



Teaching Reading Successfully in Your Homeschool

An Interview with Chelle Barnaby
by Ashley Ortega

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Ashley Ortega & Chelle Barnaby, *Teaching Reading Successfully in Your Homeschool*

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Ashley: Hello. I'm glad you joined us for our Home School Super Heroes Telesummit today. My name is Ashley Ortega, and I'm so excited to have Chelle Barnaby join us today.

Chelle is a veteran teacher and home schooling mom who specializes in reading instruction and remediation. After years of tutoring, she's now pursuing a dream of creating a product to help thousands of students who struggle with reading.

Chelle's a mom of 9 children, and a grandmother of 2. Their family lives in a handmade log home, and enjoys kayaking, camping, and geocaching in their spare time. They're beginning their 22nd year of home schooling.

Hi Chelle. How are you?

Chelle: I'm great Ashley. How are you?

Ashley: Good. Just to get started, I was going to see if you could tell our listeners a little bit about you and your family and your approach to home schooling.

Chelle: Well, as they heard from my bio, we've been at this for a long time, so probably some of the things have changed over the years. But I think even after more than 20 years of home schooling, a lot of the reasons I began home schooling are the things that still ring true for us today.

Things like I wanted to be able to provide my children an education that was individualized to them so that they could each capitalize on the strengths that God had given them, and at the same time we could shore up any weaknesses or any areas where they struggled in a way that they were able to focus mostly on what they were best at.

And I think we still do that. So even though I have 9 children, they definitely have not had a cookie cutter education. Each one has done a lot of things differently than the others.

But within that I would definitely say that reading is very important to us. The basics are very important to us, because I found over the years that when you want children to pursue an interest-led curriculum or be able to focus on their interests, if their skills are not strong, particularly in math and language arts, they get bogged down. They don't get to pursue the things they're most interested in, because their lack of skill in an area keeps them from being able to do that.

For example, if I had a child who wanted to pursue, I had one child that was interested in hunting things, and when he was young and struggled

with reading, I couldn't just hand him that material, because he was struggling through the reading portion. When we were able to turn it around and he was able to read well, then he was able to pursue his interests without having to look to me first.

That's the basis of where we function from. Strong skills so that each child can follow their own God-given direction.

Ashley: That's neat. That's a good direction to take, just to be able to individualize it for each child.

I know you're a hero to our listeners in the area of reading, so I'm just wondering if you have some practical tips and tricks that you can share with them for how they can teach reading.

Chelle: That's such a loaded question. I have so many things. I guess if I had to say after so many years in the home school movement, probably the number one thing would be exactly this. Each child really is created unique, and even though there are definitely trends and patterns, and especially within families, there are patterns where all the children learn to read very early, or a little bit on the later side, or maybe they all tend to reverse letters when they're young. Within that, though, each child is still very unique, and one thing that I've noticed because I worked both in the public school realm and in the home schooling area, I notice that many home schoolers are very attached to their belief systems about reading.

While I don't think that's a bad thing—like I myself am a huge advocate for phonics—at the same time, what's the old adage about the definition of insanity is continuing to do something the same way and expecting to get a new result. I have sometimes seen people who are so attached to a particular program or a certain way of teaching that even though their child is bogged down and not making progress, they'll fight tooth and nail to hold to that ideal rather than change the teaching method to better suit the child.

And I have found, especially in the last couple of years that I've been working almost solely with children that are far below skill level in reading that oftentimes that's part of the issue. People are just so attached to a program that they don't know how to move around that to help get the child over a hump.

Ashley: That's good. That's a good thing to think about, to be able to possibly change what you've used so many times based on who the child is and what their specific needs are.

As far as reading goes, I know there are multiple age levels and multiple reading levels from the very beginning all the way up to high school and graduating and going to college. How do you balance it all? I know you've had 9 children, so there has to be at least some age span. How did you balance all that, and specifically teaching reading, was it the same for certain kids and different for others, or was it different for everyone? How did you do that?

Chelle: Sometimes not very well. Sometimes very well. It has always been a juggling act, and each year has been a little bit different. My children range in age now from 24 down to 7. So when my older children were still at home, my oldest daughter was still at home when my youngest son was born. So those couple of years of homeschooling when there really were 9 children in the house at once were very, very busy for us.

