historical fiction books, which is actually one of the reasons that there are some objections to Laura Ingalls Wilder's Little House on the Prairie series. That's a very specific historical point of view and so some people are going to say, you should substitute in Louise Erdrich's Birchbark House series. That is another point of view of the same time period.

Jen: [00:08:29] I would say you need to read both. I would also add in Caddie Woodlawn because although that is old, it's still a different viewpoint of the same time period in Wisconsin.

Courtney: [00:08:39] There are issues with these books.

Jen: [00:08:41] I'm going to use them with my high schooler and we're going to read them through that lens as early propaganda.

Courtney: [00:08:47] I love that you're doing that, by the way. That's another point, is just because they're older doesn't mean that everything they have to read has to be super intense.

Jen: [00:08:56] Not at all. I'll add meaty picture books and graphic novels even to my high school list. It gets worse than reading *Little House on the Prairie* with my 9th grader.

Courtney: [00:09:03] I added the Max Axiom Physics comic books to her chemistry this year.

[00:09:10] [Sound of pages turning.]

Courtney: [00:09:10] We have a special treat for you. This is Dr. Kripa Sundar and she is a scientist. Science of learning! We noticed that parents tend to like really pretty curricula. And we both agreed that when the pedal hit the metal, we prefer simple black and white textbooks and workbooks. It occurred to me, hey, there's a science to this. This is something that people study. I reached out to Kripa and she agreed to come talk to us about this. Do you want to share a little bit about that?

Kripa: [00:09:36] Absolutely. Thank you so much for having me. One of my areas of research is multimedia design where we define multimedia as presenting content in more than one format. Whether it's in images, whether it's on paper form or in digital form, audio, video, images, audio, whichever combination you want.

[00:09:54] Dr. Richard Mayer has developed a whole series of principles. One of them is called the coherence principle, and what the coherence principle refers to is getting relevant information all in the same place.

Courtney: [00:10:08] That seems like that should be a no-brainer.

Kripa: [00:10:10] Yeah, actually the first time I read his principles, they seemed like common sense. Why is the federal organization sponsoring so much research into this? But the more I got into it, the better I understood. Yes, it sounds fairly common sense, but it's also one of those things that we need to be mindful of.

[00:10:27] Coming back to the coherence principle, it's the idea of putting it all together. My main focus is the idea of seductive details, like—

Courtney: [00:10:35] Not a romance novel, I take it.

Kripa: [00:10:36] Unfortunately, no. Seductive details are basically interesting and irrelevant information that can deter learning.

Courtney: [00:10:45] It doesn't have to be pretty pictures.

Kripa: [00:10:46] No, it doesn't have to be pretty pictures. It could even be the "Did you know?" facts that come in textbooks, often.

Courtney: [00:10:51] So those sidebar little things?

Kripa: [00:10:53] Yeah, when you're learning about lightning, almost every textbook has a "Did you know? In this particular year, 300 people died from lightning strike." Even those kind of interesting information, which are fun tidbit, they might [inaudible] interest in a learning setting where everything is directed. And you can have that conversation for a few minutes to warm up your class and then move straight into your content.

[00:11:12] If you were learning this individually, which is how a lot of these research studies are conducted, what they found is when it's independent learning, seductive details tend to deter student learning. Meaning, students who learned with seductive details scored worse than student who learned without.

Courtney: [00:11:26] That's how homeschoolers roll. We've got one student. We've got one textbook. Or, in Jen's case, you had five, right?

Jen: [00:11:34] At one point, yeah.

Courtney: [00:11:35] Hey, I've got to go help this other kid, you sit here by yourself and you do this thing. So this is especially relevant for us.

Kripa: [00:11:41] I do think so, and when I do my afterschooling, with my now 1st grader, the word that I end up using is focus.

Courtney: [00:11:49] Oh, yes. We were doing reading yesterday. I was, "pay attention! Focus!"

Kripa: [00:11:54] But when you have these other interesting tidbits, they can take kids down a different path. Also something we want to take in mind in terms of how much time we have to teach that content. Now, if you can allow that five or ten minute diversion and then pull your kid back and then stay on track, it's not going to significantly damage your learning.

[00:12:09] Some of my learning also tries to look at how do you overcome this negative effect. I've also seen taking notes. That makes a

big difference, because now your kid's listening to what you're saying. You're thinking about it, and you're summarizing it in your own way. That kind of generative activity usually helps to deter the seductive details effect. It also helps when these kind of distractions are dynamic. They're like a gif, they're there for a second and then goes away. Like the disclaimer in front of a movie.

