



S5E11: Breaking Free from Multitasking

Julie Bogart with Courtney Moyer

Julie: [Theme music plays] Multi-tasking. That is one of the most common questions I get. How can I teach multiple levels to multiple kids and still have a joyful household? It's okay if we enforce a bunch of workbooks and everybody is stuck at a kitchen table. But how do we do this if we're trying to bring inspiration into learning? If we're trying to pay attention to personal passions? It seems impossible. Well, today's conversation with Courtney Moyer, hopefully will shed some light on how our traditional notions of education interfere with our homeschooling opportunities. Take a listen [theme music plays].

Julie: Today's episode on [season five](#) of the Brave Writer Podcast features a mother of four with an additional niece that she gets to look after two to three times a week. That makes five kids if you're doing the math, ages 12 down to 1 year of age. Courtney submitted her application to our Ask Julie season and I noticed immediately that the challenge she is confronting in her homeschool is one so many parents face. How to homeschool effectively when dealing with multiple ages and multiple children in multiple stages? I especially appreciated her honesty in this line of her application. She wrote: "our environment is like a tsunami, with Mama drowning most days." I don't know about you, but I bet you can relate. I know I could. When you have lots of little ones and the Mt. Everest scale responsibility to educate them well, it can seem like an impossible climb to the top—just to mix metaphors for a minute [laughs]. So let's get started and hear from Courtney Moyer and we'll see what we can do together. Hi Courtney! Welcome to the podcast!

Courtney: Hi! Good morning, thank you!

Julie: So glad you're here. Can you tell us first about your kids, so we can get to know your family a little bit?

Courtney: Oh definitely. Okay so my oldest is 12 year old. Her name is Athena. She's pretty much my independent one. She was recently crowned as Miss Preteen Sunbeam in Lakeland Florida, so that's been pretty exciting for us here lately. And then my second child is Ariak, he's 8 years old. His biggest passion is to be a hero and protect the world from criminals so we'll see if that makes due as time passes on. Then I have Athiah, she's 5 years old. And she's one that just has an impact of large energy. Loves glitter and sparkles and every single thing that can possibly be girl-y. And then my youngest one is Akilah, she's two—at the end of this month she'll be two. She is just highly into decorating my walls with every marker, crayon, anything she can find in our house and the floors are covered with lotions and soaps and anything she could find that would be slippery.

Julie: Oh my goodness.

Courtney: And then of course as Julie had mentioned, I occasionally do have my niece. Her name is Carly and she joins us two or three times a week. We love having her here, she's so much fun. But she does keep my little one entertained most days or they work together to combat against me in doing just mischievous baby-type things. So yeah! That's my little bunch of children that I have. They are usually five of them here running around.

Julie: You know I had five kid too and the age span was 9 years so not too different from yours. One of the big challenges I remember was just toddlers can climb chairs, climb on the table, rip pages out from under kids who are actually doing what we would call schoolwork. Are you experiencing some of those kinds of interruptions?

Courtney: You know, until very, very recently I had been. And we just recently were able to take our formal dining room area and make some barn doors and kind of seclude that entire room into a toy room and that's just been maybe in the last three-ish weeks, four weeks. And so that has been an outstanding help to me, which is right next to our school room. So our rooms are almost joined together in a sense. So that has been very helpful but prior to that, she would do that. She would be in a school room trying to write A's and trying to do things that the kindergartener's doing. And then there was an interruption for a diaper change and she needed a bottle and all those kind of things that would just roll one after another in the midst of me trying to teach the other ones what they trying to learn for their lesson for that day.

Julie: Yeah I noticed that you gave me a whole list of things that you've tried to manage this complexity of multi-tasking and multiple children. Tell me a few of those strategies if you remember them or I can read some of them to you. But I kind of want to paint the picture here because I think so many parents experience this pressure of trying to get through what they know if the education their child deserves but they've got all of these varying amounts of energy and attention spans to deal with simultaneously.

Courtney: Yeah certainly! So like I had kind of mentioned, my oldest she is very independent and so what I usually allow her to do is she kind of does her work on her own, with the exception of our read-aloud. I've tried starting early in the morning, because of course my kindergartener and my 1 year old—or 2 year old—is the one that's usually awake first. So I've tried to really corral them to do breakfast and get my day started early, I usually start my day about 5 in the morning.

Julie: Oh my gosh [laughs].

Courtney: Yes [laughs] that's the key factor right there. And there's been known times I'm awake at 4-4:30 just to try to get ahead of the cleaning schedule or those kinds of things. So I'll get my kindergartener and set for the day and I'll try to get her learning and things going but then because I don't have an older child awake to stay with the baby, then a lot of times that's when she's most distracting. So I find that that's kind of difficult schedule to have and try to work that part in. Getting as much done in the time frame of naptime. I mean that was working until of course she's gotten to become a bit older and then at that point her naptime now is like down to about an hour and a half, I mean that doesn't provide much time to get in all the subjects that we're trying to squeeze in at one time. I've tried listing out assignments so that the two olders can kind of see what needs to be done.

But I'm a teacher! I love being with my kids. It's one of the things that really—it's just in me. I just love sitting with them. I could read—read aloud to them all day and have conversations and just learn from that. So it's in me to want to sit with them and to teach. And so—and I think that's a great experience for us to try and have in the meantime. Teaching them as a group, you know we do use a small side curriculum and that does allow for a group teaching but then my son started to fall behind because he wasn't understanding and then it was holding my daughter back. So there just seems to be this struggle of trying to get them to be able to do group work and activities because of their age differences.

Julie: Yes I totally get that. I mean, reading aloud to everybody is possible but the skill work of mastering phonics or learning how to handwrite or becoming capable in math, those do tend to break down according to the current developmental stage of the child. And some of those really

do need dedicated attention. You wrote “my biggest homeschool challenge is learning how to position myself in an atmosphere to multi-task with homeschooling, housework, and additional activities.” And I really loved that you identified those three aspects of life at home. We aren’t in a school environment where we can just ignore the dog that needs to be let out or the fact that we might have a laundry load that needs to be changed. There’s a sense of home that pervades even our most rigorous attempts to set a schedule as you admitted. And so one of the things that I did in response to your request, your cry for help, was I looked up some brain-research on multi-tasking. But before we talk about that, I wanted to ask you to define what you think multi-tasking is. What is your fantasy of this multi-tasking life that you wish could implement? What would that look like if you were doing it successfully?

