



S5E4: Checklist Lovers — Planning from Behind

Julie Bogart with Jennifer Vetter

Julie: [Theme music plays] Today's episode of the podcast is for you, if you've ever asked yourself the following question: How can I be sure that my kids are getting *all* the learning and education they deserve? You know, that feeling like, "Am I homeschooling enough?" I don't know about you, but here's what used to happen with me: I'd walk into a room ready to invite all the kids to the kitchen table for math, or copywork, or a little poetry teatime, even, and I would look into the family room and all five kids were happily, busily engaged. Not squabbling; playing together nicely. And I'd wonder: should I interrupt that so we could do quote-unquote "real school, real learning"? And I wrestled with it back and forth. What is the balance between allowing your children to explore the world and ensuring that they're getting the education they should have, the one you feel responsible to deliver to them?

You're in luck. Today's conversation is with Jennifer Vetter and she posed this very question to me. We have a great conversation about it. She goes away for a few months and, when she comes back, we talk about the ways she made tweaks and adjustments to transform that experience into one that empowers her rather than leaving her feeling bewildered or worried.

Also, stick around till the end. When we get into the follow-up conversation, Jennifer and I start trading game suggestions. So, if you need some good ideas of things to play with your kids, you're in luck. We're going to talk about it today.

With all that preparation, I don't know about you, but I'm ready to jump right in. So, let's meet Jennifer and start the conversation. [Theme music ends].

Julie: I'd like to give a Brave Writer welcome to Jennifer Vetter, mom to six kids, 14 down to a sweet little baby. Jennifer comes to us from Iowa and has been homeschooling her kids for nine years. When sifting through the Ask Julie questions, Jennifer's entry popped through the array of submissions. Jennifer has embraced the emphasis on relationship and freedom in learning, yet she worries that her children also need to learn skills that don't lend themselves as easily to fort-building and play. Should she interrupt their happy games to teach phonics, for instance? She asks: "How do I balance the love and creative side of learning with the nuts, bolts, and rules side of learning?" I know this is a popular question in our community and I'm eager to dive in and see if I might have a few ideas to help Jennifer meet both of those goals. Welcome, Jennifer!

Jennifer: Hello.

Julie: Thank you for joining me today.

Jennifer: Yeah, I'm glad to be here.

Julie: Tell us a little bit about your family. I'd love to hear about your children and some of the things that make your homeschool unique to you.

Jennifer: Okay, so, I have two older boys that are in junior high and upper elementary, and then I have three sweet middle children who are lower elementary and pre-school, and then the baby who is just winning the hearts of everyone right now.

Julie: I absolutely love that about babies [laughs].

Jennifer: Yes, he likes to interrupt us—but in a good way, I think. We look forward to those little interruptions. It keeps it real, and that's what I love about homeschooling is that as a family, we can support each other. So, my older learners are pretty independent. We get together about once a week, discuss what the expectations are for the week, and then I mostly motivate them to get started and check in with them as they have questions. My three middle learners, I try to catch right away after breakfast, because if I don't catch them, they run off and they play all day, which I love, but they do need to learn to read and write [laughs].

Julie: [Laughs] Yes, absolutely. And so, one of the things I noticed in your submission is you mentioned that you wrote a mission statement for your homeschool vision and you said that was the single best thing you did for your homeschool, which immediately piqued my curiosity. Can you tell us a little bit first about what that mission statement is, and then why it's been beneficial to your homeschool?

Jennifer: Sure. Okay, so, my mission statement—a wonderful friend recommended this when I was struggling, when I was an early homeschooler, and I had toddlers and a little boy who just could not learn how to read to save his poor little life, and I was really struggling how I was going to do it, and she said, “Well, you need to start with the big picture.” So, I made a mission statement that reminds me, at the end of all of this, when my children are 18 or however long it takes them to learn the basics before they launch into life, what do I want them to have learned? So, I divided it by subject area and, by the time they're done with my homeschool, I want them to be able to read great literature, to have been able to read through the Bible. To be able to write at a college level. Have been through the maths. And then, there were also some things about personal daily skills. Can they do everything they need to take care of themselves? Do they have a passion in something? Have I instilled that in them? And then that way when I'm in the trenches of it and the baby's sick and we haven't homeschooled for two weeks, I can look at my mission statement and I can say, you know what? We have eighteen years to get here. Right now, what can I do that supports that? Can they read a book? Can they write in a journal? And then, that just helps to keep me grounded.

Julie: I really love the language you just used there. When you said, “What can I do to support that?” Such a good way to think about it, rather than, “What can I do to get through something or get done?” It's really beautiful. Great language. I think when we're talking with these moms who are listening and dads who are tuned in, it's helpful to remember that there is a bigger picture, and we have time to get there, so thank you for sharing that, that's really helpful.

Jennifer: Yeah, great.

Julie: When you were talking earlier about catching your little ones before they went off to play, what happens when you don't catch them, and tell me a little description of what play looks like in your family?

Jennifer: Sure. Well, when I don't catch them, sometimes I can pull them away one-on-one, which works really well, so that I can make sure that we get a reading lesson in and some math practice done. If I catch them first thing after breakfast, we can get a read-aloud in. Talk about

some science and history concepts a little bit. The reason I really like to promote their play is because we like to get outside. They build forts in their bedrooms. They love to play pretend with their horses and they build with blocks. I really try to keep their play-time as unstructured as possible, unless they're playing games. So, that's a bit of a contradiction, I guess. Because sometimes kids really do need that structure of here are the rules, here's the time limit; it's a game.

Julie: Yes, yes.

Jennifer: But they also need that free-play to learn to interact with each other and just have those life experiences, so that when you're reading about something, you can say, "Oh! I've done that! I've gone out and done that."

Julie: So, help me understand the dilemma, then. So, you see a child engaged in free-play. Playing with horses. They're enjoying each other. What is the sensation that overtakes you when you start thinking about lessons, whether it's grammar or spelling or phonics or any of those—you know, maths?