[00:12:32] The reason I'm raising that point is there is some positive research in terms of seductive details being able to trigger temporary interest in the topic. Even if it's [inaudible] short-term negative learning impact.

Courtney: [00:12:44] Here, I have a question for you. Jen and I were talking in our last episode about a science curriculum called Scientific Connections Through Inquiry, which is a revamp of an older, notoriously user unfriendly science curriculum which I happen to love, but I will freely admit is not really super useful for a lot of people. A group of people worked with the original author and made up a version. But it's pretty. Graphic designer was awesome.

[00:13:15] But one of the things I objected to was they excised some information which I thought was important for helping students situate it in their background knowledge. They took out the historical context for when the discoveries were made. For example, the first lesson was on cells and teaching children how to use a microscope. That bit about, it was Hooke, I think, who looked at plant cells and noticed that they look like little rooms, and that comes from the Latin for cell, so that kind of background context and that it happened in the 1600s. When I teach this, I have my kid tootle over to their timeline on the wall, and I have them mark this is when Hooke looked at this and saw cells.

[00:13:55] For me, it helps them situate it in context, and it helps them remember, this is where the word cells come from. This is why we call it a cell, has its visual shape of a square. But they took all of that out. And I was... that's not okay. But here's the question. Is that a seductive detail? Were they right to take that out? Am I being just uselessly curmudgeonly over here, or do I actually have a point?

Kripa: [00:14:15] I think it depends on the learning objective. The way that you use that information was in a way that could help your kid have another hook to another piece of knowledge in their head. I don't know if this particular textbook or curriculum supported supporting resources that kind of framed it in the way you did. If it was just presented, it could have... I could see both sides to it, is what I'm saying. If it was

information that was properly used and used in a way that can place information, then great.

[00:14:43] Another thing to think about was what are the learning objectives meant for that lesson. I think this is one of the challenges when it comes to homeschooling, too. Something to think about. When you think of seductive details, it's about not whether that information inherently is useful or useless, but also to think about how relevant is it to your learning objective.

[00:15:00] Another piece is also to think about how interesting is it to that student. A third element that's not often discussed is the student's prior knowledge. There is some evidence, and in my metanalysis that I published earlier this year summarizing about 50, 60 studies on seductive details, one observation that stood out to me because of my own personal interest is, the more that a student had some basic knowledge in that field that they're studying, or if they'd already had high prior knowledge about the subject that they were revisiting, the weaker the effect.

[00:15:31] I think that makes perfect sense, too. So, in context, one study I did was in a chemistry undergraduate study. I'd ask the students how many chemistry classes have you taken, even if it wasn't the exact same class. And what I found is if they had exposure to the general domain, they were much better at identifying, oh, this is related to chemistry, oh this is not related to chemistry. This is related to the topic or not, and they could kind of identify if it was relevant or not.

[00:15:56] Coming back to your timeline question, it depends on how much your kids already know and how you're using and how that piece of information connects to the learning objective you've set for that lesson.

Courtney: [00:16:08] Jen, does that not sound like pegs on hooks?

Jen: [00:16:11] It does, which is a basic tenet of classical ed. It also explains my aversion to things like handing a younger kid something like the Kingfisher history because it's all sidebars. The whole thing is sidebars and pictures. Nearly impossible for a younger student to discern what is important.

Courtney: [00:16:36] We're big fans of direct instruction.

Jen: [00:16:37] Yeah.

Courtney: [00:16:37] I will tell you what I want you to know.

Kripa: [00:16:40] I am a huge supporter of it, too. I do think that direct instruction is valuable and informative when we have students with low prior knowledge, which in a lot of cases they might be when they're coming into it.

[00:16:51] As much as I'm a fan of direct instruction, it takes time and almost a sense of training to be able to engage in that. I've studied in five different educational systems, coming a lot from personal experience. There are some school systems that do just lectures with a lot of interactions, which is still direct instruction, it's still active. And then there are others who just stand up and kind of lecture at you. Refuse to let you write notes, refuse to let you process notes. Like pressing play on a tape recorder if anyone still has those.

Courtney: [00:17:18] And you can train students to attend to those lectures and retain a lot, but it's work.

Kripa: [00:17:23] It is, and it's also a matter of understanding. Again, it comes down to the prior knowledge. Comes down to personal interest in that topic. So in some ways, I think I see both sides again. I like inquiry-based education. I do like more engaging information, with the caveat that there is strong doses of direct instruction blended into it. I am definitely not a supporter of, oh, let's go create this engine and then go find out how you're doing it. But if you're doing it step by step and you let them tinker a little bit but you also show them how to do it after they tinker a little bit, I don't see the harm in that.

