

Making Curriculum Work for You

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It's a proven fact. We are our most dangerous after reading *The Lost Tools of Civilization* or any article from a Latin based curriculum catalog. However, it turns out not every successful homeschool has Latin, Homer, sketched flowers and detailed hand drawn maps of the world -- although super groovy if you do.

The homeschool market is bursting with amazing options for curriculum choices. And since we are shaping our family's entire existence around our educational choice, we pretty much want to nail the almighty curriculum choice arena. But by the time you take into consideration budget, mom's teaching style, and the varied learning styles of each family member you will most likely find yourself needing to break free from the teaching guide to adapt the curriculum for your reality. Which might incorporate a cute little Latin-resistant, flower-stomping map-scribbler.

Let's look at a few of the more common approaches you might have chosen and then perhaps we can offer you a few ideas on how to properly deconstruct and rebuild these into viable solutions.

Textbook Approach

(A Beka, Bob Jones University Press, Christian Liberty Press, Rod and Staff)

Loved for: the handholding. Hated for: the handcuffing.

Perhaps you were drawn to the textbook based curriculum for the nice organized schedules and abundant teaching resources. However in just days you might find one of your students (or yourself!) crying over a mountain of paperwork and endless writing. Remember, this curriculum is over-packed with work to give a classroom teacher options for reinforcing the lesson.

Try this: Tuck away the section reviews, the chapter reviews, the quizzes, the test study questions, and the tests. Then ask yourself how much does your child need to learn the material? Does a daily oral review suffice in place of the section and chapter reviews? Are the tests too dense? Do the quizzes or chapter reviews make better test options for your child? Or does your child need you to add a word bank for the fill in the blanks section or need to answer the essay questions orally? These minor adaptations can help your child successfully learn from a curriculum that otherwise would be too overwhelming.

Literature Approach

(Charlotte Mason, Sonlight, Heart of Dakota, Beautiful Feet, My Father's World)

Loved for: All those awesome books! Hated for: All those boring books!

You have read the touching endorsements of children surrounding mom while she reads timeless, cultured literature and you want to start your family's memories now. But wait! Why won't that one child just sit still? And how can you read until you are hoarse only to have your children give you blank stares when you ask them what they liked best about the story today? They were there! Right?!

Your issues might range from learning style to learning difficulty. Many an engineer, dentist or computer programmer will confess that their last non-fiction book was read during their school days. Now they read only trade journals, devour computer programming books or browse financial journals. But hey, what mom wouldn't be thrilled to find out their Shakespeare shunner is an embracer of all things binary? Right? However, if you only have a few short years to shovel some culture in that brain, you want as fast and painless system as possible. And the unabridged, annotated *War and Peace* is not the answer.

Try this: Remember the critical purpose of your curriculum and separate it from the suggested delivery system. This means replacing some of the reading with movies, graphic novels and alternative book choices. Christine Miller's *All Through the Ages* is a nearly exhaustive book of narrative history, non-fiction and historical literature organized by elementary junior high and senior high study levels. You can use this list to find alternatives for books that aren't working in your program. Some learners prefer biographies and some prefer historical fiction. Either genre can help a student grasp historical concepts.

Classically Based Curriculum

(Memoria Press, Classical Conversations, TRISMS)

Loved for: Time honored learning methods. Hated for: Memory work and inflexible learning methods

When parents choose a classical education they are choosing a method that has produced some of the finest thinkers throughout history. What can be forgotten is that not all great thinkers think alike. Heavy memory work can be an incredible burden for children who struggle with short-term memory problems but are otherwise bright students. Studying Latin early can be an additional language burden for any child not reading up to grade level.

One popular classical curriculum is offering adapted versions of their materials for non-traditional students. You can adapt your curriculum yourself by making simple changes to bridge any learning gaps your child is struggling with. For example, instead of flashcards for memory work, change the material to a multiple choice based format or a fill in the blank with a word blank format. Adapt all grammar, reading and Latin studies for the student's true reading level.

Unit Study Curriculum

(KONOS, Weaver, Alta Vista)

Loved for: So many learning options. Hated for: Taking over the dining room table and producing uncertain results.

At first glance unit studies might seem to have it all. Delight learning abounds with topics and projects that you choose from to fit your family's interests and learning styles. Your dining room table fills with handmade daub and wattle houses and home-produced videos of your children delivering speeches dressed as dead presidents. But then one day you walk in to hear your child confidently declaring that Lincoln died of a stroke and Roosevelt was assassinated and you think whoa, how is this happening?

