

Episode 435: Becoming Homeschoolers with Monica Swanson

Episode 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: What's the quote, Andrew, from Cicero about children misbehaving?

Andrew Pudewa: Oh, yes. “Times are bad. The currency is debased, children do not obey their parents, and everyone is writing a book.”

Julie Walker: And I wanted to start with that because I have in my hand a book that a friend of ours wrote. And I should start by saying this is Episode 435, which we have been doing now since 2020, the pandemic year, every 10 episodes on the fives called Homeschooling 101. So listeners, if you are just getting started on your homeschooling journey, this is for you. If you have been down this road a few years, this is for you to share with your friend. If you are a full-time school teacher, which we have plenty listening to our podcast, this may or may not be for you. Jury's still out on that, because we actually haven't recorded it yet.

Andrew Pudewa: It might help you understand those weird homeschoolers.

Julie Walker: Yeah, it's true. Those weird homeschoolers, a little better. Yes. And I was in both camps. I did teach school for several years, and I did homeschool my kids. And now I work here at IEW, and we just like to be meeting people where they are and help them on their educational journey and helping their students learn to write and think.

Andrew Pudewa: So, what book are you holding?

Julie Walker: First I have to read one of the introductions. So, there's several famous people who wrote little forewords on her book. So, listen to this one. Monica, so this is Monica Swanson's, our dear friend Monica Swanson.

Andrew Pudewa: She's been on our podcast before.

Julie Walker: She has been, and usually we talk to her when she's either coming out with or writing a book. She did the *Boy Mom* book, which of course, if you're talking about boys, then you better talk to Andrew Pudewa, who knows a thing or two about teaching boys and other children who'd rather be making forts all day.

Andrew Pudewa: You better talk to Monica Swanson, who's got a bunch of them.

Julie Walker: ...and Monica, who has four, she upped me by one.

Andrew Pudewa: But this is her, this is her new book.

Julie Walker: Yeah, yeah. And so listen to this really well-written, little paragraph extolling Monica's book. "Monica's newest book provides a clear, organized, delightful overview of most everything you'd need to know to step on and stay on joyfully the homeschool trail."

That's so good. Did that sound good, Andrew?

Andrew Pudewa: Well, that's just one sentence.

Julie Walker: "With insight and humor, she provokes the real reasons to educate your children at home, as well as practical tips that will help you navigate through changes and challenges as your children grow through different stages. This is not just a 'read it once' book, but an 'I'll visit this every couple years kind' of book. Get it, buy it, read it."

Andrew Pudewa: Wow. I wonder how much she had to pay for that.

Julie Walker: I know, right? And I'm seeing some sentence variations and some decorations in here.

Andrew Pudewa: 3sss at the end. I wonder if that person was experienced in Structure and Style?

Julie Walker: Of course, this was Andrew's forward. Monica, thank you for joining us on our podcast.

Andrew Pudewa: It's good to have you here.

Monica Swanson: So good to be here. Love hanging out with you guys.

Julie Walker: Monica, when I first was introduced to you, I just kind of came across your name. I'm not even sure how we were first introduced, but I wasn't sure at that time. I knew that you were, you had boys, because I'm a boy mom too. And I knew that you were homeschooling. And I knew that you were kind of like a mommy blogger, Grom mom, right? I knew you in the Grom mom days. I used to, do you still use that moniker?

Monica Swanson: Not so much, but people remember it.

Julie Walker: Yes, yes, it is very distinctive. But I love that you've written a book about *Becoming Homeschoolers*, that's the name of your book, but yet your podcast, your blogs, it's really about parenting and family. And I love that.

Monica Swanson: Yes.

Julie Walker: So what compelled you to be so specific in writing a book specifically for people who are interested in becoming homeschoolers?

Monica Swanson: Yes. I love that question because... Well, first of all, Julie, it's been so much fun building a friendship with you over these years. So this is great. Julie showed up to cheer on my son at a surf contest in California. We've had dinner together, just love hanging out with you, and loved getting to meet Andrew in real life here in Hawaii when he was here earlier this year.

