

Podcast 449 Homeschooling Preschool

Episode Transcript

Andrew Pudewa: That's going to build the auditory sensitivity. That's going to build the vocabulary. That's going to build the context for the understanding of the language.

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: So I'm going to do something, Andrew, that we've never done on a podcast before, and that is I'm going to wish a very special someone a happy birthday. And it's not you.

Andrew Pudewa: No, I hope not.

Julie Walker: So it is my sister's birthday. So happy birthday, Janelle.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, good for her.

Julie Walker: But there's a reason for this. I've had some conversations with her recently because she has decided to homeschool her granddaughter. And this is so fun that my sister is interested in homeschooling, considering that this was something that she was never interested in raising her own children.

Andrew Pudewa: And where does she live?

Julie Walker: She lives in Texas. Yeah, it is a good state. But here's why I wanted to say happy birthday to her. I wanted to have a conversation for her that I think is relevant to a lot of people.

And that is, how do you homeschool, not how do you homeschool your grandchild, although I know that's happening more and more, which I love, but how do you homeschool a preschooler? Because her granddaughter is three going on four. So that's what I'd like our topic to be. I sent her your talk, *Cultivating Language Arts: Preschool through High School*, and I noted that you spent probably half the time just talking about preschool.

Andrew Pudewa: It's tough. It's one of those talks that needs to be divided into more parts. Well, and that's a foundation, if you get that right so much more goes so much more smoothly for the whole rest of the whole homeschooling-education-childhood thing. And there is this trend, I would say, an unfortunate trend of people to use the word homeschool in relation to a three or 4-year-old child.

Julie Walker: Yes.

Andrew Pudewa: We, I think, unfortunately, see this idea of somehow we have to have pre-K curriculum and push academics earlier and earlier, and I don't know that that is at all a good way to cultivate good language skills.

Julie Walker: Yes. Yes. And I know that, when I've worked at homeschool conventions, people will come up and usually what we ask when they first come up to our booth and start looking at things is, how old are your children? And oftentimes they'll say, oh, two, three. And I think of when I first went to my very first homeschool convention, my son was four. And so I can absolutely relate to this eagerness to figure out what you're going to do, but when is a good time to start using IEW materials? Probably not at two. And so, when I think about just that, so many parts of the talk, and I'm just going to stop talking because I want you to talk, but I thought, I took so many notes because of my own grandchildren and wanting them, wanting to create an environment that would help cultivate language arts in the preschool

Andrew Pudewa: Well, and most of our listeners are aware of how we use the term language arts, or as I prefer, arts of language, just to kind of create a different concept right there. The whole idea of language arts as curriculum is overwhelming to many people. You have to start thinking about, oh no, there's phonics for decoding and reading and reading comprehension and spelling and handwriting and to cursive or not to cursive and grammar, and composition, and public speaking, and creative writing, and this list goes on and on.

Julie Walker: Yes.

Andrew Pudewa: And so, I always like to start that talk by saying, relax, that's, that's not what I'm talking about. We, of course, have defined the arts of language as listening, speaking, reading, and writing. And a lot of what I've been trying to share over the past, well, decade or more, is the relationship between listening and speaking as foundational to the academic ideas of reading and writing. And that they're so interdependent.

And one of the, I think most intelligent things I've ever heard, particularly, an administrative at public school say to me once long ago was one of our problems in schools is that we put a lot of effort into teaching reading and writing because we assess those things, we test them. We don't, however, attend to cultivating listening and speaking. Because we don't test them. They're hard to assess. So, if what we want is good reading and writing down the line, then what we should do is attend to cultivating listening and speaking.

The other thing that's interesting about those words is we have in English such a rich language, so many words, and the idea of hearing and listening, they're almost synonyms, but not quite, because there's a different nuance of meaning. Hearing is accidental, everybody hears, unless you have an impediment, right? You hear, you hear all the time, you can't not hear. Whereas listening is a more intentional, kind of a transitive verb, it requires an object, you listen to something, you listen for something.

Same thing with speaking and talking. Everybody talks. Some people talk too much. But speaking, again, has that intentionality to it. You speak to someone. You speak about

something. So, while hearing and talking are natural, accidental human functions, listening and speaking, I would argue, are arts that can and should be cultivated.

Julie Walker: Yes, yes. And so when you're thinking about a preschooler, you're probably not spending much time having them read or write because you have a lot of foundation to lay. So how can we do that?

