

Podcast 447: Alternative Learning with Jennifer Mauser

Episode Transcript

Jennifer Mauser: Trust your gut. Parents really do know their children well, and if something is amiss to them, then that's a signal to them that they need to pay attention.

Julie Walker: So Andrew, it's October, schools are in session, both homeschools and full time schools, and we're getting a lot of calls.

Andrew Pudewa: Yes, we get a lot of calls.

Julie Walker: Well, and

Andrew Pudewa: And that's good.

Julie Walker: That is good.

Andrew Pudewa: People are getting into the nitty gritty of teaching, writing, grammar, dealing with some of the problems they come up against as the school year unrolls.

Julie Walker: Yeah, so these are, yes, as you indicate, these are not necessarily people who are trying to figure out what to buy because They've already bought it, but they have a few questions because our writing method is different than perhaps what they themselves used as they were a student. But we also are getting more questions from those families and teachers that are working with the students with learning differences.

And so I thought it would be good for us to devote a podcast specifically to questions that they might have, and that way maybe they could listen to this podcast and not feel compelled to call.

Andrew Pudewa: Sure, well, we do have a lot of experience, and we have some experts that work with us.

Julie Walker: We do.

Andrew Pudewa: One of my favorite experts that helps us a lot is, of course, our, she's not quite a guest because she's on our team, although she is remote in Florida. We're here in Oklahoma, but we are so grateful for Jennifer Mauser. Welcome.

Jennifer Mauser: Well, thank you. I'm glad to be here.

Andrew Pudewa: Jennifer, for people who may not have heard you before, give us just the very quickest little overview of your experience and qualifications and how you work with us and the work you do outside of direct consultation with IEW people.

Jennifer Mauser: Sure. My background is a homeschooling, educating parent, and I have three children who have fledged and are now working. They've all graduated college. About Fifteen years ago, I started working with students who have learning differences, specifically dyslexia, dysgraphia, ADHD, and are on the autism spectrum. And my training is with the Barton Reading and Spelling Program. I'm a master certified tutor and I use that training alongside the training that I've received through *Teaching Writing: Structure and Style* in my years of teaching IEW and to classrooms of students as well as in the homeschool environment to help the students that I meet become competent and confident communicators and thinkers.

Julie Walker: I love that.

Andrew Pudewa: You said it just like Julie likes.

Julie Walker: Almost, almost exactly the same. So I will say, just for our listeners sake, we're going to try to limit our conversation today to specifically three areas: dyslexia, ADHD, and something that we often don't think about as learning differences, and that's the gifted and talented students.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah, uh, also we should let people know that we did have Susan Barton herself as a guest and that was an excellent podcast. So anyone who is dealing, I would say particularly dealing with, "I wonder if my child is dyslexic" would benefit hugely from listening to her share of her lifetime of experience.

And I know I find this, Jennifer, that more and more. If you're talking with a family that's got two or three children or more, one of those children is going to have some kind of challenge, issue, learning, struggles that are something the parent may not really know what it is or how to address that and they will ask us questions. And we will, of course, send them to experts such as yourself to get more information on, I guess, how to do a self assessment, an analysis, a self diagnosis, a home diagnosis. What would you say to the parent who said, well, my eight year old is really struggling with reading and he hates writing, he, his handwriting is really bad and I think he might be, I don't know, dyslexic or something? What do you think I should do? How do you answer that question? Because that is probably in the top five questions I get asked at conventions and events.

Jennifer Mauser: The very first thing I say is, trust your gut. Parents really do know their children well, and if something is amiss to them, then that's a signal to them that they need to pay attention and figure out what's going on. A lot of the challenge that I find with parents is, frankly, they don't feel equipped to be in the educational realm, a lot of them. And so they

will sometimes abdicate that role and will consult with a school or a teacher. And a lot of times I find—in fact, it's very, very common, schools and teachers are not aware of dyslexia. They're not trained to deal with it. So they just say, “Oh, well, be patient. It will come with time.”

Unfortunately, time is not on our side as parents when we're working with our students. There is this optimal time for learning and learning how to read and and gaining vocabulary, and the time is when they're young. It's so much harder to close a gap later on. So listen. And then the next thing I advise after I find out what they're dealing with is if a student is having trouble with reading or with spelling, a lot of times I'll recommend they go first to neural learning, which is Dr. Eide. Both doctors have this NeuroLearning app, which is a very affordable way to get a baseline indication if dyslexia, or if there might be another issue that's going on, having that results of that test can drive positive action as they go forward because they're no longer flying blind. They have a very concrete idea of where the challenge lays. And then it comes down to do we try to remediate this ourselves? Do we try and find a tutor who's equipped to do with this? What is their evaluation at that point, what the steps should be? But they're not flying blind at that point.

