

# Choosing Curriculum the Family Way

## Video Workshop Transcript

**Welcome to this workshop: *Choosing Curriculum the Family Way*.** I'm a consultant at Rainbow Resource Center, and a longtime homeschooling mom, and I also welcome you to the homeschooling journey. It's a wonderful journey, full of all the things an adventuresome journey should be filled with: warm and funny happenings that become family favorite stories and memories; exciting challenges; sometimes rocky paths. But always there's this hope of doing something important, this sense that you're accomplishing something notable.

When we start on our homeschooling journey, we rather expect the path to be smooth and bumpless. For most of those, though, that's an illusion, and we quickly discover that the path is full of confusing twists and turns, seemingly conflicting information, and difficult decisions.

Homeschoolers get pieces of information from all sorts of sources. They get them from friends, homeschooling conventions, from online forums, from homeschooling magazines, from speakers, from authors. And much of this information is very good and very helpful. But if we're not careful, we find ourselves following first one path and then another, and before we know it, we've lost sight of where we're going.

I could have called this workshop, "Confessions of a Curriculum Junkie." I discovered long ago that I have a compulsive curriculum buying disorder. I purchased not one, but two phonics programs because I couldn't decide between them. Then I purchased another for a later child for whom the first two didn't work. I had at least three, maybe four, programs on my shelves that looked good, and I thought were going to be wonderful, but just didn't work for our family. When I *did* find something that worked, I tended to buy all the levels of it so I would be prepared.

I abandoned curriculum and bought new just because something surfaced that everybody was raving about. I used to be that homeschool mom that every exhibit hall vendor hopes to meet: the one who's willing to try something new, and who could make room in her budget for one more purchase.

Have you ever wondered how your life would be different if you could apply the knowledge you have now to the decisions you made back then? I've thought about that in terms of homeschooling decisions. What was missing through my early years of homeschooling was a framework. I longed for a type of GPS that would tell me when to turn, and where to turn, and would "recalculate" if I made the wrong turn. But what I failed to realize was that what I really needed was criteria to feed into the GPS. If I didn't know where I was going, and whether or not I wanted to take the scenic path or the interstate route, how could I expect a GPS to get me there?

So how can you learn to make wise and informed choices?

Being a consultant at Rainbow is the world's most perfect job—or at least the most perfect job for a retired homeschool mom and a curriculum junkie. Each day I talk—or email, or live chat now—with homeschooling moms. Sometimes I compare two or more products. Sometimes I just provide additional information about a particular product. Sometimes—and I like this part—we bring products in from the warehouse and take a look at them and become your eyes and ears to help you know the product better. Sometimes, moms just want suggestions on how to address a particularly troubling situation. Sometimes they want ideas for a particular subject.

We talk about getting started with kindergartners, with 7th & 8th graders, or even high schoolers. And we talk about graduation requirements, getting scholarships, taking tests, preparing transcripts. The subjects are endless.

Moms always want to know, though, what is our best-selling product. I guess the thinking, or assumption, is that if a product is a best-seller at Rainbow, it's going to be as close as you can get to a perfect curriculum product. Interestingly, though, our best-selling item isn't a curriculum product at all. It's Geoboards, a math manipulative.

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There is no curriculum product that rises to the top of our sales list, and that's because there is no "perfect" curriculum, no "best" curriculum, no "one size meets all" curriculum. Homeschooling curriculum must fit *your* family.

All curriculum designers put together programs that match the educational objectives that they think are the most important. This is true for major textbook publishers, but it's also true for the homeschooling mom who's putting together her own unit study, and it's true for everybody in between. You need to determine what your educational objectives are. In other words, you need to have your own personal philosophy of education.

Your family is unique, different from all other homeschooling families in some way. And whatever that way is, it might be the most important factor in choosing curriculum. That difference means that a product that is perfect for your friend, or for tons of other homeschoolers, might just not work for you.

Developing a personal philosophy of education sounds a little scary. But believe it or not, your educational objectives are only a set of diagnostic questions away.

There are six factors that make each family unique:

- Your *faith*, or philosophy distinctives.
- What *approach* to education you take.
- The *money* you have to spend.
- The *individuals* who make up your family.
- Your family *life*.
- And *you*, the homeschooling parent.