So I would say at the core of our reading enjoyment and instruction has always been a tremendous love of literature and a read-aloud time. I have always felt like within the classics, there's something for everyone. You can always see a house full of little ones sitting around while you're reading to bigger ones. And you think they might not be listening, they might be sitting on the floor playing with Legos, but a few hours or a few days later, they'll pop into the conversation, and you realize that they really were taking in so much all along.

So I've never been someone who thinks that you should dumb down literature. I prefer not to read abridged classics. I like the full, unabridged books. I like the littler children to sit and enjoy it and get what they can. And we've just rotated. We might read an easier book or a shorter book. My older children might have to listen through as we re-read Beatrix Potter or Winnie the Pooh for the millionth time, but there's still something fun for the older kids in the familiar favorites. It brings back memories, and I think it builds a cohesive family unit. You get the chance to lit-speak. We have within our family this speaking about certain books or certain phrases, and it becomes a private family joke or a way we communicate to each other based on a character in a book or a line from a character.

I think that was one of the things that made our home school so successful. A major part of our day was spent reading out loud together.

Beyond that, I will tell you this. My children varied greatly. There were some trends. I would say, though, my earliest reader was only 3 years old when she began to read and really was self-taught. And my latest reader was more like approaching, he was close to being a teen. That was a huge challenge to design a program that worked for everyone. I had two children that had an identifiable reading difficulty. That's sort of what led

me down this path to begin with. One of my older children had a severe reading problem. From what I learned through the struggles that he encountered, my child who came much later in the mix with a very similar problem, we were able to change some strategies much earlier on, and that was extremely helpful. And there are so many. I could spend all day talking to you about little tricks and hints that have made enormous differences in our children.

But I guess the one thing that really stands out to me that I would say within the last year or so, I had an epiphany about this working with a lot of other home schoolers. When children learn to read in more of a classroom setting, we often get one child reading at a time, and maybe there are 20 children in a class. They might be sitting around and doing what they used to call round Robin reading. One child reads a paragraph, and then another child reads a paragraph. That whole time, your child might only be reading once out of every 20 paragraphs, but they're following along as other people are reading the whole time.

Within the home school setting, we don't get that opportunity very often at all. A child is usually just reading to mom or silently, very occasionally to brothers and sisters. But that style of practice that comes from listening to someone else read out loud and the child following along simultaneously is something that is often overlooked in a home school environment. And I think it's a huge component for children who are struggling. So I have suggested to people before that if there aren't siblings or if they don't have that opportunity, then the best thing, and I've seen huge strides made is to get your children a book on audio tape and the book, and have them read along as the audio tape is going.

It frees the mom up to work individually with another child, and at the same time, the child is getting the very kind of practice that they've most been lacking.

Ashley: That's neat. That's a really good idea and tip for our listeners to use with their children. Following along with a book, and something fun and different that the kid can do. Speaking a little bit about reading difficulties, if our listeners have a child that is further behind, are there specific things that either you can look for to notice where they stand if they have an actual difficulty or what are different tips they can use to help increase that level.

Chelle: I would say that the first place to consider is to be a detective for your child, in the same way if you have a child with a physical problem or frustration. Sometimes you have to look to figure things out. I just had a girlfriend with a son who had a food allergy. She knew something was wrong, but it took some pretty serious detective work of writing down,

what was he eating that day, where did we go that day, what were we doing? I would use a similar system to figure out, pinpoint the source. Is your child struggling with sounding out a word, do they understand the individual sounds as letters? Is it a visual problem? Are they not seeing the same thing that you're seeing?

Are they able to sound out letters and words and then just not remembering what they read? Is it a cognition problem? Within the realm of reading, there are lots of different difficulties, like what I already mentioned. It might be visual, auditory, cognitive. It might be a processing problem where for all intents and purposes the child seems to be reading just fine when they're reading out loud to you and yet they have no recollection or interaction with what they've just read.

All of those have a different way of being treated. The first thing that a mom can do that provides invaluable information farther down the road is to really figure out what is going on. And sometimes it's as simple as having to be really honest with ourselves as very busy home school moms. Has this child just not had an opportunity for enough practice? There is a very wide range of, it's said in reading circles that most children have to encounter a word about 100 times before they make that word their own.