Julie Walker: And of course, we've had the Eides also on our podcast, and we'll put a link in the show notes to the app that Jennifer is referring to.

Andrew Pudewa: Right. And their book is *The Dyslexic Advantage*, I believe. So a question I feel very ill equipped to answer that I think you could help us with is, what is the difference between dyslexia and dysgraphia? And do they always go together? And if you have one but not the other, how does that change the way you would approach the teaching of reading and writing.

Jennifer Mauser: Dyslexia is the most common learning disability there is. It affects, depending on who you speak with, about 20 percent of our population. Of course, it's on a continuum. Some you may not even realize have dyslexia because it's so mild. But if we look at our roots, let's go back to our Greek here: *dys-*, which precedes both of those words, is really just meaning difficulty.

And in *lex*, it comes with words. So *dyslexia* literally just means *difficulty with words*. Dysgraphia, *-graph* means to draw or write, so *dysgraphia* literally means difficulty with writing. And a lot of times, the two go hand in hand. But sometimes they don't; they appear differently, and that can drive some instruction, but generally speaking, the best way to get the best results is to tie reading to writing. They're really just flip sides of the same coin and you're going to find that students are going to make the best gains when you're working with both sides of that coin.

Andrew Pudewa: Interesting research that I came across was talking about how once children learn to write words, they are able to recognize them more quickly in reading. Is there a connection there that you see?

Jennifer Mauser: There is. Where I find difficulties with comprehension, if you will, is with, uh, students having trouble with segmenting. Because you need to be able to segment words in order to be able to spell them accurately. And students who don't know how to segment tend to just go with that first sound or blend that they see, and they tend to come up with their own ideas about what those words might mean.

So, teaching segmenting is an important aspect of building that comprehension, really. And you do that orally, audibly, which is, tends to be a weaker set than a visual learning method. So building a student's oral skills is very important.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah, that's interesting. When I was young, I didn't learn to read in school. I have no memory of that. I do remember pretty clearly my mom trying to get me to say the syllables of words, so that I would hear the syllables, and then she would teach me to read and spell. Somehow, I don't remember. I don't think she had a particular methodology, but I seem to always remember if I could get the syllables then I could figure the thing out and she would be happy. So, segmenting would include syllables. What other aspects would segmenting include?

Jennifer Mauser: It would also include phonemes. So, if you're thinking, great. For example, how many sounds are in that one syllable word? We've got g, r, a, t, four sounds. But how do you spell it? So, English is a very opaque language. It's difficult because we borrow our words from a lot of different languages, unlike Spanish or Italian, which is much more clarifying. So, there are multiple ways to spell sounds. And if we teach students that there's just this one sound-symbol correspondence, then we're really hampering them because an A doesn't just say -ay or -a, it has a lot of different sounds that it can say. So being able to teach students how to segment those sounds is an important way to help them develop that left-right reading ability and then also really help them with when they do get to multi syllable words, they're still having to do segmenting within those syllables as well. So it really does start with that phoneme understanding the sound and segmenting that word and being able to do that throughout the different syllables whether you're doing the word *egret* or whether you're doing *antidisestablishmentarianism*, which is a mouthful to get out.

Julie Walker: But you could spell that, Jennifer. I know you

Jennifer Mauser: I can, yes.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, and it's evidently not the longest word in the English language anymore, but...

So what material do you recommend for the parent who wants to get into teaching the phonemes in an organized way, either as a homeschool reading program or to make up for what the school is unable to do in a group? Because I think reading is one of those skills that you almost have to have individual coaching to some degree. You have to have someone who is there watching the student try to read and figuring out what's the next thing they need to know and providing that at the point of need as opposed to let's take all 26 of these children and teach them this phonogram today and expect them to remember it tomorrow.

Jennifer Mauser: Right. Well, one method I can say you should avoid would be something that's called balanced literacy, or whole language, and there's a lot of research that has come out, thanks in much part to Emily Hansford, who has with APM Reports, who has really done a lot of research into what constitutes an effective writing program and reading program, and what the schools are or are not doing.