Jennifer: Because once I interrupt them, then they have a harder time—the dynamics change in their play-time. They might start to bicker more with each other. And not all of them—like, I have one daughter who loves workbooks. But she's at that 9-year-old stage where I think that she's starting to come into her own ideas, and so she's like, "I'm not really feeling this school-work that you've selected for me, so I'm going to kind of complain and I'm going to sigh and I'm going to put down some attitude." And the other issue I have is, okay, so, today I decided that we're going to do *this* lesson. And I've interrupted them, and I have applied the lesson, and they've given me the bare minimum. They've written some really blah sentence, no adjectives; bare minimum. Whereas the week before, when we were sitting down, and we were talking about a book, and it was like, "If you could change the ending what would you do?" And suddenly they've written like two pages of the next part of the novel because that idea really struck them. Or they're playing pretend and they need a menu and they've like, put out this whole five-page menu where they've written the food and how much it costs, and so when they're creative and they're writing what they want to write about, they're prolific.

Julie: Yes!

Jennifer: But when I sit down and try to do a lesson that someone else has prepared for us, it's like they hit a wall.

Julie: And what happens to you when they hit that wall? Do you feel defeated, guilty, worried? What kinds of emotions come up for you when you try to sort of steer them towards this more structured kind of learning?

Jennifer: I feel frustrated. I guess for me and for them, because that's how I felt with my boys. That I had pushed the curriculum so hard that they disliked writing. So, they didn't even—my oldest just now, as a 14-year-old, has discovered that he has words inside of him and he can share them in the written word.

Julie: Nice.

Jennifer: My 11-year-old, we're still in the informal writing stage. He's finally realized that he can write a nice summary. His current favorite thing to summarize are YouTube videos.

Julie: Nice, nice!

Jennifer: So, he's at that stage now, but they never wanted to just write about things like my younger ones do. And I don't know if it's just a girl/boy thing or if it's just because I haven't pushed that structured writing as early on them.

Julie: Yeah, one of the things I noticed you mentioned that you have tried the Arrow, which is, for those who don't know, it's a Brave Writer product that teaches copywork and dictation. Uses copywork and dictation to teach the mechanics of writing through living literature. And there was a really interesting word you used in your submission and I want to go to that word. You said that you didn't trust it fully. And I wanted to ask you about the word "trust," what does it mean to you to trust a product or trust a process in education? When *are* you trusting?

Jennifer: I think the biggest issue that affected my trust with the Arrow was that it didn't give me an outline from the beginning. Like, if you follow this through to the end, these are all of the things that you will cover. I'm kind of a big picture thinker, so I need to open the front-page

of whatever curriculum I'm using and I'm like, "Okay, if I do all of these things, I cover this area, like that's my plan, so I'm going to use that." With the Arrow, I just had to be like, "Okay, it looks like we're covering this grammar concept with this book, and then the next book it's a different one, and I don't know when we're going to get it all covered."

Julie: Got it. So, for you part of trust is not only the big picture, but there is a discrete set of concepts that you imagine equal an educated person, and you want to make sure that you don't miss any, does that sound like an accurate description?

Jennifer: Yes, I think so. My goal for elementary is that they're prepared for junior high and high school. And so, there are grammar concepts that they had expected they had learned, and I want to make sure that I hit them all, yes, systematically.

Julie: Correct. And so—and so, in your mind, there's a list. There's a list somewhere—someone's got the list. Who has that list? Do you know? What list are you looking at that's helping you know that you hit the exact right amount of concepts to ensure that they will get to junior high and be able to successfully do it? Who's got the list?

Jennifer: You know, I think it's a list of looking at other systematic grammar curriculums that say they have to know the eight parts of speech, and then they have to know how they parse them, and all those things. Although, I have not found parsing to be especially helpful [laughs], in my experience.

Julie: Let me ask you this, before you found even those systematic grammar programs, could you have sat down and made a list of what the eight parts of speech were as an adult? Could you have parsed a sentence without a model? In other words, some of this list-making that comes from whatever program you pick is discretionary. It is built around this notion that there are concepts to get through in order to successfully achieve an education. But even as adults, I have people call me all the time and say, "I can't teach writing because I don't remember grammar, so therefore I need my children to learn grammar." And yet, they are functioning [laughs] as adults! They're writing, they're living, they're paying their bills, they even have jobs. There is something about the list, though, that is very magically appealing to a certain temperament. It's the feeling of having, like you said, "covered it." What would happen if your child got to eighth grade and you found out that there was something that didn't make your list that your child needed? What would you feel then?

Jennifer: I'm actually in that position right now.

Julie: Okay, tell me about that. That'd be great.

Jennifer: Yeah, so, I chose to use a boxed curriculum for his high school, so that he could get a diploma. That was something that was important in our family.

Julie: Yes.

Jennifer: And so, doing the eighth grade with that curriculum now, and there's a very specific grammar book. He was not catching grammar in elementary, so I wasn't pushing it, but he could write beautifully because he listened to fantastic books and he seemed to transfer that. He's learning it in his eighth-grade grammar book just fine. They're presenting it as if he'd never seen it before and it's making a lot more sense later than it did when he was younger. So, that's our current experience with it.

Julie: That's actually beautiful, isn't it? To realize that sometimes, even if some time goes by, some maturity, some more exposure, you can actually make swifter progress? There was a speaker on the homeschool circuit back when I was raising my kids, who used to say—and it was a very provocative statement but I took it to heart, it was valuable to me—he used to say that you could literally do nothing structured with your children between ages of 5 and 12 and teach them everything you didn't teach them in one year. Because at 12, the brain is so much more capable of assimilating that information that you could teach all the math, all the spelling, all the punctuation, in a year. And I didn't ever fully test that, I mean, we went ahead and used our workbooks, or we worked with the principles and ideas that I had for writing, but what I felt at the time was, "Oh, maturity helps learning." It's not just the system, it's not just the method. So, I love that you've drawn that principle out and that you're experiencing it. So, let's circle back a little bit again, then, to this notion of trust. I want to ask you what you consider to be evidence that your child is learning?