Julie Walker: It's always good to have friends in Hawaii. Let me just say, you have an excuse to go visit.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, I mean, she has an excuse to come to Tulsa too.

Julie Walker: This is true.

Monica Swanson: Yes, I have roots, remember, I think I told you my father hails from Ponca City, Oklahoma.

But, to answer your question, which I love, is that yes, I spent years really, serving parents everywhere with just encouragement, biblical wisdom, practical advice. I love to encourage families, but because I knew that statistically speaking, most people don't homeschool, I was always careful to not talk too much about our homeschool life. I wanted to serve the greater audience and to not be too narrow.

So I wrote *Boy Mom* and then I wrote my book *Raising Amazing* and throughout my writing, certainly I made mentions of our homeschool life, but it was really at the end of writing *Raising Amazing* that I had a chapter. I think it was titled something like "How They Spend Their Days" or something. And I was just talking about zooming out and really thinking about. The way your kids spend their days, because one day that will be in essence, how they spend their childhood. You will look back on those specific things as the childhood that they built. And when I did, I read that somebody did the math and came up with a number 14,000 hours is how many hours a child will spend in school if they go to school outside the home, a traditional school setting and how that is more time than they will spend anywhere else in their childhood, including at home, if you're not counting sleep. And so I got pretty fired up about my passion for our experience, homeschooling our kids. And I thought, I want to share a little bit about our homeschool journey.

Well, one paragraph led to another to another. Pretty soon I had pages about homeschooling. And when I turned that in, my editor got back to me and was like I think we need to cut this. You got a little bit extra on the homeschool topic, but let's save it for your next book, one about homeschooling.

And I just love that because I thought, as much as I have talked about parenting, I think I haven't been completely honest even with myself at that point. I said, I think that I have not really come to terms with the fact that homeschooling is not just a part of my boys' life. It's really been the biggest, next to their relationship with God, homeschooling has shaped them

more than anything else has. And now that I have three legal adult children, I can look at them and know that who they are is much because of their homeschool experience.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, and I would guess that some of the amazing things they've been able to do were made possible because of the flexibility and the schedule and the lifestyle that homeschooling offers.

Monica Swanson: Without a doubt.

And you hear this, kids become very accomplished musicians at a relatively young age. They write a novel, and it gets published. They win advanced surfing competitions or whatever. And they will always say, well, if I went to school, I wouldn't have had the time to do this. And I think that's one of the things that we want to help parents understand is that it's much less about curriculum, like what you read and study and learn during your childhood as to how you use your time. And I think that comes across very well in all the little stories that you are able to tell in the books.

Monica Swanson: Thank you. Yes, I think you said it well. That has been our experience though I didn't know a lot. I tell in the book that I didn't start off planning to be a homeschool parent. That was not really on my radar until we began. So I learned as I went. But yes, now looking back, I see that it was all those hours that they spent building forts, climbing trees, surfing waves. Now my just-turned-14 year old is pursuing golf very seriously, and it's because of the time he has that flexibility that he can do that, so.

Andrew Pudewa: The other thing, the title is somewhat intriguing. It's not the kind of title someone would expect, like beginning homeschooling, or how to homeschool, or start your homeschool journey. But *Becoming* has this implication that it's a little more than just deciding to do it, that it's a much longer process, that you would start becoming homeschoolers and you would continue becoming homeschoolers. And would you really ever reach the fulfillment of homeschool-ness? Or is it really truly a lifelong process?

Monica Swanson: That's a great question. I'm going to go with a lifelong process, and I love that you noticed that because I do think that there were times throughout our journey that I was like, how long are we going to do this? Are we going to put the kids back in school ever? And I talk often about how there's a change I see in my own family's experience, but also in other people when you switch from saying, "We're going to try homeschooling. We're going to do it this year." You kind of have that exit strategy or that way out if it doesn't work. ...into saying we're homeschoolers. That's who we are. That's our family identity. I think something happens when you decide. I mean, you, you still always have the opportunity to change if need be, but I think there's a really cool thing that happens when you kind of own that as your family identity and culture. And so I think that's kind of what I was alluding to with that title as well as that once we realized we were becoming homeschoolers, it gave us a different way of doing life and doing our kids' education at home. So I love that.