So then, when you're looking for a reading program, I would look for one that aligns with what we call the science of reading. And there's generally two approaches. One would be a print to speech method. That would be something that would be following, say an Orton-Gillingham method. For example, Barton follows an Orton-Gillingham method.

The other potential pathway that a parent could choose would be one that flips the script and goes with a speech to print method and there are some great programs out there. They're all very systematic. They're all very explicit. They're all very diagnostic, and they all respect the student and move at that student's pace to help them close those gaps and become effective readers. And really the most important goal of reading is comprehension. It doesn't really matter if you can read something if you can't comprehend it. Then what good is the exercise of reading? For example, I can read German. I know the pronunciation, but I can't understand it. So really for me to read German, it's a waste of time

Julie Walker: So, Jennifer, you're familiar, of course, being one of our IEW team members, you're familiar with our PAL program, Primary Arts of Language. Which camp does that program live in?

Jennifer Mauser: As I'm thinking about it, I would say it is more of a, lot of it is a speech to print. I love the program because it does blend in the phonograms, it teaches them explicitly, but it'll also address multiple sounds and how those sounds can be spelled. For example, the ou versus the ow. It will introduce those at the same time. So you're dealing with ow and ou, but how do you apply those sounds? So, it's a very solid program. And we have Anna Ingham who came up with the foundation of that through her Blended Sound Sight System of Learning, which it's all based upon. And you notice it's the sound and then the sight that's listed.

Andrew Pudewa: I would like to underscore on this comprehension side the extraordinary importance of parents reading aloud to children because that's the way they'll develop the

vocabulary of words outside just daily life and daily use. And I think one of the problems we see in schools is that children are getting the phonics information they need to decode words, but they don't necessarily recognize the words when they try to decode and say it, it's not a part of their active vocabulary because daily life just doesn't include those words.

So I know you also are coaching parents to read aloud to children a lot, and I think that's even more important for children who really don't want to learn to read. It's a chore, it's tedious, it's too hard, they would rather look at screens or play music or draw pictures or run around and do sports. So what's the short answer on how much should parents read to dyslexic children?

Because I've heard some parents say, "Well, I was told that I shouldn't read to the kid because then he won't want to read on his own." So there's got to be kind of a common sense balance in there. But from my view, if you don't read a lot out loud, they won't learn the words that they're going to have to decode downline.

Jennifer Mauser: It's funny that you say that some parents are coming to you saying, well, I'm not supposed to read to my child. That is a travesty. Parents need to read, not just to their dyslexic children, but to all children, because you're right, Andrew. I read a statistic once that said, in our daily conversation across the dinner table, we don't usually rise to a vocabulary much above a fourth grader's. So, where are they going to encounter that language but through literature? So, read daily. Read a lot and enjoy that literature together. It builds great memories. It builds great neuropathways for comprehending words and taking those into an active vocabulary.

Andrew Pudewa: Good. Yeah. So, now, screens. Screens is kind of a bridge into the area we would also like to talk about, which is ADHD. And there seems to be a very rapid increase in the diagnosis of ADHD, particularly in just the last 5 to 10 years. People have different hypotheses about why this is true. I think one of the contributing factors is that screens are visually hyper stimulating, and so children are not able to tune in auditorily to their environment as well, nor are they able to focus on detail of non-moving things like words. Do you see this connection? And do you coach parents of children to try to minimize the screens, especially if they're showing this kind of ADHD symptom?

Jennifer Mauser: Very much so. I would like to see children outside and playing and grounding themselves in the earth and getting dirty rather than sitting on a couch in an air conditioned room on their devices. I would like to see kids not even have a device until they're much, much older because I think they are so dangerous to the student, the child's development as an individual. They [devices] separate us from people. They separate us from the earth. They separate us from language unless it's appearing in memes. It's a very, very poor substitution for life.

Andrew Pudewa: So what do you encounter when parents or teachers use that label, and say, I think this kid has Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder, in terms of a strategy. So,

someone comes to you and says, “Well, my, my kid just, he can't sit still long enough to write a sentence. What can I do?”

Jennifer Mauser: Well, there's a lot of different pathways you can begin going down before you get to medication. However, I do believe medication is a viable alternative, and sometimes it's very necessary. There's a lot of research into the science of exercise, and how exercise really helps students with ADHD focus. So get them outside, get them involved in activities, get them involved in working outside. That's very important.