Jennifer: That's a really good question. So, I think—evidence that my child is learning would be a concept that they previously didn't know that they are now using. So, math is really easy to see progress. They can suddenly add two-digit numbers when they couldn't before. In writing, I guess when they start taking those little tiny "the dog sat" sentences and expanding on them. You know: "The dog sat in my bedroom for a really long time." They've learned to

think larger. And with reading, when they can read words that I used to have to provide for them. I mean, I guess I see lots of evidence of their learning daily.

Julie: Well, in fact that's true. So, let me ask you this, do you record any of the evidence? So, for instance, when you were talking about writing menus, which brought back so many memories from my childhood, I was into playing restaurant all the time. We wrote menus constantly [laughs], serving pretend food, the whole nine yards. But no one in my school knew that I was playing restaurant at home. My teachers could never count that as valuable progress towards this education of writing. All they had were workbooks. That was the only way they could measure my progress. One of the things about homeschooling that's unique is that we can measure progress taking in the entire scope of a child's experience and life. So, when your child spontaneously writes a YouTube video review, or plays with the menus for a restaurant, where do you record that? How do you keep track that that happened?

Jennifer: Sure. I have a portfolio for each of them where I put their writing samples and their artwork in folders for every year. I don't keep all the menus, especially—you know how kids are, sometimes they're on 300 scraps of paper, that's not realistic.

Julie: Yes, yes.

Jennifer: But when they do something that I can save, I save it. My son—I wouldn't say it's spontaneous writing summaries, there's some motivation there [laughs]. But he has a notebook that he puts them in.

Julie: Do they ever get read again? Do you read aloud together or ever read them back to your other kids?

Jennifer: Mm-mm, no, I don't. I think my son might read his old writings because he's a huge reader/researcher.

Julie: Nice. Well, one of the things I want to suggest to you as a starting point is to start paying attention to the way the skills are showing up when they're being used naturally. So, what's an interesting shift that you might experiment with is this: When we focus on covering a list, wherever we get that list, we sometimes stop seeing the actual practice in action. We're

more interested in getting through things that are in the future that we can check off than in the assimilation and implementation of what those kids have already taken in and are using now with ease. It may show up in play, it may show up in a dinner conversation, it may show up in how they organize all the change that they've been collecting from years of you handing them their change. Whatever it is, it may show up in ways you're not expecting. And right now, not all of it is a work sample that can go in a folder. Some of it is being acted out in front of you. Character development, story ideas, the fact that they are using their own imaginations to assimilate what they got from a book and now they're using their play horses to act it out.

And so, what we're going to do today, what I want to recommend to you, is making a chart. So, if you've got a sheet of paper, here's what I'm going to have you do. I want you to make two columns. And on one column, I want you to put at the top "Collaboration" and then on the other column I want you to put "Independence."

Now, you started this conversation a little bit by talking about your older kids, who are working through a systematic curriculum somewhat independently where they check in with you. One of the things that we know, especially for skills that are hard, they benefit from collaboration. Our temptation in homeschooling is often to say, "I want my child to work independently on skill development," and then we end up collaborating with them on taking them to a soccer practice and kicking the ball in the backyard, or playing a table top game, or reading aloud. The things that are actually somewhat easy for them, we sometimes find it easier to partner with them. Baking, setting the table, having a poetry teatime; we end up collaborating, which is fine, those certainly can happen. But what we really want to recognize is a lot of the independent learning that's going on is delight-directed. And *we* can start valuing what that looks like in academic terms if we use this following strategy.

So, what I suggest is you observe. And you could start for a week or two observing your children's play, and I want you to use the magic power of your mental translator to imagine how those pieces are showing up even in the curriculum ideas that you have in mind. Like the list that's in your mind. So, if your child, for instance, is playing with Legos and they name all of their Lego men, what they've done is they've actually used pronouns. You don't think of it as pronouns because you're busy thinking, "We're going to learn pronouns over here. We're going to learn proper nouns over here." But you hear them naming them, so you know you've got these little proper nouns, and then they're using them as pronouns. As you observe that, you can make a note in this column under "Independence," and then you can imagine how to collaborate and tie that back to their play, so that when you do actually make time to work on a skill, you can start to imagine ways to tie it to things that are already natural to them.

Now, I'm going to talk more about that, I don't want to go on too long. But the goal here is to start to value the play as independent and the skill-building as collaboration. Does this—are you following? Does this make sense?

Jennifer: Yeah, I am, and you had asked me earlier how I know they're learning and you're absolutely right, when I talk to them, I know they're learning because of what they tell me or what I observe.

Julie: Yes!

Jennifer: So, I do understand what you're saying.

Julie: And we can note that. We can actually put it down in a place that reassures us. I used to keep notes like this on a calendar and I would put those notes *after* the fact. Instead of planning ahead, I always call it planning from behind [laughs]. It's like I would notice what had already happened, which would then shape what was going to happen in the future. But if all I did was focus on the future, a lot of times I discounted what was already going on that was valuable to their learning journey. It was almost like once it was over and behind me, it had no value. It almost evaporated and disappeared from my awareness, and so I kept living, waiting for the future to confirm to me that we were learning.

So, I like what you were saying before, we can see skill-development, we can see $2+2=4$ and last week they didn't understand it. But now, does that even show up in their natural utility, like of their own use? So, you've been doing all of this menu-writing, your kids have been working on math over here, can they now make change when you pay them for the blueberry muffin? It would be an interesting thing to just allow yourself to inject that because you see them as the same, you don't see them as two separate things, one where they're covering the schoolwork and one where they're playing. Does that make sense? Are you hearing what I'm saying?

Jennifer: I am definitely hearing what you're saying, because that is really how I do preschool.

Julie: Yes!

Jennifer: I totally interject all the time, making sure we're counting out the snack and we're identifying the colors and we're making sure we use prepositions, and you're suggesting I extend that into the later years as well, and inject some of the skills that I would like them to pick up.