Andrew Pudewa: That's why I think I like that book so much because my endorsement was very sincere.

Monica Swanson: Thank you.

Andrew Pudewa: And it is kind of a case where you could have this big, thick, encyclopedic volume, everything you will ever need to know about homeschooling, that could be more of a burden than a blessing in many cases. And then there are other things written that make it seem, oh, you It's really not that different. Your life isn't going to change that much, you're just going to teach your kids at home rather than send them to school and now choose your curriculum and it'll all work and we'll help you make your transcripts when you need them kind of thing. But getting more into the core of the nitty gritty of how do you deal with it as a mom, I think that's where it's very strong. And then all the little stories about the things your kids do and did and that, that kind of keeps the book very lively. So I really do recommend it heartily.

But the thing I like the most is this idea. In Latin, there's the imperfect tense. So it's kind of as though you're not finished with something. It's continuing, and it's a process. It's life. It's growing. It's preparing for eternity. It's all of these things that are just always in process. I think that that's unnerving to a lot of people who want to think, "Okay, now I define myself as having done something." And you could, you'll be homeschooled for three years or whatever, but that condition of always like it's a continuous training program, right? Training, you're training your kids. God is training the parents.

Monica Swanson: Yes, absolutely. Yes, I love that.

Andrew Pudewa: So what are some of the most valuable or important lessons that you yourself feel? It's easy to talk about how great homeschooling is for kids. We could all do that and say, yeah, my kids do this or that. And they got into this college or they got into the military academy or they got this great internship or they sailed around the world. But not a lot of people will talk about what was the growth and the long term benefit for you as a parent? So once the kids are all gone, you're going to say, well, I invested decades in this enterprise. I have now, I suppose, become a homeschooler. I don't have any kids around to teach anymore, but that's still my identity. So what are some of those most important lessons that you think God might have used homeschooling to transform you, to help you grow?

Monica Swanson: I love that. I was just talking with a friend recently about that word we sometimes use when we talk about homeschooling, how it's a sacrifice, we might say. That instead of having this freedom or going out and getting a job that actually paid me money or anything else that there's a sacrifice to homeschooling. But how we might start off thinking it's a sacrifice, but in the end we find that it's a bigger blessing for us than we ever imagined. Maybe we get more out of it than our kids even do. So I would say that when I talk in the book about some of the things that make people hesitate or obstacles to choosing to homeschool, one of the things that comes up often is just parents who think they don't have the patience, or they just couldn't stand all that time with their kids. They are going to butt heads, all these things that I hear come up often, and I say that it's because I had to face some of those things that were very real concerns for me. I struggled with my temper. I had a short fuse when my kids were young, and I thought, my goodness, if I can't handle that one hour in the morning, as I prepared them for preschool, how could I have them home all day? But what I found was that sanctification process of choosing to be home with them all day grew me in so many ways, it grew my patience, it grew me in character. And I think that when I faced the things that were my biggest fears, I saw God growing me in many, many ways. And I think that's just what happens when we do hard things, all of us. And I think there's no greater way to do it than with our kids at home, where they're watching that process as well,

and they're learning from us. So, yeah, God's grown me a lot. He's humbled me plenty, and my kids have inspired me. To see them overcome challenges and learn new things has been an inspiration for me as well.

Andrew Pudewa: I love that you used the word *sanctification*, because we don't hear that much in daily life, outside of maybe a very religious conversation. But even then, I don't think we look at everything we do in life is building toward who we will be when we die, and that process of sanctification comes in so many forms. And we often rebel against the unpleasant things that we have to deal with in life rather than looking at it as this opportunity for gaining holiness.