So then also create opportunities where the learning is intense. It goes on for about five minutes before the student is out of patience or out of the ability to remain focused. And try to build up gradually to build that memory retention. And like you said earlier, Limit the opportunity to be on a device. Limit the access because that's only going to erode your efforts that you're working on outside of that. If you've done the exercise, if you change the diet, if you've gone and done all the things, cognitive behavior therapy can sometimes be a real benefit, and if you're still struggling and your child is still struggling, definitely consider a medication. There's a lot of great medications out there that can really help a student be successful.

Julie Walker: But there are several steps that, as you mentioned, Jennifer, that you can take and I feel it necessary to chime in just really quickly with my own experience raising, turns out I had two boys with ADHD. I didn't know it. I had one for sure, and yes, those short, intense academic exercises, and then getting him outside so that they can run and change in the scenery and allowing him to work at a stand up desk.

He works for us right now and he still is at a stand up desk. So try to avoid, trying to avoid the screens. My mother-in-law graciously was willing to buy them a Nintendo Play System. And even then, we said, no, they don't need that. They've got enough going on. So, I have to put in a plug here now for our writing system and why it works so well for ADHD kids because the assignments can be broken down into the small steps. So you do a key word outline, maybe only two sentences, and then you go outside and run around the house, and then you come back and do the next one. And there's good stopping places where the kids don't have to think, Oh my goodness, I was in the middle of something and I can't remember where I was.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, I think part of the thing that causes kids to dislike or struggle with writing is the complexity of the process, which seems to be exacerbated by ADHD. So, there's just too many things you have to do to get an idea from somewhere and record it on a piece of paper in a way that someone else can read it. And so, that, I think, is the problem. Obviously, our super strong point is taking that complex process and breaking it into those very small, manageable, doable accomplishment steps. I think there is a little bit of a misunderstanding that somehow kids with ADHD can't concentrate, but you can see those same kids zeroed in on some kind of activity and have phenomenal concentration on a

particular thing. Maybe you could comment on that a little bit, Jennifer, because it seems like the ADHD problem isn't, "Oh, we can't concentrate." It's this kid won't concentrate on the things I want them to concentrate

Jennifer Mauser: Right? Sometimes it comes down to a hyper fixation. I have a, my middle son is diagnosed with ADHD, and academic subjects were definitely a challenge. I had to do the same thing that Julie did, stand up and write, get outside, get those LEGOs out and do these transitional experiences. But he is oh, so able to hyper fixate and work on designing electronics or building. He'll spend an entire day designing a shield for an airsoft experience, and then he sells these things. It's pretty incredible how he's turned a disability into something that has actually been financially lucrative for him.

But yeah, that hyperfixation is definitely an aspect of ADHD. One thing I really wanted to plug is the checklist that IEW uses for students that have ADHD. Just being able to have that clarification, that explicitness, helps a student be able to say, "oh, okay, I can do this." And then it's very explicit what they're expected to do, what they're expected to accomplish, and there's a certain amount of peace that comes with that versus these fuzzy writing assignments where a student's like, "I don't even know what I'm done. Have I done it? Have I not done it?"

The checklist is just such a brilliant addition. I use it. And not only that, but Andrew, you've talked about intangibles. Being able to break these steps apart and plan out your steps is such an important intangible for students of all kinds, but most especially for students who have ADHD and who struggle with those executive function skills. So that's another thing that I really appreciate about the Structure and Style writing methodology.

Andrew Pudewa: One interesting thing we can see kind of in the world of entrepreneurship, what you said about your son reminded me, that a lot of these people who've been very successful were as children not into reading or academics. They probably were dyslexic and/or ADHD to some degree and/or had that hyper fixation which, in the academic the highly structured world of, "Here's all the things you have to do" doesn't necessarily work but in the world of "wow, go deep into something" and you could get really good and be very successful at that. It kind of brings us into that area of the super smart kids, I wouldn't even call them super-smart. All children have intelligence. their parents.

Super smart. I mean, all children have intelligence in that way, but we would refer to them as maybe gifted because they learn to read easily or they have an aptness for doing mental math.

Julie Walker: Easily. And I think, I think that's probably the recurring theme with these students is everything comes easily to them. Everything comes easy to them and yet they can't... they then when they encounter something challenging

Andrew Pudewa: They don't want to engage it.

Julie Walker: They don't want to or if they can't get it perfect so perfectionism is it.

Jennifer Mauser: Yeah, something that's not so facile is a stop sign for them because it's no longer this easy flow of knowledge or skill that they can demonstrate. They can really be a challenge for teachers, too, because there is a definite difference between our gifted students. Like you said, Andrew, all students have intelligence, but these gifted students, they're outside of the bell curve and you do have to meet them in a different way.