Andrew Pudewa: Well, and not only that, there's neurological readiness. And one of the things that's so important for people to understand is if you try to teach a child to read or write before they are developmentally ready, neurologically ready, they will hate that. And if you keep doing that and they continue to hate it, they will continue to hate it even after they become neurologically ready for it because they've spent months or in some cases years hating it.

And everybody wishes that there was an age, right? So if it was exactly six years old and everybody just magically became neurologically developmentally ready to read and write, well that would, that would be a lot easier I guess. You and I both know that that isn't the case. There are some children who are quite apt to start reading at an earlier age. And there are many children who should not be forced at that age because they're just not ready for it. And my conclusion is it's actually better to wait a little longer than to start too early and create that anxiety and overwhelm and frustration.

But what can you do to cultivate the arts of language from a young age? Well, this is a little counterintuitive. I will argue that music is the most important and best thing you can start with if what you want is a good reader and writer years from now. Why? Well, because language is tonal. If I were speaking a different language right now, you and our listeners wouldn't really be hearing language unless you knew some different language. You would be hearing tones. Short tones, long tones, going up tones, going down tones, harsh tones, soft tones, louder tones. And if tonal patterns are repeated in context again and again, then we start to associate meaning with those tonal patterns. But it's the differentiation of tonal patterns that allows for language to exist.

And this is why, in probably every culture, I mean, I haven't checked very single culture, but most all cultures that we can think of, mothers will sing to their children before they will even talk to them very much because there's that deep, instinctive knowledge that tonal sensitivity is connected with the distinctly human function of language.

So I like to suggest that with young children, one of the most valuable things you can do is focused listening to music, beautiful music, with high repetition. So, the idea would be to take a short piece of good or great music, and you don't have to know a lot, you don't have to have studied music. All you need is a few names, Bach, Beethoven, Mozart, Handel, throw in Vivaldi, if you want to. And you're good. I would say always start with Bach because Bach is the best. But preferably non vocal music so that you're not confusing words with it, but you're just working on tonal differentiations and rhythmic patterning. So start with a section of music that's beautiful, short for a young child, a few minutes, and play that same few minutes of music several times a day, every day for a week. So you would get a repetition of let's say

somewhere between 15 and 20 some repetitions of that same pattern. Now, what will happen if a child of 6 years old hears that same pattern of a few minutes of music that many times?

Julie Walker: They'll know it.

Andrew Pudewa: They'll know it. They will memorize it. They will get it into their brain and their heart. And what will happen is that they will start to anticipate what's happening, right? And this causes two very, very important things. Number one, it cultivates attentiveness. So when we are anticipating what's going to happen, we become more attentive to that thing. And when the thing we are anticipating happens, then there's a little burst of joy, a little burst of happiness. And that's a lifelong thing. Why do people go to superhero movies? It's not for the acting. Maybe for the action, but mostly it's because we anticipate that the good guys will defeat the bad guys. In fact, we know that's going to happen, and yet we sit there to the end anyway, and when it does happen, we're happy.

And this has a lot of implications for children. So, I have had a chance to observe this with grandchildren in a way that I didn't necessarily think about it with my own children. I've always known the value of music as that's my background and a repetition for the learning of music. But it's interesting to kind of observe children in this position of having more life experience and perspective on things.

And you see this exactly happening. They know it's going to happen. When it happens, they are happy, and they are more attentive, and they get that little burst of joy. And we see the similar thing happening with books, with picture books. And it's a rare and I would argue indicative of some kind of neurological disorder to have a young child of that age who doesn't enjoy being read to from picture books. Well, why? What's happening? The same thing, in a way, they know what's going to happen because they've heard this story again and again.

Julie Walker: Yes.

Andrew Pudewa: But they are more attentive because of that. And then when the expected thing does happen, there's that little burst of joy. The other thing is that there's, with the attentiveness, there's a greater focus on the smaller details, the smaller differentiations within the music or in the story, with the vocabulary.

So, the first time they hear a story, they may not understand all the words. They may not understand most of the words, the pictures are helping drive the comprehension, which is why, by the way, we really should encourage people to invest in children's books with high quality pictures, with beautiful pictures, and unfortunately, not all children's books have this these days. But it's worth searching for those books.

Julie Walker: Are there any that you can think of off the top of your head that might be something that you could recommend?

Andrew Pudewa: Well, I mean, there, I'm not necessarily going to be able to name a lot of titles and illustrators and all that, but I know someone who can, and that would be Sarah

Mackenzie. And she's actually started her own imprint to publish children's literature because she found that the currently being published children's literature is just not good in so many cases.

But she knows illustrators, she knows authors, she's interviewed lots and lots of them. So, rather than just throw out a few titles randomly, let's just point people to readaloudrevival.com and Sarah Mackenzie and her resources there.

