

Big Picture Homeschool Planning

- ✓ 4 Questions to Ask Before Planning
- ✓ 7 Steps to an Easy Homeschool Plan

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HUMILITY & DOXOLOGY

4 Questions to Ask BEFORE You Start Planning or Buying Curriculum

It is exciting to head to a convention or curriculum fair and see all the bright shiny new choices as you're planning next year's curriculum. It's like Christmas to flip through a homeschool catalogue or browse an online market full of books and "perfect" curriculum choices.

But with so many good options out there, how do we know what is best for our family? Do you ever get stymied by indecision? Do you come in like Franck in *Father of the Bride* and say let's "change everything"? Do you blow your budget buying All The Things that sit collecting dust on your shelf the following year?

Here are 4 questions I suggest you ask before you even think about planning your year or choosing your curriculum:



1. What kind of human would I like to raise?

Before you consider any academic goals, it is helpful to look at the big picture: at the end of the day, what kind of person do you want your child to be when they leave home?

Try listing 5 non-academic-specific traits. Here are some ideas to get you started: honest, kind, creative, persistent, hard-working, diligent, peaceful, empathetic, funny, joyful, loving, self-motivated, curious, lover of God's Word, servant, leader, one who prays, self-controlled, bold, faithful, friend.

All of these are good things, and I could keep listing even more qualities I hope characterize my grown children one day. But it can be helpful to think about your own family's top priorities.

Keep this list of curated traits before your mind the entire time you are choosing curriculum and making choices for next school year.

If you are visual, maybe literally write them in big letters at the top of your planning brainstorm sheet, or tape them on a piece of paper on the wall above your desk.

I'm an external processor, so a lot of times this step involves me sharing lots and lots of words out loud with my very patient husband.

At the very least, before you begin any period of planning, purposefully think about what kind of person you hope (by God's grace) leaves your home when the school years are through.

The list you curate also gives you an ideal way to pray purposefully with and for your children not just during planning season, but all through the year! After all, fruit is always the work of the Spirit!

Education is not about producing children whose minds have been filled up with a certain amount of knowledge and facts. As home educators, especially, we are able to plan our academic year with the whole person in mind.

2. What has worked really well this year?

So often I have heard a fellow homeschool mom talk about choosing "new stuff" for the upcoming school year, even though what they have already been using in certain subjects has been working out great already. Some of our personalities veer more this way than others; we long for a change, something new, something exciting.

Let me caution you: if something is already working well for your children and your family, change for the sake of change is probably not a good choice. Faithful consistency is our best friend in this marathon. There are enough areas of challenge that may require a change; don't throw a new math curriculum in there if your children are already enjoying the program they have.

How do you know what has worked well? Here are some questions to ponder:

- What books have your children been most excited to use this school year?
- Which programs have produced the fewest tears? (Remember, just because something was occasionally hard doesn't mean it wasn't working.)
- What have you observed your children talking about outside of "school hours" or incorporating in their play?

Also, don't forget to ask what has been enjoyable for you as the teacher! Has there been something that has made your life easier or been exciting for you to pull off the shelf? Teachers are people, too!

Don't forget to ask your children for their perspective directly, too!

3. What has not worked well this year?

Is there something you never got around to, because you or the children just really didn't like it? Maybe it was good in theory, but not in reality. Is there a curriculum that always led to tears or confusion? Did you find yourself having to re-teach a subject because the textbook was unclear?

Did you put too many things on your daily checklist? Too few? Sometimes we make things too hard for ourselves and our children. Sometimes they may be bored because we haven't challenged them sufficiently.

What do you most regret not getting to regularly this year? Is this something you would like to prioritize for next year, or do you need to accept that it is not feasible in this season of your life?

Ask your children: what is something you would like to see change? If you could eliminate one subject from school, what would it be? (Now, obviously, you can't just stop doing math or reading, but maybe this warning sign points to a subject whose curriculum could use a little shake-up or creative supplementation!)

4. At the end of next school year, I will feel successful if _____.

How would you complete this sentence? There is not a right or wrong answer here. Would you feel successful if your child has mastered their addition facts? If you have spent 30 minutes a day reading aloud as a family more often than not? If you have gone outside every day? If you've seen healing in a difficult family relationship? If you have kept a consistent morning routine? If you have incorporated more hands-on learning?

The answer was probably not "I will feel successful if we finished all of the workbooks." Maybe it was (if so, to quote *Princess Bride*, "get used to disappointment"). But if you can figure out what would truly make you, the teacher, and you, the family, feel successful, it will help you make wise choices about how to fill your time and planning sheets for next year.

It has been surprisingly helpful to see how sometimes what looks like "success" to me is not exactly the same as it is for my husband. By discussing this question and analyzing our similar-but-different end-goals, we are able to craft a united vision for our family.