Courtney: Oh my gosh. Okay so that’s a peek inside my brain, I think. So what I ideally see when I’m thinking multi-tasking is being able to almost in a business sense, I guess would be the best way to try to explain it, to be able to distribute tasks at one time to multiple kids. So because they are all over the house doing different things at different times, it’s difficult for me to put myself in the middle of that and to be able to see what they’re all doing at one time in the midst of the changing the diapers and those kinds of things. So in my head, I’m feeling like I think that multi-tasking would really be able to I guess delegate would be a great word and trying to get all the kids to what they need to do at their times, at their levels because I feel like that’s what’s important. I can get them in a group because they’re pretty obedient for the most part, but it’s more of my own internal multi-tasking that I’m struggling with.

Julie: So keep going with that. When you say “internal”—so there are two things that I heard you say. One was: delegating. So in a sense, the way you would multi-task would be multiple kids independently working without needing you all at the same time. Is that what you meant by delegating?

Courtney: I would say so, yes. I mean of course, she would obviously—she has a specific need from me because she’s still very little. But I feel like the older three, if I could actually in my—but I feel like my brain doesn’t have the capacity to be able to get them separated in different locations doing the things that they need to do and for me to be like completely aware—not just my body present but to be completely aware of where each person’s level is at, what they’re kind of completing—just as their life in a whole. Like to be able to understand where they’re at separately but then as we come together united as a group, for us to be able to connect on those separate levels. Does that make sense?

Julie: Yes. I mean it makes sense. I’m not sure it’s possible [laughs] but it definitely makes sense. I was going to say the second piece of this in your fantasy of what it would look like to multi-task is that you would be 100 percent present for all three kids simultaneously, that’s what I’m picking up as the undercurrent. You mentioned that you really love teaching and you

could do it all day and you love sitting with them. And yet, each child has this unique need. And so you're trying to imagine—tell me if I'm getting this right—you're trying to imagine how to be fully present to each child somewhat simultaneously aware of their needs without being overrun by household tasks, a baby who needs a diaper changed, and the feeling of not fully knowing what each child is doing separate in the house? Is that kind of close to what you're hoping for?

Courtney: That's almost like—that's exactly where my thought processes are going, yes [laughs].

Julie: Alright good then let's jump right into the brain research about multi-tasking. So one of the fantasies that we have about ourselves is that we can do more than we're capable of. In other words, one of the ways we solve our problems is to imagine we can do more. So for instance, let's just talk about money as an example. We have a certain income that comes every month and let's say we don't have a great income, maybe it's just adequate for our needs. And then suddenly a car breaks down and we have to figure out where we're going to find that extra money that isn't normally allocated for a car breaking down.

So we pull it from a variety of places. We might take it from the grocery budget, we might take it from the summer vacation we were saving for because right now we can't even go if the car is broken. And we figure out a way to pay for that car. But then! The refrigerator breaks. And suddenly, we really don't have the money for that additional thing and yet our belief is that we should be able to pay for it. So we dig deeper and we try to find more fantasy money that really doesn't exist. We might even put it on a credit card with the belief that in the future we could pay for it.

What ends up happening is we build up this financial stress because we have this fall idea that the amount of times we have can be stretched past the amount that we actually have. That there is some mystery-religion around money that if we could just solve it we would be able to afford all the things that we need and want based on whatever this limited income is. I'm drawing out the metaphor because we do the same thing with time and we also do it with energy. It's one thing to say well I allocated a certain amount of time to this subject and it didn't seem to be enough, I'll just borrow time from somewhere else. But what about our mental energy? Maybe we can even re-allocate the time but we don't even have the stamina to be as present as we want to be. That's kind of what I'm hearing you say. I'm hearing you say that there is this amount of energy and time that you have and you keep thinking if you could just tweak it a little bit, there'd be more leftover to spend. Does that seem true?

Courtney: That's very true. And I love what you just said about taking the time and trying to allocate it and borrow from other departments, if you will, within life. And that's where I see the struggle because I think okay so if I get up really early I can get a head-start and get my cleaning things done and because that is kind of a high priority to me, too. I have to keep things orderly and clean with organization so I'll get that going. And then as soon as somebody

wakes up I'm like okay, so while this is taking place I'll just steal some time, I'm not going to throw that load of laundry in, I'll do this instead. But then eventually, just like you mentioned it, it all starts piling up and then at the end of the week I'm like oh my goodness, what is going on here you know?

Julie: Yes, exactly. And it's partly because there is an un-ending set of tasks of a mother at home. You will never actually finish the checklist. There's no moment in time where it stands still and you've achieved the goal. So one of the goals for a mom like you and you are a self-admitted well-organized person, the distress that is created internally for you when you don't feel organized and on top of things, steals energy that you could be using for those things that you value because your disquiet inside is going to drive you to keep pushing because you keep thinking "Oh I'll get to this endpoint" right? Does that happen to you? "I'll get to this one day where it magically all came together and that will be the symbol that I can sustain this for an unending amount of time."

Courtney: Definitely. I do feel—I wouldn't say that I would be one that I—you know go to bed at night and I get into this bed like I'm a failure, like I don't feel like that in that sense. But I do feel like when the week is done—we usually do like Friday night movie night with the kids and do some popcorn and some fun things but when I get to that point and I know that's the one time out of the week that the kids are having an expectation that I'm going to sit down, I want to sit down but because I need my house to be orderly and I feel like I have this unending task, I'm thinking "If I sit down now, it's just going to all run into tomorrow and the next day and the next day." And it just creates this hamster wheel that I feel like I can't get out of trying to accomplish so many things for such a large family at one time.

Julie: So here's what the brain research about multi-tasking that I think will be valuable to you. One of the challenges that we have is that we believe falsely that the brain can actually handle multiple tasks simultaneously. But that actually isn't what multi-tasking is. Multi-tasking is shifting between tasks quickly.