Julie Walker: Yes, and of course she has a podcast, and I'm sure she has talked about illustrators in her podcast. So we'll link to that.

Andrew Pudewa: But you're reading the story and it may be a sentence or two or three or ten on a page and what is the three, four, five year old child doing?

Julie Walker: Looking at the picture.

Andrew Pudewa: And the pictures are helping to build the comprehension of the words in their mind. And every time you read that same book again and again and again, their understanding of it increases more. And so I look at that focused listening of music with repetition and children's story books with repetition as being foundational to everything else because that's going to build the auditory sensitivity. That's going to build the vocabulary. That's going to build the context for the understanding of the language.

And we adults just have to get over the fact that they want to hear that book one more time or many more times. And it's interesting because kids that age will kind of hit a critical mass. They'll say, read it again, read it again, read it again, sometimes many times in one day. And then they'll hit a point and they don't want to hear it again.

Well, why? Well, because they got as much as could be gotten out of that and it needs to take a side place and a new book then comes in to build new vocabulary, new understanding, and new contexts. And so, I think for parents or grandparents who are, quote, planning to homeschool a child from the very beginning of three, four, five years old, the investment in beautiful children's books is the most important thing. It is exponentially more important than thinking about a curriculum. Beautiful children's books are the curriculum.

Julie Walker: Yes, yes.

Andrew Pudewa: So there's that, and connected with this is what I would call the nursery rhyme culture.

Julie Walker: yes.

Andrew Pudewa: Probably as recently as 60 or 70 years ago, every home in the civilized West had a book of nursery rhymes.

Andrew Pudewa: I mean, every home had the treasury of Mother Goose. Why? Well, because the parents grew up with it. Why? Because their parents grew up with it. Because their parents grew up with it. And so it's this great handing on of tradition. And what happens

with nursery rhymes? Well, they're short. They're very often humorous or quirky. They use vocabulary that you might not find in daily life. And, if children hear them—because they have a rhythmic scheme, they have a rhyme and a rhythm scheme—they are easier to remember and easier to replicate. So children will naturally start to speak the memorized nursery rhymes that they grow up with.

Julie Walker: Yep. And my sister and I, and our other siblings, we definitely grew up on Mother Goose. And so, Janelle, be sure you get out dad's Mother Goose book and read it to your granddaughter.

Andrew Pudewa: When children memorize language, and it happens most easily with poetry, they are building the vocabulary. Very often, they are moving vocabulary from a passive, ie: I hear that or I kind of know what it means into, I can say this word. I can use this word. There's a confidence that happens with memorized language. And that is a foundation really for the higher order of listening and speaking that we want to introduce as children hit a little bit older age of 6, 7, 8 when we would read them, say chapter books with no pictures or fewer illustrations. And that is forcing them to cultivate their imagination in a greater way.

And they can memorize things that aren't quite so short and funny, things that are a little bit longer and more involved. And whether it's poetry or scripture, songs, of course, can fall into that category. And so that those are foundational, that listening and speaking as skills to be cultivated are way more important than anything else I know of that I can think of. And they were kind of just a natural part of growing up, I would say, until television became a babysitting tool. And now, the portable, ubiquitous screen that goes way beyond television. Minimizing technology in young children's lives is so important.

Julie Walker: And this is actually the reason that my sister decided to do this for my niece, and that is they had too many screens at their preschool.

Andrew Pudewa: Oh, at the preschool?

Julie Walker: Yes, exactly. So they were using TVs to babysit, essentially, the kids rather than involving them in their activities.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah, and one thing we know about screens is that they are visually hyperstimulating. And when children are locked into screens, they're very much tuned out to the auditory world around them. The content that's coming across the screens, even if it wears the guise of being educational, is not really cultivating language art in the same way that, books and environment and conversations and, and then of course, if you're watching a screen, you're not doing something with your body, you're not building something with your hands. And we know all the research. And it's cited by everything from the American Pediatrics Association, the American Psychological Association. All the research indicates that screens are not good for the language or brain development of young children. So, yes, well, I commend your sister on making that an option.

Not everyone can, but that child will benefit greatly by being able to not be in a world of ubiquitous screens so many waking hours.

Julie Walker: So you mentioned, of course, listening to music and you mentioned your favorite composers as a place to start. Those short, find some short pieces, probably the popular ones, so that when they hear it later on in life, they'll go, Oh, I know that

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah. Best of Bach, best of Vivaldi, best of Mozart. And as kids get a little bit older, you can lengthen the time. All my kids grew up with some marvelous, well they were originally cassette tapes and then CDs of story with music built in. And the series that I think is the most well done is the Classical Kids by Susan Hammond.

