



S5E9: Awesome Adulthood

Julie Bogart with Jessica Hammond

Julie: [Theme music plays] Today's episode of the podcast could be called "Plate Spinning 101". I know you know the drill. Each day you want to connect to your kids, you want a little me-time, and you want to live in a house that is reasonably tidy. Or, well, at least reasonably sanitary [laughs]. And it seems like it takes every last ounce of energy to do those three things. Sometimes it's a juggling act and we're going to discuss that very struggle, the plate spin, the juggle, today with Jessica Hammond [theme music plays].

Today I get to chat with Jessica Hammond. A homeschooling mother of two, ages 7 and 2 years old. Before her kiddos came along, Jessica studied elementary education and was a librarian. Jessica has a laundry list of passion projects and hobbies and she wants to be able to devote time and energy to those passions without feeling guilty. Sound familiar? With our various roles as mothers, wives, and home educators, have you ever stopped and wondered where your own personal fulfillment fits in? How do you nurture that awesome adult I like to talk about in yourself? Jessica has a similar question. She asks "How can I adjust my mindset and trust that I really am going to get enough time for both home education and all of my varied interests?" Welcome to the podcast Jessica!

Jessica: Thank you!

Julie: Does that represent the question you had?

Jessica: Yes it does.

Julie: So let's hear about some of these hobbies and passions that you just love to do any time your kids are quietly occupied elsewhere.

Jessica: Oh wow, where do you want me to start?

Julie: You pick your favorite one and we'll work through them.

Jessica: Alright. Well my favorite is genealogy, which I've been interested in since oh gosh, like 10 years now, I think? I really enjoy the detective work that goes with genealogy and trying to track down that one secret clue that will uncover what I'm looking for. I like to knit. I actually have knitting in my lap right now and I'm hoping it doesn't pick up on the microphone.

Julie: No that's great.

Jessica: I like to read. I take a lot of pictures. I'm not really talented as a photographer but I have this project going where it's called my "Big Box of Crayons" project and I look for—I pick a different Crayola color from the big box of Crayola's that you get when you're in elementary school and I pick a different crayon every week or two and I try to look for things in the world that match that color and so that's another project that I like. I don't know, I have quite a few. That's a start anyway.

Julie: No those are wonderful. I loved your Crayola project idea. That sounds really fun. I'm kind of like you, I'm not a professional or trained photographer but I got interested in taking a picture a day in a project they called "Project 365". This was before Instagram so we did it all by blog but it became this obsession with me where I was really learning how to take better quality pictures, how to see through a camera lens differently, how to care about color. So when you mentioned this idea of comparing it to Crayola colors I immediately found myself thinking "I want to do that!" [laughs].

Jessica: It's fun. I've been doing it—my kids, as long as they can remember. So they're always like "Mom, is this your color? Is this your color?"

Julie: Oh that's so interesting. So they're just hopping right on board supporting you in your interest.

Jessica: Yeah.

Julie: Well that's fascinating. Well in terms of the genealogy work that you've done, what's been the best thing about it? You said you really enjoy the detective work. What are some of the things you've learned or discovered that have been especially meaningful to you?

Jessica: You know, I really wish that I could tell you I uncovered some really deep and important story about some ancestor of mine, but it really mostly doesn't work like that. And mostly most of my ancestors are just—they were farmers and they did about what you would expect as farmers. I like that usually the stories of women are not told, especially like illiterate women. So I like that I'm uncovering their lives somewhat. I feel like they would have been lost.

Julie: Yes. That's definitely the librarian in you, too, isn't it? The endless researcher. That's really awesome. So tell me a little bit then about this dilemma that you're experiencing. You have these interests that draw you and you want to dive deep and yet somehow you're not feeling 100% comfortable with the amount of your lifetime that you're giving to it. Tell me a little more about that.

Jessica: It is not, I think, that I'm not getting enough time. It's that it's hard to feel like I have the balance right and so when I'm doing one thing, I often feel pulled to do something in some other aspect of my life. Could I give you a more concrete example?

Julie: Yes yes that's exactly what I want.

Jessica: Okay. So I was just thinking about it since I knew I'd be talking to you today. I was thinking about it this morning. I got up early and I was the first one up and you know I'm on my laptop, trying to prepare my day, write in my journal, think about my plans. And then my daughter who's 7 gets up and she wants to sit in my lap and cuddle, which is great! You know I want to cuddle with my 7 year old because I know there's not a lot of that left in the years ahead where she'll want to sit on my lap and cuddle. But this is like my one time that I have to myself and so then I'm also in the back of my mind going oh but here goes my time to myself and oh I was hoping to walk the dogs this morning and now I'm not going to get to walk the dogs but oh I really want to be here and cuddle with my daughter. So it's not the homeschooling so much as the wanting to be me and do the things that have nothing to do with my kids. And also wanting to fully be there with my kids, does that make sense?

Julie: Oh it totally makes sense and it's such a challenge. I sometimes describe it like this: you get to the end of college, you know, you get your degree. You're finally launched, you're an adult on your own, it's time to pay your own loans or be married and pay bills together. But in any case, you're not under your parents or teachers anymore and it feels like sometimes even if you wait a few years, right around the corner from that are children who plunge you back into the very life you barely escaped.

Jessica: Right.

