Courtney: Hello, listeners, and welcome to The Good Enough Homeschool podcast. We are:
Jenn Naughton,
Courtney Ostaff, and
Andrew Campbell.

Jenn: It's that time of year again: homeschool planning season. It's time to make some decisions about your curricula, homeschooling philosophy. And most importantly your planner. Digital or paper? In any case, I am your resident office supply addict, and I'd like to give you a quick run down on all of it. Unfortunately, you need to know what your plans are before we get into how you'll be keeping track of it all. So we're going to give you a run-down on planning, all the way from high-level questions of educational philosophy to the nitty-gritty of scheduling your day.

AJ: Let's start with educational philosophy. SWB recently shared an article on her Facebook page from the Read-Aloud Revival site entitled "My Biggest Homeschooling Mistake: Over-Thinking Methods & Philosophies." We'll link to the piece in the show notes, but briefly, the author warns parents against being swayed by books that promote this or that educational method. While she makes some good and important points that we'll come back to in this episode—like why you shouldn't constantly second-guess your decisions and why it's important to pay attention to your children's needs—if this article were written today, I doubt it would be about homeschooling philosophies. It would be about sparkly new printables, and the title would include the acronym FOMO: Fear of Missing Out.

We definitely endorse the idea that you should stay the course and not be swayed by every marketing campaign you see on Instagram. But we'd also like to suggest that homeschooling parents think *more,* not less, about their educational philosophy before deciding on their goals and on the methods and curricula they'll use to achieve them. In fact, Episode 15 is all about that.

Why is this important? In practice, most academically-minded secular homeschoolers end up being eclectic because there just isn't any one truly comprehensive, secular program that covers all subjects equally well. But eclectic does not mean random. The products you choose need to come together as a coherent whole. You won't usually hear me quoting Martin Cothran (::cough::), but he does have some intelligent things to say on this subject (and again, there will be a link to his entire piece in the show notes):

> A curriculum is not a mere collection of courses or subjects; it is an organized and coherent grade-by-grade course of studies. There are many ways to gather things together, but a collection of parts doesn't always make a whole. A whole

implies some unifying principle, something that makes the parts, in this particular arrangement, a different thing than it would be if the parts were under some other principle. And, being a whole makes these things, together, greater than the sum of all of them.

The word curriculum comes from the Latin root that means "to run," and in classical Latin, the word referred to a running course or track, and by association, to the career track (which is where we get the term curriculum vitae or CV). In other words, a curriculum has a goal (the finish line at the end of the race) and a set way to get there (the track). If you go off track, you're no longer in the race; you're just running around aimlessly.

Courtney: The next question is how do you know what subjects to teach? You should check with state laws, reconcile those with your homeschooling philosophy, age levels of your children, and future goals. If you haven't already listened to our "Becoming an Educational Architect" podcast, you might check there for an overview.

AJ: Once you know what subjects you want to teach, you need to figure out how you want to teach them. The curriculum products you purchase need to fit your educational philosophy, your preferred teaching style, and your children's needs.

Often products are marketed according to the underlying homeschooling philosophy or method, and if you join FB groups for a given method, you'll get a good idea of what products are available that fit that style of homeschooling.

We've talked quite a bit in other episodes about how to identify a solid curriculum, so I'm going to run through this quickly, checklist-style.

1. You want to look for authors who have subject expertise, either through higher education or through significant practical experience. Ideally, you also want someone with teaching experience beyond their own family. That doesn't have to be a teaching license; it could be 15 years in an active homeschooling co-op where the person has ended up teaching dozens and dozens of different kids.

2. You want curriculum that uses effective, evidence-based teaching methods and avoids educational myths and approaches that aren't supported by science. Effective teaching methods include things like direct instruction, modeling with worked problems, scaffolded practice, and lots of review. These are things that research has shown to be helpful to the vast majority of students. Educational myths include things like "learning styles"—that is, the idea that there are visual/auditory/kinesthetic learners and that you

should tailor instruction to the student's preferred mode. There is zero scientific evidence to support this claim, so no, your wiggly 5yo is not a "kinesthetic learner." Approaches that have been shown to be ineffective for young learners are things like "discovery learning" or, in reading instruction, anything that does not explicitly teach phoneme-grapheme correspondences.