Julie: Yes, well, and so here's sort of the axis of how to think about the skill-building versus the play. So, the play looks like it's super fun and you value it deeply and you know it's teaching all kinds of things, but what it's teaching feels a little vague and invisible to you. So, what I'm asking you to do is to start noticing and making concrete what the play is doing that you may not have noticed because it's happening away from you or it's happening in a playful way and doesn't look like skill-building. But play is where they're doing that consolidation of skills actually, that's when they're taking what they actually have learned and using it because it's valuable enough to show up in play. And then, on the flipside, I want you to imagine that the skills you want them to learn can actually go through a playful treatment, almost like a baptism of enchantment or pixie dust.

And so, here's what I'd like you to start playing with is this notion that for the skills that take a little bit more committed energy, one-on-one time, working-through, how can I add the elements of play to that experience? Some of the ideas that I've shared in the past are things like sweetening the deal. So, even just adding a pot of tea or brownies sometimes helps a child sort of enter into the hard work of a skill development moment in a way that they wouldn't if you just said, "Get to the table, where's your pencil?" Adding a different pen, using a different color, writing on different kinds of paper.

Another thing that helps is keeping it short. Literally saying to a child, collaborating with your child, "You know what, you have the whole day, and I'm excited to see what you do with it. Can I book time with you? 15 minutes for you and I to have time just us two—" Now, I know you have five other kids, so you'll have to park them in front of the TV, or give them something else to do, or maybe they're also pretending to participate but you're focused on the one child. And you focus on the one skill that's going to reassure you that you've done the things that make you know you're moving the skill-development forward. But you have to be selective. You choose a 15 minute window and you rotate through them over the course of a week. And you allow for that skill-development to be something where you collaborate and you add a little pixie dust. Something that sweetens the deal, that helps the child know that you're on their team while they're putting in harder work, and you admit the hard work.

So, I think what happens so often for families, and it happened for me for sure, is that we see play as good until our own anxiety about their skills grows, and then we shut down the play with, "Alright, we can't only play; we need to do this skill work over here." And for a child that suddenly seems like we're setting up a competition. And now, they want to resist the skills because they don't want their playtime to be shut down. But if we can borrow some of those properties into the skill-building, and then borrow some of the skill-building into the play, we actually start to create a more seamless experience of this delight-directed learning life that we think we all want.

Jennifer: Yes, so, I think what I'm hearing is you coming back to that word trust.

Julie: Yes.

Jennifer: Because I am doing a lot of those things, short lessons, gel pens, trying to assign things that, like you said, have relevance to them. Whether it's a game they've gotten really into or a book they really enjoy, and just trust that through those interactions and through my leading them through the skillsets that I know from experience build up to my goal, that they will learn it and it doesn't have to look systematic or pretty or clean.

Julie: That's right, that's right. And when you have a 9-year-old who's balking, who is now bored, she's already done workbooks, she's already mastered that, she knows what that feels like. The challenge then is on the parent to reinvent it again. To reignite the interest, to give that child another way to have a hook.

So, I'll give you an example, I remember when we were first doing grammar with my young kids. I was trying to teach them parts of speech, and I already knew that abstraction for grammar is very difficult to master when you're a young child. And I didn't need them to master it. I saw myself as simply introducing them to this notion that you could look at a word and put it in a category. That was all I cared about! I just wanted them to know this thing called grammar exists out there, you're going to understand it better when you take French or Hindi or Spanish or German or whatever you're going to study later, but for now, I just want you to know that this game called grammar and parts of speech *exists*, and it's a thing eventually you're going to do.

So, what we did is we would take magazines—this is back when people had magazines [laughs]—and we would cut up a whole bunch of pictures and we cut up a whole bunch of colorful words, and we would put them on the floor and organize them by categories, but I didn't even call them nouns. I'd say, "If something's a thing, let's put it in this stack. If something's a person, let's put it in this stack. If something seems like an action or an activity, put it in this stack." And we started just gathering words through visions—through visuals—and then once we organized them, I would talk about, "Well, this is a noun. We call it a noun." Hard to know what a noun is, but here we have it in pictures, and we would make them into these visual collages, which had nothing to do with workbooks.

It felt like play, it wasn't any—drawn from curiosity and even from their own clipping of images. It wasn't up to me to decide. I wasn't saying match—you know, in a workbook it would be like, "Match the noun image to the word 'noun'," [laughs] you know? And you draw a line across a page and the images are pre-selected and you're just moving a pencil across a page. That is not what we can do at home. We can borrow those properties of scissors and glue and allowing our children to not know the answer before we even start. Where, if they collected a whole slew of images just because they liked them, how many different ways could they be categorized? How many different ways could they be sorted? By color—oh, well, now we're

dealing adjectival ideas. They could be sorted by activity, they can be sorted by pronoun! A he, and a she, and a they. But how can we bring that kind of learning into the list?

Now, I want to give you a couple comments about the list, because people who need lists, need lists. And the worst thing you can do for people who want to make sure they're covering everything is tell them it doesn't matter, because your anxiety will be high. And so, I want to reassure you that the list is a valuable thing. But go get one. Go get one. Do what you did with your mission statement. Laminate it, hang it on the door, stick it in the front of your notebook. Get a list! If you want to have key concepts in grammar that my child in fourth grade ought to know, make a list. You might even then reduce it by half, sometimes list-makers go overkill [laughs]. And then, you get to be on a scavenger hunt for how those are already showing up in your child's life and you weren't paying attention. You get to start correlating play with your list.

So, let me give you an example, when Liam was 4 years old, and he created all these Lego-men and he gave them these proper name nouns, that's an opportunity for me to actually in a Big Juicy Conversation just use that language naturally. You don't have to do a worksheet! He's already creating proper-nouns by himself. And we can point out when I handwrite them for him, "Look how there's a capital letter at the beginning of that. That's because you *named* him. You know, if you call him 'Fire Power Man' the F, the P, and the M are all capitalized because that is his name. Even though, most of the time fire, power, and man don't get capitalized." That lesson is going to last so much longer than if we do it in a worksheet. And we can then go check it off! We can say, "Oh, gosh, it showed up! I was aware, I noticed, and I counted it."

