

## Episode 411: Reading for the Long Run with Sara Osborne Transcript

**Julie Walker:** Hello, and welcome to the Arts of Language Podcast with Andrew Pudewa, founder of the Institute for Excellence in Writing or as many like to say, “IEW.” My name is Julie Walker, and I’m honored to serve Andrew and IEW as the chief marketing officer. Our goal is to equip teachers and teaching parents with methods and materials, which will aid them in training their students to become confident and competent communicators and thinkers.

**Julie Walker:** So, Andrew, I know you know, but perhaps our listeners don't know that our theme for the year 2023 Which is, of course, in our rearview mirror now, has been special needs and how IEW helps students that have learning differences. And we've spent a lot of time talking about all different kinds of things. ADHD, actually gifted and talented would be a learning difference. Dysgraphia, but probably the most popular ones are related to dyslexia.

**Andrew Pudewa:** I would say one out of every three people I talk to wants to talk to me about a child who's just not reading.

**Julie Walker:** Not reading, yep.

**Andrew Pudewa:** They're frustrated and they don't know what to do and sometimes their fears are very unfounded because the child is only six years old.

**Julie Walker:** Right.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Sometimes it's later and you know, God has blessed me with experience in that area and blessed us with a lot of resources and people to be able to connect other people with.

**Julie Walker:** Yes. And so we have a plethora, to borrow one of your words, of podcasts that we'll link to a few of them in our show notes about specifically dyslexia, but you have stumbled upon an author who's written a book about dyslexia and has approached it from a completely different angle.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Yeah, very much so. In fact, I saw this book titled *Reading for the Long Run*, subtitle *Leading Struggling Students into the Reading Life*, and it's being published by the Circe Institute, which of course we're all very familiar with. And I thought, okay, I'll take a look at this. And I emailed over and said, “Hey, send me a copy of that book. I'd like to take a look at it.” I was hooked, I think, by page 20 or so, I was absolutely sure we had to get this author, Sara Osborne, on our podcast.

**Julie Walker:** And here she is. Welcome to our podcast, Sarah.

**Sara Osborn:** Oh, thank you so much. I'm happy to be here.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Tell us, Sarah, how did you originally feel the need or the calling to write this book?

**Sara Osborn:** Great question. I like to say that this book is the resource that I so desperately was looking for when I began to teach one of my own children. I have four children, and they all have a variety of strengths and weaknesses. But my third child was very different from the first two that I had taught to read myself, and they read quite easily and well. And then my first son really struggled from the very beginning, but of course, when we began to inch closer towards school age, like many parents, that's when we began to get more concerned and frustrated and frankly, even afraid of what the future would hold. And I looked around for a lot of resources. Obviously, there's a lot out there on the science of reading, kind of the more technical aspects of dyslexia or visual processing, some of those types of resources. But what I didn't know was whether or not my child could be classically educated, which was what I was pursuing for all of my children at the emphasis on great books and, you know, very logo centric way of learning and I wasn't sure if it was possible, but I wanted it. And it really prompted a lot of wrestling for me about the purpose of education, what I was really striving for. And I came to realize that what I wish had been out there was a combination of good research, for sure, helpful tips, things to do, so to speak, but also just kind of a companion for the journey. And some encouragement that even these very long, difficult endeavors that frankly sometimes the end point is unclear. The finish line is, you know, maybe yet to come into focus, that that's still a journey that I could pursue with my child, and that he could overcome many of the difficulties that we were seeing.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Yes, I have seven grown children, six girls, one boy, and most of the girls, they just learned to read very easily, but it was number six, the boy, and wow, it was a completely different world. And I'm so grateful that he was not number one because if he was number one, I would have thought, I'm the stupidest failure of a teacher, dad, human being on earth. How could I be failing him so badly? But by the time he came along, it was like, "Well, I know how to teach people to read. This is obviously not a "I'm teaching badly" problem." But the thing that struck me about your book that I thought, this is so qualitatively different of a contemplation than most people have. Most people, as you mentioned, can really fall into this fear zone like, "Oh, no, if this child doesn't read well, then everything's going to go bad.

It'll be a total disaster. Academically, financially, socially." And you kind of took it in a surprising way, talking about the beauty and the pleasure that reading gives. So that the motive for engaging in this undertaking of helping a child for whom reading is not easy, wasn't out of that "Oh, I have to avoid this horrible disaster. And if I don't, I fail." It was more like, "but this is the beautiful world that I want them to also be able to share in and come to." And that right off there must offer a lot of peace and tranquility to parents you meet and parents you talk to. It certainly, I think, did for me reading the book. And I was already past the worst of it.