So if you get up, you make a cup of coffee. While it's brewing you go check email, you come back, you get your cup of coffee. You change a diaper, you go back and look at Facebook. Then you send a text to your friend, then you open a book. Then you walk over into the living room to grab the laundry that you didn't find in the hamper but that was out on the floor and you add it to the hamper. And you're literally just moving—you're switching, you're toggling between all these tasks. You aren't starting by saying okay, laundry first and then investing deeply in laundry. We are like trying to do everything simultaneously. Pour the cheerios, nurse the baby, read the read-aloud. And that's so tempting! And so easy to do with a big a family. I mean, I certainly have lived the hamster wheel, I know exactly what you're talking about.

Here's what they say, the professors who do this brain research at University of California and other schools, when we attempt to multi-task we don't actually do more than one activity at

once. We are quickly switching between them. And it is the switching that is exhausting. I want you to just let that sit for a minute. The switching is what's exhausting. It uses up oxygenated glucose in the brain, running down the same fuel that's needed to focus on a task. So think for a moment each time you shift. You have to remember what it is you were about to do. I notice this happens to me the older I get and I don't even have five children in my house anymore. If I go downstairs to do the laundry while I was still thinking about my previous task, sometimes I can't remember why I went down the stairs. You know? I was on auto-pilot that I should go do the laundry but my brain is still on the email I was answering, which triggered another thought about a phone-call I should make and when I get downstairs, I can't quite remember why I was there.

The shifting is what drains our energy. It removes from us that capacity to focus. And here's one of the things that people do as a result: they eat more, they drink more caffeine but what they really need is a break to regroup. We talked about on the podcast last season about the need for brain breaks for our children. Well we also need them as adults and one of the things that I thought was really fascinating. Gloria Mark, professor at the department of informatics at University of California Irvine says that when people are interrupted, it typically takes 23 minutes and 15 seconds to return to their work. Can you even believe that? So if we—

Courtney: Oh my gosh.

Julie: Isn't that a crazy number?

Courtney: That's a large chunk of time in my day. To think of even just being interrupted or having to shift that task two or three times, there's already more than an hour that's taken out of my day right there.

Julie: Truly! And the thing is: we tend to believe that we can sort of do things in these little burst fragments but to drop down into the focused attention space we need to do any of them well requires staying put for at least a few minutes. You know, we can't just sort of like hover above our homeschools, we have to sink down and inhabit them. Another thing that I thought was really fascinating is that when we use a multi-tasking approach to our lives, what we're doing is we are deferring our gratification. You know there is a sense of accomplishment when you actually experience the pleasure or the celebration of an accomplishment, rather than rushing off to the next thing. So instead of pausing, we barely get it done or get it started and we're moving to the next thing and so we never have this satisfying final sip of tea. We never have the final problem completed. We're already thinking about the next thing that is incomplete. So we don't get to experience completion. So multi-tasking is the hamster wheel [laughs]. That was the perfect metaphor.

Courtney: Yeah and I mean I completely feel that way when I'm in that shifting zone, going from one thing to the next all day long continuously. I mean by the time I start getting dinner going, I do dinner fairly early because my husband works third shift and we eat as a family, so dinner time I start cooking at 3:00 PM. And so by the time I get to that point and I sit down at dinner, oh my gosh this is the one time I don't have to think. I don't need to do something, nobody's asking me for anything, everybody has food in front of them, and they're all eating. This is spectacular.

Julie: You are so right. And in fact, I think it's why poetry teatime happens to be so popular in our community. Because it's the one time when everybody is on task together and we don't feel guilty about it. We're like at least this counts, there's like a school component. If all we did was have a snack, moms would be thinking about the dental appointment. But because we've got poetry books and food, there is that moment that's sort of a respite where we sort of drop down into the experience. And what creates momentum in homeschool is dropping down into the experience, having a satisfying depth, and then noticing before we move on. We actually need to high five ourselves. We need to give ourselves credit for that moment.

One of the things that Gloria Marks, that researcher, says is when it comes to long-term projects, she says you should spend 25 minutes to 2 hours working on the project at a time. This is for adults. So one of the problems is if we spend less than 25 minutes on a challenging task, we typically never feel that sense of accomplishment. We always feel like we're behind.

So how do we do this in homeschool? You know, children have shorter attention spans so we're not going to force a child to work on something for 2 hours. But what would it look like if our days were segmented differently as home educators? Most of us have this belief that we need to do seven subjects a day. Right? There's this feeling of daily-ness that seems required for every subject based on the school model. We also have this belief that school has to happen on weekdays between certain times of day. And for the most part, that's reasonable. You know you want to use the center of your day for home education because that's when everybody's fed, has the most attention, Dad's not home. But within that parameter, what can we do now to help you think about dropping down into something that would be more focused attention? And how do we rotate through these three categories you so accurately identified—homeschooling, housework, and additional activities, whatever those are (co-op, soccer, or going to the dentist)?

And so I wanted to ask you to think a little bit about that with me. What would happen if you thought about the subjects not as something to get through but as accomplishments based on exposure to information? In other words, the skill development is important but how do we hold that skill development? Is it based on quantity of pages? Is it based on amount of time that we spend in the subject area? Is it based on how much they get done in a certain month or a week? Or are we looking at the skill as a part of development towards a bigger picture end goal. How do you think about your daily subjects with your kids? What is your frame of reference for having made an accomplishment?

Courtney: I think in the end what kind of is an anchor for me would be more so that it's the end accomplishment. And so I think that it's not so much thinking about getting in the seven and ten subjects. It's not a longer to do list, so to say for them, but I think it's more the quality. Like you were mentioning about Teatime Tuesday. Me and the kids, we love Teatime Tuesday. I mean it's like a faithful thing in the house. It's an anchor to them and they know that on Tuesday morning, that's something that they can cling to that starts our day. So it's more so about the quality of the things that they're learning. I mean currently, we are still—we just finished a curriculum that we've been working for two years. So I'm not really one to say that because somebody wrote something or they said that I need to do that that's how I feel pressured for my kids to learn. I want them to learn in the exact place where they're at. So whatever that may mean for them individually and at the end of the school year or at the end of their school time, I want it to be more looking back into saying "Okay, we had quality at this. We really learned a great deal about this subject." I would rather them learn a lot about say two or three things than to be scattered all the way across and just be sprinkled with all these things that they really aren't grounded in education-wise. I just would prefer that they would get an overall of one topic.

