



Courtney Ostaff: Welcome, listeners, to the Good Enough Homeschool Podcast, where we cheerfully eviscerate popular homeschool curriculum. We are: Courtney Ostaff.

Jenn Noughton: Jenn Noughton of the Bookish Society.

AJ Campell: and AJ Campbell of Quidnam Press.

Today we're going to be talking about changing your homeschool with the seasons, both in the calendar sense and in the season of life sense. Courtney, you are starting to look ahead to summer, what's homeschooling going to look like for you come June?

Courtney: Unfortunately for my children, summer break is not a break, but instead [chuckles] we switched gears, because I teach from August to May, so I'm available for more intense work with my children in the summer. Last summer, I hit the books hard in terms of math and phonics and that intense work paid huge dividends in the school year when I was busier. For this summer, I've picked up Ellen McHenry's *Botany Lessons* on the recommendation of Lu Allen and several other people in the Facebook group, and I really liked it because I can do it with both my children.

It's rare that I find something that lets me do a lesson with children who are six and a half years apart. I appreciate that both level one and level two are included and coordinate. This makes a nice break from Building Foundations of Scientific Understanding, which we've been doing all school year thus far, and it goes well with the life cycles lesson, which is where Elena is right now.

I'm also considering *Pepper and Pine's* Silk Road Unit Study, which looks just up my alley--except that the opening activity for elementary and middle is an out-of-print board game called *10 Days in Asia*. The board game has incredible reviews, but I can't find it to buy anywhere. When I reached out to the author, she suggested *Ticket To Ride Asia*. I might pick that up. For the high school read aloud or assigned reading, the *Cities Of Golden; Isles Of Spice* by price is long out of print, I can't even find it on ThriftBooks or AbeBooks or any of those. Instead, the author suggested biographies of the people who traveled on the Silk Road. The common thing that makes me hesitate is that the picture book selection for the elementary level is both fantastic and really expensive with 16 different books.

Even with pricing it out, looking at what my library has, I was looking at about \$165 last night. On the other hand, I love the recipe suggestions and the lesson activities and the handwork, and the fact that the lesson book is the same for elementary and middle school. These unit-based history and science curricula are not something I would ordinarily do during the school year, but it's a nice, soft way to continue learning in the



summer and a good bridge to medieval history for Elena for next year. It would help shore up Gwen with history from modern history next year.

I also appreciate that it's written by Hannah Khatib, an experienced homeschooling mom, who is Muslim, and who brings that perspective to these Waldorf style lessons. At any rate, we'll keep doing literature and phonics and math all summer, as well. We'll sleep in, we'll have a low-key, slow breakfast, and then we'll do academics for a couple of hours every day before splitting off to do other activities. If we need to take a break here or there for travel or other things, it won't be a huge deal.

Jenn: Oh, I like a unit study for summer. I always continue with math. We sometimes took December off from our regular studies to delve into an interest-based learning, again with regular math. If we abandoned math, all is lost. We have zero long-term memory for math. Apparently, we have to do it all year long every day. I gravitate towards unit studies that consist of either entirely reading books or ones that have only one spine, which is usually a nonfiction book. I would make a terrible homeschooler/unit study homeschool parent because I would either have planned way too much or way too little. My kids always had an age spread so that someone would be finding it all either too easy or too hard

AJ: Yes, I'm with you, Jenn, I really don't love unit studies as the main learning mode. It's too easy to end up with this kind of haphazard accumulation of unconnected information rather than the orderly progressive building up of knowledge within the academic disciplines that I'm all about. Honestly, that randomness is very much how my own elementary school experience felt to me.

There were lots of these separate units that I remember doing in class, but I came away with no sense of how those things connected into a bigger hole. Unlike, Courtney, what you were expressing about this being a bridge to medieval studies for Elena or something that fit into where Gwen is moving and they know that, and they can see that, that stuff was completely opaque to me as a kid. I do not know why in my fourth grade class, we raised mealworms, which my mother was really grossed out by and I had to bring them home.

I could not tell you why we did that or what I was supposed to learn. I have no idea why we wrote a country report project that every American kid seems to do in fifth or sixth grade or how that connected to anything. No idea. Since like every kid in America does that and that's geography for [laughs] elementary school, you're done. I really wanted to avoid that with my daughter. That sense of not having the big picture in mind. I also have to admit that I'm not crafty, at least not in a homeschool context. I have my own crafts that I like to do, but my kid was totally uninterested in cooking. We got all of our crafting ya ya's out in Girl Scouts by the time she was in, like, third grade. That aspect of unit studies, which some people love, is completely wasted on my family.