Julie: Right? So the thing that you thought was now behind you is front and center again. You may not be the child but your life is littered with all the things that being a child is about.

Jessica: That's true.

Julie: And suddenly this glistening, glittering picture of yourself as an adult, fully empowered, fully released, fully unleashed, has to take a back seat again. Right at the moment you thought this person was coming into view. Does that feel like what you're going through a little bit?

Jessica: Yes, except as a child I think I was much better—I mean I don't know. It's hard to look back on your child memories where well life is the way it is. You just happily roll with what's going on right now. But since I'm an adult I get to choose what I do so then my mind is thinking about these choices instead of happily rolling with what I'm doing at that time.

Julie: And in addition there is limited time. I mean you have a 24 hour day, your children do require the lion share of your energy when they're 7 and 2. You have a marriage to maintain. You have a lifestyle in a home that requires your attention. So some of these passions that you have really do feel like they aren't as essential so they're easier to sort of put off to the side or to say "Well, I'll get to them later." Do you have that going on at all, feeling like maybe they don't deserve front and center? Or, conversely, the only way to keep them going is if they are front and center?

Jessica: I think I often tend to tilt more in the direction of—actually I think what I tend to do is I make time for my kids for much of the day, I squeeze time in my for passions after my kids are in bed, and so then that leaves the household chores. And so that's the thing that I'm always trying to—I have quote-y fingers now—"escape my kids" to do during the day. So I can

get these chores in during the day so I don't have to use precious asleep time on chore things. Does that make sense?

Julie: Ah got it! Very interesting. Oh gosh yes, I think I was the same person. I mean I didn't have a hard time really giving myself permission to learn to play guitar but it then meant that something else had to go and that was usually like vacuuming. Cleaning that bathroom.

Jessica: I'm so excited to go do laundry because it's like a rare opportunity. So my kids will disappear to go play a thing. You know, they'll play an imaginary game together and I'm escaping to do the laundry. But I want to be with my kids when they're playing their imaginary games, at least some of the time.

Julie: So you just named the key thing about homeschooling and parenting. One of the things that happens for kids who are in school is those children actually leave the house. They go away from the house for hours a day and even though in talking to my public school mom friends, they still feel like their kids are dominant in their lives. They do actually have, if they're not working outside of the home, time in their houses themselves. If they are working outside of the home, they actually have a much more similar experience to homeschoolers because nobody is in the house in a meaningful way without everybody else home at the same time.

So part of what goes on is we're trying to manage a household while people are making the messes, while they're needing homework or homeschool attention, while we have other passions and interests that we want to pursue. These are all legitimate issues. So one of the catchphrases I like to offer about education I want to offer you about life in general. Let's start with the principle lower the bar to experience success. We are constantly in like a state of triage when we're making decisions about how to spend our time. So it's always a question, like you said, about this morning. My daughter sitting my lap or journaling or starting a load of laundry. Like those are the three things. One is necessary to the functioning of the family, one is necessary to the healthy functioning of you, and one is necessary to the healthy functioning of your child. And some days, the laundry really does matter more than those other two and you will miss out on those other two while you're doing the laundry. Some days the cuddling in the chair really is more important than the other two and that's what you'll give your time to. And then there will be yet another instance where journaling is the thing.

The question mark that is hard to manage then is: how do we decide when one of those is the most important thing and what do we do with the guilt when we prefer one to the others? So let's start with the how do we decide which is the most important question. How have you decided that up until now? How do you decide which item in your list is the most important to you at a specific moment, not in the scheme of things, I know your children are top priority but what is your criteria for making that judgment in a moment?

Jessica: I think I have tried not very successfully to think about it as a time of day thing. So there are certain hours of the day that are homeschool and even if we're not doing things that look like homeschool, I try to give my kids my full attention during that time and then there are certain hours of the day, often when they're in bed, that are mine. And then there are some in-between hours in there that are just kind of free for all or whatever. I haven't found that actually works all that well.

Julie: Okay [laughs].

Jessica: So that's maybe not my call.

Julie: So that might actually—when I hear it, it sounds logical. But what we know is that everything bleeds together when you're all together. So you know, if your kids go play in the creek and they get all their clothes muddy, you have to do the laundry right then or you're just going to have muddy smelly clothes in the middle of the bedroom. Vice versa if this is the moment when your child is having the reading breakthrough, telling your child to wait while you go write in your journal is probably not a great use of your time. So even though the hour framework might work as a general rubric, it might give you a routine, it doesn't always help you with judging the value of the item or the presenting need.

So how would you judge—let's say we're in our hours of homeschool and suddenly you get a text message from someone and they have sent you information that you need for this genealogy you've been working on. How do you make that decision? What do you do? Do you put it on hold? Do you find yourself now resentful of your kids for doing math because you'd really rather be over here looking at this? How does it impact you emotionally when you're in one and another one crashes in? Kind of like what happened to you this morning, you're journaling and your daughter climbs in your lap? What do you—what's the feeling inside? Are you pulled away? Do you feel resentful? What kind of emotional turmoil do you enter?

Jessica: I don't think I feel resentful, I think I feel distracted where my mind will—in your example of I get some new bit of cool genealogical information, my mind's going to be on that new thing even while I'm trying to have my mind be with my kids.