Courtney: [00:17:54] Yeah. But my problem as a working parent who homeschools is that I very often don't feel like I have time to do the tinkering first. With my kids, I'm okay, I have between 9:00 and 9:45, let's get 'er done.

Kripa: [00:18:10] I don't think it needs to be first. Details, I think that was also what we were recommending, to not let them do, is not let them get way too off-track, especially if they've got no prior knowledge. And the reason behind that, taking us back to the idea of seductive details is that one, if you've got low prior knowledge, you won't be able to identify if it's a piece of relevant information or not. You're going to spend a lot more time trying to figure out, is this something I should know or not? Or build an incorrect schema about that concept. Or at the very simple sense, it's a distraction.

[00:18:41] Though I must say, given that you were talking about the colors and the visual graphics and design and usability of resources. I don't think that's a bad thing. I do think that there's a distinction to be

made where seductive details can be distracting, but all distractions are not seductive details.

Courtney: [00:18:58] How does that work?

Kripa: [00:18:59] For example, the nice pretty color, a beautiful visual design, usability. I'm definitely a fan of [inaudible] but I also know that my kid can get distracted. Oh look! They've got a pink border. But at the same time it is something that can get them to start wanting to open the book and put in that time and effort that they need to to read the book. But it is a nice thing for me, saying, hey, do you want to open up to the pink page and we can start from there? Almost using colors in a form of signaling, which is another multimedia principle where you're highlighting relevant information. Indicating to the reader where one section ends and another section starts.

Courtney: [00:19:32] That was actually part of my objection is that it was very pretty, it was very aesthetic but as a teacher, what I want from this curriculum is to have the questions that I need to ask the students highlighted. That is the most important thing for me out of this. And they weren't! They're buried within paragraphs of text. I found that incredibly unhelpful. That's, correct me if I'm wrong, Jen, is that we do not have the time or the patience or the inclination to go trawling for stuff.

Jen: [00:20:00] That and I've been homeschooling since 2001. At that time there was very little out there. You had to really search the internet to find things unless you were going to go to your school and say, can I have these textbooks. Everything was homemade. Trying to create some perfect educational environment for these two individuals. At some point it got too much and when I added my third child to the mix when he started kindergarten, I realized that actually straightforward teaching worked well for all of them despite being ahead or behind their grade level. I didn't know any of the science, it was all experimental. That's where I landed, and luckily I landed in the right place because now I have four graduates and they're all fully functional adults.

Courtney: [00:20:47] Thank you. I really appreciate you coming and telling us the science behind this.

Kripa: [00:20:53] My pleasure.

Courtney: [00:20:53] This is really interesting and I think that other homeschool moms will find this useful.

Jen: [00:20:58] Actually, Kripa proved us wrong. Our curmudgeony take of, it's pretty so therefore it's not good was actually very short-sighted because I think in this case, that particular curriculum is aesthetically pleasing but then failed on the level of using the color to highlight the important passages, and if they had, then it would have probably worked better for us.

Courtney: [00:21:25] I agree and maybe my complaining about the fact that they took the history and background questions out was maybe a little over the top, because not everybody who uses that is going to do classical education like we do with the timelines and the mental hooks and the pegs and the deliberate schema linking.

Jen: [00:21:40] Yes.

Courtney: [00:21:40] So, thank you for coming and educating us, we appreciate it.

Kripa: [00:21:45] Thank you so much for having me.

Courtney: [00:21:47] You're very welcome.

[00:21:47] [Pages turning.]

Courtney: [00:21:47] We both love Build Your Library. Yes?

Jen: [00:21:52] Yes.

Courtney: [00:21:53] We are a big fan of Emily Cook. She seems like a super nice person. I read her book about Charlotte Mason secular education, which I liked.

Jen: [00:22:02] I did, too.

Courtney: [00:22:04] Is it available through Kindle Unlimited?

Jen: [00:22:05] I think it's Kindle Unlimited, still.

Courtney: [00:22:07] I don't like BYL for the younger years. That is less about Emily and BYL itself than it is about Charlotte Mason-style education for 10 and under. Not a huge fan.

Jen: [00:22:20] When I think of Charlotte Mason for younger kids, I think of an atmosphere that homeschoolers have created here in America that is not indicative of how Charlotte Mason, the real person in England, ran her schools.

Courtney: [00:22:38] That's a really interesting statement. Tell me more about this.

Jen: [00:22:42] I was attracted to Charlotte Mason and read her original books early on when I was researching all of the things homeschooling.