The first time they see the word cat, they're going to say k-a-t. And they'll do that a few times. And pretty soon it's k-at. And they see it a few more times and they say cat. There are some very precocious children that will see that word once and remember it. And that's all they ever need to see it. There are other children that rather than that 50-100 encounters, they need more like 200 or 300 encounters before that word becomes part of their reading vocabulary. Sometimes it's just a matter of, they simply haven't had enough practice reading.

I would really seek what's the source of the difficulty.

Ashley: That's a good thing to, once you can pinpoint that, it'll become easier to address it. Spend time with that child and see what their difficulty is—that's a great thing our listeners can take from.

I want to shift gears for a second. One question I'm asking all of our speakers is what are you really passionate about? What really lights your fire?

Chelle: Wow. There are so many things, I guess. I think you probably heard some of it in what I said earlier. I'm really passionate about literature, and really passionate about just a general joy and information and all the things that come from, not just being a good technical reader, or enduring reading, but loving to read.

I love to read, even as an adult. My favorite thing to try to be done with all my home schooling stuff. In my bio, it mentions all the outdoorsy things we do, and we do those outdoorsy things. But I will be found in the kayak with a book as often as not. But I guess I'm passionate about reading, very much so. Because I think that reading is what unlocks the joy and pleasure that comes from the rest of home schooling.

We love to sit around as a family and talk about what everybody's been reading. I think it just, despite, we live in a very sparsely populated part of the country way out in the middle of nowhere, and we have a really rich environment because of all of the places we've traveled and the things we've done in books, not just real life.

So I guess it comes down to reading.

Ashley: That's neat. I like the idea of being able to travel and see different things in books. It's one thing, I feel like sometimes we get so bogged down in the idea of we've got to read that book or that book. We shouldn't get lost and remember it should be an enjoyment thing too.

Chelle: What you just mentioned, that reminds me of something else too, that's a more recent phenomenon. When I first started helping kids reading, I saw this much less than I do now. We live in a culture now that is so media-driven and so screen driven by both computer and television, one interesting thing I see repeatedly in children who really struggle to read is if we love to read, I don't know about you, I often don't like to see the movie after I've read a book. I'm so disappointed. How could they cast that person? That's not what that person looks like. That's not it at all.

However, a child who's really struggling does the opposite. If they've had too much screen time, or they're particularly visually sensitive, they don't form that mental picture. You can ask them, so what does Anne Shirley look like? They might not have the first clue. They describe what they've seen in the media. They'll describe the character, they'll name the actor, or they'll name something like that, rather than having formed a rich sense of what's going on in the book. That's often one way that when I said, to have the mom be the detective, that's one other way you can be that detective. Have them draw or describe what they're seeing in their mind's eye. And what you'll be surprised is there are some children who see nothing in their mind's eye at all.

And they are most definitely usually a struggling reader, if they don't have that mental picture.

Ashley: That makes sense. That's a great clue.

If you could start home schooling all over again, what is one thing you would do differently knowing what you know now?

Chelle: I think that the one thing I would do differently is to, one of the principles that I learned when I was reading about Thomas Jefferson Education, and I wouldn't say that's completely my philosophy. But the thing I came away with after reading that was the concept of scheduling time not content.

And by that, I'm saying that no matter what, no matter what, no matter what, there should have been school from this time to this time every day. It was really easy with a large household of children to have life creep in on us. There were always toddlers to diaper and preschoolers to occupy, and sometimes those beginning school age, when all my children were littler. I think that lack of practice that I referred to, a couple of my children suffered from what I would call a pure lack of practice, because I was pretty short on time.

I just see now over the years and now that I have younger children where there aren't toddlers and little tiny ones in the household, I can see how having that extra time every day to do the little by little bit by bit, how much more successful they've been earlier on. I mean, the thing about skill work is it's not just the number of hours you put in a week. Some of these little teeny skills. The things that stand out are reading and handwriting and math facts. You have to do it every day. It wouldn't matter if you sat down and did it for 10 hours once a week, you would not produce the same kind of results as doing it one hour every day.

It's so much better to do a little and do it often.

Ashley: That's good. I know people will get overwhelmed with life and all their responsibilities. Sometimes it not necessarily gets pushed aside, but it looks different, and it's not that one-on-one time that children need with you.