Monica Swanson: Yes. And I think a good analogy I mentioned somewhere in the book, you'll appreciate because of your fitness journey, but I say, if we have weak muscles, the way to build muscle is to do some reps. You work your biceps by lifting harder weights, heavier weights. And in the same way, if you say, Oh, I don't have the patience. Well, then that sounds like a parenting problem, not a homeschool problem. That sounds like a character issue. And so perhaps God will use this to grow you in ways that you really need to grow anyway. So I give a little tough, big sister love in there and just say, let's not let that be an excuse to not do something that perhaps you're called to do. Instead let's grow in that area, and you'll be a better person for it.

Andrew Pudewa: I've been thinking a lot recently about obedience as a superpower. So we generally think about obedience as a necessary unpleasantness. I'm talking about the kind of obedience when someone wants us to do something and we don't want to do it. And they may be in a position of authority, or maybe not, but if you practice being obedient to legitimate authority in your life, and this is true from a young age, all the way up to when you start working and when you take on responsibilities, hopefully, we all have an authority structure to be in. Probably the most dangerous situation would be to be completely outside any authority structure.

But I've been thinking about, okay, There are a lot of things that we know we should do, but we don't want to do them. And so we have to make a decision to either do the thing that we know we should do that we don't want to do, or to not do it because we don't want to. And we think of that as our free will. But what I've come to be reflecting on a lot, really a lot in the last month or so, is that if you develop this ability to be obedient, even if it's unjust, if it's a legitimate authority and you have to do something, even if you perceive it as unjust and you get past that and you do it anyway, you're building the same core muscles of willpower that you would need to do the thing that you know you should do, but you don't want to do.

Monica Swanson: Yes.

Andrew Pudewa: And I fear that too many parents are perhaps in one way not understanding the importance of training children to do this, and at the same time, not operating in an authority structure that allows them to develop that strength because it's a lifelong thing. And if you could do the worst thing you could think of and be absolutely, perfectly happy doing it, that would be a superpower. That would be like Batman or Superman-level strength, wouldn't it?

Monica Swanson: It would be, but I love that idea. And I think that's a great way to look at it. And I think that, yeah, we could use that language with our kids too. Superpower is always good.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, I'm just thinking our world doesn't necessarily think properly about obedience as a skill, as an opportunity for obedience as a blessing to do this. And again, the gym analogy is really strong. Like, I don't want to do this. But, if you can make yourself do it, then you get better growth. And I'm sure that every mom out there, whether they're homeschooling or not, has these many moments where it would be so much easier to not deal with this kid in this issue at this moment. Only we know we should.

Monica Swanson: Yes, and I think that's where our culture is, has normalized giving the kid a screen, keeping them busy doing anything other than what we need to do. But again, for anyone who might listen to this, who's considering homeschooling, but maybe have some fear in there. I'm going to say that, even though we talk about it using words like obedience or sacrifice, the blessings are so quick to come. I mean, the reward, the joy, the peace, I always quote 3 John verse 4 as my favorite parenting verse. It says, "I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth." And I'm like, if you want to know the best joy, then get through that hard thing because there's so many blessings there. And a Monica just 20 years ago would be surprised to hear me saying these words, but it's 100% true.

Julie Walker: So, Monica, I love some of your chapter titles that you've got in Part 2, Preschool to College. It makes me think, Andrew, of your talk, Cultivating Language Arts. Maybe you should adopt these titles as a part of your talk. Listen to this. Homeschooling preschool is "Curious and Cuddly." Don't you love that?

Andrew Pudewa: That's so true.

Julie Walker: Homeschooling elementary school is "Magical and Mischievous." I actually taught in first and second grade. That's when I was a "real" school teacher when I wasn't pretending. And the kids just love their teachers at this age. And they are so ready to learn that the parents just think that you're a miracle worker. It's not. So it's magical. And yeah, they're a little feisty.

Then the homeschooling middle school. Awesome and—Can you guess, Andrew?

Andrew Pudewa: Well, I suppose it has to start with an A.

Julie Walker: What typifies middle school?

Andrew Pudewa: Aggravating? I was going to say obnoxious, but

Julie Walker: You wrote an article. It goes like this. So, so, so...