Julie: That makes good sense. So one of the things that you could do is identify those more concretely so that you actually have sort of a frame of reference. So if we're talking about history, you could actually say for yourself "Okay, we are looking at the American Revolution period." And you could make a bullet list for yourself that's just for the year. I want them to know these songs, have heard this poetry, we read this book, they have this basic understanding. Sometimes I feel like we get so down in the details, we kind of forget the overarching goal and we forget that that has the whole school year to evolve. And I realize we're recording this during the end of a school year so you will want to implement starting in the fall again, or whenever you do, August, whenever. So part of what helps to keep us from getting in those details is feeling more at peace with a ten month overview than the daily habits. Now we can compartmentalize those habits and that's the next thing I'm going to ask you about. Have you ever rotated children by day? Or do you have all your kids doing homeschool everyday with you?

Courtney: Wow, what you just said is a great idea and no I have not tried that. Usually what it looks like is they're all kind of working on things within a certain—say on a Monday from about 8 until noonish or something like that and everybody's scattered around doing different things. That sounds like a great idea. So what I'm thinking what you may be meaning is like Monday maybe for my oldest, Tuesday would be for—So each day would just be for one child's teaching time?

Julie: That's right. I mean you can still do your group activities. Poetry teatime on Tuesday. You can do read-alouds all together. But what you were describing where you want three kids in three different parts of the house, you could do that if you just deep dove with one child per

day. So you could say: Well the skill that I'm really wanting to build with this child, with my 8 year old, we're going to devote where that's where she has me and the other kids are going to watch a movie, take a nap. Whatever their personal needs are, that will happen. And this is your sacred time with that one child. Because here's what's amazing: A deep dive with a child for a half hour or for an hour teaches more than lots of fragmented multi-tasking style attempts over a week. Especially now that we know that it takes 23 minutes and 15 seconds on average to recapture your awareness of what you're learning.

So if every single day is this little fragment where it's interrupted a lot, no one ever sinks in. They don't actually get that moment where they are assimilating the information. They need a little time to drop into it. You need time to drop into it with them. They need time to do the work. And then they need a little bit of time to come out of it and be proud of that experience. So one of the things that is possible then is if you have three kids who are in that stage, you literally just do one every day. It doesn't have to be Monday/Wednesday/Friday, you can just say today is Athena, the next day is your next child and just rotate through them for a while. Just see how that feels.

Courtney: That seems like an excellent opportunity and I know we have a few more weeks of school left before the end of the year and so I have an opportunity to implement some of these things prior to us taking a summer break and I'm definitely going to think over that and see how I can put that in. Because it's key! I think even for my oldest, what tends to happen, because she is the next mama bear in line, so to say, she takes up so much that there are times when I want to spend that time with her education and just being able to get really deep into a book and just really have conversations with her at her level, but because she is the oldest, sometimes she's the one that gets set aside and then the other ones are being dealt with, you know?

Julie: Absolutely. And the danger with the oldest child in a large family is to send them away to do their work and what happens is they stop feeling as connected to the younger children and the whole family experience. But they need that quiet because it's hard to get things done when the toddler is being loud and so if you schedule time, if you make time to have that one on one, even if it's just once a week, you actually create momentum with your daughter. I know for me that actually taking my kid away sometimes helped. On a weekend when the dad is home, I would take Johannah. We would go to Barnes & Noble and work on writing together on a weekend. And because we were at Barnes & Noble, it just felt like a treat. It didn't feel like school, it felt like a treat. So we would go and work on revision with Frappuccinos and have time away from the other four kids. And she needed that experience of my presence with her. The same thing with Noah. He would spend time with his dad. Talking about books they were reading.

You can give your child attention that is focused during the school week for sure. But the second advice I was going to give you was: break free from Monday-Friday, especially with your

oldest kids. And break free even from middle of the day. My son Liam, we did writing in the evenings. So he needed my focused attention and he also needed dark. Daytime was too distracting so he did better focusing on writing when it was the two of us at a table, in a room with just soft lighting. For some reason, that's when he could drop down into that focused attention.

So the strategy that I want to consider with you, these are the three things: rotate children on different days. You can rotate subjects, you don't have to only do one subject per child, per day. You can actually say "Well, this week we're going to stick with history all week because it'd be good to do that all in a row and then next week we're going to focus on science." I know that skill development depends on daily-ness so keep that short and keep it in a good strong burst, you know 15 good minutes of math a day does a lot as long as it's being done.

And then finally, break free of the traditional time structure. Give yourself permission to do something at a different time, whether it's the weekend, an evening. I know that you said that your husband works second shift so that might be more challenging for you. But if you can come up with some ways to address a specific need with a specific child that doesn't necessarily feel like it's draining you in the middle of the day that can go a long distance towards education.

Courtney: So I can definitely see the deep dive with one child throughout the week becoming a strong anchor. So in the midst of that, would I still be having the other children working—say Monday was just Athena's day. And so would I still have my second oldest, Ariak, doing math or maybe a couple things I know he's capable of kind of doing independently?

Julie: Yes I think so. But not while you're working with Athena. So rather than needing a daily amount of time with all three kids where you're very focused, know that you're going to give that dedicated focus to a child on each day. And you know, I know you're a very well organized mom so I can picture you feeling like you have to evenly distribute that and rotate oldest, middle, young. Oldest, middle, young. But you don't have to! It might be that you have this routine that you've established in the morning. You read aloud, everybody does their math, you do the best you can with the chaos and they do the best they can and then maybe there's one week where Athena really needs you every day because you're working on this one writing project and the other kids just have homeschool light that week. They do their basics but they're not having that deep dive into some more meaty subject and their week is coming. You can allow yourself the flexibility to address the needs and to zero in on one child for a deep dive when you need to.

Here's what is mistaken in most of our imaginations. We think more instruction equals more learning. But what's actually true is a more quality deep dive does all the teaching that your kids need. My mom, the professional writer, helped me with writing growing up a handful of times in very concrete ways. And those lessons have stayed with me my entire life in a way that my school teachers did not. You can make amazing progress with a quality lesson. So feel the

freedom to rotate not based on a system but based on need. Based on your observations of your children.

Courtney: Would that be an opportunity, say, that when they're working independently for some certain things—for example, my second oldest, when he's doing his math there is occasionally where he can pretty much do his lesson on his own and then the ones that he gets wrong and the ones that he struggles with, we kind of go back and revisit. So would I be kind of using that anchor time to revisit some of those? Or would that be completely separate.