**Sara Osborn:** Yes. Well, I'd like to say that that was my mentality from day one, uh, which it definitely was not. You know, I can absolutely resonate with those feelings of frustration, fear, isolation, even despair, dare I say, at moments. Even a kind of grief in a way for parents who maybe have seen the world altogether differently, or who have had other children that followed the trajectory that they were most familiar with as parents or teachers. And I think that's true for any of us who have children who just exhibit some uniqueness that's challenging. And absolutely, I think the most critical component of achieving the success that we've seen with our son was not so much finding the right resources for him, although that was certainly an integral part of the process. But it frankly was a reorienting in our minds, as parents, as teachers. We had to decide whether this thing we were signing up for was worth the long haul. If this reading life is the thing that's making it worth the effort that I'm willing

to put into day after day, hour after hour, year after year? This is not a short process. There had to be something compelling there, you know, that was worth our buy in.

**Julie Walker:** I love the metaphor of the long distance runner. I ran in high school. I ran cross country and track, the long distance. I was not a sprinter, but I always knew where the finish line was. And, you know, sometimes when you're running cross country, it's over hills and up and down and around and, but you always know where that finish line is. You don't always know that when you're doing this with a child that's struggling to learn to read. You don't, when is it going to click? When is it going to turn on? And you kind of address that.

**Sara Osborn:** Absolutely. You know, of course, in the book, I do talk about what success can look like. Obviously, we know what we hope it looks like, but we also, if we're truly taking into account that each of these children is unique, then it's going to look different for different children. I love that you mentioned that, just kind of the uncertainty that a parent or teacher has to wrestle with as you're trying to train a struggling reader, that this process is taking a long time. I think one of the important things for us. And our personal experience was kind of looking for those mile markers along the way.

You know, I address a lot of things related to the running metaphor in this book, and I am a distance runner. And so the metaphor came about because I was going for long runs, trying to process how to help my child, and I just began to see time after time after time how the endeavors were so similar, everything from motivation to planning and injury prevention. But part of that motivation is marking the successes and measuring progress and recognizing that yes, this is a really long run. And sometimes even when you know where the end is, it still feels very long. But just finding ways to plot your course and to celebrate victories and to allow your child to see those victories for what they are, to do that in community, to be able to walk with the child in a way that promotes an attitude that's going to serve the child and the teacher in pursuit of the reading life.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Give us just the brief timeline. I know listeners would be curious. What age did you determine that this was not going to be an easy thing to have your son read? And then what happened over the years, you got to the point where you kind of thought, okay, we're good now. We're over the biggest hump and we can move forward and maybe even delight in a little bit of downhill.

**Sara Osborn:** yeah. Our child had some significant vision problems from his infancy. He endured two eye muscle surgeries before the age of four. We did a lot of eye patching. We did perceptual therapy. We did all kinds of different things, some of which were related to visual skills. Some were related to just behaviors we were seeing. Frankly, it took a lot of years before we began to put the pieces together because we struggled to find anyone who would really kind of look at our whole child and not just an eye muscle and a neurological process and a behavior and an emotion, you know, but to be able to look at all those things together.

But, of course, it was when he began formal schooling in kindergarten that those struggles where reading specifically began to surface more prominently. I already had concerns because I was, of course, comparing him to my daughters who had gone on a very different trajectory. But I thought, okay, he's a boy, you know, he's maybe he's a later bloomer, no real cause for alarm, perhaps at that stage, although some concern, but then, you know, after a full year of kindergarten and early phonics training, still very little fruit in terms of reading skill.

He ended up repeating kindergarten. We hoped that that would kind of give him the extra time that he might need, but then continuing on really at the end of first grade is when my husband and I decided that the small modifications that we were making in the classroom with color coding and enlarging print, reducing visual clutter, things like that, just weren't accomplishing the size gains that we needed and so I began to do his reading instruction myself beginning as soon as first grade ended in May, and I did that for years. Actually just this past year, we completed after four and a half years of four days a week, me meeting him at school and engaging in these systematic explicit reading lessons, we finally finished all of that. And supplemented it with lots of other resources as well, but those lessons were pretty critical. And I would say that really, first grade, second grade, third grade, I can't tell you how many days we went through the phonograms again. And these are, these are drills that we had been literally doing for years. And some days it just wasn't there, and I thought, Oh, my goodness, I have gotten this terribly wrong. We have spent so much time and energy and effort and emotion and, you know, mustering up the attitude to be optimistic and try to lead him through this. And there was very little fruit for many years.

