

Podcast: Good Enough Homeschooling

Episode: 15: Becoming an Educational Architect

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Transcription by Keffy

Courtney: [00:00:00] Welcome listeners to the Good Enough Homeschool podcast where we cheerfully eviscerate popular homeschool curricula. We are:

Jenn: [00:00:07] Jenn Naughton.

Courtney: [00:00:07] Courtney Ostaff.

AJ: [00:00:09] And AJ Campbell.

Courtney: [00:00:09] Today we're discussing self-education for the homeschooling parent. What parents need to know about educational theory and why.

AJ: [00:00:17] Okay, family, it's time for some real talk about the responsibilities you take on when you become a homeschooling parent. We often say that homeschooling is a lifestyle, and it really is. A key part of that lifestyle is parental self-education. So unless you've studied education at the college level, chances are you haven't ever been asked to articulate your own philosophy of education. You might not even know much about the nuts and bolts of teaching beyond what you experienced yourself as a child, for better or worse.

Jenn: [00:00:48] We, your hosts, encourage you to stop scrolling Instagram, laughing at TikTok, and viewing curriculum unboxings on YouTube. You've all asked how we've managed to home educate for such a long time and the answer is that we keep reading the science behind learning and adjusting as we go.

AJ: [00:01:07] Spoiler alert! That's the core of today's podcast right there. In order to be an effective homeschooler, you need to find the time to read about educational theories, methods and philosophies. Since we're focused on secular classical education in this podcast, that's what we're mostly going to be talking about but no matter where you come down philosophically, as a homeschooler, you need to know enough about your options to make informed choices. And to do that, you need to read at least a few books that explain what we know about how humans learn.

Small humans, big humans, all humans, and what we can identify as best practices for teaching reading or math or writing and all those good things.

[00:01:47] Once you have that knowledge, you can use it to help you plan your children's education and to choose appropriate curriculum to help you work that plan.

Jenn:

[00:01:55] I'm gonna pull up my rocking chair and speak some truths about ye olde days of homeschooling. When I started homeschooling, I didn't know any secular homeschoolers. I thought that in order to do this, we were going to have to use religious materials. My first two years, we used Seton, a school at home Catholic provider. They made it easy to get started with workbooks and daily lesson plans. They also had us mailing in our tests to be graded by a real teacher. I believe that Abeka and Bob Jones work the same way, except they have more of evangelical flavoring instead of full immersion Catholicism.

[00:02:33] I was willing to read any book I could find on home education and there weren't that many. Because I was friends with many Catholic homeschoolers, I read the book written by the Seton founder, and I read Laura Berquist's *The Harp and Laurel Wreath*, which was my first introduction to classical homeschooling. There wasn't much out there to read until *The Well-Trained Mind* was published. That led me to Calvert, which I wouldn't have found on my own and eventually into the Well-Trained Mind version of a neoclassical home education.

[00:03:01] There were way more unschooling books at that point, and I knew I wasn't cool with that for my kids. Now CM homeschoolers. Wait, you don't know what CM is? Okay. That's part of the problem. You need to investigate all the acronyms of home ed at the very least. CM is Charlotte Mason and Charlotte Mason used a term called mother culture. I find that both sexist and outdated, as any adult can be a homeschool educator. What it loosely means is that you are learning with or ahead of your children all the while taking care of yourself and bringing your family closer to God by continuing your own educational hobby pursuits just for the sake of learning. In other words, if your children see that you take joy in the act of learning anything outside of school, they will follow in suit as you are creating a culture of learning within your family.

[00:03:50] So this is what I've come up with. Mother culture equals educational architect. Charlotte Mason has a famous quote that is, "Education is an atmosphere, a discipline, a life."

AJ:

[00:04:00] Right. And that takes us back to what we were saying about homeschooling being a lifestyle. It's not something that you just do and set aside, it's part of the whole way that your family lives. So as a homeschooler, you are, to use Jenn's term there, the educational architect for your children.

[00:04:18] Now, I want to be clear here, you don't need a master's in education to homeschool and you don't need to be an edu wonk on Twitter. But you do need to know just enough about educational theory to evaluate curriculum, and to put together a coherent educational program for your kids because that's your responsibility as a homeschooler. So the more you understand about different educational theories and methods, the easier it will be for you to clarify your educational goals and to figure out the best way to reach them.