Of course, it's no coincidence that these form the acronym **FAMILY**.

### Faith/Philosophy

When I was asked why we were homeschooling, I always replied with a variation of these reasons:

"We want our children to have an education that is thoroughly integrated with a biblical and Christian worldview. We want to promote family unity and avoid negative peer-pressure or dependency. We want to provide our family with an excellent, but also a tailored, education."

As you've made your decision to homeschool, you've undoubtedly been doing some thinking about *why*, so you have a good idea about what your own specific reasons are, and they might differ from our reasons. In fact, they probably will differ. Some of you want your children to be thrilled with learning. Some of you want your children to be safe. Some of you want your child to do better than he is now, because right now he's failing. Some of you want to allow for the development of special interests and abilities. Some of you want your child to avoid medication or a label. Some of you want to protect your child from bullies.

What are *your* reasons for homeschooling? Have you thought about what success will look like?

Suppose you only homeschool for one year. How will you know you did a good job? If your student is able to go back into the public school system, then you'll know you've done a good job?

What if you homeschool for ten years? How will you know if you've succeeded? If your children have scored high each year on a standardized test? Then you'll know you've succeeded?

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What if you homeschool—like I did—clear through high school? Will graduation itself be the measure of success? Or does there need to be something more?

So the question is: after you've completed however many years of homeschooling you complete, how will you know you've been successful? Are you seeking to develop godly character in your children? Do you want your children to be faithfully walking with the Lord? Are you seeking to develop a strong student? Maybe you want your student to qualify for a large scholarship or get into the college of his choice. Do you want your daughter to be ready to take care of her own home, her husband, her children; and your son prepared to be an effective leader in his home? Or maybe you want your son or daughter to start and operate their own business, or to be part of a family business. Or maybe, you want all of the above.

You probably have some idea of how you'll know if you've been successful. If not, start thinking about it. How will you know if you've done a good job?

Closely related to that is the educational goals you have for your children. If there were no laws or state standards, what would you want your children's education to include? Real-life experiences and exploration? Learning to work independently? Reading good books? Real books? How about developing practical life skills and work skills? Or how to start and operate a family business? Maybe you just want to make sure you cover all the same subjects as the public schools are covering. Or perhaps your goal is stimulating your child's curiosity and interest and a love for learning, or his mental training and discipline. What do you want your children to learn?

These things: the reasons you are homeschooling, what success will look like for you, and your educational goals, all contribute to your family's Faith or Philosophy factor.

### Approaches

Our "A" in FAMILY is the various *Approaches* to education in general, and homeschooling in particular. It's easy to see why this is pivotal. You've probably already heard some of the terms that are associated with the various educational approaches: "hands-on," "drill to instill," "fact memorization," "real books," "facts first and then a framework," "explore and investigate." And you've likewise probably already run across some of the names associated with the various approaches: "Charlotte Mason," "classical," "traditional," "unit studies," "Thomas Jefferson education."

All of the general "getting started" homeschooling books address the question of how children learn, and they seek to give you a working answer. Cathy Duffy talks about "teaching approaches," Debra Bell and Mary Pride talk about "methods." Each has her own list of the various options.

You'll want to do some thinking about how your children assimilate information, what motivates them to learn, and what kind of input and output methodologies you're comfortable with. Let's take a quick look at some of the basic approaches to home education.

When using *Traditional Textbooks*, information flows from the teacher to the student. This is typically in the form of textual information that is read by the student, followed by questions, reinforcing activities and tests. Textbooks usually mean less planning for the teacher. Papers are easy to grade. And record-keeping is straightforward. And there are tests to show how the student is progressing.

However, textbooks usually also mean less freedom for the student and less depth in terms of information. This means there's a higher potential for boredom.

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Emphasis is on short-term mastery, and test-taking—in other words, teaching to the test—and materials are usually grade-specific. Bob Jones and Saxon are examples of traditional textbook publishers.

The *Classical* approach is organized around the trivium learning model which describes three different stages of learning. There's the grammar stage when young students are little fact-sponges. There's the dialectic stage when middle school students start to think logically. And the rhetoric stage, when the emphasis is on synthesizing information and on writing and speaking.