Julie: You know, you could! You could do that. You know, I have a joke that I share a lot at conferences about homeschooling and math. Homeschoolers have never gotten a single math problem wrong. Do you know why? Their mothers won't let them [laughs].

Courtney: [Laughs] You are so right. It's so true. As soon as I see that he has something wrong I'm like "Okay we're going to go back and revisit that and we have to make sure..." So you're so right.

Julie: So in school kids get minus three. At home, they never get minus three. They are going to fix that problem. And there is value in that! Absolutely. I mean if you fix what was mistaken right after you do it, there is a kind of learning that happens there that's really valuable. But it's also possible to be in overdrive. To do overkill. It may be that you only make him rework his problems once a week. He does all the skill building and then when have your anchor time and you do that math with him, that's the day that you do the revisiting of problems from that day that he missed. Rather than, feeling the burden of perfection.

Part of what we're so afraid of as home educators is that our kids will make a single mistake and it will live with them forever when really, in so many areas, whether it's playing soccer or practicing piano, we're so comfortable with mistakes. We know that they're going to get the two hands together at some point. We know that if they don't score a goal now, by the end of the season they probably will. Or they'll get closer to scoring a goal. But for some reason, with math and reading and spelling we are so driven that not a single mistake happens, when really they might need some freedom to practice, to make some mistakes and then to address those in a meaningful way.

With no pressure, without the feeling of perfectionism, without it feeling so corrective. It could instead feel empowering! Wow! Look it! You did math this week, four days in a row, without help from me. And look at all the problems that you got right! That you answered correctly. Now, let's look at a couple—you pick a couple of those problems that you missed, that we've looked at together, and let's rework them and see if after a week of working these problems

you even know how to correct them without any help from me. So much more empowering. So much more focused on their growth and strength rather than fear of what they're doing wrong.

Courtney: Yes I agree with so much of that because I—what I'm hearing from you and how I'm feeling is I'm thinking and I'm envisioning myself throughout the week is that that tends to be a time taker. So like as soon as I go in and he does his math lesson, I'm right back behind him saying "okay, let's do this." Well it's like he just sat there for how long and did his lesson and then I'm right behind him saying let's fix it right now. To where as if what I'm hearing you say if I just gave him his freedom and kind of moved past that and allowed him to get a few wrong and revisit it at the end of the week and say let's choose five problems to go over, I feel like it would be much more beneficial and just as you had mentioned, it's not so much of the instruction that it's learning. It's allowing him the experience of going through the process of math in and of itself.

Julie: Exactly. And in fact, one of the best things that someone said to me when I was struggling with whether or not my children were encoding mistakes, this other homeschooler said to me, "The practice is teaching. Trust the practice." And you know, that is such a powerful thing to consider that practicing those math problems is doing the teaching. Now obviously, if they're making a consistent error, something that's a fundamental misunderstanding of what the principle is, you do want to step in and say "oh no, no, when you multiply 0 times 3, it's always 0." You know? If they're always doing the wrong answer, you could step in. If they're fundamentally not understanding the principle. But if they've understood the principle and are making mistakes, just like they might understand the principle of spelling, part of what's happening is the practice is teaching them. And if you put a little distance between the first effort and when they correct, sometimes their brains unconsciously have taught them what they needed to know just from having practiced.

We see this happen all the time in spelling. You know, you help a kid do copywork and dictation and they get it pretty accurately. And then you ask them to freewrite and they misspell. But if you can put space between the freewrite and them coming back to read their own writing, a lot of times they can even identify their own misspellings because their brains have the information. It's just not fluent yet. And they need a little bit of time to sort of come back and re-evaluate their own experience, they own process, to critique their own work. And they can do it! Which is what's so cool.

Courtney: Yeah, my second one. He just kind of seems to be the key because he's just at that age where he can sometimes be independent but the occasionally he's kind of needing that help so there's that pull there. But I ended up pulling him off what we were doing completely—probably in the last eight weeks or so and I noticed that he was struggling a bit with his writing and I said you know what we're going to put everything aside and we're only going to work on this. So every day he gets a freewrite topic and he starts writing. And he kind of got to a point

where he became a bit stronger and there was an opportunity and I said “Hey do you want to enter your writing into a county contest?” and he said “Sure” and so he went for it. And that in itself was so huge for me to see that he was willing to go through that process and it did give me that opportunity to be able to just sit with him and just do writing. I mean, he also did his math but aside from the history and the science and you know, all the other things that as a homeschool mom we feel like are such a requirement to get in. And eventually they do need those topics but when I saw that he was struggling with that, I thought if I could get him to read and write a little bit better, that was a point where I felt like he could get a bit more independent to give me that little bit more freedom of my time and be able to scoot over to another one of the kids that do need me more.

Julie: Well what you just shared is powerful. The fact that he had a real venue to share his writing in, not just something that he’s doing for you, drew the two of you together. You made time just to focus exclusively on him. And that experience is worth a month of other kinds of writing. That’s worth several months of it, actually. Because all the pieces that he learned through that experience are going to stay with him because it was so powerful and deep. So as we’re thinking, then, about this notion of multi-tasking, the key is to do things one at a time and get into them deeply enough that it has a lasting impression. So rather than shifting constantly between the needs, allow yourself some time and space—you know, make it sacred—that you are going to give some time.

Now, obviously, you’re going to have a toddler that interrupts you occasionally in the middle of these anchor moments, trust that that’s okay, too. That’s going to happen. You can’t stop life and interruptions. But if you create some space, especially for your well organized personality where you know you can count on these times and you put them on the calendar after the fact, to prove to you that you did it, you will start to believe some momentum in your homeschool.

And the last piece that I wanted to address was this idea of housework and outside activities. One of the things I learned very early on was that I really should not schedule orthodontists, doctors, in the middle of the day. I should treat the sacred hours of waking up till about 2 in the afternoon as my time with my kids and be like all the school parents who schedule things after school. And the reason that worked well for me is that I discovered if I did those in the middle of the day, the day was lost. We were never going to read aloud that day, we probably weren’t going to get any other kind of school behavior happening. We were going to spend most of it looking for shoes and coats, then getting in the car, managing the toddler, going to the dentist. You know, it would become like a field trip just to go to the dentist. And there’s nothing wrong with that if you feel comfortable, if that’s what you want to do. But what I found for me is that contributed to my level of fragmentation. The feeling that I wasn’t getting any traction during a week.