Julie: [Laughs] yes.

Jessica: And I think that probably in that—in that situation what's going to happen is I'm going to try my best to stay with my kids and then my mind's going to be drifting away to whatever cool new shiny thing is there and then I'm going to be mentally scolding myself for drifting

away. So then I'll have this whole mental one-sided although really two sided dialogue going on in my head while I'm trying my best to just be there and present with whatever it is that I'm doing with my kids right now.

Julie: Oh my goodness, I so have lived this. I understand it completely. In fact, one of the challenges that I remember having in homeschool with the dawn of the internet, and you have to remember that I used to homeschool without the internet so when the internet came along, it was its own new shiny toy. This notion that I could be communicating with people around the country about homeschooling, parenting, art, music, movies was mind-blowing. And I would find myself composing responses to stimulating posts while I was in my head while I was trying to teach my child to read.

So you're right, you can almost not control your brain. Your brain is going to wander off the reservation and go play while you're trying to be present. I did actually use a strategy that you already mentioned where I would start to—I recognized at a certain point, I just can't go on the computer between these three hours—9 and 12 was my three hour time because I knew if I did, it would do that to my brain. So that was sort of the deal I made with myself for the mornings.

One other thing that we did do though is we never started homeschool right when we woke up. I gave myself—I don't know if you do this, it sounds like you were trying to do it before your daughter woke up—but I gave myself and my kids about a half hour of time to play, to do a video game, for me to go on the computer, drink my tea, listen to a radio show. We had what I call the waking up time and it helped me for sure and I assume it helped them but it helped us make a transition to all of us paying full attention because here's what was crazy: my kids had the same problem I did. They were still playing about the video game they played or the book they were reading for pleasure or the Lego set that was half-way completed. You know if we just dove right into that, they were also drawn away from that focus time. Do your kids enjoy playing on their own and is that one of the issues that they do and then you feel guilty for not being more involved?

Jessica: Yes. I didn't think—I had kids five years apart so I didn't really expect them to be as much playmates as they are. But they do! They go in the backyard. They go in the basement. Like I remember yesterday they were downstairs—actually this morning—in their secret hideout together. It's so great that they have this one on one time with just the two of them. But I spent so much time with my older daughter—I had a daughter and a son. So my oldest child when she was a preschooler with just the two of us playing. And I don't do that as much anymore because they keep themselves busy and so then I go disappear to go do the laundry. But then I wish that I was doing more time with just them but then I wish I had more laundry that was done so [laughs].

Julie: So I think what we have to decide then is how to make the judgment call in the moment. Because one thing—one principle that everybody knows who has lots of kids and since you have only two maybe you aren't aware of it since your youngest is two but every child has a different parent. They don't get the same parent! So the youngest child has a different parent than the oldest child. Even though you're all in the same house and you're all doing quote unquote the same things. But they also have siblings in a way that the oldest, when it was just the two of you, that daughter didn't have.

So there is a different life that gets created for each one and each of those lives involve different features in your life. You're going to have different interests at different times. You may even have different pressures and demands. You know, a couple that is going through a particularly challenging marriage crisis or loss of a job or a foreclosure on a house or cancer. These things undermine that sort of vision we have in our heads of seamless connection, self-knowledge, and orderly home. I mean those are the three things and we're juggling them like balls and sometimes one of them falls to the ground.

So where I think we want to go is recognizing that we're not trying to create a perfect connection, a perfectly cared for home, and perfectly attended to interests, but how to make the judgment call in the moment. And I think your system of the three categories of time is brilliant. What we want to do now is help you settle into those and trust the outcomes. So let's say this vague time that you've established for your house maintenance and laundry.

Jessica: [Laughs] that's the problem, that's not a time.

Julie: Yes, I think you need one. And the time of day that I did that was usually around 4 to about 6. I would put my kids—literally at 5 I'd stick them in front of PBS and I would throw some laundry in and start dinner and I listened to a book on tape while I did that because that was one of my ways of staying stimulated. I never had time to read for myself so I listened to a book on tape. That's what I did. But while I did those things I was peeling potatoes, throwing in the laundry, maybe making a bed with new sheets. Something like that. Where I knew that I was checked out.

Now here's what's fascinating, my children are adults today and they tell stories about shows they watched, inside jokes, music they care about, quotes from shows and I didn't know about any of them. I thought they were watching Arthur and Liberty Kids, turns out they were watching that and other shows. They have a whole lexicon of music that was children's music that I don't know about that they found for themselves and I laugh about it because I think I was in the house, how did I miss all that [laughs]? How'd I miss that, right? But it's because I can only be present so much. They also get to have their own agency and their own lives even under my roof.

So I would give them the morning, we would usually do some kind of a project in the afternoon that might involve me or not, then I would have some time to do chores and dinner and then the evenings were usually family time or me working, I had Brave Writer for a lot of that time

and I was teaching online classes or whatever. So I think your framework is good but I wonder about your expectations for what each of those things looks like. So for example, your 7 year old comes, she climbs into your lap. This is the time you've delegated to yourself for journaling. If you could say to her, if you could give her a big cuddle, kiss her all over her face, tickle her, and then say "I've got 25 minutes, I'm going to journal, you want to journal in the same room? And then we're going to start school." Like feeling permission to indulge the moment but then continue to finish the thing that you were planning to do and then giving as much of your full attention as you can to the next thing. How—does that sound like that addresses it or do you feel you're already doing that and that's not working?