Classical curriculum is typically academically rigorous, and it incorporates classical literature. There is an emphasis on teaching thinking skills and developing independent learners, which is considered an advantage. Materials tend to be grade-specific, although some newer publishers like Peace Hill have multi-grade curriculum. Higher student-teacher interaction and teacher involvement are also typical characteristics.

In addition to Peace Hill Press, some examples of classical publishers are Memoria Press, Canon Press, Logos School, Classical Writing and Classical Academic Press.

The *Charlotte Mason* approach is sometimes referred to as the “living books” approach because it “real” or “living” books rather than text, and then integrating other subjects into the reading. Narration and notebooking (and notebooking's newest cousin, lapbooking) are specific methodologies that are employed for feedback on the student's progress.

This approach allows explorations of subjects in a low-key learning environment (by simply reading a book), but it's difficult to track the work or follow a traditional scope and sequence or to align to standards.

Some examples of Charlotte Mason publishers and products are Queen Homeschool, Beautiful Feet, Learning Language Arts Through Literature, Five in a Row, and the Apologia Elementary Science.

*Unit Studies* organize subjects around a theme. Educational material usually comes from books, and it usually involves hands-on activities. Rainbow carries both prepared unit studies that do most of the planning for you, but we also have lots of materials that you can use to build and prepare your own unit study.

With unit studies, information retention is good. They can usually be used with multiple ages, so they work well with large families, and they can become very in-depth to accommodate a child's particular interests.

However, teacher involvement is almost always very high, both in preparation and in interaction. Unit studies are hard to track, and they don't follow a traditional scope and sequence or align to standards. In high school if you're using unit studies, it can be very difficult to assign high school credits.

Some examples of prepared unit studies would be Prairie Primer, Learning Adventures, Five in a Row, and Moving Beyond the Page.

*Unschooling* assumes that children have innate desire to learn and that they should be allowed to follow that desire and follow their own natural curiosity with minimal structure. Obviously this takes little planning. It does create self-learners, and tends to avoid teacher burnout. But it's hard to assess. It often neglects some subjects or whole areas of learning, and alignment to state standards is practically impossible.

*Umbrella Programs* are often the choice of beginning homeschoolers. The student is enrolled in a school, and the curriculum is either provided or planned for the student. Grading and record-keeping is sometimes provided, or sometimes it's provided for additional fees.

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Using an umbrella school means there are fewer decisions, which makes it easier on the teacher. But these programs are often quite costly and they provide less flexibility.

*Eclectic* draws from all the other approaches for various subjects. In other words, mix and match. A student might use traditional textbooks for math, or Charlotte Mason and unit studies for history and science. This allows the teacher to determine what will work best with each subject and for each student. But it can sometimes lead to decision-making confusion.

### Money

As much as we might prefer to ignore any cost-factors, few of us have the luxury of indifference to monetary considerations, so this is our third factor in the FAMILY acronym.

You will need to determine your family's financial boundaries and priorities, and I can guarantee they'll be different than your friend's. Research shows that the average homeschooling family spends \$500-600 in curriculum purchases/products per child per year. This of course is just a tiny percentage of the \$5000 per child per year that the public schools spend. Still, it's a big chunk for most families, and it's an *average*. That figure represents families on both ends of the spectrum.

Only you will be able to decide what level of investment you can make in your child's education, what you can, you should, you will make. Each family's income level and situation is different. Many, if not most, have a single income. But you might have ways of supplementing the budget: a home business or part-time job. Maybe you have grandparents who are able and willing to assist with curriculum purchases.

In addition to how much you can afford to spend, you'll also have to sort out your family's priorities—your educational priorities. One family might want art or music lessons, while another family pursues sports or travel. Only you can determine what those priorities will be.

In general, it's good to remember that time equals money in terms of curriculum products. In other words, if you prepare your own lesson plans, if you prepare your own materials, if you search the internet for useful things, you are going to spend a lot less money—there'll be a lot less expense than if you choose a product that provides all those things. However, it's going to take a lot more time.

### Individuals

Your family—*your* family—is made up of individuals. Shocking, I know. We're usually very much aware of the differences of each of our children: how they learn, how they think, how they take in information. But now we need to think about what that means in terms of choosing curriculum.