Once I started treating those hours as sacred during my homeschool, everything calmed down because I knew I had enough time. I wasn’t thinking to myself well shoot, we have a dental appointment on Tuesday and we have co-op on Monday so really I only have Wednesday, Thursday and Friday to have quality home-education days.

So treat that middle of the day as sacred. I stopped doing housework during the middle of the day. I did. I saved it for the late afternoon and evenings. I don't know if that will work for you, but for me that was a huge shift in my thinking. Instead of like, "I'm just going to run downstairs and throw in this load," I never did. I was actually in the room, with the kids. And I could play with the baby and blocks while kids were sitting at the kitchen table and I could pop up and help them. Differently than when I was trying to do a little dusting, do a little laundry, wash a few dishes, and I even—this is just me sharing what I did but I even would leave lunch plates out—which might drive you crazy [laughs]—but we would eat lunch, I would just clear them to the counter. I wouldn't wash them. And I would just know I was going to do that later. By sort of organizing my day into these chunks where there was the plate cleaning and housekeeping later in the day, where I knew I had dedicated this nice block of time from morning through lunch up to about two in the afternoon just to education and my children, I stopped feeling frazzled so easily. I was able to sink into each of those experiences.

Also, another shocking benefit, by putting off the housework till late in the day, I would just park my kids in front of PBS and turn on a tape recorder, this is the dark ages, and listen to a book on tape while I was making dinner, while I was cleaning dishes, while I was folding laundry. And suddenly, this little space opened up for me to recover from the morning. So those were ways that I sort of managed the outside demands and the housework in combination with this desire to multitask. How does that hit you?

Courtney: Well I'm laughing with your lunch plates because just this—in the last five-seven days in our grocery run, my older said "Can we please just get paper plates?" And I'm like okay, I think that's doable. So we grabbed paper plates because just like you said, we do our lunch and it's like I have this notion that I need to clean up but it's powerful what you're saying because if I—one way that I did help my home is by using those barn doors to utilize that as a toy area. So every toy that we own is in that space, which we don't really have an overabundance but it's in that area so they don't have toys in their bedrooms and things like that. So it kind of helped tidy up my living room and things. But whenever we're going throughout our day and I see things, I feel like if I see a book on the floor, it's in my mind continually like "there's a book on the floor, there's a book on the floor, there's a book on the floor." Like over and over until it gets picked up. And so, just like you were talking about, that's kind of using those the time in putting them into compartments to figure out how are we going to handle this? Because the reality of it is: if the book is on the floor in the living room and we're in the school room, why does it matter? We're not even in the living room where the book is on the floor, you know?

Julie: Yes it's just robbing you of your ability to drop down, or sink down. Now you can create all kinds of hacks for yourself. You can have the laundry basket that collects anything that's on the floor so that when you walk by, it just gets off the floor and it's in the sort-it-out-later category. So what we want to prevent is you picking up the book, figuring out which bookcase it came from, going through your alphabetized books because that's how you are [laughs] you

know what I mean? That's just too big of a job. But if you could just toss it in a basket and know "I do household tasks between 3:00 and 5:00 and that's when the kids play on their own, watch TV, do video games, play on the iPad," that's perfect. We made lunch and we used—for years I did quesadillas and we used a chip and dip container so there would be salsa and sour cream in the middle and then triangles of quesadillas and it was a one plate lunch, every day. There were no plates. Everybody just dipped out of the same middle. So I only had one plate to clean up.

These are the ways that we have to think. We're at home. This is so different than school life where maybe you pack a lunch and send your kids off for the day. We have to use that table again after lunch. And so we're trying to figure out how to maximize our energy—or minimize our energy, maximize our opportunities. So for me, you know, paper plates are legit. And I know, environmentalists might be upset about paper plates. I remember reading a homeschooler who—there was a big debate about paper diapers versus cloth diapers, and this one homeschool mom said "I'm going to save the environment after my kids are grown [laughs]." Which I thought was pretty hilarious.

But I feel like we have to give ourselves a little bit of freedom here to not save everything. We have a limited time with these kids. And our education we're giving them is sucking out the lion share of our energy. It may be difficult to foster child and save the environment and campaign for our favorite political candidate all while homeschooling. Life for you will not be over when they all leave home so while they're home, let's let the house be a little messy, let's not enter into our biggest redecorating projects, let's focus on segmenting the day into three containers: the activity container, the housekeeping container, the home education container. Rotate through kids. Rotate through subjects. And sink in. Deep dive when you are present.

Courtney: Yeah I mean this—this has just been so powerful to me. I mean even like an eye-opener to the different things that we've been talking about. And I think overall if I were to pinpoint a fear, I would say I do have a fear that when my kids get to that graduating point—the thing I don't want them to do is to look back and say "Over the last 12 years of us being homeschooled, mom constantly said 'clean up, clean up, clean up, clean up' and then time was scattered all over the place." And I'm thinking—because I've asked them "What does homeschooling look like to you?" and the answers I get of course are bizarre. You know, as most kids could probably come up with. But I want them to be able to say really that it was about our relationship. And so there are times where I think to myself, I have to just let this go because what's going to happen by me going against what they're going to do. It becomes a power struggle and it's like I don't want that to happen. So overall, I just want our relationships to have a strong foundation of unconditional love and I want them to feel that and know that beyond even the education point.

Julie: Perfect. I think you've summed up very well why it matters to have these, as you're calling them, anchor times with your children and how to reframe your expectations around

what your homeschool looks like. So can you say back to me two or three things that you've taken away from this conversation that you would like to try implementing?

Courtney: Absolutely. Well the one thing that is key I think, which is going to be huge for us, is we do call them anchors like the freewrite Fridays and the teatime. The things that we know are kind of stand-alone for our time and I think if I were able to implement the deep dive, you know this method that we kind of talked about and actually title that as another anchor within our week, I think the kids would really be able to benefit from that and it would kind of free me from that mental exhaustion of going from task to task trying to figure out how I can switch going to different things. So that was the one thing that I know was a huge idea for me. And then also, even just the idea of taking them outside of the home for continued schoolwork. Maybe not for the entire day but just like you mentioned for revision of writing or any kind of work they have to do. If we can take our math outside, let's get outside. Let's go to a coffee shop or something. And my kids, they do love that.