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All that said, I do find that unit studies work best if they have a humanities focus. Where you're combining history and literature and art and music, and then keep the STEM subjects separate, unless there's some pressing reason to bring a history of science topic in, for example, which can be really helpful, but then that's more history than science if that makes sense.

If you think about it, that's basically what the Well-Trained Mind does by using history as the organizing principle of their curriculum. Your literature and your art studies and your music studies are usually linked to whatever you're studying in history. That makes sense. It's not a full-on unit study, but it has that feel where everything is connected more organically. I think that's really great. I also had a look at the Silk Road Unit Study that Courtney mentioned.

One thing that I did notice that gave me pause was that the novel that's assigned for high school is actually a middle-grade book. The Lexile level is 830, but because it's balanced out by an adult level history text. It was a popular history. That's probably fine for a short study. I wouldn't worry about that too much. I do have a real beef with building curriculum around out of print books.

I know it's really hard if you put together something that is literature based, you always have that thing of those books go out of print and then you either have to keep up with it and constantly be refreshing the curriculum, or you have to just shrug and maybe have some alternatives or tell people I'm sorry, you have to find it on the used market. It's something that I'm trying to be very careful about in the literature program that I'm working on.

I'm really looking for books that I am pretty darn sure are going to stay in print for the long haul. I also am not super big into programs that require many, many individual books. A lot of literature-based programs just have too many moving parts for me, I'm a minimalist. Give me a spine and give me a few things on top of that. If it's the 16 books, that's just way too many.

It does make sense I think to use high-quality picture books for younger kids. Jenn, as you said, in some cases for older ones. If you've got a really, really good picture book, use it, but chasing down a dozen or more books, including out-of-print ones, that seems like a whole lot of time and money and effort for study that's only going to last a month or two, but you know, all that said, if you're looking for a change of pace or a deep dive during the summer, like what you want to do, Courtney, I think a unit study might be just the thing.

We also homeschooled with the seasons. I also like Jen found that year around homeschooling with some variation in academic intensity was a winning bet for our family. Homeschooling year-round avoided that notorious summer slide or what they talk

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about in the news as the summer learning loss. It also avoided the need to work our way back into academics in the fall. I tended to go lighter on academics in February. I refer to it as the longest shortest month of the homeschooling year. Plus, June and December, as my daughter's birthday is in July.

We typically started our school year, then, the day after her birthday, but we never really stopped entirely because it was just too easy to lose momentum. Then I'd meet with all kinds of resistance when it came time to start back up.

In addition to homeschooling with the calendar seasons, we also face the challenge of homeschooling through life's seasons. When things in our families may not be ideal or right now when the whole world is in chaos because of the pandemic. Jenn, I know you've homeschooled through nearly every crisis imaginable.

Jenn: Can I just say before I start that 2021 is proving to be less than ideal? Can we just call the whole year less than ideal? That is something that new homeschoolers really need to keep in mind. If you pulled your kids out of school last year because of the pandemic and now your kids are happier and you're going to keep homeschooling, you may be hitting the wall about this point because you're all just home together all the time. You just have to remember that this isn't really what homeschooling is. Normally we do get out some. Even my family, we go to the library. We haven't even been able to do that.

Let me go over the last 20 years of my tales of woe. Or, I guess I'd call it everyone's real life that no one talks about. I have a lot of addicts in my family, on both sides of the tree, and throughout my life, I've nearly always had one or more living with us while homeschooling. Obviously as an adult, I was the main caretaker for four different elderly relatives through their end of life sicknesses and hospice journeys. I had a very late miscarriage. I also had a pregnancy where I was so sick I stayed on the couch for nine months. Add in the typical teenage hijinks of having four teenagers at once and at many times it felt overwhelming.

That's why I'm such a fan of schooling year round, and committing to homeschooling all the way through high school, if you can. Keep in mind, at any point you can change your mind. The school is there. They will take your kid. But if you're thinking about doing this, then it really is freeing.