Jessica: I'll address two different things here. First part with the planting my kids in front of PBS or whatever, you know of course my mind is going not more screen-time!

Julie: [Laughs]

Jessica: But we actually do quite a bit because our morning routine is our kids get up and they kind of like lounge around, Penny usually reads a book and eventually she pours herself cereal and then they get to do game time until 9 AM. So we've already got that going in the morning when game time is currently I think Animal Crossing is her video game of choice and Oliver usually watches videos about Dinosaurs. And then in the evening, I put them in front of their games again so I can get dinner made. So I'm thinking "Oh no, I want time to do chores." I would love to get them occupied with something so I can do chores but I don't know if I want to invite more game time or—

Julie: Oh definitely not. You don't need to! It doesn't have to be screen-time. That was the actual only time they watched TV during our day. So that was it. But what you could do—here's what I'm meaning: can you unhook from them and allow yourself permission to follow through and not feel bad that you're not giving them full attention because you've already given them full attention at another time. We're going to talk about what to do with the squirrel in your brain that is making you not be interested in what you're doing when you are with them because I think that will help you but is that possible? Could it be that you say "You know, these two days a week or these three days a week, I'm going to use this time to do chores and so when you come to me, I'm not going to be as able to help you set up the arts and crafts so I'm going to let you know "I'm about to do this. What do you need to get started? I'll be around if you need me." Like can you do that? I know it won't always look seamless but I'm just trying to get inside your head a little. Would that feel doable to you or would you still really resent the chores.

Jessica: [Laughs] well, I don't like chores.

Julie: Can you hire them out?

Jessica: [Laughs] No.

Julie: Okay.

Jessica: I think that would work. I think that would feel doable. I think it would never quite look like what it would look like in my perfect world where I get to put in my podcast and do my chores and kind of sink into podcast and chore world because with a two year old I'm going to get interrupted a lot.

Julie: Yes.

Jessica: But I think that it is possible to set aside regular time that is: this is mom's chore time and they might at least—at least my 7 year old would certainly understand that this is chore time and my 2 year old might slowly get the idea.

Julie: And will keep getting older, which is going to be helpful.

Jessica: [Laughs] that's true! That's a good point.

Julie: Not 2 forever. Yeah, this is all about to change. In six months everything is going to look different yet again and then six more months it'll look different yet again. So some of this is a stop gap measure while you're in this time. So then my second thing is let's talk about the squirrel mind because that is the hardest thing. It's the thing we don't admit in homeschool and here's what it is: It's a little boring sometimes. You're doing math that you learned in second grade. I mean, come on. It's not a mystery to you anymore. We're reading stories that are moving. I mean E.B. White makes me cry no matter what age I am but it is a children's story. And the things that our kids find fascinating and exciting, like smushing Play-Do or stacking the blocks and knocking them down yet again, not as intellectually stimulating as being a detective in genealogy work.

Jessica: Right.

Julie: And you have a full functioning mature adult mind that is hungry for food and stimulation and to be used and exercised. So one of the things that I think we have to start with is admitting that when we commit time to being with our children, it may not feel always as magical, connect-y, and stimulating as all the fantasy parenting magazines and books would have us imagine it is. That it's okay for your mind to dart, for you to occasionally wish you weren't there, to need a break from that too much in a row. You know maybe you need an occasional day a month where nobody does anything but what they feel like and you just make junk food for the day. Where you just check out of the responsible you and everybody is just themselves and there's no pressure, no agenda.

But when we're in the homeschool piece, if you limit it to a certain amount of time and you invest yourself in your kids and you take what shows up—so your mind goes squirrel, I'm really thinking about this one new piece of information that I really want to chase down, and when it comes you accept it, you recognize it, and you just give it a date. You say "I'll get to you at 2:00 PM." "I know this is coming, every time you come in my head I'm going to say, 'See you at 2:00!'" You know? And start training yourself to notice and pivot and accept your fluctuating feelings if you can. Accept that that is a part of homeschooling these very young ages where they're not yet to the level of dialogue partner that they will be at 13, 15, and 18.

Jessica: Mhm. That sounds like mindfulness, like what I've read about mindfulness practices.

Julie: Very much. Yeah. Very much. I sometimes avoid that word because immediately people plug themselves into the New Age and zen and yoga and I also don't know that I'm an expert at mindfulness. What I definitely know is I am an expert at losing track of my focus. I know how to do that really well. I can be drawn aside as well as anyone by scrolling through Instagram or checking out to think about a thought that is more interesting to me than what's in front of me. The only thing that has worked for me is to not fight it. To sort of give it a big hug. To start to recognize that this is a part of the person that is me and the fact that I'm drawn to those things is valid and valuable but I can also make choices right in the moment. I can say to myself "that is a great thought, I'll see you at 2:00."