[00:04:49] What happens if you don't have this knowledge base? If you don't have a plan, you basically end up buying whatever shiny thing the nice lady on Instagram is selling this week. Look at it this way, it's like going to the supermarket hungry and without a shopping list. You're going to come home with \$100 with a junk food and you still have nothing for dinner. If you don't trust your own ability to teach, because you don't really understand how teaching works and how kids' minds work and how we learn, you're going to wake up one morning and realize that your third grader is on Zoom all day, every day. And that you have essentially handed over a lot of really important decisions about your kid's education, to some virtual academy.

[00:05:31] Now, we see this all the time. And it really all boils down to the same issue. It's an over reliance on an outside authority. In other words, someone who is not you, the homeschooling parent, the educational architect. Now, if you're clear about your goals, and you know what the science says about what works in education, you won't end up giving your kids the educational equivalent of Doritos for dinner. And you also won't feel like you have to order takeout every night of the week either.

[00:05:59] What is the actual content of the kind of rigorous liberal arts education that classical homeschoolers aspire to? And how do we mere mortals managed to give that to our kids?

Courtney:

[00:06:11] Well, one thing that I think distinguishes classical education or, AJ, a good liberal arts education, is the systematic nature of the curriculum. Now, those of you old enough to remember this might recoil in horror, but in 2002, Don Rumsfeld, who was then George W. Bush's Secretary of Defense said, "As we know, there are known knowns, there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns,

that is to say, we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns, the ones we don't know, we don't know.”

[00:06:51] Now, when I venture into homeschooling spaces, I see a lot of talk about gaps. We can't possibly teach all the knowledge in the world so we must teach our children how to learn. Well, you know, kids can't learn something if they don't know it exists. Part of our job as classical educators is to give our children known knowns, like, for example, the multiplication table, they should know it exists, and they should know it backwards and forwards.

[00:07:19] But our children should also learn about known unknowns, say, calculus or James Joyce. Not everyone is going to take AP Calculus or read Joyce's Ulysses. But teaching them intellectual humility that they know they don't know something is also a goal for us as home educators. We need to avoid letting them be caught in the Dunning-Kruger effect, where those who don't actually know something, think they've got it, whereas the more competent someone is, the more they realize they don't actually know it as well as they thought they did.

[00:07:53] In order to make this happen. We need to systematically lead our children through the various branches of each academic subject. No, they're not going to remember everything forever. And, yes, you're going to leave something out, but at least your child knows that the item exists.

[00:08:09] So what are those branches? Let's start with reading. For example, all seven strands of Scarborough's rope that we talked about last time. Writing. First sentences, and then paragraphs, and then essays. And of course, arithmetic, such as addition and subtraction and multiplication and division and exponents and roots with fractions and decimals and integers, as well as geometry and analysis. The natural sciences, that's physical sciences like chemistry and physics and earth science and astronomy. And then we have the life sciences like biochem and botany and zoology and ecology. And then we have social sciences. You have anthropology and archaeology and economics and geography and history and law and philosophy and political science and psychology and religion and sociology. And then we mustn't forget the fine arts and literature and the performing arts.

[00:08:58] So yeah, when we sign on to homeschool our kids, we make ourselves responsible for all those various areas of study. Now, I don't know about you, but I could live to be 100 and never develop sufficient expertise in all those subjects to carefully guide my child through them. This is why I continually seek out high quality curricula. I can come up with cool concepts all by myself, like I want Elena to master the basics of

drawing. But since I'm not an artist, and I don't have any expertise in that area, without a really good curriculum, it's significantly less likely to happen.

AJ: [00:09:35] Right. And no one is expecting you to have mastered all this content yourself. That's why we have things like textbooks and scripted curricula.

Courtney: [00:09:44] So as homeschoolers, we're taking on that expert role. That's our responsibility, nobody else's. What knowledge gaps does my child have? How can we fix those gaps? What does our child need to know now in order to succeed later? What is the best way to convey those concepts? How can we ensure sufficient practice of the correct difficulty to engage and challenge our child and still put it in their long term memory?

[00:10:12] Education researchers and scientists study all these different areas. There are in fact generally accepted principles of teaching and learning that have been rigorously tested both in labs and in the field for how to, with all respect to Brown, Roediger, and McDaniel, *Make It Stick*. We're not just going on what's always been done, although I will say that some time tested activities like narration, summarization, and recitation hold up remarkably well to analysis by scientists.

[00:10:44] So, while I might switch between curricula as my children grow and learn, and that might look eclectic, I do in fact, have a written long term plan for their success complete with possible curricula as they get older. I refer back to it every year, sometimes more than once a year. I'm systematic, explicit, and as coherent as I can possibly be to make sure that they're covering all the areas of knowledge. For some areas, my children will have known knowns. For others, it's sufficient that they have known unknowns. And it's my goal to reduce the unknown unknowns as much as humanly possible.