Don't toss the marshmallow sculpture Mayflower yet. Some kids just need a little more to organize their learning than projects. Consider adding a worktext as a spine for learning. Some

families add A Beka or another text for history and science (many skip the tests and quizzes since they consider the projects to be the learning reinforcement). For younger students homemade worksheets or premade ones found online are enough for supplementing. Also, remember to balance what a student loves with areas that they need to grow in so that delight can pave the way for discipline. And of course unit studies recommend you add in structured curriculum for grammar, arithmetic

Which brings us to a final point that pertains to all curriculum choices. When your child is struggling to read or do math, it seems that all of the curriculum choices range from bad to wretched. At this point it is time to drop from house level down to tend the foundation for a bit.

Remember if your child struggles with basic skills such as reading, handwriting, clear speech and math computation, your number one curriculum adjustment is a remedial program for the lagging skill. Consider working with a group like CAPES, or professional speech therapists and occupational therapists for an accurate diagnosis and treatment. In recent years much progress has been made in helping student overcome and adapt their learning differences in the academic arena. This means a diagnosis is much more than a label but rather a key to solutions. Many of these solutions can require 1-2 hours of your school day to implement but are critical to the foundation of your child's entire academic career. So for a season you might find your school centered around remediation subjects with a dominant focus on reading, writing and math. History, science and foreign languages may be deemphasized until later years.

If your child is struggling with the reading, go online and find a test to determine their true reading level. Many a parent has over estimated their child's reading level but then wondered why they have a daydreaming or hyperactivity problem. Take a moment at the beginning of each school year to get an accurate assessment.

There are many ways to assess your students reading level yourself:

www.letsgolearn.com (about \$20)

<https://www.scholastic.com/teachers/bookwizard/> (you type in a book your child reads easily to find their reading level)

Pathwayreaders.com (tests through end of third grade)

Gleightripod.com (offers a Schonell Reading Test)

If your child is diagnosed as dyslexic you can get the person who diagnosed them to sign your paperwork to Learning Ally which gives you access to many recorded books for an annual fee of \$100. Audible is a resource available to everyone. Also, if you have a Kindle Fire or an older Kindle keyboard then you can use their Text To Speech feature.

If your curriculum is writing intensive or copywork intensive but your child struggles with dysgraphia or a passionate hate of all things written, choose your battles. Move the bulk of their work to oral based review, replace handwriting with keyboarding and reduce the copywork to a once a week limited in scope assignment.

Also, consider Illustrated Classics as a way to pre-read a book. If your student is struggling with a literature selection have them support their reading with a review of that days reading on Sparks Notes. Sparks Notes also features video recaps of some stories as well as modern English version of some of the more difficult to read classics (look for No Fear Literature)/

Another idea: Pull your non-reader in through activity. Make some of the learning hands-on to help a student relate to the material. For example, consider supplementing with KONOS based projects to reinforce learning in a way that is meaningful to the active learner. KONOS is organized by topic and character trait so you can flip through the volumes for projects that fit your current area of study. (KONOS is available used at Bibliomania for a reduced price.)

This means replacing some of the heavy reading with movies, graphic novels and simpler, reader-friendly versions of classic literature. For alternatives to classic novels, go to Timberdoodle and check out their extensive supply of graphic novels*. You can find many of these at the library. Or do a websearch on “Classic books, movie version.” Wow. Who knew it was that long – right? This is just one more way to get more culture into a book resistance mind. Think zucchini in the brownies.

Movies and educational films are particularly useful for auditory learners. If you have a student who talks all day and can repeat anything that is said or heard then they will usually soak up information from this medium. Remember you are not just locked into the television. There are also high quality subscription learning videos from sources such as Discovery Channel that can be purchased at a discount from HomeschoolBuyersCo-op.org Brain Pop offers educational videos for younger grades as well.

Remember, no matter what learning program you fell in love with, if it is killing your students love of learning, take a step back and consider how to lighten the load of what they find the most burdensome and increase the elements that kindle their love of learning. Before investing in curriculum remember to consider not only how well does it fit your family, but also how easy is it to alter when it doesn't.

*Graphic Novel alert. Stick with the graphic novels from Timberdoodle. Not all graphic novels are appropriate for your student. Some are quite adult. You may have heard the outcry of graphic novels being used at the college level. The outcry is for good reason. So if you use the publishers found at Timberdoodle you should be fine.