Start with the Big Picture when planning curriculum

We're all familiar with the priorities word picture: put big rocks in the jar first, then the small pebbles, next the sand, and finally the water. If you fill the jar with water first, there is no room for anything else.

In the same way, answering these Big Picture Questions now ensures that you fill the jar of your education and curriculum planning with the big rocks of your family's priorities.

Don't choose another family's priority-rocks; purposefully choose your own. You don't want to get to the end of the year full of discouragement because your days always seemed full, but you never quite got around to what was important to your own family!

Action steps: Take some time to pray and think through these questions. Journal, discuss them with your spouse, and talk with your children. Pray some more. Process some more. Brainstorm sheets can be found at the end of this ebook.

You just may find that planning your curriculum for next year now proceeds with a lot more focus and peace!

Have you considered your Big Picture goals and chosen a course of study for the homeschool year? Now it's time to create your own Big Picture Easy Homeschool Plan!

In our family, clear expectations and consistent checklists generally lead to less fighting and more peace. But I still desire freedom and flexibility in my day-to-day life.

Big-Picture Planning gives me the ability to craft weekly assignment lists for the kids (and myself) without having to type out any lesson plans, write out lists of page numbers, or feel bound by dates on the calendar!

Try these 7 Big-Picture Steps for an Easy Homeschool Plan

i. List each subject for each child and any books associated with that topic. Then, come up with a **“how-to-finish” basic plan.**

I prefer to do this rough draft with paper and pencil, but you could certainly type it up as you went along. My handwritten lists are never longer than one page front and back per child, and often shorter for the early years. I'm all about uncomplicated, simple, and achievable!

For example, for my 6th grader, I brainstormed this simple list for her writing curriculum:

Writing and Rhetoric: 14 Chapters. ~2 weeks/chapter, 4 days/week. Read lesson and look over all chapter assignments, narrate/discuss with Mom, review “Memoria” daily, complete writing exercises/first draft, revision

You'll notice this is so far from fancy that it's almost a little embarrassing to share. It wouldn't look good on Pinterest. However, it simply establishes the basic steps my daughter will consistently loop through to be "finished" with any given chapter. It's the same for each chapter, so I do not feel any need to write out each lesson requirement individually. Some chapters she may progress through more rapidly, some more slowly. We'll just do the next thing.

2. Estimate how much time each subject will take. **When planning, be a pessimist.** Analyze the sum total of time required, look at the time you actually have available, then revise.

It is better to be an extreme pessimist when estimating how much time any given subject will take us during the planning stage. Building in plenty of buffer on the front end enables us to have the freedom to finish more quickly during the school year.

Pessimistic planning equips me to be an optimist at the end of April when we're so [close to completing our goals!](#) And wouldn't you rather have that burst of energy at the end of the long race instead of sprinting out full of vigor at the beginning and limping to the finish line?

As an example, this year I estimated that my 3rd grader will require 45 minutes a day to complete her Latin. When I created a time-flow chart for her week, however (see step 7), I gave her an hour block for her daily Latin. Some days she may need all that time if the 3-year-old has a distracting meltdown in the room down the hall. Some days, however, she'll have the feeling of finishing "early," and I think that is an incredibly motivating and encouraging experience!

Just like you would never walk into a store and buy everything on your wishlist, neither should you create an ideal school plan that is unattainable.

If you only have \$30, but spend \$250 at the store, you'll go into debt.

If you try to fit 36 hours of education into a 24-hour day, you'll just spend lots of time feeling like a failure and crying into your chocolate.

Ask me how I know.

Are you familiar with that fabulous Calvin and Hobbes cartoon where Calvin creates a snowball too big to throw? He collapses to the ground wailing, "reality continues to ruin my life!" (This cartoon strip tends to be the story of my life.)

Don't let reality ruin your beautiful and elegant homeschool plans. Face reality with clear eyes during planning, and life will be much more peaceful and joyful during the execution!

3. Find creative ways to include the things that are important to you, even if they don't initially seem to fit in the time budget.

You may really love a good steak, but you have to save that purchase for special occasions. There are, similarly, important desires we have for our school days that can still be enjoyed, just less frequently.

You can do this in many different ways. You could incorporate elements into your [morning time](#). You could attempt loop or block scheduling. You could move things to a monthly, instead of a daily or weekly, list.

For example, I would like to make sure my son and I have a regular, concentrated time to discuss literature. The reality is I cannot do that (at least formally) every week. I decided that once a month our literary discussion time would replace his usual humanities-reading time.

Goals without a plan rarely actually get done.

I immediately headed to my calendar and scheduled a Friday appointment with my son each month through the school year. We can always adjust that if needed as any particular week demands, but rescheduling is much better than forgetting to do it at all!