Started the first one was Mr. Bach Comes to Call and there's Vivaldi's Ring of Mystery and Tchaikovsky Discovers America and all this. So, as children's listening capacity grows a little bit, weaving language and music together in a delightful synthesis and story that one can listen to again and again and again and again.

Julie Walker: I can just imagine a preschooler listening to the stories while building with the wooden blocks.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah. Yeah, exactly.

Julie Walker: And then you mentioned reading out loud. And then you kind of touched on memorizing. I want you to spend just a little bit more time talking about memorizing language and what to memorize. You mentioned poetry, scripture.

Andrew Pudewa: Children are wired to memorize.

Julie Walker: It's amazing how much they can memorize at a young age. It truly is.

Andrew Pudewa: And how quickly, how in, in so many fewer repetitions than I would need to memorize. Their brains are growing very rapidly. And truly, I mean, anything we ever learn, we learn by memory, so cultivating memory. If you don't give children things that are good and beautiful to memorize, they will memorize whatever junk is in their environment.

Whether it's dumb TV commercials or bad rap or good rap or whatever, they will memorize, whether you do it intentionally or not. So why wouldn't you do it intentionally by giving them a higher repetition of things that are good and true and beautiful? And that's pretty much the history of humanity.

I mean, memorized repertoire of language goes back as far as records of humans go back. And in fact in a way, written language served as a way to remind people of what they already had learned, what they already knew. And so, when we look at the relationship there, if you know a word and then you want to try to read it, you're a little bit older now and you're starting to get your decoding skills and your phonics for reading and if you already know a word and then you try to sound it out, well you'll be successful a lot more often than if you're trying to read a word you never heard and couldn't say and didn't know and you were completely unfamiliar with that word. In fact, it's an odd thing, but watching children learn to read is pretty much a continuous observation of the process of elimination.

They see a pattern of letters and they start to use whatever. Experience they have on the sound of those letters or combinations of those letters. And they start to remember, Oh, a T H together has a [th] sound and work with that. And what they're doing is they're trying to wrestle the sound off the page. And they only really know what they've got if they are able to say it. Then they're comparing what they can say with the database of known words in their head. And if it works, then they know what it is. But if there's no word there, even though they might be able to say it, if it doesn't mean anything, they're not reading it.

I like to use the example of... because English is so weird. We have all these, like, O U G H. It's got how many different sounds can this pattern of four letters make? One a little easier though, but you still come up against it would be EIGH, right? So you're a little kid and you're reading along and, and you look at this thing and you say, S L E I G H, Sligaha, Sligaha, Sligaha, what's a Sligaha? There is no such thing as a Sligaha. How do you know there's no such thing? You've never heard it. It doesn't exist in your auditory memory. It's not a word you've ever heard anyone say or you've never used it. So you eliminate the possibility. It can't be a slighaha. It has to be something else. So then you go back to your mental drawing board, stare at it, and if you're lucky, you realize, oh, E I G, oh, that's, that's that A like in the word *eight*, which is a word you would have come across many times in your life, especially if you're eight or about to be eight, right?

So then you would, you would say S-L-A, S L A, sleigh, it's a sleigh, but that only works if you already know what a sleigh is. If you don't know what a sleigh is, you may be able to say it, but you don't understand it. Now, the problem, of course, is that a sleigh is not a thing that appears in children's lives in daily life, right?

We don't use them. We don't write in them. We don't even see them, except maybe a fake sleigh. With a fake Santa in a fake mall at a fake Christmas-y thing, right? And it's all fake, so you might get it from there, but where would you probably learn sleigh?

Julie Walker: From a Christmas song

Andrew Pudewa: Or a picture book

Julie Walker: Or a picture book.

Andrew Pudewa: right? A little picture version of Anne of Green Gables, or, well, what was it? Where did I see it last? *Little House on the Prairie*. A little picture book made for young children of *Little House on the Prairie* characters and activities and they get in a sleigh and they ride in the snow for a Thanksgiving thing. Well, okay, now you hear the word, you hear it in context, you see a picture. And it all makes sense. And you don't need a lot of repetition. But if you don't have a few repetitions, at some point, you will never know the meaning of the word. So that was a long example, but I think the point is pretty clear. If you don't already know what a word is, you can't really read it. So your reading comprehension is limited by your auditorily acquired language database, your vocabulary.