Thankfully, we have a wonderful coach, our optometrist friend, Dr. David Pierce, who specializes in vision-related learning problems, just stuck with me and kept telling me, you're building the pathways, you're stomping down the trails, you're repeating the things that need to be repeated, and over time, with maturity and repetition, you will see results. And I would be lying to say that it was always easy to trust that advice. But I did trust it. He had proven trustworthy through leading lots of other children on a similar path. And the Lord enabled me in faith to keep putting one foot in front of the other. But really it was probably fifth grade when a lot of those pieces started connecting and what had once sounded like just laborious, segmented reading—t was decoding, but just, you know—suddenly turned into sentences that sounded like sentences, paragraphs that sounded like paragraphs, and a newfound confidence and motivation that had not been there previously. This year, my son is in sixth grade, and at the beginning of the year, one day I was busy, and my husband had to help with homework. And I connected with him afterwards and just kind of inquired about how it had gone that day. And they had taken turns reading passages from *The Fellowship of the Ring*, and I would say that that was the moment when I just thought, wow, you know, this is working, like, we are actually moving into not just being able to read decodable readers, but he is stepping into the inheritance of literature that his parents and teachers and siblings and friends have all encountered before him, and that is what we've been working for.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Oh, that's beautiful. I think that Tolkien's work has inspired many a boy to strive to read above their perceived limits of decoding abilities. I really like how you did put in each chapter, I think each chapter, notes from the trainer, questions, answers, and commentary from Dr. Pierce, and so much great common sense in there, thinking that any mom, whether the problem is dyslexia or more complex physiological, visual problems, just the common sense business here, you know, the alphabet is key. He's got to see the letter in his head.

**Sara Osborn:** Yes.

**Andrew Pudewa:** You have to start at the very beginning. The other thing you said that I wanted to underscore a bit is how things are always not always getting better day after day after day after day. And you've experienced this in running. I've been, in the last few years, a lot more interested in fitness, doing some weight training, and I find it frustrating that I can't just get stronger every single day. Like how come, how come there's these dips in the thing, and it corresponds completely with teaching children anything, whether it's music.

My primary background is teaching violin and music to children or reading or math or a foreign language, whatever. It's just like humans don't always get better. We get a little better, and then we seem to need some recalibration, and it looks like a decline. How come I can't go as fast as I did before, or push as much as I did before? How come my kid is totally exhausted and zapped out after only six minutes of trying something today, when yesterday he was good for a whole 20 minutes? What am I now doing wrong? And that message came through, I think, very well, that it's not a continuous upward progression.

**Sara Osborn:** Yes, absolutely. And I'm not sure that that's something that I had internalized in the early weeks and years of training my son. I think that's something that has come to me with time and just witnessing it in my own child. I hope that perhaps the stories in my book might help other parents and teachers arrive at that earlier than I did. But really, yes, we are human. We all have weaknesses. My child's is manifest through his struggle to read, and mine is manifest through my struggle to teach him. Some days he's more tired. He's got early symptoms of sickness. He's had a run in with a friend on the playground. There's an exciting trip coming up. Not every interference is negative. But yeah, I think that's where just recognizing that this is a whole person we're talking about. This is not just a robot that we're programming a skill into really serves the overall endeavor for us to keep that in mind. I also, you know, I talk a little bit about mystery and wonder in one of the chapters in the book, and there absolutely have been those moments where it just doesn't make sense. And truly, in some of those circumstances, it's not even helpful for me to ask why. Sometimes it is a matter for problem solving and finding a new way to do it better next time. But sometimes it's just people. And I think that one of the things that I've learned through this process of teaching my struggling reader, that I've been shaped by and not just him, is that reminder that there is a part of humanizing education that should leave us wondering because it is the human spirit. It's the human mind. This is a person that God has made differently than me. And I don't have to understand every element of the process, and I don't always have to see daily success to press on towards positive movement. I do that for myself in all kinds of areas in my life. I don't give up when I have a bad day at a particular skill or practice, and in grace, I can hope to do that for my son, too.