Andrew Pudewa: Awkward. Yes, yeah, and that's a much fairer word, yeah.

Julie Walker: Yeah, yeah. And then homeschooling high school, you talk about this actually in your talk, Hacking High School, and that's "Independent and Inspired." Monica, I love your titles, and I love how you go into these different stages because homeschooling these different ages is very different.

I loved homeschooling high school. And a lot of times parents are intimidated by that because "I don't know biology and algebra. And how am I going to teach writing?" Well, we've got the writing problem solved, but the nice thing is the independent inspired the kids. If you've done a good job of parenting and not just homeschooling, if you've done a good job parenting, they're going to want to own their education. And that will help them into the last stage, which is "The Nitty Gritty," which you call it, which is college prep.

Monica Swanson: Absolutely. Yes, my college boys have told me that college is a lot like homeschooling. Like, the only difference is we have to walk to class, but otherwise they're like organizing our time, getting our priorities in order, getting things done. Their roommates were struggling because they were used to having somebody tell them every day what to do with their time. And they're like, "We're used to it. This is just like an extension of homeschooling." So I love that.

Andrew Pudewa: What was your favorite part of the book to write?

Monica Swanson: Oh, goodness. Well, I think I had some fun with the first part of the book, where I have a few different chapters that are lists, twenty good reasons to homeschool, ten things homeschoolers get to avoid, and then I have the eleven reasons people choose not to homeschool.

And the reason I enjoyed that was because I know how much I've loved my homeschool journey. When people ask what's your favorite part, I'm going to talk about how my kids are best friends, how we have a good relationship with them, how they have not deconstructed their faith when they left the home because they have a solid relationship with God. So, I have all those things, but it was good for me to dig in and do some research and to find out things like the fact that most homeschool kids have better SAT scores than traditionally schooled kids and find out things like colleges are actually recruiting homeschoolers more and more. To dig in and do some research because there are parents out there who need to know that. Like, it's not just enough to say it, "Monica has warm fuzzies about her homeschooled kids who grew up pretty well." They want to know some of the facts. Homeschooled kids have better mental health overall. They get more sleep at night. So it was fun for me to have to do some research. And to present that in a list was, I just got a lot of joy out of that.

Julie Walker: So I want to point out chapter 13.

Andrew Pudewa: Thirteen, okay.

Julie Walker: This is so practical, Monica. There's a couple of reasons I want to point this out, because this totally resonates with me—"A Day in the Life" When I homeschooled my kids, we had a schedule. My kids were up and they were at the dining room table, and we did

family devotions together and scripture memorization and then we did our chores. We did a white tornado. Do you know what a white tornado is?

Andrew Pudewa: Tell me.

Julie Walker: Set the timer for 15 minutes and everybody has an area that they have to clean. And that way you start out with a clean house, right? But then listen to Monica's schedule and then you'll hear what the other kids Reason I love this so much.

So she's got this 7:30 a. m. wake up, breakfast, devotion, chores, 9:00 Bible lesson, 9:30 math. All right. Here's what she does. On Monday. Breakfast, devotion, math, four times a week, math, IEW writing class three times a week. It's right there in her schedule, IEW. Monica, you're the best. Grammar, four times weekly. Science, four times weekly. History, and it's just four times a week because what you're doing, it seems like, Monica, is allowing for flexibility in your schedule to go out and do fun things like surfing and golfing, right?

Monica Swanson: Absolutely.

Julie Walker: Reading 45 minutes a day. Laundry. It's on her kids' schedules. Teach those boys to do laundry, Monica Swanson. You're amazing. So write thank you notes. Their wives will thank you too.

Andrew Pudewa: What percentage of the time did you stay basically on schedule, do you think?

Monica Swanson: Well, I confess in there that we got the chunks done. Definitely. But they were rarely done in the same order day after day. That was a good sample. But yeah, that whole surfing thing could throw us off every day of the week, but we got them done. We like checklists, so get it done.

Andrew Pudewa: And how, how old are your kids at home right now?