Your overall learning style includes both the channel through which you take in information—what you see, what you hear, what you touch—and the ways you're most motivated to learn, or your thinking style. We all have discovery channels—a favorite way to discover new facts about the world—the way we take in information.

Some of us are visual learners. We're easily distracted by new sights, but we're able to remember where we've put something. We're good at catching typos and doing puzzles, and we're very aware of the visual details in drawings. We're the ones who'll remember people's names better if we see them written out. But some visual learners are picture-learners, while others are word-learners, and it's an important difference.

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Some of us are auditory learners; we learn by hearing... Or talking. We like to talk, sometimes even if it's only to ourselves. We remember names easily, and we can carry a tune... Usually. We follow oral instruction well, and we usually know the answer, but may have trouble writing it down on paper.

Some of us are kinesthetic or tactile learners. What most people don't understand about is that we *have* to be moving or touching in order to learn. We're fun to watch as we tell stories because we have animated gestures and facial expressions. Oh, and we like to take things apart.

But how you most easily take in information is just part of the equation. It's also important how you process information; how you think about it. Cathy Duffy and Debra Bell, as well as others, have outlined different personality types that characterize various learning and thinking styles. Cathy Duffy talks about "Wiggly Willy" who does well with hands-on projects; "Perfect Paula," who likes to follow a typical school curriculum; "Competent Carl," who tends towards analytical subjects like math or science; and "Sociable Sue" who prefers the big picture rather than the boring details.

Debra Bell prefers the learning styles define by Dr. Keith Golay. The Actual Spontaneous Learner: the one who says, "I dare you to teach me." Or the Actual Routine Learner, the one who says, "Teacher, may I help you?" Or the Conceptual Specific Learner: "Frankly, mother, I prefer to do it myself." Or the Conceptual Global Learner: "Hey, everybody! Look at me!"

Be careful with these designations. Most young children are wiggly and prefer hands-on learning activities. All of us need to develop and strengthen our various ways of taking in information and processing it. If you jump too quickly into a learning style designation, you may be wrong—or your child may mature or change into a different style.

I like what Carol Barnier says about the learning styles: "Focus on the three main learning paths—seeing, hearing, moving—but teach to all of them."

There is one last consideration in the area of learning individual-ness. Do you have a learning-blessed or a learning-differently child? One will go through curriculum very quickly, and you'll be scrambling to keep up. The other may need special material or extra time. All of these considerations will impact your curriculum choices.

### Life

Our "L" in FAMILY is life: the distinctives of your family's life. So, what are they?

Does your family father have an unusual work schedule? Third shift, maybe, or a firefighter's two days on and two days off. Or maybe he's a long-haul trucker who's gone for a week at a time. Is your family involved in a home business that requires everybody's participation at certain times? Do you have an elderly grandparent living with you? And if so, does that provide wonderful education options, or does it require detailed care? Do your children have farm animals or outdoor chores? What season of life are you in? Do you have all young students? Are you trying to homeschool older children while keeping preschoolers occupied? Do you have highschoolers or older students who can work independently? Or perhaps your family has children whose ages span the entire spectrum.

What special events—short term or long term—will be factors in your homeschooling this year? Will there be a new baby, or perhaps a special trip? Those are the ones we can take into account as we choose curriculum. However, I've known moms who've homeschooled through major illnesses, or injury. Some of these we can never plan for, but they will impact curriculum decisions.

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### You

The last factor to consider is You. It's surprising how easy it is to overlook yourself.

First of all, how do you see your homeschool? Do you expect to be teaching various ages of children all together, or have them do grade-specific work? Are you going to set up a classroom, or gather everyone around the kitchen table?

What type of teacher do you expect to be? Is it more like: "I'm the teacher and you're the student." Or is it more like: "Come on, we're all going to learn together." Or maybe you see yourself in the role of an administrator, tapping into various resources and utilizing lots of outside instructional opportunities. This is something that can change from year to year, or perhaps according to the different seasons of your children's lives. I started out being a teacher, but ended up being more of an administrator.