If you aren't tied to getting all the learning done during a specific set of 36 weeks, you end up taking a longer view. You're outside the box of the school system already. There's no reason to feel behind according to their calendar. During many seasons, we schooled every other day, at night, all weekend--basically every time except early mornings, which kept me sane, as I am an early bird and my family collectively is not.



Now I work at my own business and homeschool creatively again. Our school days are Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, afternoons, and Friday mornings. I know AJ, you also have had this experience.

AJ: My biggest challenge with homeschooling, hands down, has been with dealing with physical and mental health issues, both my own and my child's. My daughter is 2E, meaning she's academically gifted, and she's also autistic, and she has a whopping anxiety disorder.

I developed fibromyalgia when my daughter was in ninth grade. I spent most of the year teaching her from bed and because I wasn't well enough to walk her through every reading (and her eyes would glaze over if I just handed her a textbook and a reading schedule, just nothing got done that way), we ended up relying really heavily on video based learning and subsequent discussion. She would watch the videos either with me or with my wife, depending on who was available.

Then we would talk about what we had watched. We used some things from The Great Courses, which I have to admit were not the most scintillating for her. We were mostly using the courses that they market to adults. Those are college level lectures.

The other thing we used a lot was Crash Course, and she loved those things. Crash Course saved my bacon. When I was really sick, and my daughter decided that she wanted to go back to a brick and mortar school to graduate from high school. She needed to do a speed run through American history because that's what her classmates had been studying for two years while she was at home learning world history and also taking things like comparative religion class at the local unschooling resource center.

Or the other thing that I found really helpful, were test prep books. I'm talking about the kinds that give you an outline of the course material and then a quick and dirty summary, like a mini textbook. Those things were really helpful for me to make sure that she was getting the important points in subjects where I'm not an expert, but she could do that without slogging through a huge textbook that neither she nor I had the energy for. It was a 'get 'er done' option and it's not ideal, but it worked for those times when we were both really struggling. Then finally, as Jenn, sometimes the school is there.

They will take your kid and sometimes sending your child to school really is the best option for the whole family, either temporarily or permanently.

Courtney: Statistically, speaking of families who homeschool and have multiple children, over half homeschool some of their children, and send some of their other children to public school. It's not even an all or one option even within a family, which I think is really interesting.



AJ: There's just different times when it makes sense for your kid to be in school. I think people need to be realistic about that as an option. I don't want to say, "give up the second your kid gives you any resistance," because then they're going to be in public school. Sometimes schools really are a reasonable option for a particular child at a particular season in their life. At other times it really was possible for us to keep going with homeschooling.

What it took really was my letting go of a lot of my own assumptions about what homeschooling should look like, or even memories of what it had looked like when my daughter was younger. I really needed, by the time she got to high school, to reassess what success meant for her. Her interests and talents are very different from mine. In high school, it became increasingly important to play to her strengths. That sometimes meant being willing to just check boxes in other areas that are really less crucial for her future.

If I'm honest, that's exactly what I did in high school. Even in college, I stopped taking science and math at 11th Grade so that I could do honors English classes and more foreign languages because those were the things I cared about. Those were the things I was good at. We still wanted to make sure that our daughter got a decent grounding in academics, but realistically she didn't need to be able to write an in-depth analysis of the teapot dome scandal, or the intersections of race, class, and gender in a classic novel by the age of 16. Honestly she probably will never need to do those things. That's okay.

Courtney: As a special education teacher in the public school system, I wrote a lot of IEPs and I saw a lot of IEPs being written. What I saw is that IEPs are very often focused on what a student lacks, and not their strengths. When I chose to homeschool my children, part of the reason why was that I wanted to emphasize their strengths because I felt like that was what would serve them well in the long run. What can my child do better than most? How could I develop that into a skill that would enable them to succeed later in life?

Now, caveat, not all talents are readily identifiable and what makes a good talent in academics doesn't necessarily lead to adult success. I still think there's something to be said for being able to focus on what your child does well instead of poorly. It changes a whole perspective that you bring to your child. I think it helps the homeschooling relationship.

Not that you shouldn't shore up poor skills. You absolutely should. But, by challenging your child in their talents, you help them feel good about what they do well and help them develop their talents as much as possible for later adult success.