However, many of these students still have challenges; a lot of them are twice exceptional. Some of these students have ADHD. Some of these students have dyslexia. Some have autism, so you have to respect the entire student and look at what comes easily for them and then address the things that they find challenging. And I think again, it can look a lot of different ways, but the checklist is a great way to help expand student ability in writing. Those who have that baseline ability, you can grow their challenges by working with them to be more targeted about perhaps their verbs, or to insert more literary devices, or to examine, more challenging texts, source texts that they can break down and outline and then write about and consider. So, it's great for the students that have these talents.

Andrew Pudewa: Do you ever bump into parents who will say something like this? “Oh, my daughter, she, she loves to write. She's good at it and I'm afraid that IEW it's gonna be too structured and, and that it'll somehow stifle her creativity.” I could make an argument in that regard, but I'd be very curious what, how you might respond.

Have you heard that?

Jennifer Mauser: Oh, yes, I certainly have. And the thing that I would say is the checklist is going to help shape that child who is already a good writer; it's going to help challenge them to become even better. It's going to help them refine their skills. It's going to help them to really carefully consider their word selections.

So it's not always about free writing. It's really about being able to fit within the parameters of a writing assignment. I love to write, but nearly every assignment or task I've been given has parameters that I need to follow. It's not about what I want to do; it's really about the task that's been presented to me. And having tools that will facilitate that and help me become a better writer are wonderful resources that I can pull out. And building that toolbox, Andrew, that we have within the Structure and Style methodology is going to provide those tools for a lifetime.

And I would encourage parents to really take a careful consideration before they just say, well, my child is so gifted, she or he does not need this structured approach.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah, I think one of the things parents realize when they do the TWSS course, if they do the practicum assignments is, “no, this isn't limiting my creativity. This is

actually sparking new areas of thought that I probably wouldn't have encountered if I had just been doing whatever I'm used to doing.”

So, kind of that, that old saying, you know. I guess I have made it an old thing because I am old, but if you just do what you can do, you'll be able to do what you can do, but you won't be able to do what you can't do because you're only doing what you can do. And I think all of us adults, children, we get in these ruts of how we are used to doing things.

And the Structure and Style approach I think has, has a tremendous power of kind of forcing people out of a rut and looking at new options they might not otherwise have seen.

Jennifer Mauser: It is most definitely a compelling program. It compels you to develop those skills.

Andrew Pudewa: So, all kids are different. That's the challenge, isn't it?

Jennifer Mauser: It is.

Andrew Pudewa: All kids are different and we tend to feel as though we do need to teach them in groups. And I do think that it's an advantage to teach children, particularly writing, in a small group because you can share ideas and you can kind of stir it all up and let words and thoughts and devices and things settle on different children in different ways. But there is that need to customize the challenge for the dyslexic student, the ADHD student, the very gifted student. And that's our work, isn't it? Is, is how to customize for each child in a consistent, appropriate way.

Jennifer Mauser: You have some wonderful ways to do that that make the job so much easier. Number one is that checklist generator, which is a part of our Premium Membership. It has been such a blessing to me as an educator when I'm teaching in classes to be able to match the checklist to the student. The other thing that I have utilized in the past to great success would be our B level theme-based writing. Many of those have been PDFs that come for advanced editions for those students who are ready for an extra challenge, or for those students who need to roll things back a bit, the simplified source texts. They have made my job as a teacher so much more pleasant. I'm able to focus more on teaching versus adjusting, which I appreciate so much.

Julie Walker: Jennifer, our timekeeper has told us we're out of time, but boy, we could sure talk with you for another half hour or so. But I do want to be respectful of those of you who are out walking today that I'm sure you're wrapping things up, but it's always a joy to have you on our podcast. You are such a tremendous resource to us here and are really, we are really grateful for you being on our IEW team.

Andrew Pudewa: And we've got links to other podcasts with you, the Eides, uh, Susan Barton, my son, the very, very dyslexic boy who came on and talked as a young adult about the superpowers that you get growing up dyslexic and all that, and uh, if people have specific questions, we often will forward them to you.

And I am profoundly grateful for your willingness to make yourself available in this area of expertise, because it is clearly a point of not just confusion and frustration, but sometimes some real emotional stress that parents have, and I appreciate your helping us to serve them better.

Jennifer Mauser: Thank you, Andrew. I appreciate being called to be on this podcast. It's always a pleasure.

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