

Homeschool 101 – A Conversation with Cathy Duffy

Transcript of Podcast Episode 345

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.

Andrew, we are at Episode 345.

Andrew Pudewa: And I finally, after 345 episodes, know what that means.

Julie Walker: Oh, good.

Andrew Pudewa: Homeschool 101. Yes!

Julie Walker: That’s right. Exactly right. So we have started this series of Homeschool 101 podcasts every tenth episode on the fives because of more and more people deciding that maybe they’d like to consider homeschooling. They know someone now that homeschools, and it doesn’t seem that hard. Or maybe it does seem really hard and overwhelming. And so you had suggested that we spend some time talking to those homeschoolers. So that’s what this episode is.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, and it worked because someone told me just recently ... Where was I? Oh, I was in St. Charles two weeks ago, and someone said, “I love to tell new homeschoolers about your Homeschooling 101 podcast.”

Julie Walker: Oh, I love that.

Andrew Pudewa: And I was so happy because I thought, okay, you know, there’s reverberations.

Julie Walker: Yes. So we try to keep our Homeschool 101 podcasts essentially ... well, what 101 kind of means, which is the basics.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah. Simple, introductory. But you know, sometimes we get interesting stuff that’s interesting to everyone. And I always like to say, you know, every parent homeschools. Whether your kids are in a full-time five-day-a-week brick and mortar school or a hybrid school, or anything, you still as a parent teach them at home. I mean, you can’t really not.

Julie Walker: Right, exactly.

Andrew Pudewa: So it’s just: do you have intentionality? And of course, we love to have guests.

Julie Walker: Well, and before we talk about our guest, I want to talk about what this episode is about. And this is true 101 information right here. And that is curriculum. What curriculum should I use? And so we said, hmm, do we know anyone who is the expert on homeschooling curriculum? How about someone who wrote the book?

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah, who's been tracking it for decades.

Julie Walker: For decades. Well, and let me ... Oh, okay, so say who our guest is.

Andrew Pudewa: Oh, it's Cathy Duffy.

Julie Walker: Hi Cathy. So glad to have you here. So Andrew, the first time I met Cathy, I was homeschooling my boys in Southern California, and she came to our homeschool group meeting, and she did a talk on different learning styles.

And it was really, really wonderful. And yesterday I mentioned here in the podcast studio (and we were recording another podcast) to my son who works for us, that we were going to have Cathy Duffy on. He's like, "Cathy Duffy. Why do I know that name? I know that name." So Cathy, you're famous.

Cathy Duffy: That's funny.

Julie Walker: So you've recently come out with a new edition of your book. Do you want to talk about that a little bit?

Andrew Pudewa: Well, give us the history, too, because you've been doing this for a long time. When did you come out with the first big book, and how did you decide what to put in? And I think you started with a hundred, and then now there's more.

Cathy Duffy: It goes back much further than that. When we first started homeschooling in the early eighties, there was nothing out there. And I started, you know, researching information, collecting it, typing things up and mailing them out, sharing it, park days, that sort of thing. You know, the dark ages.

Julie Walker: Not emailing. You said *mail*.

Andrew Pudewa: Mail. Yes, I remember.

Cathy Duffy: People don't remember that. Yeah, I'm typing. Who knows? You know, but it grew into my first skinny little book, you know, compound typed-up book, I think, in 1984. And it grew from there. And it grew very, very large. I tried to put every review I ever wrote into those books; it grew into two full books.

And then the internet came along, and I figured out, oh, I can put these on the internet. And I don't have to have everything in the book. And at that point I started doing the *Top Picks* book. So I started with *100 Top Picks*. And one of the things I figured out along the way was that just

giving people a bunch of reviews was not terribly helpful, especially when there were hundreds and hundreds of them.

And so how to sort out, how to choose curriculum became a major focus. And so in the top picked books, I used the first five chapters to walk people through the process for how to choose curriculum, what to think about before you even start looking at curriculum so that it makes the process much simpler. So I've continued doing that, and we went from 100 topics to 101, 102. And now we're at 103, the new one.

Julie Walker: So for our listeners that are brand new to homeschooling and have never heard of Cathy Duffy's top picks, what's the full name of your book?