Courtney: [00:22:53] I did, too.

Jen: [00:22:52] I think they're also free on Kindle. Charlotte Mason started her schools as an alternative to whatever the national education program was in England. Her ideals were that kids were going to learn about the world around them. They were going to have nature study be a major tenet of their early education. There really was no need to study grammar intensely because kids would pick it up through copy work and dictation effortlessly.

Courtney: [00:23:28] I understand, it is true that effective grammar for reading and writing is best taught in the context of the reading and writing.

Jen: [00:23:36] And I would argue that especially in the younger years, if you require your children to memorize key grammar terms. As they get older, they have, again, those pegs to fall back on.

Courtney: [00:23:48] So that when their editor hands something back to them marked up with tense problems, they know that they're not talking about being stressed out.

Jen: [00:23:56] Exactly. Although that is very stressful. I think that there's a draw towards making a gentle introduction to education and a beautiful introduction to education. There's nothing intrinsically wrong with that except that I feel like you're missing a time in your child's academic life when memorization is both fun and easy. Whether it's memorizing your math facts or memorizing what a noun and a verb are. It's not going to take that much out of your day. You can do memory work while you're walking through the woods picking up acorns just as well as you can at a desk. And I feel like everyone has taken what they want from her writing and have created different programs. As long as it somehow goes back to something she wrote within those six books, it's a "Charlotte Mason" philosophy.

Courtney: [00:24:49] There are lots of offshoots. There's a Catholic offshoot and a secular offshoot and an Evangelical Christian offshoot. I would argue that the whole wild and free movement is a variation, thereof as well.

Jen: [00:25:02] Yeah, although that's not really a curriculum but more of a lifestyle.

Courtney: [00:25:06] My problem with a lot of Charlotte Mason curricula is that it's about the lifestyle. So, for example, the younger years of Build Your Library do a lot of presuming that you're going to read out loud to your kid. A, I do not have the time for this. B, I hate reading out loud. C, my children are not great auditory learners. And I don't say this in the learning style sense. I say this in that my youngest has a mild to moderate hearing impairment. On Wednesday, we went around for about 15 minutes on the fact that oval and over are two different words. She could not hear it.

[00:25:40] And I suspect that I am not the only parent who has these kinds of issues. This illusion of these joyous hours of reading out loud by the fire while your children play quietly on the floor and absorb knowledge by osmosis sounds great, looks beautiful on an Instagram photo. Not really practical as far as I'm concerned. And, I agree, it doesn't demand as much of the children as you could demand with only a slight modification in your day.

[00:26:11] I know that I come across as being really hardcore, but honestly, my kids spend most of their day playing. We just sit down and work hard for a little bit at a time, and then the rest of the day they spend playing. It's okay to ask your kids to work hard for a little bit. This is my essential problem with the younger years of Build Your Library.

Jen: [00:26:30] Yeah, I couldn't really agree more. My kids like to listen to books. I like reading out loud. I have bought levels of Build Your Library, I have bought levels of Bookshark. I've bought Sonlight. I am an avid book collector. I have never had kids that could bounce in between those books. I know with Build Your Library there's the literature and then there's the readers.

Courtney: [00:26:53] At least four books at a time.

Jen: [00:26:54] We will do, at the most, two books at a time. I don't read four books out loud a day. And so people think, when I said, hey, I bought Bookshark that I was doing all of that. Or I bought Build Your Library I was reading all of that a day, and in fact, we're more of a Well Trained Mind mindset. We have our academics. We go hard at it. It doesn't take long. I try to keep it to one book during that hard school time that we're actually studying. Then at night we'll have another book going.

Courtney: [00:27:23] Don't feel guilty about it. And if you're a parent out there listening, you don't need to feel guilty about it either that your lifestyle isn't Instagram-worthy.

Jen: [00:27:31] Oh my gosh.

Courtney: [00:27:34] I bought BYL 8. Gwen loves it so much even though she's carrying a pretty heavy load this year, she asked me to buy BYL 7 so that she could continue to read it independently. So thank you, Emily Cook, for those wise choices in your books. However, we're going to use this Charlotte Mason-style book list in a very Well Trained Mind style.

Jen: [00:27:54] Yeah, that sounds perfect.

Courtney: [00:27:55] You, too, can do this. We will enable you.

Jen: [00:27:58] We will enable your book-buying habits.

Courtney: [00:28:00] 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 many veteran homeschoolers. And thanks for listening to Good Enough Homeschoolers. Before we go, show some love for your new favorite podcast by leaving us a review. And then stay tuned for next week where we will show some love and hate for another curriculum.