4. Include non-negotiable “appointments” in your time estimates.

Do you have an outside-the-house class or co-op every week? A midday exercise class you want to attend on a regular basis? Piano class, sports activities, or choir? Don't forget to include those time-estimates in your plan!

I have been much more faithful in my personal exercise routine since I incorporated my own exercise on the actual homeschool schedule. **Moms are people, too!**

5. Create weekly checklists for the kids that follow a pattern, not specific page numbers.

If I ever tried to assign certain pages or chapters to certain days, I feel sure that my husband would come home to find me weeping over Tension Tamer tea in the corner while the kids ate cheerios for dinner.

And frankly, I do not want to spend my evenings or weekends after long days of Mom-ing writing out the next day's or week's assignments. **I want something that is reproducible, but also flexible enough to meet us where we are through the changing seasons.** Did a child get stuck on a math concept and need 3 days for one chapter? Or maybe they wanted to “get ahead” so they could have a free day with their friends! Can I create a plan that combines flexibility, freedom, and a disciplined routine?

Here is a method that works really well for our family:

There are some **subjects I would like the kids to work on each day**, without the pressure to complete a certain chapter each day.

For example, my oldest son will be studying precalculus this year. My goal is for him to actually understand the material, not hit a certain page number goal each day. But in order for that claim to carry weight, his assignment sheet needs to reflect that perspective. Thus, the precalculus portion of his weekly checklist looks like this:

Precalculus (60-75 minutes each day): M T W Th F

Pages Studied:_____ Videos watched:_____ Test:_____

He can record in the blanks the material he actually completed. I can also see at a glance if he is faithfully hitting the daily math goal, or if he gets off track one week. But the goal is faithful consistency and habit, not meeting certain benchmarks.

On the other hand, there are **some items for which I have a certain number goal each week**. I would like my 3rd grader to complete 3 [reading journal pages](#) each week. She may do more reading on Tuesday and want to complete 3 pages, or she may want to spread the assignment out over several days. I want her to have that freedom and flexibility. Her checklist looks like this:

Reading Journal: 1 2 3

She can mark the reading journal pages off as she completes them, no matter when that occurs during the week.

You'll notice that in both cases, **one of my primary goals is to encourage my children to develop diligence and self-control, while also giving them space to work at their own pace**. I don't want them to feel the pressure of being "behind," but neither do I want them to be unmotivated. This format seems to work well (most of the time) for our family.

6. Create checklists for the teacher, too!

I admit it; I cringe when I hear other homeschoolers say they went a month or more without checking their child's math homework. But I also understand, as a mom of many, that life happens and my brain is full and it's a given that important things will sometimes slip through the cracks.

But I take my job as home educator very seriously, and I want to plan for success as a mom and teacher. This means that I also have a daily checklist. This includes things like "Check Math: J, E, S, G." (See, I don't even write out the kids' names! Every day I can just cross off the initial when I've checked their work.) It also includes items like, "read a book with the 3-year-old." Yep, idealistic past-self, there comes a time in every mom's life when she has to include the obvious on her list so it actually gets done!

I also have a weekly checklist. This includes things that at some point each week I need to accomplish: check on reading journal pages, check Latin worksheets, piano lessons, etc.

And, finally, a monthly checklist: literature discussion with Joshua, logic discussion with Emma, and map work with the girls.

Once again, I have created a structure of accountability to encourage self-discipline, but because I am not tied down to a certain day or date there is freedom to be flexible in my daily schedules.

7. Create a weekly time flow chart

First, a massive caveat. I have never in my entire life actually lived according to a strict time chart. In fact, the thought of having blocks of time rigidly scheduled every day gives me the eebie-jeebies! But when creating a big-picture plan, it helps to take the time estimates (see Step 2!) for each child and see if it can actually work in a weekly schedule.

Additionally, while my own personality cringes at the thought of doing “A, B, C” in the same order every day, some of my children actually thrive on this approach! Creating a time-flow is a way I can show love and care to them.

One of the most helpful things this does is help me as the teacher balance out my own energy. Certain subjects for certain children require my regular oversight. I’d be exhausted if I did them all in a row!

By playing around with our weekly assignments on a time-slot chart, I can figure out a way to equitably balance out my own energy and my children’s concentration, while taking into account our weekly appointments outside of the home. I’m never going to be the mom to tell my child, “It’s 8:55 now. Stop in the middle of this math problem and get started on your Latin, quick!” But checking to see if we can enjoy a realistic routine during planning ensures that I don’t inadvertently create a burden too hard to bear for our family!

Could a Big-Picture Easy Homeschool Plan work for your family?