Cathy Duffy: *103 Top Picks for Homeschool Curriculum*

Andrew Pudewa: And what's your website?

Cathy Duffy: cathyduffyreviews

Julie Walker: There you go. That's all you need to know.

Andrew Pudewa: Okay. Easy to remember. So you were homeschooling before I was.

Julie Walker: Yeah, she's one of the pioneers. Yeah. '84. She talked about '84. My oldest son was born in '84.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah, I don't think we ... We didn't really start until '90. And then I didn't start IEW till almost '95. So you were well established by the time I was a complete neophyte. What, what was it like – new homeschoolers back in the late eighties, early nineties? What do you remember? Because you were on the circuit ... You'd do talks. You were a founding member of CHIA of California if I'm correct.

Cathy Duffy: You know, just going back, it was so different. People couldn't even relate. New homeschoolers couldn't relate to it because it was the worries about legality, how to find research. Publishers wouldn't talk to us. There were not homeschool publishers. Even the Christian publishers didn't want to sell to homeschoolers.

So it was really difficult to get resources, figure out what to do. And it made a lot of us pioneers back then really resourceful. And so a lot of the good unit studies and really creative resources for homeschooling started developing early on simply out of necessity. So that was actually a blessing in disguise. We didn't just copy schools because we couldn't.

Andrew Pudewa: Right. That is a very good point. And I'm wondering if you've seen this kind of shift in the way parents think about curriculum. In the early days you'd say something like "unit studies." People would get kind of excited, like, oh, we can do stuff with multiple ages together. Oh, we can integrate. Like I'm always pushing: writing, reading, talking about stuff that's connected with your history or your religion or your science.

And so there was kind of that excitement about, wow, I'm going to be involved in creative ... in homeschool curriculum. I see a lot less enthusiasm for that these days.

Cathy Duffy: Yes, I think that's unfortunate, and I think there are a number of factors that have contributed to it. Much of it, you know, people working under programs run by government schools, charter schools, virtual schools where they are still in the mode of, you know, we have a separate class for this and a separate class for that.

And then homeschoolers enrolling their kids in all kinds of classes that are segregated classes where they're learning only one subject. And partly parents just wanting it to be as easy and straightforward as possible, and you can't fault them for that, especially when they're just starting out. But there's so much more available. You and I know this.

You know, there's just a really fun world out there of learning when you get off the regular old what-looks-like-school stuff. So it's unfortunate. But then again at the same time, the internet is creating some opportunities for really creative curriculum where the integration happens to a better extent than it used to. So, you know, there's potential there if people will, you know, use things that are unusual.

Andrew Pudewa: So you did the first book, *100 Top Picks*, in what year?

Cathy Duffy: I think that was '95.

Andrew Pudewa: Okay, so you've had a hard time with this, no doubt, because if we look at from '95 to 2022, there's a whole lot of more stuff. I mean, you just go to a big convention, Cincinnati or Virginia or something. And every time I go, I see stuff that ... I've never seen that before.

There's some, you know, homeschool family that's got their little thing, and now they want to try to make it into a product and sell it. And so the problem I have, you know like with clothes, is when you buy a new piece of clothes, if you don't get rid of an old piece of clothing, then pretty soon you don't have space for all your clothes.

I'm sure you've had this same problem with your book. So how do you figure out what to kick out of your book? I mean, you've got to kick out something because you've only gone from 100 to 103. And I know there is more than 3 amazing new things out there.

Cathy Duffy: That's a tough one. And I try in my book to keep a selection. I want to cross ... You know, there's core subject areas. Partly I've made it work by eliminating the arts and handwriting and, you know, some of the subjects that are not just hardcore. So focusing down more on the main stuff. So that's one way.

But there are some really great products that have been in my top picks in the past that have gotten bumped because other things come along that are maybe a little easier to use, a little more interesting. Just, you know, different options. Some of the free products we have available now are just amazing, so, you know, we've got to get a few of those in there too.

Andrew Pudewa: People must be sad. Like I would be so sad if your book came out, and IEW wasn't in it anymore. I mean, I wouldn't resent it because I know the problem you have, but I'd just be emotionally affected. Do you find that ... Like, do people come to you and say, "Why? What could I have done differently? How do I get back in your book?"