Jennifer: Yes! You know me so well.

Julie: [Laughs].

Jennifer: I am a list-maker, and the problem with me as a list-maker is, because I have six kids and the best laid plans go awry, I end up throwing my list out and getting frustrated. Your plan creates balance for me because it's saying don't throw the list out when it doesn't work, just keep it there as a reminder and just keep looking for opportunities and marking it off as you get them, and sort of an extension of my mission-statement of—and making it specific to, like you said, this year or this season, or—I like sequential mastery based schooling, so I'm a little bit, "Oh, they've mastered these, they can move onto the next step in the sequence of learning." And I don't have to throw the baby out with the bathwater, you could say [laughs].

Julie: You absolutely don't, and you may notice things coming out of sequence because that's children and that's play and it's also the brain, the brain is wired for making imaginative leaps. You know, I don't know if you remember teaching your oldest kids to read, but remember how

there's a moment where you didn't teach them the "-ight"? You didn't teach them the "-ion," and yet they were reading it? The brain has leapt from oral speech, to the idea of syntax, to knowing how to decode, and they start figuring out diagraphs and blends without anybody telling them, and you think how did that happen? Well, it's the brain! The brain is amazing. We don't always have to teach everything. Sometimes they make a magical leap.

I remember when Liam started doing sophisticated calculations of percentages, and we had not gotten there yet in the math book, and I found out it came through online gaming. He had been worried about how much life he had left and he had done his own mental math to figure out the percentage he had based on hits and kills and all the stuff they do in online gaming that I don't understand. We sometimes short-sell on those experiences. We think, "Well, it didn't come through the book."

My very favorite example of this in literature is Scout Finch in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, who learned to read, sitting in her dad's lap looking at the newspaper. And she gets to school, and her second-grade teacher says to her, "Well, you didn't really learn to read because you didn't learn to read using these books over here." And they treat her as though she doesn't know how. The danger with the list is that. It's this missing the big picture because we're so focused on the minutiae.

So, when we see this consolidation of skills, or this imaginative leap that the brain makes, I want you to go back and just check them all off. If your kid is watching a Disney movie and is suddenly talking about climax and you've never explained what climax is, name it and check it off, so that you see that your children are actually doing the work of learning.

The main issue most parents have in this lifestyle of learning homeschool agenda is this: they want peace and they want progress. And sometimes peace looks like play and doesn't feel like progress, and sometimes progress looks like misery and not peace. So, we're trying to find that sweet spot between peace for you and your mind and peace for your kids, and then progress in your mind and progress that your kids value. It's that axis. We're always working with that kind of combination. So, we have to take everyone into account. We don't only look at our kids, we don't only look at our school model. We also look at ourselves and our goals. And I think you're doing a beautiful job of that, by the way.

Jennifer: Oh, wow, thank you. Again, that's a lot of great information. I think another thing that drives my need for lists and systematic instruction, just to kind of play devil's advocate a little bit and maybe you can help me out with that, is we have learning challenges running in our family. My oldest is profoundly dyslexic and my second is on the spectrum. And so, they're not always great at just catching information. They need direct instruction, each in their own areas.

Julie: Perfect.

Jennifer: Or they get really frustrated and flounder.

Julie: No, you sound like you've got a good system for them, I wouldn't change it. What you want to stay alert to—yeah, this isn't about getting rid of the system. It's about recognizing each person's need to prove to themselves that they're having a good life. That's really what homeschooling is about. You are helping each person prove to themselves that they are getting an education and having a good life.

And so, for those kids that need that more systematic instruction, that's when you sweeten the deal. That's when you bring in these magical elements to support the hard work of skill-building. And when they're playing, to sweeten the deal for you, you go into observation and narration mode. You're going to observe and you're going to reassure yourself that your goals are also being achieved through play.

So, it's both sides! When they're playing, we're working to reassure you. When they're working hard, we're working to reassure them. And we want to keep both of those, and you can make this totally transparent. Don't keep this as a hidden agenda from your children. You can say, even to your youngest child, "You know I love your big full fun playful life. There are these skills that I know are going to ultimately make you feel like such a smart, intelligent human being. And so, we're going to tackle them, 15 minutes a day. Here are some ways that you can—that I can help make this a fun experience for you. Which one do you want to do today?" Different gel pens, something sweet to eat, taking it outside, going to Starbucks. Like I said about grammar, scissors and glue, so much more interesting for a second grader.

You know, thinking through what animates my second grader and their play is going to teach you. Maybe, if you have a kid who's really into dress-up clothes and face paints, maybe you think about how do I use dress-up clothes and face paints for the skill work that I'm interested in. And ask yourself the question, we tend to segregate the skill development from the play, and I'm inviting us to consider how we borrow from each side for the other agenda.

Jennifer: Yeah, no, thank you for clarifying. So, you're discussing a both/and.

Julie: Definitely.

Jennifer: Keep my system that they need, but incorporate more play and maybe, like you said, for the things they learn out of sequence, that I'm keeping a list and checking that off, so they're not using up their energies with everything, I guess? Focus just on what's really important to me, this is what I'm going to teach with the method and sweeten it for them.

Here's what I know they need to know, but it doesn't matter in what order they learn it, and I'm just going to watch for it and catch it and encourage it and mark it down for *me*.

Julie: That's exactly right. And you may find that not everything on your list gets covered through a delight-directed way, that's when you go back to saying I'm going to target this in that skill development way. But what we're looking at here is creating a good life. So, if you have a 9-year-old who's heaving sighs and rolling her eyes that means that method is dead for her. It is *tired*. And our typical attitude is, "I'm going to double-down and tell her you can't always have fun. Not everything is easy. Sometimes we have to do what we don't like." This is what parents say! This is the adult culture of the United States, anyway.