You know, I'll give a personal example of when I learned this lesson because it's through a completely different experience than what you're talking about but I think it correlates. So many people will know who listen to this podcast will know that I'm no longer married to my kids' dad. And when I was going through a very challenging period of my life, trying to work all that out, I was in a lot of grief and it was very difficult for me to stay focused on the main things like making food and educating my children because I wanted to cry and be sad. And I know people dealing with cancer, dealing with job challenges, there's all kind of reasons that we get distracted besides just being awesome adults. It can come out of left field, you can lose a parent suddenly, you can have a child with cancer. So when grief welled up in my life I had a therapist who said to me, "Even though your grief is legitimate and even though it's real, it

does not get to take charge of your life. Your emotions are not the boss of you. So here's what I want you to do, when you feel the emotion swell, you tell yourself I have a date with grief at 6:00. And at 6:00 PM I'm going to go lock myself in a room and feel the full scale of my grief by a timer [laughs] for 30 minutes. And then at the end of 30 minutes, I'm to leave the room and go back and do my life." So I did that twice a day and then I did it until I only needed to do it once a day. And then I only needed to do it once a week. And it slowly dissipated but it was a really instructive process for me because I suddenly saw that I could take charge of my choices about how I felt in specific circumstances. I wasn't pretending them away. I wasn't acting like I was interested when I wasn't, I was starting to be in charge of the emotional that I was having instead of letting them control me.

Jessica: That's really powerful.

Julie: Let's just put it this way, it was completely different than how I'd ever lived my life before. I have the tendency and maybe this is enculturated as women or maybe this is just temperament and personality type, I don't know. But I have the tendency to believe I'm my most authentic self when I'm feeling deeply and so sometimes, that can act as a rouse. It actually seduces me away from the thing I care the most about. You know you have a feeling come up you think oh this must be real, I should indulge it. Rather than "oh look at that, a feeling, it showed up. Well I don't have time to work on that right now [laughs]." You know? I am curious, I am interested, I can't wait to get back to my guitar but that doesn't mean I have to stop teaching math to go play guitar. I can go play it later, right? We can see it on that level.

And so maybe the discipline for you will be to return, to keep returning. To say okay I'm with my kids right now, that's where my energy will be. And I'm not going to let myself feel guilty for the times when my mind darts. I'm just going to recognize of course my mind darts, this is a 7 year old math book, I'm not that interested. But I love my child so I'm going to be here anyway." And then when you're doing the thing you love the most which is genealogy to not feel bad that you're missing out on some imagination play happening in the backyard because the imagination play without parental supervision teaches oh my gosh so many amazing things.

Jessica: Oh yeah.

Julie: Right?

Jessica: Right.

Julie: And it's okay that your kids are not a completely open book to you. It's okay that they have their own private thought life. Their own imaginary friends that you haven't met. That doesn't make you a bad mother. That actually makes you a space giving mother.

Jessica: And it helps them build a relationship between the two of them, too, which is nice that they have special things that are just between the two of them and not with adults involved.

Julie: That's 100% true. The thing I know about you from just this very short conversation is that you're a conscientious person, would you say that's true?

Jessica: I think so.

Julie: So give yourself credit. You're probably doing a great job [laughs]. This is my hunch. Like I almost don't want to fix anything because I feel like the only thing that you need is reassurance that you're actually doing a really good job.

Jessica: I think that your advice about—I have these three domains in my life: I have parenting/homeschooling, I have my own personal development, and I have household chores. And I think your advice that well I've made specific time for those two things but that third thing I'm just trying to like squeeze in the edges because I don't really like it and I think your advice that I should just make time for specific—like set aside time for all of those domains in my life I think would help out a lot.

Julie: And you know one idea—this also was true for me. I didn't really do the big stuff like vacuuming or cleaning bathrooms. Those kinds of bigger chores I only did those on the weekends and our family kind of pitched in once we got them at the ages where they really could. But you might even consider having the dad take the kids and you get two hours and you just every week, that's the only thing you do during that time. And you just get forget about it during the week. You know, we just don't need this. It's just not necessary. I sometimes think we over function in terms of household chores.

Jessica: [Laughs] I don't know if that's actually the case for me.

Julie: [Laughs]

Jessica: I was never a very good housekeeper and having children did not make me suddenly magically a better housekeeper.

Julie: And neither did turning 50! What's that about? I assumed when I turned 50 I would suddenly be organized and I was so disappointed to find out that that wasn't true [laughs]. That it was going to take effort. I think you haven't been to my house. Literally we had a big joke that my two daughters hadn't walked on the floor of their own bedroom for years because they had a trundle bed that they had to pull out to sleep on but they would always put stuff on top of the trundle bed so then it could never fit back under the bed. So their bedroom was just two beds like for years.

Jessica: [Laughs] that was it.

Julie: And you know what's crazy? They grew up, they're adults, they're perfectly fine. You know that's the kind of thing you can be thinking "a beautiful house right now would be the key to a great peaceful life." But you know, house not beautiful was the key to a great peaceful life for us. I can make my life more beautiful now, nobody's here. It stays the same. I go to bed and I wake up and it all looks the same. That was never true once when I had five kids.

Jessica: Right.

Julie: So. Lots of ways to squeeze in that chore function if you need to. Tell me more about what you're thinking. Are you worried about something?

Jessica: No. My two biggest concerns—or my things I'm trying to work on the most right now are the squirrel brain as you called it and—which I guess just is the squirrel brain. I'm just trying to make sure—trying to convince myself that the thing that I—the balance that I have chosen for myself is the right balance and I think that I am—I find myself constantly re-evaluating my balance during the day, which I don't think is necessarily the right thing to do. I think the right thing is probably to decide in a cool moment okay, these are my priorities and stick to those priorities rather than constantly wondering "Oh did I really choose the right priorities?"