**Andrew Pudewa:** I think one of my favorite parts of the book is when you talked about how this is going to change you, not just help the student grow, but change you as the teacher. And you quoted Romans 5 here, and you don't have to even be a religious person, this just makes sense to every human being who's dealt with anything. "Suffering produces endurance. Endurance produces character. And character produces hope." We see that in so many ways. I've worked with many families that have had children with mild to even very severe disabilities and brain injuries. And it's nothing you would ever wish on anyone. You certainly would not wish it on yourself, but those people who experience it would never trade it in. They would never go back and say, Oh, I wish I hadn't had this challenge in my life because the growth that occurs. As a result of the, you know, the blessing, I was laughed because there's this book called *The Gift of Dyslexia*. I'm sure you've read it by Ron Davis. The sub joke is, yeah, the gift that everybody wants. But in truth, how we can help our children at a younger age. perceive the need for the combination of accepting help and assistance and even supernatural assistance while at the same time just being perseverant and building that inner muscle of the will to keep doing the hard thing. Those two factors really, I would guess, are the greatest predictors of what you might perceive, self-perceive, as successful or a fulfilling life.

**Sara Osborn:** Early in the book, in one of the notes from the trainer sections where Kevin Clark offers some input from his sphere of leadership and teaching in classical education. He talks about how as human beings, we are not primarily independent, that the truth of being human is dependent in every direction that it's something we resist, but it's not unique to students with special needs. It's true of all of us. And I think the same can be said of just growth that stems from difficulty, right? None of us naturally are inclined to pursue obstacles. We try to get them out of the way as quickly as possible. And sadly, I think that that's been the improper response to a lot of struggling readers. Is "this is just let's hurry up and fix this problem so this child can, you know, get back on the same track as every other person," which, of course, in and of itself is not true. We're not all on the same exact learning path, but but that's the perception or the misperception rather. And the truth is that life shapes us through the challenges, right? We can all think of countless people that we admire who have accomplished great things in the world who were profoundly shaped by early obstacles and challenges.

And I think that this absolutely is an opportunity to shape a child's attitude and perspective on subsequent challenges that show up in life after reading training. There is a place in my book where I talk about the idea of cross training where, you know, as runners, sometimes we actually strengthen our bodies and shape our minds by activities other than running, which is maybe counterintuitive. But we found the same thing to be true for our child was that there are skills and attitudes of mind that are going to serve his reading endeavor that can be built through other activities. And I give the example of our son was, you know, we looked and looked kind of for something that could serve this purpose in his life.

And we finally arrived at his passion for working dogs. We have German shorthair pointers. My husband is an upland hunter, and our son just fell in love with the dogs and, and his love for the dogs and his interest in spending time with them and working with them enabled us to use that as an opportunity for him to push into difficult settings and circumstances out of a motivation that he might not have to pursue the same kinds of challenges with reading. Whereas reading was this thing that he did not want to press into. Testing and training these dogs was something he very much wanted to do. And so through entering our dogs in these hunting trials and tests, he had to decide, do I want to go out there and do it myself? Am I going to grow in independence and confidence? Am I going to overcome something that's That's just downright scary to me. Am I gonna walk out here with this field of adults, and I'm the only child here? And we just saw overcoming a different kind of obstacle in that area build in him the kind of character that then transferred over into pursuing the reading life. And I think, you know, in the same way that learning to train hunting dogs served character building that helped his reading progress, also pursuing the reading life and overcoming those challenges is going to help him be able to conquer other things in his life. So I do think that the perception that, well, this is hard, we probably shouldn't push a child in this area, is just dead wrong because life is full of hard things. And maybe these children who have learning struggles more than others need to learn how to pursue those challenges in a way that builds them up for the rest of their life.

**Andrew Pudewa:** I had a student many, many years ago who, it seemed like for her everything was difficult, paying attention and doing the basic writing stuff that I was teaching. And she came one time with a notebook. She had put in a little quote on the front of the notebook. And I don't know where it came from, and I don't know I've got it exactly right, but she had written in her own hand, with a sharpie on this notebook, "he who struggles to learn is twice blessed. He learns what he's trying to learn but also learns how to overcome

difficulty.” And I thought, and this girl's probably 12, 13, so she had kind of a more mature, philosophical way to think about the fact that things were hard for her. Every time she would come, she would have that notebook and it would be right on the top in big letters. And I thought, the whole world really needs to be reminded of this because all too often we laud the students who learn quickly and easily and look good and make the teachers look good. And you think, “I'm such a great teacher because look at this kid.”