And what I'm recommending is recognize the emotional need. Say to yourself, "Oh! I see, she used to do workbooks really happily, this method is now tired. Now it's on me to imagine a new way. Does it mean taking a break? Does it mean a different program? Does it mean taking an online class? Does it mean inviting a friend over?"

I remember when Johannah was young and she loved reading books, but she started to get tired of just reading for herself; she's a social person. So, we created the Johannah Book Club and once a month she had six friends come over. She always picked a certain food, a certain drink, and a craft to go with the book. And they would read the book, and like all adult book clubs they'd talk about it for about five minutes, and then it was just crafts and drinks and treats, but it made reading the book during the month more interesting because there was a group of friends coming at the end of the month that she got to have a party with.

So, *that's* what I'm talking about. We want to continue to recognize that learning is advanced when everybody is happy *and* engaged. There's nothing wrong with hard work or skill-building. We just want to recognize that when we are putting our kids into that mode and requiring it of them to the point of depression, anxiety, tears, unhappiness, it's lost its value and we can sweeten the deal and bring it back around and let them in on it!

Jennifer: Yes, I agree with you completely, and I am not one that likes to create tears, so I will, like you said, look for taking a break. You know, what season are they in for learning, and they seem to learn in fits and starts.

Julie: Totally.

Jennifer: And I love your book club idea, I'm going to discuss that with my daughter today.

Julie: Oh, wonderful. Well, here's what I'd like to leave you with. Think about toggling. You know? Think about the idea of toggling between independence and collaboration. And reimagine independence as play and collaboration as skill-building, instead of the other way around. And then start keeping track. You could do it, like I said, in two columns, you could just jot down, "They independently built a fort," "They independently played with their horses," and then on the collaboration side, "We read together, and he learned to sound out consonant-vowel-consonant." You can start just keeping track and, on your calendar, go ahead—or on a separate sheet of paper—put down two-three-four skills that you think would be worth addressing in the next month by subject area and child, and in that mix, I think you're going to start seeing things that right now are invisible to you. And you'll start seeing a way to borrow from the imaginative side into the skill-building, and the skill-building side into the imaginative. And then note it on your calendar; plan from behind.

Jennifer: Okay.

Julie: Put it on your calendar when you see it happen. So that in the next three/four months—and this can carry on right into summer, I know it's spring right now—when you see it happening, make a note on your calendar, because then, after three months, you could literally write up a little narrative of what the learning journey looked like for each child, and you strike me as the kind of person who would enjoy doing that [laughs].

Jennifer: [Laughs]

Julie: And you will start to see those two sides of learning, the love of learning side and the rules nuts and bolts side, working together instead of separately from each other.

Jennifer: Right. Right. I like that, that they're no longer at odds with each other.

Julie: Correct.

Jennifer: Yes, I do find that helpful, thank you.

Julie: You're welcome. So, what we would love to do, then, is contact you again in the fall, it'll be September or something like that, and just see how it's gone. And, you know, you may have some new insights for me and our audience about how you modified whatever we discussed to match and suit your family.

One thing I wanted to tell you, because I don't know if you know this, because of mothers like you who need a list and a big picture, the most recent Arrows from the last two years, have an overview of everything that gets covered in the Arrow. Did you know that?

Jennifer: I did not know that, I will admit that I have not looked at it in the last two years.

Julie: Understood! And it's because of the need of parents like you that we modified our product. So, we call it the Spin and Spiral instead of Scope and Sequence, because we do tend to circle through things inductively. We use the original text to guide what we teach as opposed to a big list. That said, what you don't know is Brave Writer *has* a list. We know what concepts we want to cover and what we do with that list, is we just make sure that over the course of a year that we're making sure that we hit on the key ideas that are the right concepts for that developmental stage of growth, and then we look for them. We do a scavenger hunt and we find them in the passages. So, now what we've done is at the head of each Arrow, we include a nice list called the Spin and Spiral that tells you what literary devices, grammar, principles, punctuation, and spelling is going to be covered. So, how fun is that? Thank you!

Jennifer: I love it [laughs].

Julie: I would like to end on that note, too. Sometimes there is this notion that there is one way, that there is one kind of homeschooler that we want to aspire to be, and I don't believe in that at all. What we want to be is our best version of our natural personalities, and we want to accommodate and address the best version of each of your children. That's really the goal in homeschool.

Jennifer: Yes, yes, and that is so interesting for me because all of my children are different types of learners and it's not always the same way that I learn, and so, yes, I am constantly having to adjust and make changes, so that everybody, like you said, is loving the journey and really looking forward to it every day.

Julie: Well, that is a perfect note to end on. Thank you so much for joining me today, Jennifer!

Jennifer: Thank you, Julie! I was so happy to be here. And thank you for all of your wonderful ideas and advice, and I can't wait to start implementing it!

Julie: Let's give Jennifer a little time to put some of those ideas into practice. We will circle back and hear how it all worked out for her in just a few minutes.

I promised you that I would read you a quote each week from my new book called, [THE BRAVE LEARNER: Finding Everyday Magic in Homeschool, Learning and Life](#). Quote:

Let's let this unsettling idea sit on the page: everything can be taught through anything. The key to a successful education is not remembering the sequence of battles in World War I or getting an A on the geometry test. A robust education is the ability to make meaningful use of any and all information.

One of the things we're discovering today in our conversation with Jennifer is that it is so easy to devalue what looks satisfying and playful, and overvalue what looks like steady, studious work. And yet, the goal of our educations is for children to acquire skills and tools that they can use, that they see as valuable to them, not just at some distant date like college admission.

My book, *The Brave Learner*, addresses all of that. How do you find your balance? How do you create a context that enriches the subjects for school and that values the inspiration-led play that is natural to your children?