Julie: Yes definitely. I mean I think you're answering your own question. And the beauty of it is: what if you stick to your priorities based on whatever frame of reference you have and then you just re-evaluate in two months. Right? Give yourself two months to actually live the thing that seems like it might work. I mean, you can make variations in the day, if you have a sick child or somebody doesn't feel like being alone and you just decide okay I'm not going to do laundry, I'm just going to push it back a day, I mean you don't have to be rigid. But in terms of just like your overall structure, when you are involved in whichever aspect you're in, give yourself permission to enjoy it and to allow your brain to go away and come back, go away and come back and not feel guilty about those things. If you can start to allow yourself to inhabit the choices and then only re-evaluate periodically instead of daily then maybe you'll start to feel a peacefulness coming in instead of this continual treadmill of am I doing enough? Am I doing it better? Am I doing it right?

Jessica: Right. I think that's right.

Julie: Wonderful. Well here's what I'd love you to do before we talk again. You know, we'll give you a few months. Why don't you do that? Why don't you come up with this sort of structure that sounds for you like a routine you could embrace and then just make occasional notes on a calendar about how you're managing emotionally? Like I don't want you to be rigid and then feel miserable [laughs]. How is it feeling? Are you able to maintain that balance? And then the thing to pay attention to is the undercurrent of emotion. You know the guilt or 'shoulds' that come from watching what other people do or hearing the story telling. "Oh I just can't imagine anything greater than spending time with my children." And you think "I can!" And then you feel bad about that. You know those are the stories that undermine healthy choices we make. So help yourself by taking notes to stay connected to that undercurrent of emotion that might be sabotaging the good plan you've already made. And then after you know six or eight weeks of trying or two to four weeks, whatever amount of time sounds good to you, pause and just reconsider. Look and say "Do I feel good about the balance I've struck?"

Jessica: That seems like a really workable plan.

Julie: Awesome. Wonderful. And then what we'll do is we will call you back in the fall and check in and see how you're doing and have any follow up consulting if that would help you.

Jessica: Alright well that sounds great.

Julie: Thank you so much for joining me!

Jessica: Thank you very much for having me! It was a lot of fun.

Julie: Oh it was great Jessica [theme music plays].

Julie: Talking with Jessica made me think of my new book [*The Brave Learner: Finding everyday magic in homeschool, learning, and life*](#). I dedicate a whole chapter to the functioning of your household. I call it "House-schooling". And talking with Jessica made me think of this one quote in particular. Here it is:

The point is that you can't expect learning to magically occur if your energy is directed at maintaining a tidy, attractive home. Our need for a perfect learning moment and a perfectly neat environment are in conflict. You must pick one! Famed writing instructor Anne Lamott puts it this way: "Perfectionism means that you try desperately not to leave so much mess to clean up, but clutter and mess show us that life is being lived." Celebrate the messes that show you life is being lived.

As you go into your week then, I hope you'll rethink your attachment to needing the house to be a particular way. And I think the follow up conversation with Jessica is going to go a long way for giving you some more ideas for how to bring that balance into your life. Before we get back to her though, I wanted to make you aware that [*The Brave Learner Conference*](#), a conference I'm putting on with my team from Brave Writer is coming in July of 2019. We're going to meet here in Cincinnati, Ohio, 300 of you plus me and my team. We're going to talk all about the projects and the ideas and the practices in my book *The Brave Learner* and we're going to have just a great big party celebration. Fun and swag and treats. It's going to be awesome. Tickets for this event go on sale January 22nd that is our early bird special. And we will be holding the conference on July 19th, a Friday, in 2019. So mark your calendars. If you want to get in on the early bird rate that rate goes up at the end of March. There are only 300 seats so if you want to be in, set your alarms, make sure you sign up. We are allowing [Homeschool Alliance](#) members to sign up a day early on January 21st so if you want to get in on the early, early registration sign up for the Alliance.

All the details are on thebravelearner.com/conference. I'll say that again thebravelearner.com/conference. I can't wait to meet you! We'll have hugs, we'll take selfies, we'll hang out. It's going to be wonderful. And I appreciate your enthusiasm for the book and this is going to be a big extravaganza party celebrating the end of that book tour. So now let's get back to the conversation with Jessica and see how she's doing [theme music plays].

Julie: Hello Jessica!

Jessica: Hi Julie.

Julie: How are you doing?

Jessica: I'm doing good.

Julie: It's great talking with you again! It's been a few months since our last conversation.

Jessica: It's good to hear from you.

Julie: Well I loved receiving your email. You gave this incredible report about how you are starting to incorporate both your interests with your kids' homeschooling, with your need for a clutter free orderly environment. And so I wanted to talk to you about that a little bit. One thing that you said that really sparked my interest was that you discovered that this craving for order was never actually about the laundry [laughs].

Jessica: [Laughs] Yeah well I don't love laundry! I have no passion for laundry.

Julie: You know one of my friends said back when we were raising kids, she said "I do not want to be known for having successfully laundered thousands of loads of laundry!"

Jessica: [Laughs] that is true!