Courtney: If this sounds like Charlie Brown's teacher to you, "Wa, waa, waaa", then I recommend you pick up Willingham's *Why Don't Students Like School?* and Brown, Roediger, and McDaniel's *Make It Stick*. If entire books sound like too much of a commitment, Rosenshine's "Principles of Instruction" is 9 pages and worth a close look.

AJ:

3. You want something content-rich. Your children should be learning facts and making explicit connections between their existing knowledge and new information.

4. Whether the curriculum is mastery or spiral, open-and-go or more freeform, it should be well-organized and thoughtfully designed. Information should be presented in a logical sequence, with prerequisite knowledge or skills taught before more advanced ideas. If it's a textbook, you want features that make the book easy to use. One example would be having new vocabulary pulled out in boxes or sidebars and a good glossary in the back. You want clear section headers and sensible chapter divisions.

5. It should be easy for you to determine what knowledge and skills your child will have after successfully completing the program. If the product website doesn't provide this kind of information either in the product descriptions or, even better, in a scope and sequence chart, move on.

6. Above all, you want your core materials to move your children toward the educational goals you've set for them. It's fine to go on occasional rabbit trails as children develop new interests, but if you find those interests crowding out basics like math or writing, it's time to rein things in. Those interests are now full-fledged hobbies (which are awesome and to be encouraged) that happen after lesson time.

The curriculum you choose should match your preferred teaching style, by which I mean whether you like scripted or unscripted curricula; open-and-go vs. lessons that need significant prep time; hands-on activities vs. lots of bookwork; and so on.

Courtney: Some of this will be determined by your own educational background, your own talents and skills, your funding, and your time commitment. I always say, you can have it good, fast, or free. Pick two. Good and free do exist, but you have to put in a lot of time and effort to make that happen. I can count on one hand the number of times I have seen anything listed for free on a website that I would pick up and use as a centerpiece in my home school. If you're pressed for time and it's not your area of expertise, there is no shame in using scripted curricula.

Let's be clear that if your child has special needs, you're going to have to put in significant amounts of extra time and effort for your child to reach the same level of success as a child without special needs--if that is even possible for your child. The more unique your child's learning needs, the less likely it is that open-and-go lessons will work for your child.

And some of this is just about funding. If, like a homeschooling mother I know, you can afford to hire a housekeeper and a nanny who will speak Spanish to your child to ensure that your child is fluent in Spanish, you may be able to call that unschooling because you, yourself are not doing the work. But most of us cannot afford that level of strewing.

In that case, you may want to, yes, invest in a Spanish textbook and workbooks and as much tutoring as you can afford. Reading, listening, writing, and speaking about topics are the best way to learn about them. You're rarely going to find a high-quality curriculum that is solely inquiry, or problem-based, because children need to have a certain amount of background information in order to solve the problem at hand. In fact, let me know if you find one.

AJ: Last but by no means least, the products have to work for the children you actually have, not the perfect angels in the stock photo on the publisher's website. For example, some kids absolutely love workbooks, and others find them dull as dirt. If you have a kid with dyspraxia, choosing a program that requires a lot of writing by hand (again, those workbooks!) will mean that you need to find accommodations, like speech-to-text apps or scribing.

Courtney: For example, I spent hundreds of hours reading up on math curricula before I started working with Gwen, and I eventually settled on Singapore math. We did three years of it, and then I realized that she was retaining almost nothing in terms of math facts, despite my diligence in adhering to the Home Instructor's Guide, and Gwen's work in the Extra Practice and Intensive Practice books. I love, love, love Singapore, but

for a child with a math learning disability like Gwen, it just did not work. I had to switch to Saxon, which I had previously regarded with horror. To make it up, Gwen spent fourth grade doing double math, from 1 to 4 every afternoon. She'd cry and then I'd cry and then she'd cry again. But she's working on grade level and even a bit ahead, because I was willing to be flexible in terms of curriculum.