Jenn: [00:11:22] Yes, if you have a long term plan, you can adjust for factors like a newly released curriculum, and the fact that what you used for your oldest kid may not work as great for younger siblings. I try to encourage new home educators by saying you can do this and I believe you can. What you need to realize is that this is now your full time job. Here's the hard truth, you're not going to have a good outcome if you look for easy, free, and hands off for you. Homeschooling is not and shouldn't be thought of as kids teaching themselves.

AJ: [00:11:55] The classical education is nothing if not orderly, and systematic. It is not random. When we polled the members of the *Secular*

Inclusive Classical Teachers group on Facebook a while back, they said that the orderly progression of instruction was one of the most attractive aspects of classical education to them. A lot of people mentioned that they felt that they had significant gaps in their own education, and that they felt that classical education's system would prevent those kinds of problems for their own children.

[00:12:25] So classical education, and frankly, any well thought out course of study, begins with the end in mind. So you need to ask yourself, what your vision is, for a well-educated 18-year-old, what do you want your kid to know and be able to do when they finish high school? And that should include what options for further education might be open to them at that point. Then you work back to consider what the child needs to learn, and when, and in what order to reach that goal.

[00:12:58] And as Jenn said, you're almost certainly going to have to adjust the details along the way, if only because some new cool curriculum came out and you want to use it. But you should always have that big picture in mind.

[00:13:10] Now, I know you're probably looking at your five-year-old and thinking it's way too early to be worrying about what classes they should be taking in 12th grade. And I'm not actually suggesting that you worry, I am suggesting that you plan, which is a very effective way to stop worrying, as it turns out.

[00:13:27] So, if you expect to homeschool for more than a pandemic year, you need a plan. And frankly, you need it yesterday. So our number one recommendation here is, you guessed it, *The Well-Trained Mind* by Susan Wise Bauer and Jessie Wise. You really can't go wrong with this book, even if you don't end up doing neoclassical style education. And I'm one of the people who did not, in fact, but I still got a tremendous amount out of the book.

[00:13:51] You can use it to sketch out which subjects need to be taught when and in what order, the well trained mind lays that all out for you in incredible detail. So that gives you an outline to fill in with a specific curricula that you want to use to teach those things. We're also going to link to some other resources in the show notes that will give you kind of a big overview picture of what a K-8 or K-12 course of study might look like.

[00:14:18] We also wanted to offer some general advice about evaluating curriculum, because it is both harder and easier than it seems. It's harder, because there's just so dang much of it out there and you don't even know what to look for, and how to eliminate the duds. How are you

supposed to choose? However, once you do know what your goals are, and what science tells us are reliable ways to get there, it becomes surprisingly easy to eliminate whole huge swathes of curriculum and narrow your choices down to only a few options. Here are our tips for evaluating curriculum.

Jenn: [00:14:53] This is my best tip. Make sure that your materials fit your long term plan. Plan we just talked about. Making that plan probably will have to become a separate podcast. If there is a scripted option in curriculum, always, always go for that. If not, make sure that they include summaries, questions, answers and notes for you. You may optimistically think that you'll stay ahead of your pre-teen and their reading. But life happens and you need a good instructor's guide to fall back on. And while I'm at it, look at samples. Almost all curriculum will have samples on their webpage. Make sure that in the question and answer segment, it doesn't say answers may vary.

AJ: [00:15:37] Even when it is actually true, sometimes, that answers will vary, you at least want some possible examples there.

Jenn: [00:15:43] Exactly.

AJ: [00:15:45] So my tip is to remember that good graphic design does not ensure that a curriculum is educationally sound. Okay, so here, we're back to the lure of Instagram. Of course, you want something that's legible, and well organized. But just because it looks pretty doesn't mean it's going to do the job for your family. You want a good match between the author's educational philosophy and your own, which means that both the author and you need to know what your philosophies are, and articulate that. And you want the author to have expertise in the subject the curriculum covers.

[00:16:17] Now, there are some exceptions to this. But if there is one, you want at least a note that says in the curriculum, usually in the introduction, that it's been checked over by a subject expert. And you want some indication that the program has been beta tested on kids who are not the author's own family.