Julie: So tell me what it was that you discovered you were craving that sort of manifested as overcoming the loads of laundry?

Jessica: Okay, I think what I told you is that I felt like what I was wanting was time when I felt focused and productive. And in my life, that's laundry. You know that's a time when I can listen to my podcasts and I can like have a task and I can do the task from beginning to end and it's done and it feels done. But if I'm interrupted like 15 times while I'm trying to do it, then it doesn't feel that way. So that was why I was always ducking away in moments of like sibling peace because it was like oh I can get that focus and productive time. So that was what was

going on for me. It's not that I care about laundry because it's so boring. But I just want to be—I just want to feel like I'm focused and I got something done, you know what I mean?

Julie: Totally. So it looks to me like you solved that in a couple ways for yourself. Would you share those with our listeners?

Jessica: Well first I tried your advice, which I believe was to tell my kids "Okay this is mom's chore time and I'm going to be focused on this and then I want you guys to focus on whatever your fun thing is and I'll be available as soon as I'm done." Which—now they're 8 and 3, that didn't work. They interrupted me like 15 times in 3 minutes.

Julie: [Laughs] totally.

Jessica: So that did not feel good. And so then it occurred to me: my parents! My parents just moved to my town a year ago. And I've never lived near either of our parents as a parent myself so I'm not used to the idea that I can ask them for help but it occurred to me oh I can ask my parents for help.

Julie: Love it.

Jessica: So I asked them if they would take my kids for like one afternoon a week and that's worked out really, really well. So like the kids go and I think what they do is they go to McDonald's with Grandma and Grandpa and they get hotcakes and it's been summer so they go to a splash pad and then they go back and they watch TV at Grandma and Grandpa's house. And then it's a win for everybody. My parents love it. My kids love it. And I have this reliable afternoon where I can do my laundry or some other task that in the past I would have felt like "I have to squeeze this in every moment I have the opportunity." And now I know that no, this time is coming so I can use my other time either to be with my kids or to do my own thing and not try to squeeze in my productive time the rest of the week.

Julie: I really love that. And I know that even if you don't have relatives in your town, sometimes you can do this by swapping with another homeschool friend. I did something like that when I lived in California and there was another homeschooling family who happened to live on my street so we would give each other intermittent breaks. I know it can also be possible to hire a mother's helper where there's someone in the house, like a 12-13 year old homeschooler who can play with the kids downstairs while you're on the computer or doing

laundry or whatever you need to do. Where they can interrupt the helper instead of interrupting you. So these are wonderful solutions. One of my favorite comments that you made in your email follow up to me was how you felt about your kids watching TV when it wasn't at your house [laughs]. Can you share that?

Jessica: [Laughs] Yeah I said this to a friend in a conversation that I don't want to stick my kids in front of a TV so I can get stuff done but if my parents do that, that doesn't count, it's totally okay. I'm not there.

Julie: [Laughs] Yes! You're not there to see it. And of course, grandparents are meant to be the indulgent ones so you sort of have this preservation of whatever your ordinary family habits and rules are at your house and then they get to be spoiled by grandparents so that's just the perfect solution. I'm so happy that you found that! So tell me a little about how that's impacted your peace of mind.

Jessica: I touched on that a little bit just now, I guess. So I think before—I was so surprised when I found myself talking to you because I thought I was going to be talking about like all of my personal growth pursuits and I ended up just talking to you about laundry.

Julie: [Laughs]

Jessica: And I think the reason why it felt that way is because I didn't have a time for those kind of mundane chores it felt like I had to do it all the time. Like there was no time so all the times were for that. And so now that I have this designated time, it doesn't feel like I have to do that anymore and instead I know that time's coming and so I can wait and set that time aside and then when I have moments of peace with my kids, I can either like step in with them and have fun in that moment with them or I can say "Hey I'm going to go use this time to like go play the piano."

Julie: Yeah! I loved seeing that you've started playing the piano again in a consistent way. How does that feel?

Jessica: That's been really fun. It's a nice thing because I can do it while my kids are in the room with me so I don't feel like I'm like—if they interrupt me constantly it's not so bad because I'm just learning so my piano songs aren't very involved so I can drop whatever I'm doing but I can sit there while they're doing their thing. I mean, a couple days ago they were

having a Pokemon battle with their stuffed animals and I was playing like beginner's Mozart. So it's been fun because it's a thing that I can do with my kids and they can see me like trying to learn and grow but I also feel like I'm not doing it for my kids, I'm doing it for me and if they get something out of it, too, that's a nice bonus.

Julie: Well are any of your kids taking piano lessons or learning to play?

Jessica: No, not lessons. My 8 year old has expressed interest off and on in learning to play so I've like helped her walk through the first piano book and then now she periodically will sit down and try to like informally a bit more. My 3 year old will play Twinke, Twinkle Little Star where he methodically hits the keys with each word while he sings Twinke, Twinkle Little Star.

Julie: That is beyond adorable [laughs]. So tell me a little bit about your squirrel brain.

Jessica: I found that advice most useful actually. In a homeschool that I am the facilitator—I kind of run sort of the homeschool group and there was a bit of conflict, which is stressful for me because I'm the one that's supposed to figure out how to help manage the conflict so when that happened I was able to use your advice about telling yourself "I will have time to think about this. Right now I'm doing this. I will set this aside a time later when I can stress about this conflict that's happening." And you know, it didn't work as well as I would like. I bet that is a practice that people really need to work on. You can't just switch it on. But it was helpful advice and I tried.