Cathy Duffy: They don't cry, but they do ask. Yeah, that's really tough because you know the products – if they were in there before ... it's still a good product. So you know, I keep on my website like ... And I've actually just started with this round where I'm keeping my little apple logo that identifies top picks, like from the *102 Top Picks*. I'm keeping that up there on my website so people can see it was in *102 Top Picks*, so still a good product. Just there's so much.

Julie Walker: Just didn't make the cut this time around.

Cathy Duffy: Well, I'm reviewing so many products. I write up at least two reviews a week, and I'm looking at lots of other things. There are a lot of things that come across that I spend time on that never make the light of day because they're not worth it. But I'm looking at a lot of things. You add all up, you know, all of those new products, somethin's gotta give.

Julie Walker: So I am really curious to hear more about some of those pages at the beginning of your book that I wonder how many people skip over just to see, "I want to get to Chapter 6 because that's where the top picks are." No, no, no, no. What you really need to do is go back and evaluate who you are, who your child is, what your goals are. Cathy, can you speak to that a little bit?

Cathy Duffy: Yeah. That's the part that I think is so critical to the book: that you need to think about these things before you go looking at curriculum. And number one is what are your goals: the goals for your family, the goals for your children? And you know, that includes what are the schools doing? Maybe, you know, whatever legal requirements you have.

But does my child need to really work on mastering the math facts this year? Or you know, you've got things like that that you need to identify and really focus on. Put those at the top of the list so you set your own goals. And use that to kind of guide you in your curriculum selection and also your evaluation as you're going through the year.

Are we making progress on those goals? Not how many pages did we complete in a textbook; so the goal setting. And then there are so many different approaches to education. People coming into homeschooling are kind of blown away. There's a new vocabulary you need to learn of classical education, Charlotte Mason unit studies, delight-directed. You know, it goes on and on.

And so I walk people through that. And I've got a questionnaire to help them sort out the approaches to education to help them figure out what's likely to work for them.

Andrew Pudewa: Oh, that's really good. So is the questionnaire in the book, on the website, or both?

Cathy Duffy: It's just in the book.

Andrew Pudewa: I'm very into this idea of self-assessment in all areas of life, and this is probably the thing that people find most different. Like you put your kid in a school ... Well, the school may or may not do an assessment of that student. But it's pretty much meaningless because the school will just do whatever they're going to do.

And the kid will either conform and succeed or not conform and not succeed or cycle out. Talk a little more about the questions in this because I know from kind of a general life experience that when I get more information and more insight into myself, I can make better decisions about things like what to eat and how to use my time and what shall I read of all the thousand books that I own that I've never read, you know?

Cathy Duffy: You know, it's a two-page chart with questions that will help just sort out the different approaches to education. For instance if, you know, you like to use real books—books, you know, historical fiction and novels, literature as a part of your curriculum—then that might steer you toward Charlotte Mason or maybe a classical approach to education.

Or the unit studies that we talked about. If you want your subjects integrated, if you want to have history and English and handwriting and maybe even some science connected, you might want to use a unit study approach. So there are things that people don't even know to ask the questions. So that's in there.

And then with learning styles, I don't have questionnaires in there, but I do describe and give people ways to identify their children's learning styles so that they can figure out what's going to work best with each child because our kids are all so different. And back on the math facts: Some children learn well; just, you know, give them flashcards. They'll look at them and memorize them, and that's great. They've got it, and they're done.

Others need to use manipulatives. They need to see how the numbers go together, how those blocks all pile up to really grasp the concept. Some might need to work with video or video computer games to master the math facts. They'll do it that way, but flashcards won't work for them.

So you figure out what works for your child, and then try to let them use, as much as you can, the learning styles that work best for them when they're struggling, especially with a subject. So it's about efficiency in the long run. It's about teaching your children in ways they learn best. You don't have to keep reteaching until everybody's bored and crying.

Andrew Pudewa: Could you kind of just—I know this is like opening a big can of content—but briefly what are the learning styles that you have taught about that? You know, I'm sure you've refined it since Julie Walker first heard about it decades ago, but give us the three-minute summary.