So I think that that's important as well. And then I just love the information that you had talked about through the study of how our brains are working and the 23 minutes and the shifting. And you know, that is intriguing to me. I think to me that's kind of like knowledge to myself that's going to go with me for a while. Because I don't want to lose that time! My time is precious with my kids and I think that's what's most important is trying to figure out how to get these minutes into the write areas so that we can make it work all together, you know?

Julie: I think that's wonderful. So the homework piece I want to give you for those principles is this: I want you to record on your calendar when you've had one of those anchor times with your kids, write down their name, maybe the subject area, even how long it took you. And honestly, give yourself permission for those to be 15 minutes or 20 minutes. They don't have to be an hour or two hour segments. It means that when you are there, you are present. That you're not thinking about the lunch plates or throwing in another load of laundry or the book lost in the living room. So when you've done one of those, I want you to put it on your calendar and what the name of that child was so that you can start to accrue in your own mind, you can prove to yourself that are giving this time your kids.

And then the second thing that I want you to do is to consider this notion of segmenting homeschool, housework, and outside activities and just see—play with what the framework looks like. You know, there are days when you have your niece and other days when you don't. Your husband is third shift so that might affect when you decide to do some of these outside tasks or housework. So sort of play with the blocks of those instead of letting them intermingle and see if you can come up with a routine that works for you.

Courtney: Awesome. This has been such a huge privilege, Julie, to be able to sit here with you and to just go over what my daily things look like and just to gain some of your wisdom and

knowledge from the things that you've done and gone through yourself. So thank you so much for this opportunity, it's been fantastic.

Julie: Well thank you, you've just been a wonderful person to share with and I'm looking forward to seeing how these things are implemented in ways that you will find new ideas that I couldn't even think of. One of the things that I really, really want to remind you and anyone listening is there is no formula. All there is, is the collective wisdom and insight of our community of homeschoolers and you just try things and then your own wisdom and insight and personality will shape them into its personalized, tailor-made, home-education. Would you mind if I call you back then in the fall and we check in and see how you do?

Courtney: Absolutely, please do. I would really love that and just to spend more time with you would be fantastic.

Julie: Well we will definitely do that then, Courtney. Thank you for joining me today and have a wonderful end of the year and we'll check back later this year.

Courtney: Excellent, thank you so much! Have a great rest of your day.

Julie: [Theme music plays] Let's take a little break and talk about my new book, [*The Brave Learner: Finding everyday magic in homeschool, learning, and life*](#). *The Brave Learner* publishes on February 5th, 2019. It is still available for presales and the two free bonus gifts that come if you pre-order so I urge you or invite you to go to thebravelearner.com for more details about that. But each week I am reading a quote from the book, during season five of the podcast. Here's this week's quote. Reasonable expectations of your child enable you to be a supporter rather than an evaluator.

You know, how many times have you felt like there was a moment in your educational career as a student that you wanted to offer something that was a bit of a risk. Perhaps you wanted to write a poem instead of an essay or you wanted to fictionalize an historical story to demonstrate your understanding. Or maybe, you wanted to approach a math problem using a technique you made up for yourself. But you held back because you knew that the real job of the teacher was to evaluate what you offered based on their criteria. That is a normative experience in traditional education. But what we want in our homeschools are reasonable expectations. We want to understand who our kids are. We want to create space for them to show up in surprising ways and then we want to support that expression and understand it. How does it serve the child and their need to grow in their own education?

I talk about all of this in my book. IN fact, after this quote, the very next section is a story I tell about a time when my grandparents were awesome encouragers. Champions. Supporters, not evaluators. It's one of my favorite stories of my entire childhood and served as a guiding light in my own parenting. So I look forward to your reading about that and letting me know what you think of it. For now, check out thebravelearner.com.

You can see book tour details, our [conference](#) that's coming up oh my gosh. We're having a conference on July 19th and there are details about how to register on thebravelearner.com. And then of course you can purchase the book or download the free sample that has the preface, the introduction, and a free chapter so that you can get a feel of whether or not this is the right resource for you.

And now let's get back to Courtney and see how she did [theme music plays].

Julie: Welcome back to the program, Courtney!

Courtney: Thank you! I'm excited to be here and have another conversation with you.

Julie: Same. I am so looking forward to how the advice I share, the ideas I gave you worked out in your family. I think the first one that really I wanted to address again was this notion of multi-tasking versus not multi-tasking [laughs]. So, as we talked about that, how do you see that as having played out in your life? Did you notice yourself make a shift after our conversation?

Courtney: Hugely. I think that for our overall conversation, that was probably the biggest takeaway and understanding of not doing that shifting of back and forth. So I have been able to organize my day and structure things a little bit differently. That has been huge. And I feel so much more at peace and restful by not going back and forth. So a big key component of that has been utilizing a schedule but not so specific so that I feel so tied to it. So we're using it very lightly. So that's been a big help so thank you for that.

Julie: Oh no that's wonderful. So tell me a little bit about what that means when you say lightly, is it more like a routine then? Or do you have scheduled times then that you're using? What does that look like?

Courtney: So what a schedule looks like for us is that my oldest, which is now 13, she is very independent so the only time that I really kind of instruct her is during group time, which really is just read-aloud time. And then I say, okay, what's your day look like today? She kind of gives

me a rundown and she goes and takes care of herself. For my middle two, which is 9 and 6, we kind of have it more block scheduled. So I have time frames within 30 minutes to an hour of some different things for them to be doing. And in that time, what I have done is the night before, I just very loosely—and when I say loosely, I’m not specific to page numbers, I’m not specific to topics and subjects—they started utilizing art-tube for art time, which has been fantastic. Rather than an actual curriculum so to say. So they do that through YouTube so they go and they’ll sit and they’ll do that time but I don’t give them a specific thing to do. So I kind of have just let them, I guess like more just decide on their own, like things that they’re really into. So the same thing, like they’ve really been doing a lot with the statue of liberty.