Jenn: So let's talk about scheduling. It makes sense to work from high-level down to details here as well: yearly, then weekly, then daily.

AJ: On the yearly level, will you school year-round or take summers off? When will you take scheduled breaks? Summers? Major holidays? The dreaded February slump? That month when half the family has birthdays? It's a good idea to pad your schedule to allow for unforeseen circumstances (illness, family crisis). I usually scheduled 40 weeks to complete a 36-week curriculum but continued with our core subjects (math and Latin) during the summer.

Decide on your weekly schedule. Are you going to teach four or five days a week, or some other combination? Do you need to work around co-ops, music lessons, sports practices, regular medical appointments, or your own work schedule?

Jenn and Courtney, both of you have to schedule your homeschooling around your own teaching. How does that work for you?

Courtney: Not only do I schedule around my work schedule, I also schedule around my husband's work schedule and my children's health issues. So, at my house, this looks like late morning starts, short and intense bursts of focus with me (and sometimes my mother) or an online teacher during the day, and zero homeschooling in the evenings or weekends, with the exception of my husband reading to them at bedtime. My children get the day off when I get the day off, but when I get longer stretches of time, at the midwinter break and during the summer, they get my full attention--rare breaks for them there. I'm all about efficiency in education.

Jenn: My life could best be described as jumping the shark. I have always homeschooled around something- be it therapy for my kids, medical stuff for elder family, or mental health issues in my family- scheduling around Bookish is easy. It's scheduled and we work better in the afternoon anyway, so I work 3 ½ days a week with Bookish and we spread out homeschooling over the rest of the week. We school year round and that helps a lot in that if you aren't feeling the pressure of getting all your education in between August and May- you actually get more done in the end.

AJ: Finally, you'll need to decide on a daily time frame. Are your kids alert and ready to focus in the morning? Do you have teens who need lots of sleep? Maybe you want to work with them at night. You can be flexible, but not having *any* expectations often translates into not getting school done at all.

Think, too, about how you arrange the different subjects in the day. You want to balance subjects that really tax working memory with others that aren't as strenuous. Waldorf folks talk about "in-breaths" and "out-breaths" as a way of thinking about that balance. I found front-loading the day with more demanding subjects (like math or Latin grammar) meant that my daughter focused better on them. But there were still times when she needed a read-aloud to ease into the day.

Courtney: In the spirit of Atul Gawande's *The Checklist Manifesto*, a daily checklist, adapted to an individual parent's situation, might be useful as a product of curriculum planning. I use Scholaric to produce this. I plan out a year at a time, then print off the daily checklists by week, all 180 of them, and then I have those bound at Office Depot. Almost always, I will readjust at midwinter and reprint and have those new ones bound. I do the same in the spring, for our summer term.

When combining subjects or curricula, loop scheduling is one of my absolute favorite things. You can do it a couple of ways. The simplest way is to make a list, and just move down the list in order, doing as you can. So, if you have reading, writing, math, art, music, Spanish on your list, you might only get to three things that day. Then you just pick back up where you left off, in this case, art. You do art and music that day, but you've got to run out that afternoon, so you don't get any further. The next day, you pick up with Spanish, knock it out of the park, and then do reading, because you're back at the beginning of the list.

Another way to do loop scheduling is to assign certain things to certain days. Say you're doing Story of the World. Day 1 you read the chapter and answer the narration questions from the book. Day 2 you read some trade books or listen to relevant audio books, and have your child draw a picture about a specific scene in the book. Day 3, you do the map work from the activity book, locate the place on a globe, and add dates to your timeline. We're going to do this on a Monday/Wednesday/Friday loop. Well, say that your Day 1 is on Monday, and you don't do any homeschooling on Monday. That's fine. The next day in your loop is Wednesday, so you do Day 1 on Wednesday, skip Thursday, and then do Day 2 on Friday. No sweat!