Julie Walker: So as we're wrapping this up this episode, because our time monitor is letting us know we need to wrap things up, I do want you to share one story after I talk about two

resources we have available to our listeners who are wanting more opportunity for a “curriculum” for memorizing. And that is our *Linguistic Development through Poetry Memorization* and our new app, Memory Mentor.

And your daughter with your grandsons worked with us to help develop this app. And I was just astounded at her stories. All she would do was use the app to play some language that she wanted her boys to memorize at breakfast time. And they learned it so quickly because that's... and they listened to it like every day for a couple weeks and they knew the poems they knew The tongue twisters they knew. And we've actually put in the memory mentor app the first level of Linguistic Development through Poetry Memorization

Andrew Pudewa: We should put in some tongue twisters.

Julie Walker: we will

Andrew Pudewa: How much wood would a woodchuck chuck if a woodchuck could chuck...

Julie Walker: So, Andrew,

Andrew Pudewa: He would chuck what wood a woodchuck could chuck if a woodchuck could chuck wood.

Julie Walker: We do have tongue twisters, but they're hidden in there as gems for people to find when they're on the pathway. So we're building in games, we've built in games to motivate people so they get to hear you do a tongue twister for that. So that's the Memory Mentor app and *Linguistic Development through Poetry Memorization*, two resources that we have available to you for really any age of student.

Andrew Pudewa: Any age of student. Yeah, and we get stories of someone who buys it for an 11 year old, turns out the 4 year old memorizes the poems just as quickly. Don't neglect the Mother Goose treasury.

Julie Walker: absolutely, absolutely.

Andrew Pudewa: That's a key component.

Julie Walker: Well, and in your talk, *Cultivating Language Arts: Preschool Through High School*, you talk about teaching your preschoolers how to spell.

Andrew Pudewa: Right, you can teach children to spell before they can even read.

Julie Walker: And my sister, this is again, this podcast, all you listeners, this is all for my sister Janelle. She knows sign letters we used to do that in church, we'd like sign to each other,

Andrew Pudewa: Oh, oh, fun, yeah,

Julie Walker: But that could be something, Janelle, that you could teach Sophie is how to spell using sign language. So tell that story a little bit.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, I had my little preschool going and I had children three and a half to five and a half, almost six, and most of them weren't reading, but I thought, well, they could learn the sign language alphabet, not the sign language whole vocabulary, just the alphabet. And then I thought, well, we could just practice short three letter and then four letter words. And so every day, we'd have a list of words and we would say them and sign them. M, M, Mom, D, A, Dad, C, A, T. cat, right? And work on this and again, it's very interesting because if you know how to spell a word, then when you see it as you're trying to learn to read, you'll recognize it much faster.

So, it's kind of counterintuitive, well, why would you teach children to spell before they could read? Well, because you can, and it makes a lot of sense that it breaks down words into their component letter parts. And this is one reason why I am a strong proponent of teaching children the name of the letter first, and then the sound that it makes. And this is a little bit of a dispute in the world of teaching reading, that somehow it's going to be faster if you teach them, that's a kuh, that's a ah, that's a t. I don't find this to be true. I believe that children benefit most when they know what the thing is. Then you can add to that the information of what it does, right?

So, this is a C. It can say [k], can also say [s] right? This is an A. It's got lots of jobs here, right? But if you don't know the name of the thing, you can't really work with it in the same way. So, there are smart people who disagree with me about this, but in my experience, it works so much better. Learn the name of the letter, learn the alphabet, learn the sign language alphabet, and start spelling words, and you'll be amazed at once they can spell the word, and then they start to read and write, it'll be so much easier.

Julie Walker: I can just imagine my niece coming home from work because grandma's been homeschooling her daughter, and her daughter starts signing to her, Hi, Mom. That would be so impressive for a three year old to be able to do that. Yes.

Andrew Pudewa: I don't know that that's the objective. What I do know is that any time you can do a multisensory thing, it's going to be helpful. So if children are saying, they're also hearing what they're saying, so there's a reinforcement loop, and they are using a kinesthetic thing to add to that, it's just growing neural connections much more effectively.

Julie Walker: Well, for all of you that are considering, or probably now, this month, in the throes of homeschooling your preschooler, if you've got a lot of extra things, maybe just put them aside for a little bit and try some of Andrew's strategies to just cultivating language arts for your preschooler, starting with listening, and then being read to out loud, and then memorizing. Simple curriculum. Pretty affordable, too.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah, you shouldn't have to buy too much. And keep the screens away from young children.

Julie Walker: Very good. Thank you, Andrew.

Andrew Pudewa: Thank you.

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.