So rather than doing on their history and I document a page number and say you’re going to do page 10 to 14 today, I just say okay if we get through one page, that’s great. Let’s really talk about it and do more the deep dive, like you and I had mentioned before. And that has been very valuable and useful to being able to get them to understand the topic, and then we don’t really have to revisit it because they truly understand it. They’ve been able to see it from all perspectives, like a 365 degree angle of learning and then we can kind of move on. And our scheduling doesn’t go like Monday-Friday from 8 in the morning to 2. It has opened up a lot more. And on Saturdays, if we have a time frame that’s available, my son will jump on and do a math lesson. My daughter may actually do a little bit of spelling words. We just kind of fit things in where we can. Their day usually starts at 7 in the morning and goes to about 8 at night and of course there are a lot of breaks and outside play and things like that but also I’ve just been able to freely schedule things at a more even flow that has just really worked for us.

Julie: That’s amazing.

Courtney: This has been the best start to school that we’ve had so it has—it’s really paid a lot to me, so thank you.

Julie: Oh you’re so welcome. I love, as I’m looking over the record of how we organize your thinking about learning and some ideas to try, how you’ve really embraced the spirit of those. Because the bottom line isn’t that more rules or more structure is going to save us, it’s actually understanding the properties of learning and that’s what I hear you articulating. You’re finding ways for the information that you’re sharing to be appropriated all the way to the inside of your children. And for their participation to feel valuable, not just following a checklist for you. Is that what you see happening?

Courtney: Absolutely. And I’ve even learned that with my son, he does have some different learning ways than myself. Not that they’re wrong but he just thinks and responds to information much differently than myself. So I’ve had to kind of dig in to some research and I loved how you had before explained some brain research that you had given to me, which was

phenomenal and I thought, oh I'm so interested. I have to dig into that a little more so I did and just giving him different nutrition was very valuable and just a very small component of it. Allowing him to use a laptop to write out an assignment. So I will sit with him, I'll write out his words, I'll help him jot it down. And then rather than him sitting and rewriting it, he likes to use the laptop. So I feel like I've just had to open myself and have myself to be more willing to allow them to express their learning in their ways, which for moms—or I should say, for myself—is challenging sometimes. Because I think they're going to learn like me because they're my kid.

Julie: Yes, yes.

Courtney: But that's not the true story of it [laughs].

Julie: No and it takes some courage. I always call it letting go of the side of the pool. It's like you know what will hold you up, what gives you support, what makes you feel safe. And being willing to sort of swim into the deep end of the pool with your child who's leading the way. You know Maria Montessori's famous line "Follow your child but follow as his leader" applies here because what you're doing is you're paying attention, doing your own research, noticing the behaviors that satisfy and nourish your child's learning appetite, including even real food, which I love that you brought that up. And then you're going in and providing the space into which that child can be fully present to their style of learning. To me, that is what a good home education is all about. You are in dialogue, constant dialogue with the fullness of the person in front of you.

This is not simply about you figuring out a better plan. It's actually figuring out a better life. How do we incorporate the fullness of this person that I love so much in front of me who is also not me? So listen to all the ways that you have now created this much better life for your kids. And here's an interesting highlight that I'm noticing as you talk, you feel powerful. You are so empowered! You now are even like "I can do brain research. I can learn more. I can become a more equipped home educator." And that is the message I'm excited that you're bringing to this audience. That this isn't just about getting new tips and tricks that a homeschool veteran shares with you. It's actually personalizing the learning adventure for your children and for you and knowing that you're smart enough to make that happen. I'm so impressed with you Courtney. Good job!

Courtney: Oh thank you. And you—really it has been your support and walking through this with me. But there's a difference to it when the mom or even the family as a whole is enthusiastic to learn about whatever the topic is. And just learning and just realizing for myself and trying to dig into figuring out how my ways are and like just typical things in the house, it's not even homeschool necessarily related, it's just living that life. Like okay well I like to have my

room this way. Well they feel like this is clean to them. They feel like this is important to them so I have to step back and say okay they are trying. They're doing what they can. And one thing that you had mentioned before was about the correction of how like sometimes we just take a step back, it will kind of correct itself and revisit it the next day and that actually happens not just in a mathematic problem. It really happens in varieties of ways of life. You know you correct them and you think that they're going to correct it right now but the truth is if you go on a week later, you're like oh. That's what we worked on last week. You got it! Great job, awesome. And then they feel so empowered and encouraged to live better the next day.

Julie: I love that.

Courtney: So it's been amazing.

Julie: Ah well this is just—I'm so proud of you. If I'm allowed to say that. I'm impressed with you and I love that final nugget of wisdom so we will close on that. I really want parents to take that into their hearts. This idea that skill consolidation and the need to process and own something comes over time. It isn't in a moment. We introduce values, ideas, tactics and our children need time to process that information and make it their own. I love that you tapped into that and I'm so appreciative of you sharing that on the podcast. Thank you Courtney for being here! I love it!

Courtney: Thank you for having me! And I really felt empowered, encouraged just by your support. And the opportunity that you've given to me to write into you and to ask you questions and for you to pour back into us and into our homeschool. So I value that and I value your time, thank you.

Julie: You are so welcome [theme music plays].

Julie: I love it when our podcast guests come up with their own solutions to their problems, it just tickles me. Thank you for tuning in today and I hope you found some bits of wisdom that you can experiment with in your own life. I want to thank you for your wonderful reviews on iTunes. Our entire podcasting team reads them and celebrates every time. There was one just a week or two ago that really tickled me. This is what she said: "I can tell how burned out I am by how many Julie Bogart talks I listen to in a given period." [Laughs] yes, indeed. I'm glad that I am able to offer you some solace during those moments. So thank you for posting them. If you haven't yet, please do. It really means a lot to us when you share a review. For now, I want to thank the podcasting team that does such a great job for us. We've got Cody, Hayden,

Ben, all The Podcast Masters working on this every week for us. From our own team, Jeanette, Beth, and Amy thank you. We want to thank Daniel Smyth for his fabulous podcasting photos, they were so much fun to take at the photoshoot this year. And in the meantime, I want to commend you for working so hard every single day. I see you, I know your life, I believe in you. Have a great week of loving and learning. I'm Julie Bogart from Brave Writer [theme music plays].

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