Cathy Duffy: Yeah. It's not ... It actually hasn't changed much. Still using basically the same thing. I boiled it down to four learning styles. And again, that's any time you try to put people into only four categories, it's going to be messy. People will overlap and be more than one

category, you know? So with that caveat, I have Wiggly Willy, Perfect Paula, Competent Carl, and Sociable Sue.

Wiggly Willy - the hands on, you know, kinesthetic learner. Perfect Paula - She'll, you know, follow the rules, read the books, do what you want. Competent Carl likes to be in charge of himself, in control. Maybe you know, more independent learner. And Sociable Sue wants to learn with people whatever form that takes. You know, be around friends and very motivated by social learning.

Andrew Pudewa: I love how you did that because I do get a mental image just immediately as you say that. That is brilliant, very good. There seem to be ... I don't know if it's that there are just more kids or that people are more aware and therefore more likely to acquire either through their own discernment or from some kind of expert, but there just seem to be a lot more kids with learning challenges today than I remember when I was, you know, first starting to do a lot of conventions twenty years ago.

You find that also – that people are coming and saying, “Well, you know, I have this child who’s on the spectrum,” or “he reads really well, but he’s very dysgraphic.”

Cathy Duffy: Yeah, I agree. I’m hearing more of that, and I don’t know if it’s real or not, but it seems like in most cases, homeschooling is a good solution because when you can work with a child one-on-one (I don’t care what the labels are, and I’d rather we didn’t use labels.), you identify where there’s a problem. And you work on it, and you experiment sometimes, trying different things to figure out what will work. And homeschooling gives you the freedom to do that.

So generally it’s just more time and attention will help most of those situations. Sometimes you want to do visual therapy or something else to help improve this situation, but oftentimes time and attention will do the trick.

Andrew Pudewa: Yes. And one of the things I am constantly talking to people about is when you move into homeschooling, part of the huge benefit you gain is that you can ... If you’re willing to, you can disassociate with the kind of, I would say, pathological compulsion of everyone to put a child in a grade based on their age.

And so, you know, if you can just get rid of that and say, okay, he’s ten years old. That doesn’t mean he has to be in fourth grade compared with every other kid who’s in fourth grade. Do you see that same need? And if so, how do you help people just say goodbye to that comparison of children solely based on age?

Cathy Duffy: Yeah, I do talk about that because I think that’s one of the huge benefits of homeschooling because our children are not made in a factory all the same, able to learn the same things at the same time, at the same rate. That’s just crazy to even work on that assumption. So with homeschooling you might have a child working first grade math and third grade language arts or who knows? And it’s all fine.

What difference does it make at what point they are in those different subjects as long as they're making progress at a reasonable rate? So for homeschoolers that ... And that also frees families up to do more, like, of the unit studies, those types of things where you combine different age children working together maybe for history, science, religion, you know, your field trips of course ... is, you know, the subjects that don't have to be taught sequentially in the same way like math and some of the language arts.

So again, the house/home's going to be more efficient. But again, you've got to get off that, you know, grade level textbook thing. You know, you've just got to let go of that.

Julie Walker: That's what Andrew calls it. So Cathy, I'm a brand new homeschooler. I'm listening to this podcast. It's Homeschool 101. Okay. I get it. My kid is different. I've always known that. What do I do today? I get your book, which is really cool because your book is only a PDF. It's not something that I have to buy from Amazon and wait for it to be shipped to me.

It's a PDF. I buy it from your website (link in the show notes), and I look at it. I identify my son as a Wiggly Willy, of course, because why else would I be homeschooling if I didn't have a Wiggly Willy, right? And then what? Then you've got books and ideas for my Wiggly Willy that I can go out and buy. And it's going to make my homeschooling day perfect because ...

Andrew Pudewa: No, it will not make it perfect. We can be assured of that.

Cathy Duffy: No, that's ... Yeah. Once you've got the information, then you start looking, and I've got charts. There's a number of pages where I chart out my top picks, showing what fits different learning styles, different situations, a lot of those factors that you've identified in those first five chapters. Then I've charted that out so you can kind of at a glance see what's likely to work.