If you're interested in pre-ordering, simply go to thebravelearner.com, and you'll see a slew of ordering buttons available. When you pre-order, return to that page, enter your receipt code into the little pop-up window, and you will also receive on publication day—which is February 5th, 2019—two of our free gifts. One of them is a digital download called "Hard Cases: Q&A with Julie" and the other will be an invitation to the inaugural webinar book club for *The Brave Learner*. Really hope that you will be joining us for that, we will explore all of these ideas you're hearing about in the podcast in so much more depth and tailored to your unique family.

And now, let's return to the podcast and see how Jennifer's doing. [Theme music ends]

Julie: Welcome back, Jennifer, it's great to talk with you again.

Jennifer: And you as well.

Julie: So, I'm excited to hear how the last few months have gone! What is your overall feeling since we spoke last?

Jennifer: Overall, I think that using your term “balance”—I really feel that we have a lot more balance in our homeschool.

Julie: Oh, that’s wonderful. Give me an example of what you mean by that.

Jennifer: So, I think what I mean is I like to use curriculum that has assignments given to me, because I don’t have a teaching background, I need ideas about what kind of assignment is appropriate for each age group. Then, for example, if it’s telling me that my fourth grader needs to be writing in both English and History, I might combine the two and have her History assignment—have her write that, and then I would go back and look at what they wanted her to do in English, and we’ll talk about those concepts in light of her history assignment.

Julie: Oh, I love that. So, what you’re doing is you’re creating a little bit more of a pacing situation where you aren’t over burdening her with too much of the same thing just because these assignments both ask for it.

Jennifer: Yes.

Julie: That’s great. And how do you feel? Do you feel confident when you make that judgment call?

Jennifer: I do. It helps me to have that English or that grammar workbook as sort of a baseline. So, I’ve looked over the table of contents to see what she needs to learn over the course of a year and then I make notes on there where we’ve covered it maybe in another subject or another writing assignment that we chose together that piqued her interest better than the one in the book.

Julie: That’s perfect. You know, I did the same thing. I think we’re always in hunt—in search of good ideas. You know, we are supplying our imaginations with possibilities that we wouldn’t think of on our own, and by giving yourself permission, then to count the fulfillment of those objectives from a variety of subjects means that you can introduce a level of flexibility to the routine instead of being rigidly tied to whatever the plan was by the curriculum provider. So, I think that’s just fantastic. Did you experiment at all with my suggestion around collaboration

and independence? Looking at those two kinds of practices and maybe even making a chart to sort of keep track of which areas she needed help and which ones she was doing more independently?

Jennifer: Yes! So, what we did this summer is we worked a little bit more on what I consider unschooling and unschoolers might scoff and say, “No, that’s way too much structure!”

Julie: [Laughs]

Jennifer: But I had activities that were less structured. For instance, they were making bridges out of blocks and they were rolling the balls down and ramps and things, and when they would do projects like that, I used an app called Memento that is a journaling app, and I would take a picture and I would write a little snippet about what they did. And what I love about this journaling app is I can tag each entry. And so, I would tag it with a child’s name who worked on that activity and I would also tag it with what subject of school I felt it covered.

Julie: Nice!

Jennifer: And then, at the end of the week when I wanted to see which subjects we covered, I could look at my tags and I could make a note to say okay, next week I’m going to focus a little more on writing, and I’d choose activities that would lend themselves to more writing. Might have them make a list for grocery shopping or might have them write about our nature walk instead of drawing. Those kind of things. So then, I felt I was covering all the subject areas and they felt like they had a little more freedom during the summer.

Julie: That’s just a beautiful solution and I absolutely love this notion that you could tag them with multiple things and then sort by tags. This is one of the most wonderful aspects of technology is that—with paper, you know, you sort of have to decide which file folder am I putting it in. But with this digital world, you can actually tag it with a name, the aspect of learning that it represented to you, a subject area, whether it was collaborative or independent—so many ways to file and categorize their activities. How does that make you feel when you look through that? Do you have a sense of security now that you didn’t have before? A little more, I don’t know, grounding, as opposed to that free-floating anxiety?

Jennifer: Yes! I think that's a great word "grounding." It also brings me so much joy to look back at what they did because there are pictures and I can write a little snippet about something they might have said that was really sweet or a little quote. And then 2, like you said, I can notice, "Oh, wow, we've really covered a lot of areas and even some of those extra areas that I might not otherwise have covered."

Julie: Yes!

Jennifer: Like you said, let things be free and let my anxiety kind of go down about it.

Julie: That is fantastic. Yes, and of course, sometimes when they're doing an activity that is self-starting, it's a little bit invisible to us because we use that moment to disconnect. We're like, "Oh, good, he's happy over in that corner. I don't have to pay attention." So, if you give yourself the reminder to just sort of check in and kind of categorize what you see going on, you may still allow yourself that sort of independence to flourish, but now you have a way of quantifying it to yourself. And sometimes, kids are doing activities and using subject areas that we don't even realize, in their imaginative play. They might be counting or sorting or developing a story-arc. I mean, there are a million things that go on when children are in play and sometimes because it gives us a break, we don't even appreciate that they've been engaging their minds in the very subjects we want them to learn.

Jennifer: Yes, that was exactly my experience.

Julie: Oh, that's tremendous. I love that! What about some of these ideas of sweetening the deal? Adding some enchantment or pixie dust to the experiences of learning?

Jennifer: Okay. I think I'm pretty basic, so I do use M&Ms quite a bit [laughs].

Julie: [Laughs] We all love M&Ms! That's a great idea!

Jennifer: Especially for things like math, where they're just like, "Ugh, it's another math." It's like, well, bring—take away the complaining and here are some sweets—don't complain about

it, here are five M&Ms. It's not a burden, it's something to look forward to. I do that with cleaning for myself [laughs].

Julie: [Laughs].

Jennifer: [Laughs] We all have that thing we don't like to do. I'm like. "Okay, when I finish this, I get to have a nice cup of coffee."

Julie: Perfect.

Jennifer: So yeah, I have tried to sweeten it for them a little bit for them with those subjects that just there's no way around it than to just sit down and do it.