You can loop everything, or just non-core subjects like art appreciation and poetry. The sky's the limit.

A valid method of homeschooling is just Doing The Next Thing. You've purchased curricula you trust, or you're confident in your ability to wing it, and so every day at the same time, you simply open your book and turn to the next lesson. I did this for years, and it works just fine.

Often, it helps if you keep a record of your work in one of those cheap spiral notebooks, so if you're down with the flu for a week or two, you can remember where to come back to. It's also nice to have a record of your work in case CPS knocks on the door. Alternatively, if you're not terribly stressed for time, you can simply sit down every weekend, or every night before, and make your own checklist of things you want to do the next day or next week, and knock off your list. This subtype of doing the next thing is called the Spiral Notebook Method.

If you have a big stretch of time, like USAian summers off, or perhaps you take a big block during the winter holidays, then you might consider the file folder method. This works best if you have curricula that are kind of workbooky. Basically, you get a hanging file drawer, and use a hanging file folder for each week in your homeschool year. I used 36 weeks. Then you get 180 file folders, one for each day of the school year, and divide them out, five per week. You can adapt this, as I did, and simply do six or nine weeks at a time.

Finally, you tear apart your workbooks, or print out as many copies as you need so that *all* the work is in each day's file folder. This is nice, because everything is right where you need it. No digging under the pile by the printer, or hunting down that workbook you bought three years ago. However, not everyone is comfortable tearing apart books, or printing out great swathes of things at a time.

Personally, I found the multitude of file folders to be a little overwhelming, so I color coded each hanging file folder with washi tape, and then put that tape on the top of each manila file folder. Then I labeled all five of that week's file folders with pen: Week 1, Day 1, Week 1, Day 2, etc. This way, I could easily grab whatever folder I needed, and stick it back when we were done.

Jenn: Now let's talk about the fun stuff. I feel like the one thing that all homeschool parents have in common is that they are creatives. You don't start homeschool if you aren't at least marginally ready to think outside the box. This is the area of pinterest I love the most. For inspiration go look at the hashtags that start with planner. So these suggestions are planners that I have purchased and used in the past few years. With these examples you design both a teacher and student planner and they mail it to you

all bound and printed. That way all you have to do is add the washi tape and stickers. These two are the ones I like the most:

[Plum Paper Planner](#) wins for best quality paper and for the fact that you can customize it to suit your homeschool really easily. It's the nicest overall at about $60 a year.

A [Plan in Place Planner](#) is run by homeschoolers for homeschoolers. They aren't as flashy, but are also cheaper. They run around $30 if you add all the options in.

I don't like Erin Condren as I found that the paper came out of the binding mid year but it is on par with Plum Paper clocking in around $60 for the year.

My hands down favorite planner is the [Passion Planner](#), it's what I use now for Bookish and Declan and I have a joint one for homeschooling. It isn't customizable at all, and is an all purpose planner (although they do offer one for the academic year or calendar year) I find that filling in the subjects by hand allows me to change directions when needed. I also love their passion roadmap that can really help you to articulate your goals for your homeschool. It's like if you had a fill in the blank life coach.

In the end though the best planner is the one you use. I know from experience that when you fail to plan it can spiral out of control quickly and suddenly you give the kids a whole week off of school.

Host News
      Jenn: The Bookish Society is growing. We have added an additional teacher, and some awesome people behind the scenes to free me up a bit more.
      AJ: Hard at work on the next level of EWS.
      Courtney: I have a new scheduling service! Check it out on the Bookish Society website.

Courtney: 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.

Show Notes

https://readaloudrevival.com/my-biggest-homeschooling-mistake-over

The Curriculum Roadmap and the Purpose of Education

Ep. 15: Becoming an Educational Architect

What Is a Curriculum? by Martin Cothran

▶ The Biggest Myth In Education

Willingham's *Why Don't Students Like School?*

Brown, Roediger, and McDaniel's *Make It Stick*

Rosenshine's "Principles of Instruction"

http://scholaric.com/

Courtney's Curriculum Scheduling Service