Perhaps you have been too rigid in your schedule, or have had unrealistic expectations in the past leading to despair and discouragement. If that is the case, a time of rest and little-to-no planning may be what is necessary for your family!

But if you've tried to be an unplanned, relaxed, organic-flow homeschooler and it is not working for your family (in fact, there seems to be more confusion, fighting, and laziness than ever), this Big-Picture Planning framework may be just the right combination of freedom and discipline your family needs!

At the end of a long Big-Picture Planning day a few years ago, I did a Facebook Live. [In that video you can see a few examples of our super simple, flexible routine.](#) You can also hear a few bonus pieces of planning day advice (hint: don't forget movement, protein, and shared Google calendars!).

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Homeschool Conversations

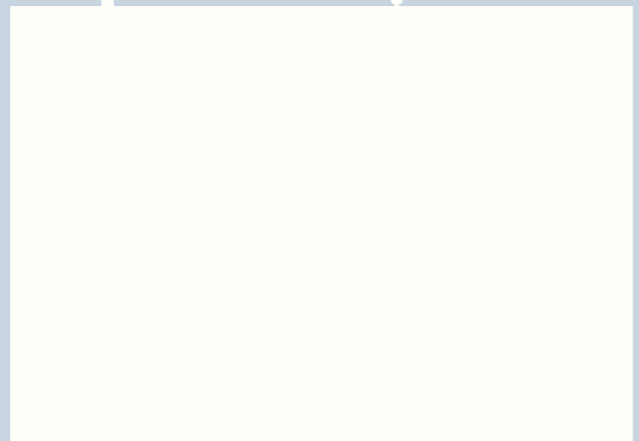
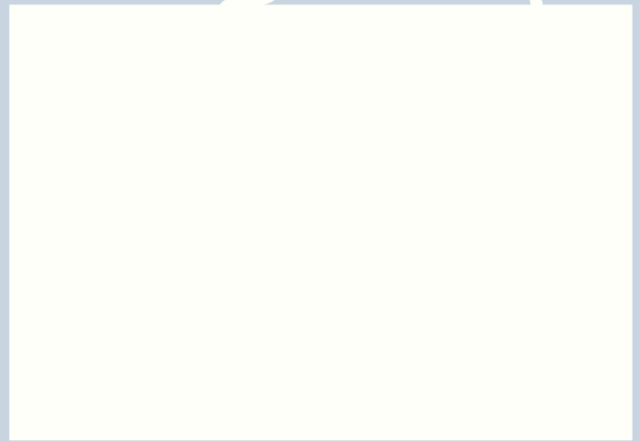
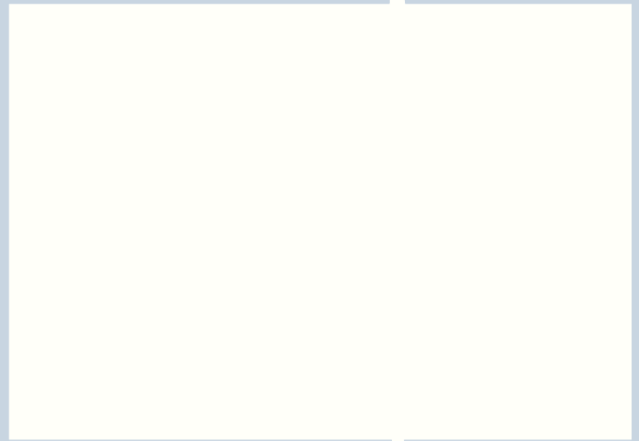
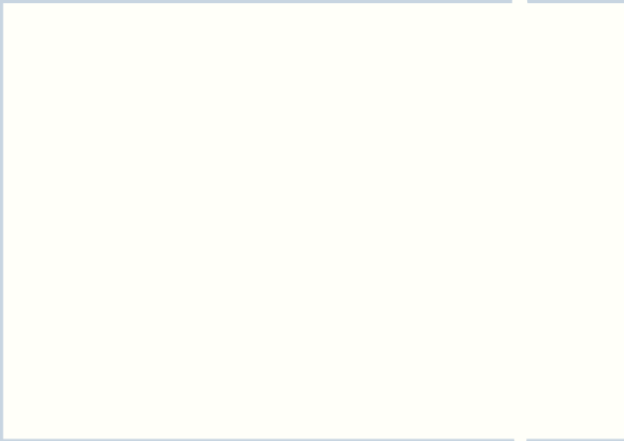
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NON-ACADEMIC GOALS



WHAT WORKED WELL THIS YEAR?

A large, empty rectangular box with a light cream background, intended for writing reflections on what worked well during the year. The box is framed by a light blue border decorated with white plus signs.

WHAT DIDN'T WORK WELL THIS YEAR?