How confident are you about how to teach? Do you need—or want—step-by-step lesson plans? Will you feel more comfortable with a scripted manual? Do you want the security of an umbrella school or a single publisher, where everything's provided and decisions are all made for you? Or maybe you're ready to dig in, thinking "How difficult can this be... Really. Just give me a book and I'm ready to go."

What are your time priorities and limitations? Are you working part-time? More and more homeschool moms are. Are you a single parent working full-time and yet still committed to homeschooling?

How much structure do you need? Do you want to make up your curriculum as you go along, adapting to the needs or interests of your children? Or do you need and want to have a plan? Do you need a set schedule, or do you have the ability to be flexible?

Don't forget to take yourself into consideration as you make curriculum choices.

We've looked at each of the FAMILY factors in making homeschool decisions. I've had you thinking about a lot of different questions. Now it's time to build your answers into a philosophy of education. I promised you we'd put together a philosophy of education—your very own philosophy of education—and we can do it in ten minutes or less. Try this little exercise.

Put the letters of your family's last name down the left-hand side of a piece of paper. If your name is long, just truncate it or abbreviate it (or maybe you have a family name that you go by). For instance, my good friends the Klopfensteins might write down "KLOP."

Pick one word to assign to each letter that characterizes an aspect of your family's homeschool. Think about the factors we've discussed. Try to choose words that are significant and foundational to your educational philosophy. To give you an idea of what I'm talking about, here's one from our family.

My last name is Price, so we have five letters: P-R-I-C-E. For "P" I chose "plans." I like structure and knew that I needed and wanted to follow lesson plans. For "R" I chose "rigorous." It was always our intention to provide an academically rigorous education. For "I" I chose "independent learning." I wanted my children to become independent learners. For "C" I chose "covenantal." This is our family's faith perspective in one word. For "E" I chose "eclectic." I like to pick and choose from all the different types of curriculum.

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What I've developed here is a very brief philosophy of education, but for our family it's also a very accurate one. I encourage you to spend at least ten minutes thinking about the possibilities and coming up with your own family educational acronym. I hope you find it helpful, but even if not, it does prove the point I'm trying to make: each family has its own unique set of determining factors. Once you are aware of these factors, you are in a much better position to evaluate the various products and to determine if this one, or that one, would be the best to meet your needs.

As you look at products, as you read reviews, as you talk to your friends, try to put their comments within your own personal framework. One of the reasons people have found the Rainbow catalog reviews and descriptions so helpful is because we identify these factors. We constantly try to address issues like learning styles, cost, time requirements, lesson plans, the teacher-student relationship, ease of use, educational approach.

Like this workshop, our goal is to give you tools that you need to identify the products that will be most helpful to your family—your own unique set of factors. We want you to choose curriculum that will be the good fit for your family. As you look through our catalog or website, here are a few guidelines to help you determine how a particular product might fit into your homeschool picture.

First of all, look for those keywords; once you start looking for them, you'll be amazed at how regularly they show up. Secondly, after you've found the keywords, analyze and recognize the differences in your own situation that might impact the usefulness of this particular product. For instance, if your child doesn't respond well to working independently, then stay away from curriculum that lists that as a strength—or be prepared to work one-on-one with that child.

Lastly, but most importantly for most of us, recognize the Lord's leading and guidance. If you are homeschooling because you have been called to it; if you feel it is part of your Christian (or other faith) commitment, then assume that God will lead you and seek his guidance in every decision.

And this brings us back full circle to *why* you are homeschooling—the real heart of the matter. “Why” is always a matter of the heart: the heart of my child, my children, of my own heart. As we homeschool, it's very easy to get caught up in finding the “perfect” curriculum, or developing the most diligent schedule, or determining whether our child is making the “right” amount of progress. We overlook, or we forsake, or we just don't take the time to nurture the relationship that we have with our children.

Curriculum choices *are* important, and you want to be as skilled as possible in making them. But in terms of our children, *relationship* issues are really the most important. Take the time and make it a priority to develop and nurture the relationship with your child and to put that at the forefront.

This concludes our workshop on choosing curriculum the FAMILY way. Thank you for joining us. I'm one of four consultants; please feel free to contact us with any of your questions at any time. **Thank you.**