Julie: Good! Wonderful. I'm all for trying. And of course, there are some challenges that just won't submit, right? They're big enough that you can't just leave them alone so I think it's valuable to recognize the difference between just being momentarily distracted and something that's really weighing on you so I think that's completely reasonable. What else? Anything else that you discovered while you had these months to take in this need? You know you had a need for some personal stimulation, you know mental stimulation beyond conversations with toddlers and little kids. You had a need to bring some order to your home environment that felt productive and completed, not just this endless un-done task that you can never quite get accomplished and then you had, on top of that, the desire to manage the distracting thoughts that come to you. Do you have any summary thoughts you want to offer about all that? About this process?

Jessica: I guess two interlocking things. One is that it has been helpful to make designated—oh you always talk about routines rather than schedules, so making designated routines for

myself. So knowing okay, very, very first thing in the morning is a time for me. After that very first thing in the morning, morning to like nap time is a time when my kids get my undivided focused attention as much as I'm able. Afternoons and evenings are kind of going with the flow. Monday afternoons are grandparent time when I get to do not fun stuff but productive stuff and I get to feel good about that. So that's been helpful to me. And it's also been helpful to recognize that it is a routine, not a schedule and I can't be too rigid about that and that I need to be realistic about my family's natural routines as well.

So like for example, I want very, very first thing in the morning to be or me but my kids wake up when they wake up. And it may be before I'm ready to put my things aside but they're always going to want to come sit on me and pile on me and cuddle—which is great! We talked about this before. And so I just need to be realistic about that and accept that for example this is a thing that's going to happen and I can't tell my kids "No, morning is mom time." Because no, they just woke up! It's cuddle time. So I've had to be flexible and accept that I can't have a schedule just a general gist for how my day is divided up.

Julie: It's beautiful actually because really what happens is those routines fluctuate as your kids change ages. I remember when I had babies I tended to stay up late because that was the time they were most likely to be asleep. As they got older into the teen years, I started going to bed before they did, getting up before they did because they were guaranteed to sleep in. So you know you find these rhythms will also modify themselves somewhat naturally as your kids get older and as you become aware of what their patterns are. But what I'm hearing from you now on this side of things is just more control. Like you have a better sense that your life is not being controlled by small people and demands. It sounds like you have choices. Do you feel like that's true?

Jessica: I do. I mean, it's going to vary some days more than others but yes, I think that is generally more true than when I talked to you in April, I think. So yeah.

Julie: Wow. Well I have really enjoyed catching up with you. Your note to me was just to inspiring. I loved hearing the way that you were taking the advice but also modifying it to work for you. And I just want to reiterate for anyone listening, any time I share a suggestion or a thought or any time you come across advice, suggestions, or thoughts always funnel it through your unique situation and your personality. No solution offered by another person will ever be as powerful as the one you create for yourself. So you can take principles, ideas, you know new ways of framing the dilemma and then funnel it through your personality and come up with that unique tailor made answer that works for your life—for now [laughs].

Jessica: Right.

Julie: Until the new question arises and you have to go through that whole experience again. Thanks Jessica, really, for being with us!

Jessica: Thank you so much! I really enjoyed it [theme music plays]!

Julie: You know what my favorite part of this podcast season has been? The fact that the conversations I have with our guests lead the guests to their own solutions. You know the wisdom we all need lives inside of us. But sometimes we are so busy spinning the plates we don't pause. We don't have that friend to talk to who helps coax us into our best insights. So here's my homework for you for this week: find at least one homeschooling friend and go out for a café latte or a root beer float and sit and discuss your greatest frustrations. And I'd like you to just volley back and forth a brainstorm of solutions. Then, go home and try them out for a month and meet back with the same friend and discuss what you learned—what worked and what didn't.

Sometimes the difference between a happy functional homeschool and one that isn't is merely taking the time to imagine new solutions and testing them, experimenting. So go do it! You'll get a free—well, you'll have to pay for it—but you'll get a café latte out of the deal. That would motivate me! I also just wanted to use today to read you a couple of amazing comments about the podcast. I promised you that I would do this so here are a couple from my Instagram account, follow me [@juliebravewriter](https://www.instagram.com/juliebravewriter). These were great: "This season's podcast from you is on fire! I will probably listen to them twice. So helpful." Another one commented on the planning from behind episode said, "Absolutely loved this podcast! Thank you. So many times it's when I'm listening to imaginative play that I realize something stuck from what we're learning. Like when my daughter named a character Figaro after listening to a podcast about Mozart." That one really touched me because isn't that the truth? You recognize the learning in the most serendipitous ways. Not by testing, not by grades.

So keep the comments coming. We love it when you post reviews on iTunes, I share them with the whole team and then we have a little Slack celebration, which is awesome. In the meantime, I hope that you will prepare to register for the conference in Cincinnati, July 19th. Registration opens January 22nd. Go to thebravelearner.com for all of the details and we will see you back right here next week. Keep going with the project of loving and learning, I'm Julie Bogart from Brave Writer [theme music plays].



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