Monica Swanson: The only one who's officially at home is Levi, who just turned 14. Luke, who is 20 and is my professional surfer, lives at home in the winter and then he travels the world much of the rest of the year while doing online college. In fact, he just sent me a narrative essay for his little online college class he's taking, and I saw a lot of IEW. I was pretty excited about that.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah. So many kids, they learn it, then they kind of forget it. But then when they have to write papers, when they're older, it all comes back. Or I get this story. "My kid went off to college and then called me and said, mom, would you please send me my IEW notebook?"

Julie Walker: And that's when moms can just send them a *Portable Walls for Structure and Style Students*[™].

Andrew Pudewa: Did any of your boys do dual enrollment classes, like doing some college classes while still high school age?

Monica Swanson: Yes, Luke (#3) did and I confess in my book, I honestly learned as I went. My first two didn't, and they were not super excited about that once they got to college to discover that most of their friends did they were like, "Thanks, Mom." But you know what you learn as you go, so Luke did some dual enrollment through Liberty University while he was finishing high school and that helped out since he's been surfing. He's taking his college courses very slowly.

Julie Walker: And you have two that have graduated from Westmont. Is that right? Have they both?

Monica Swanson: I do. Yes. Jonah, my second son, just graduated from Westmont and had a job offer the week before graduation. So they're both adulting, financially independent, and we are so grateful.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, and I'm looking forward to the day that you can officially enter the "Looks Way Too Young to Actually Be a Grandparent" club, which I started many years ago when I did actually look way too young to be a grandparent. I am now a—what's that term? member emeritus, since I do look old enough to be a grandparent, but I'm hoping to start someday the "looks way too young to actually be a great-grandparent" club.

Monica Swanson: There we go. That's a good one.

Andrew Pudewa: will tell you and all of the listeners that kind of like when you start homeschooling, you never know the joy that you're going to experience. When you start having grandchildren, you cannot possibly imagine the joy that you will experience, especially when they get old enough to talk to you and play with you and wrestle with you and the love. So the best is around the corner there for you.

Monica Swanson: I can't wait. I'm ready.

Andrew Pudewa: You just got to convince some of these boys to stay near you in Hawaii.

Monica Swanson: I know.

Andrew Pudewa: So you have access to them.

Monica Swanson: You are so right. We're working on that. We're working on that.

Julie Walker: Well, dear listener, if you are considering homeschooling perhaps this coming fall and just want a little nudge and some really practical advice, we can't recommend more highly Monica Swanson's book, *Becoming Homeschoolers*.

Andrew Pudewa: Or if you're one of those homeschoolers, and there are many, who say, "I'm just going to do it this year and see if I survive, and then do it another year and see if I survive," but you want kind of a better picture of where it could all go. This is, I think, the best book for that because you've got it divided up into all those sections and getting through the awkwardness.

Julie Walker: Yes.

Andrew Pudewa: That's, that's a big one.

Julie Walker: It's true.

Andrew Pudewa: I'm so glad that you've had such success. This is your third published book, is that right?

Monica Swanson: It is. Yes.

Andrew Pudewa: You got another one percolating in the back of your mind?

Monica Swanson: Always a good stack of them. You know how that is. Right?

Andrew Pudewa: Oh no, I don't like to write books. I like to do talks. I'm actually going to do a talk on this theme of obedience as a superpower.

Monica Swanson: Good. Can't wait to hear it.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah. So we'll see how that comes out.

Monica Swanson: Bring it to Hawaii.

Oh, it's such a long trip to Hawaii.

Monica Swanson: but we need to get you up to the North Shore where the real

Andrew Pudewa: Waves are.

Monica Swanson: the waves and the country

Julie Walker: Beautiful up there. Well, we're out of time. And so all we can say is Aloha, Monica. Thank you so much for being with us today.

Andrew Pudewa: Thank you so much for joining us. And we'll look forward to the next chance we can meet in person or virtual or accidentally, or who knows.

Monica Swanson: Somewhere.

Andrew Pudewa: God bless you.

Monica Swanson: Thank you guys. God bless you. Aloha.

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, 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.