Julie: Yeah, and that's where Barb Oakley's Pomodoro Method that she recommends in her book, *Learning How to Learn*, that is for kids, she recommends that very thing. They've shown in the brain research that you can dedicate yourself to a task by applying your focused attention for a limited amount of time, you set the timer for whatever amount of time you think that would be—I like to recommend age + 1 minute, so if it's an 8-year-old, that would be nine minutes—and then you promise yourself some kind of a celebration or reward at the end, so that you are training yourself to keep redirecting that focus while you're in that time-zone, those nine minutes or 20 minutes, whatever you pick. But knowing that not only is relief coming that it's over, but you are also going to enjoy the fruit of having given that focused attention. So, that's basically what you're doing with your kids and the brain research backs it up. It's an absolutely valuable and viable method of motivating focused attention and growth in learning. So, well done!

Jennifer: And I think also you might consider this sweetening the deal or providing balance, but with math, we've also been doing one or two days a week where we bring out math games that focus on math facts, to kind of help.

Julie: Absolutely. Right, because we want to change how we learn, not just get into a rut where we sort of master the style of learning but maybe not the content. You know, it's one thing to be able to whip through a worksheet of problems, especially if the curriculum designer has as a goal targeting, let's say, the sixes and sevens in addition. So, you're adding everything

plus six and then everything plus seven. And so, you have this sense as a child, your brain clicks into a kind of solutions-oriented method that works for that page. But then, you pull out the game *Yahtzee*, where you've got to look at all these dots on dice and do that same kind of calculating but quickly and to win a game, and there's the random element of chance. Well, that is working on those calculating skills, but it is accessing a different kind of style of implementation. So, you're not just following this worksheet and maybe using Cuisenaire Rods. Now, you're dealing with dice, different representations of the digits, different configurations that mean you'll win or lose. And it really changes how you go about solving those problems, even though it's the same skill.

So, that's why I am a huge fan of games, whether it be something as obviously mathematical as *Yahtzee*, or a game like *Life*, where you are rolling dice and you're calculating money that you spend on various experiences. There are lots of ways to encourage the experience of math that come through gaming. And the same for language arts! Lots of language games that reinforce—you know, everyone's favorite: *Mad Libs* to really master parts of speech. I mean, what a genius way to introduce that to kids.

Jennifer: Yes, we love games as well. And thanks for reminding me of *Yahtzee*, we'll have to find that one again.

Julie: *Yahtzee* is amazing. I have always felt like that game both attracted and repelled me, because I am not quick on my feet in calculating and yet I love rolling dice. I love the sound inside the little container as it rattles around, and I love watching the patterns of how they land. So, as a child, I was drawn to the action of *Yahtzee* even though I was intimidated by the calculation, but it gave me just an amazing venue for that practice and it used kind of these more aesthetic properties to draw me in. And that's what gaming does! It draws you in through a vision of an enjoyable experience and then the skills are sort of secondary.

Jennifer: Yes, for sure. Another game we like is *Bananagrams* and we can span that over multiple ages because the little kids can do the really short words and the older kids can have the longer words.

Julie: Fabulous game! Oh, we loved *Bananagrams*, that's a fantastic game. In fact, any of these language games can span ages. We even played a card game called *Quiddler* that was all about spelling words and my daughter, who couldn't read yet, played that game. She started to catch on to the sequence of how words were created by playing *Quiddler*. So, don't always assume that your kids need a certain skill-level. If they are drawn into the game, you can find

ways to support them, so that they can also participate, and it may even, you know, make a bridge into a skill that is still a little bit beyond them.

Jennifer: Awesome! We have *Quiddler* because I picked it up, but I'm still trying to convince my kids that it's okay that there are no numbers on the cards.

Julie: [Laughs].

Jennifer: We'll have to try that again [laughs].

Julie: Yeah, and you might want to try playing it open-handed. I noticed with our original first tries, you know, it's challenging to make words out of all consonants and then trying to make sure you get one vowel and still trying to work it around. So, we played open hands almost like a collaborative, to see what we could do with each person's hand. And it was like, a whole project, the whole four of us—if there were four playing. You know, we would all be focused first on Noah, and then we would shift to Johannah, and it became like, a family project to help each person have great words. So, sometimes even games that are designed to be competitive, you can turn them into a collaborative experience and still have the joy of a game.

Jennifer: That sounds amazing. We are definitely going to try that.

Julie: Awesome. Oh, that's wonderful. Well, Jennifer, thanks so much for sharing how things have gone. Are there any follow-up experiences or questions that you would like to share with me and the audience?

Jennifer: No, I just—I really enjoyed kind of looking at my homeschooled from another perspective, and it was just a really good experience and I was glad to have the opportunity. So, thank you for the recommendations; they have made a huge impact on our family.

Julie: Oh, you are so welcome. It has been a complete pleasure to talk with you. I know that your story is going to resonate with so many parents out there, so thanks for making yourself available.

Jennifer: Oh, you're welcome, my pleasure. [Theme music plays]

Julie: So, did you scribble down the names of those games or add them to your Amazon wish-list? They're good ones.

Thank you so much for joining me today. If you have not yet left us a review on iTunes, or wherever you listen to this podcast, we would greatly appreciate it. One of the ways that the team knows that they're doing a good job is they get to read those reviews and they feel valued. So, I thank you from the bottom of my heart when you take the time to do that. You can simply go to iTunes, click on reviews, and follow the instructions, they'll walk you through it.

For now, let's thank our production team, Podcast Masters. I also want to thank Jeannette, Beth, and Amy for the hard work they do in Brave Writer to make sure that this podcast is ready to go every single week. And lastly, thank you to our fabulous guests who open their hearts and homes to us and let us peek under the couch cushions. We could not have this show without their willingness to share.

In the meantime, I hope you have a phenomenal week. Go forth learning and loving. I'm Julie Bogart from Brave Writer. [Theme music ends]

How do we help our kids experience the same level of passion/excitement for school subjects that they bring naturally to their personal interests?

[THE BRAVE LEARNER](#) answers that question!