When I began homeschooling Gwen, I had a newborn, a full-time job that I was on maternity leave from, and zero expectation that I'd be homeschooling for longer than my maternity leave, which was generous, by the way. At that point, I knew that Elena had serious health issues and they wouldn't be resolved for years and we needed my income to make her household work.

I had been teaching online, off and on, as a side gig for almost 15 years at that point. It was natural for me to offhandedly apply for an online teaching job to let me focus my attention on Elena's needs. Meeting Elena's needs was the goal at that point. Homeschooling Gwen was, in some senses, my third focus. Gwen was already a fluent reader. It was relatively easy for me to just hand off texts for her to read and then to quiz her on them later with narration questions and summarization assessments. This became a pattern for how she and I work together.

She reads and works, I assess, and then I assign, because my schedule is inflexible. Teachers can't be late for class. Teachers can't just scoot out early. She quickly became accustomed to working with me as fast and efficiently as possible whenever I had time, whenever that was. Elena's health issues meant that we had to get it done as fast as possible before Elena's needs demanded my attention. Now, Elena's health issues are under control.

During the school year, I squeeze my kids in around my work. I outsourced reading and composition and Latin and Spanish and history for Gwen this year. I kept math and science and I assigned extra reading for history, as well as the reading from BYL 7 and Guest Hollow Chemistry.

I also tend to work a bit of a split shift. I teach a full-time equivalent load of live classes during the day. Then when my husband comes home at night and takes the kids. I do the asynchronous portion of teaching online, which is actually the bulk of the work. He also takes the kids on Saturday, which is usually a full eight hour day for me. Fridays after six and Sundays are my time off. I need that for my mental health. This focus on work first and homeschooling second means that sometimes things get overlooked, which is why I test my kids.

Using a criterion referenced test is how I discovered that even though Gwen was obediently and mostly successfully completing all the exercises in Singapore math, she wasn't retaining anything long term. Her third grade criterion referenced test put a large part of her math skills as a first grader.

When I went in for a more in-depth assessment with an educational psychologist, I learned that she had a learning disability in math and the curriculum design in Singapore math had allowed her to use her talents to compensate for her learning disability, right up until the testing. Would I have noticed that earlier if I didn't work? Hard

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to say, but I'm glad I have some checks and balances in my homeschooling to keep us on the path.

Summertime academics also helps reduce household stress. When I start back to work in August, I might not have time to do academics every day during the school year. My kids take off when I'm off, which means a week at Thanksgiving, about a month in mid winter, and a week in the spring. All of which is to say working full-time and homeschooling is a difficult task, but I like my job and we make it work.

I teach at the Well Trained Mind Academy, but I know you, AJ, have other things that you do.

AJ: As I said, at the beginning, I have Quidnam Press. I'm delighted to say that the first three levels of my forthcoming world literature and geography curriculum called Exploring the World Through Story are out to the beta testers right now. If you have younger kids from the ages of six to eight or so, and you'd like to get a preview of this curriculum, you can visit Jenn's site, which is the bookishsociety.com or Lu Allen's Epic Education Illawarra page on Facebook to find out about the mini courses that they're running based on this curriculum. Jenn, what else is up with your business?

Jenn: My Bookish Society Round table discussion classes start up again in July and I'm fine tuning that book list now, it's changing every day. I keep finding more new books and then I rearrange. You can keep checking back and see all the offerings at the bookishsociety.com. And I'm so excited to tell you all that I have a companion podcast where I interview Kid Lit authors of books that I want to share with parents and kids. It's called Bookish Society Secrets, and you can find it on Spotify, Apple podcasts, and I don't know, like five other podcast platforms. I started out thinking parents would be my main audience, but tons of kids listen too, and I love creating something that Bookish families can listen to together.

AJ: I can say it is actually a really charming podcast because it's basically Jenn geeking out with authors about their books. I know from experience that there is nothing like getting an author to talk about their work, you get this insight into their creative process and the enthusiasm behind their work and it's interesting too. I think for a lot of people to learn how the publishing industry works and some of the things that come up for authors that you might not really be aware of. There's a lot of fun and interesting stuff that gets talked about. I highly recommend Jenn's podcast.

Jenn: Thank you.

Courtney: It is one of my favorite things to listen to while I'm grading papers. Thanks for listening, and if you enjoyed this episode, please leave us a review wherever you get



your podcasts. Then join us next time when we give you some more real talk about homeschooling.

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