[00:16:34] I am currently tutoring a kid using a very lovely Spanish curriculum called *Beautiful Mundo*. It involves all kinds of reading of books and listening to music, and it's a really lovely, well put together curriculum. Now the author, by her own admission, is not a native speaker of Spanish. I don't believe that she has a degree in Spanish, but she does have a lot of connections to Spanish speakers, including teachers. So when she put her curriculum together, she ran this by

people who were native speakers and could make sure that her Spanish was correct, but also people who have experience teaching the language so that they could give her pointers on ways to do that.

[00:17:12] Another example would be my *I Speak Latin* curriculum. Now, people may be shocked to hear, but I don't actually have a degree in classics. My doctorate is in German, but I studied medieval literature as my area of specialization in graduate school and it was required for my degree that I take Latin as well. So what I did in creating *I Speak Latin* was to bring together my background in second language acquisition, which was a good half of my graduate work, and my understanding of Latin to create a program that brought those two things together. That program was developed over about three years, was tested on homeschooling families. It was tested in a cottage school, and then it was used for two years in a classical school with kids between the grades three and six. Basically, it had been beta tested. It's a solid curriculum, even though I am not a Classics major. So that's an example of the kind of thing you want to look for.

Courtney:

[00:18:06] Now, when I first look at a curriculum, I look for three things. One, substantial subject matter expertise, two, a professional instructional designer, and three, that it's written for more than gifted students.

[00:18:19] Now, don't get me wrong. I love gifted students, many teachers do. In a way they're easy to teach, because they're like little sponges soaking up every scrap of information no matter how poorly we teach it, and then they make us look good because they can radiate it out to others. Who wouldn't want an easy student that makes us look good? But for my money, a curriculum that the average or below average student can use and become successful is where it's at. That curriculum will require harder work on your part as the instructor and on the student's part, committing that information to long term memory. This isn't always going to make your kid happy, and it may be in a form that looks excruciatingly boring to you.

[00:19:01] I will confess, I almost fell asleep doing phonics exercises with Elena last spring, but she needed the practice and it works. Last night she and I co-read *Señorita Mariposa* and it was a beautiful sight to watch her sound out the English word "admire" and then recognize the cognate. All that phonics drill didn't kill her love of learning. Instead, it's opening up new languages. So if a curriculum has extra practice, yes, please. Interleaved, interval-spaced, varied practice with an 80-20 old-new split and a low distraction black and white? Take my money.

AJ:

[00:19:38] To expand a little bit on what Courtney said about substantial subject matter expertise. So how do you know if the author of a curriculum has that? Now I just talked about that a little bit. But one easy thing you can do is look at the author bio and the curriculum will undoubtedly have one. Find out what their educational background is and/or their work experience. You may want to check out any previous publications and you want to see relevant background that points toward college level or better. That is, graduate level knowledge of the subject. That's ideal. There are, of course, as I've said, exceptions, but that's a baseline that you can use for evaluating whether a person actually has the expertise to be teaching via a curriculum.

[00:20:24] So we've covered a lot of ground here. But to recap, to homeschool successfully long term, you need to settle on academic goals and make a comprehensive plan for meeting those goals. That plan should include a core of high-quality curriculum written by subject experts. To choose that curriculum wisely, you need some basic understanding of the science of learning, both in general and as it applies to specific subjects like math or writing. The information you need is just not going to be found in a blog post or a 10 minute YouTube video or a half hour podcast, not even this one.

[00:21:00] As we said in the beginning of this episode, it's in books. Books written by academics, scientific researchers, and other experts. And those books are typically published by mainstream academic or commercial presses. So yeah, most contemporary books on education are geared toward classroom teaching and that's not what most of us are doing. And yeah, some of the authors, particularly the older ones, like Charlotte Mason, may espouse some cultural or religious beliefs that you don't share. So I'm asking that you be flexible when you're reading these books, too, and take what's applicable to your situation. Just leave the rest without getting hung up on a stray mention of God or the Common Core, whatever it is, that trips you up there.

[00:21:41] That said, I don't want to give the impression that you shouldn't ever read books by homeschoolers for other homeschoolers. They can offer good practical advice that you're not going to find in books addressed to classroom teachers because our situation is really different. We play more than one role in the child's life. We are both parents and teachers. And sometimes those two things come into conflict. Getting advice from people who've been there and done that can be incredibly helpful.

[00:22:07] Also, some of these people have just straight out really inspiring stories to share and there's nothing wrong with drawing inspiration. Also, there are some authors who have become genuine experts in particular homeschooling philosophies. So, somebody like Karen Glass, for example, she's a trustworthy guide to Charlotte Mason, but you still need to read Miss Mason's own words, to see why that is true.