**Sara Osborn:** Right.

**Andrew Pudewa:** And really that's just not it at all and I think ever since that I came to realize that really probably some of the kids who have the hardest time learning whatever I'm trying to do with them are actually getting the most benefit out of it, even more so from a spiritual, intellectual rigor, willpower, determination, perseverance, persistence, and faith point of view, than the kid who can just walk in, you know, memorize everything instantly and spit it right back and make it look easy. And I think you really underscored that in the book.

I have to tell you this funny story. So I had this book on my table, and I had some grandchildren over And my five year old granddaughter looked at the cover. And she's not really reading to the point where she would try to read the letters and the words on the cover, but she looked at it and said, Grandpa, how come there's naked people running on top of a book? And I said, well, they're not really naked, they kind of look naked, but in the ancient world, people would run races with very little clothes on, and this is kind of a book about classical education and things like that. It was just the innocence of her comment, like, why would that be there?

**Sara Osborn:** That's funny. I was just going to say, I want to circle back to what you, you said previously, if I might just for a second about the girl who had the quote on her notebook and being 12 or 13. And I think one of the things that I bump up against a lot is people surprised that some of the conversations that my child and I have had about his learning at such a young age. When you have a child who is struggling with intense fatigue, why does this take me hours longer than my peers, why do I have to have special support at school, why do I have to do this all summer long when my friends don't? You know, a lot of these questions, we don't get to just sidestep as parents and teachers. And these kinds of difficulties don't distinguish between ages. When they hit a child at nine, the nine year old child is going to ask questions about it. And I think it's such an opportunity for parents and teachers, obviously, to help shape that child and his or her trajectory.

But I also really believe that what you saw in that student and her notebook and her attitude towards learning is one of the reasons why I do not advocate for isolating these students from learning communities. That does not mean that individual students with special needs might not best be served by homeschooling or by having an individual tutor or certain pullout sections of students who have similar difficulties. That's not what I mean at all. But what I do mean is that the larger learning community, whether that's a homeschool co-op or a classroom at a school or a support group at church or whatever the community might be, these students have something to teach us who don't have the similar struggles. And I have seen that firsthand in my child's classroom experiences over the years. I've seen his classmates witness determination and fortitude and just good old hard work in ways that maybe some of the more academically gifted students have never had to see. I've seen teachers who maybe haven't had students quite like my son grow in patience and appreciation and humility. You know, the same things that I've grown in. I've seen my child's classmates and teachers and administrators. These children don't just have needs. We need them. And I

think that we really lose out on something when we allow parents to perceive that their children are unwanted or unneeded or unteachable in these broader learning communities. I think it's really important that we have all of these children present to learn from and to teach.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Well, and thanks to parents and educators such as yourself, I think we're making a lot of progress in that area, particularly in classical education, where the emphasis has moved more from the kind of elite academic idea to the education of the whole person, the goodness, truth and beauty, the good life. What is the real purpose? What are we really doing here is a question that I think we've all been asking and discussing for the past 10, 15 years, and it's moving in such a beautiful direction.

**Sara Osborn:** Yes, I agree. And I'm so happy to see that.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Thank you so much for joining us today. These podcasts always seem painfully short to me, but we like to keep them short because most of our people are busy moms, busy teachers, and a short walk worth of podcasts is about all we can expect from them, but it's been a joy. And I hope that we get to meet in person someday.

**Sara Osborn:** Oh, yes. It's been such a pleasure. And I really appreciate your care for these kinds of students and desire to equip parents and teachers to lead them into the reading life.

**Julie Walker:** So, Sara, where can we get this book?

**Sara Osborn:** It is available at the Circe Institute. You can just visit the website and look under resources and books, and you should be able to find it.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Just for people who may not know, CIRCE is C I R C E, and then the word institute. org is their website.

**Julie Walker:** And of course, we'll put a link in the show notes, but in case you're out there walking, and you're not able to read the show notes, we'll put that link in.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Well, I hope you sell a million copies for every mom who is out there needing to hear your story and gain your wisdom and encouragement.

**Sara Osborn:** Thank you.

**Julie Walker:** Thank you, Sarah.

**Julie Walker:** Thanks so much for joining us. If you enjoyed this episode and want to hear more, please subscribe to our podcast in iTunes, Google podcasts, Stitcher, or Spotify. Or just visit us each week at IEW.com/podcast. Here you can also find show notes and relevant links from today's broadcast. One last thing: would you mind going to iTunes to rate and review our podcast? This really helps other smart, caring listeners like you find us. Thanks so much.