You can also go on my website. I have a free tool on the website at an advanced search tool where you can go and enter in a lot of these factors, including the learning styles, and that will sort through all of the reviews on my website to give you things likely to work for you, too, so that ... Using that information is valuable.

Either starting with the book, or jump to the website. Either way. But you want to really nail down that information to start with. Otherwise you're looking at way too many options. So you've got to just narrow down the world of what you're going to be examining and considering.

Andrew Pudewa: And I would say from my experience, there are three types or phases that parents go through that have the greatest anxiety: Number one - I have a five year old. I have to start homeschooling with curriculum in kindergarten. Overwhelm. The second would be I have a nine year old who does not read. He hates to read. I've tried everything to get him to read, and he hates it.

And I feel like I'm totally failing him. And I don't know if I should put him in school, but would they do any better than I am? And I don't know what to do. And then the third one is high school. This kid, you know, I want him to be ready for college, but he seems so far, and I only

have four years to get him ready. So do you kind of address those things specifically? Or how would you steer one of those people to get the most out of your resources?

Cathy Duffy: I don't try to solve every problem, but I know the concern at the early ages: I'm not going to be able to teach them to read, and it's going to ruin their whole life, which, you know, I felt that way. I think we all worry about that to a certain extent. But there's so many different approaches to reading, and so many of them do it for you now.

You know, it's pretty crazy. But there are free programs you can try out. There are, again, different ones to meet different learning styles, and that's where I'd go. I'd try one of the less expensive programs to start to see if, you know, a simpler approach works with my child. And if it seems like they're struggling, and they need something that spells things out in more detail, then I'd go to one of the more complex programs.

But I try to keep it simple. Use the simplest thing I can to begin with rather than invest a lot of money in something expensive because you're not sure that expensive program's going to work any better than the simple one.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah, that certainly is true.

Julie Walker: So we're running out of time, so I have to ... You know, chief marketing officer here. That's what I do. Cathy, tell us how ... I know we only have a minute or two to talk about this, but tell us how IEW fits in and how you discovered what it is we do. I mean, we've had a long relationship with you. I think we've been in all of your books, which is kind of cool.

Cathy Duffy: Yeah. The *Structure and Style for Students* now, your newest iteration of teaching writing – that's been a mainstay for, I don't know, for forever. But that came about because so many families were using it and having success because of the incremental way that it teaches. I mean, writing is one of those things that frightens parents when they think about trying to teach it, and when you provide them with a way to do it.

And now it really ... The program does it for you to a large extent too. When you can give them something that does it in little bitsy pieces, and children can be successful and feel like, oh, that wasn't hard, then you are heading towards success. And that's what makes that program work and why it's been so popular.

So yeah, and that's the kinds of things I'm looking for in curriculum – that people are using it and being successful. So yeah, that's why IEW continues to show up.

Julie Walker: Couldn't have said it better myself.

Andrew Pudewa: You must be engaged in just almost constant research. It's like every day you have to investigate. You have to understand something a little better. You have to make hard decisions. I don't really envy that, but for you it's clearly ... It's not a path to being a billionaire. It's got to be your love, your mission, your calling. You must have just really a love for this kind of narrow niche of serving, but perhaps most important niche of serving homeschool families.

Cathy Duffy: Very. That's very much the case. I love to learn. And I love to help people learn. And I love to help people be successful at homeschooling. So, you know, it all fits together.

Julie Walker: There you go. You should write a book. Oh, wait. You did. Well, Cathy, it has been a joy to have you on our podcast. And Andrew, I think this is one of those few people that I knew her before you did.

Andrew Pudewa: It's possible, and we've all known each other so long; we can just be very fuzzy on that.

Julie Walker: Yes, it's true.

Andrew Pudewa: She's been ... If you were to list like the top ten pioneers who contributed to growing homeschooling and helping those beginners be successful long term, I would put Cathy Duffy's name in that top ten list for sure. So we veterans on behalf of all the newbies who don't know yet, thank you for your lifetime, really a lifetime of service.

Cathy Duffy: Oh, thank you. That's very kind.

Julie Walker: Thank you, Cathy.

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