[00:22:28] There are also homeschooling parents who are independent scholars, effectively. And in fact, we're going to be interviewing one of them on our next episode. So I don't want you to come away with the idea that you shouldn't support small curriculum providers or enroll kids in online classes, or hire private tutors, or curriculum consultants. All three of us offer those services and obviously, we believe they're valuable. Also, not every expert has a bunch of letters after their name and university email address. So you know those programs in college where you can get credit for your life or work experience. Honestly, veteran homeschoolers have a lot to offer as well.

Jenn: [00:23:02] I've got some thoughts on that, go figure. Subcontracting some subjects out to experts is a great choice. I think that there are some excellent curricula being produced by retired homeschoolers, and that their hands on expertise is just as important as an advanced degree. Which is basically what you just said, but I'm going to say it again, just for reiteration.

AJ: [00:23:22] No, it bears repeating.

Jenn: [00:23:25] Home education for 10 or even 20 years, sometimes, deserves a sort of honorary home education emeritus designation. It's up to you to evaluate their offerings to ensure that they make or meet your academic criteria. To use myself as an example, I read two to four hours of children's literature daily and have for over 20 years. I know the qualities that a book should contain to be a good read aloud versus a reader that you hand to your child. I know what books an eight-year-old will love versus a 12-year-old. Other people have similar expertise in science or math. Seeking out online help from people who are passionate about their fields is nearly always a good choice.

[00:24:08] Now what you can't do is sign your child up for a class and then feel like you don't have to be involved at all. You're the director and you need to have an idea of what goes on each week.

Courtney: [00:24:16] Absolutely. And to build on here, Jenn, expertise in homeschooling is a real thing. While many former and current teachers

homeschool their children, homeschooling is not the same thing. Are there parents that seek to replicate school at home? Sure, but you can't do a turn and talk with only one child. Buying public school textbooks and using them at home is generally an exercise in frustration.

[00:24:40] On the other hand, part of the reason that I felt comfortable following Susan Wise Bauer's lead as a newbie homeschooler is that she herself is a successful product of homeschooling and she homeschooled her own children. She knows it from both ends and her curricula reflect that. And, as you say, I have learned the hard way that you cannot just hand your child a curriculum or enroll them in an online class and walk away. Even when the material or the class is well within their capabilities. No matter how diligent your child is, they need you.

[00:24:40] As the Senator from Vermont might say, "I am once again asking you to supervise your child's work."

AJ: [00:25:19] We want you to know that knowledge is power. And getting the knowledge you need to homeschool effectively is easier now than it has ever been. It's available in your local library, on your Kindle, and on your Audible account. So we're going to be posting a list of our top picks on a variety of education-related topics in the show notes. So look for that coming soon at GoodEnoughHomeschool.com.

[00:25:41] There are currently 12 books on the list, although knowing us we may end up adding a few, plus a few extra titles. If you work your way down that list, reading one book per month over the next year or so, we promise you will come out with a whole new perspective on homeschooling, and a toolbox full of practical ideas.

Courtney: [00:26:00] So that's it for us today. But hey, Jenn, before we go, tell us what the Bookish Society is up to these days.

Jenn: [00:26:05] I started a podcast called Society Secrets. And we give you the inside dish, spoilers included, about the latest and greatest new release books for kids ages five to 12. We're doing this because we know that you're busy, and you want to offer enriching literature selections and have thoughtful discussions with your kids but you don't have time to do all the research and reading yourselves.

[00:26:27] And of course, we're still enrolling for online literature circles and those range in age from five to 17. So, if you've got a teen, I've got you covered over there.

[00:26:37] How about you AJ? what's up in your corner of the interwebs?

AJ: [00:26:40] As I mentioned last time, I have a shiny new revised version of *Living Memory* available at my site which is QuidnamPress.com. So that's a secular guide to memory work for grades K-8. So it's also available in a discounted bundle with my poetry anthology, *101 Poems for Reading and Recitation*.

Courtney: [00:27:00] As the parent of two younger children, I can confirm that I love both of these things. Every month, Gwen tells me that her *Bookish Society* book is her new favorite book. "Mom, come read this bit!" I have already used some of the memory work in *Living Memory* as the basis for some of Elena's new Getty-Debay copy work.

[00:27:17] Folks, thanks for listening to us at Good Enough Homeschoolers. If you found this episode helpful, show us some love by leaving a review wherever you get your podcasts and join us next time when we will be bringing you an interview with a homeschooling author you should know.