Chelle: And the other thing that I find really interesting, another long term home school friend and I were discussing that most home school curricula is designed around history. And I said, I wonder why that is? We put our heads together over the course of a week. It sounds like a horrible thing to say, but I finally decided it's because it's the easiest.

It's the easiest thing to organize the rest of it around. And as a result, we've produced a whole home school generation of kids who are very astute historians. And that's a wonderful thing. I'm not knocking that at all. But at the same time, I don't think as a whole that home schoolers are

as adept at writing, or very technical reading. Sometimes, because too when you're working in a big family, the topic areas like science and history, they're fun. They're easy to do on a multi-grade level.

It's very easy to sit down and all learn about the same topic in history. It's much harder like we talked about earlier to read all from the same book. They can enjoy the same literature, but they're not going to be reading out loud from the same book or learning the same thing in math.

I think that without necessarily meaning to, we've pushed aside a little too much of the skill work for the topical things. And as I look over my own home schooling, that's one of the things that I've encouraged my daughter as she starts home schooling my grandchildren. Three hours first, and then, there's time for all the fun stuff. That all gets worked in as part of life. But there's no substituting for reading, writing, and math.

Ashley: That's a good thing to think about. So building off of that, how did you manage it to be able to have? Because I know in writing and reading there's a lot different levels. You do your read aloud time, but then when it comes to that technical reading or writing, how did you balance it all and be able to spend time if needed with each child?

Chelle: I think some of those things changed over the years. When my oldest children were school age and I was very heavy to babies and toddlers. At one time, my 2nd to 6th children, I had 5 children under 6. So really not very many that were school age, but a lot of little ones. During that period of time, the bulk of our schooling took place during afternoon nap. We just chose to train children that whether they were tired or not, we called it sacred hour, they got in bed, until they were at least 4, and some of them until 5.

And then in the afternoon, I did school with the older girls. Later, what worked for me, and I guess it's different for each family, but what works for me now and did for many years is that even though kids were working at different levels, we did our subjects pretty much in the same order. We always start with math. I think it's a great brain warm up. It just gets us going, and because it gives us a place to start. Even though they might all be doing different math, if they're all doing math at one time, I can bounce from child to child and help with concepts. It gives a chance to let someone else listen in and review a little bit.

Then we moved from that subject into the next, and so that's how we handled our skill work. We do math, then handwriting, then spelling, for the ones who were young enough that needed to read out loud to someone. The youngest one usually would read to me, and the next ones up would buddy up. They each had a buddy in the family, when we had everybody

at home. It was for lots of things. It helped with school, getting ready to go places, getting things put away, so that everybody knew who was responsible for who.

But at the same time I really chose not to overburden by older students with helping younger ones too much of the time. It was pretty much to listen to them read, help with a question here and there if I wasn't available. But for the most part, I wanted to leave my older kids free to pursue their academics too. And pretty much everybody stayed around the table until I would say 8th grade. And then my high schoolers go off on their own, because they have heavier duty things that they're working on.

Ashley: That sounds good. You were able to utilize older and younger kids and not go insane in the process of it all.

So since it was back to school time, what advice would you have for home schooling parents as they start to plan and prep for this upcoming school years, that they could do in their planning or prepping, or in the beginning of school that they could start right now.

Chelle: I think, I guess one of the most important things is to not take it all too seriously either. I like the saying is the best curriculum is the one that gets used. During this planning phase, we want to provide our children with this huge banquet of academic opportunities.

And when you start looking at the banquet in a list form, it can get out of control. And it still does for me too, before I realize it, I've written down 200 book titles to cover, and there's just no way that can all happen. I think it's really important to focus on what's most important, and each family will have their own flavor of things. I think that's the other thing about, when you know you have the basics covered, it really allows you as a family to pursue home schooling that suits you well.

For example, we do live in the middle of the woods. My kids have excellent skills in identifying flowers, trees, animals, prints. They can track things. Right now, they're heavily into mushroom identification. Do I think that's a necessity in a science curriculum for children? Absolutely not. But it's their bent. It's what they're passionate about. When you have covered the basics, it allows you to make some of those accommodations and do what fits you as a family or as individual children, and those concepts they learn, the scientific principles they learn in gathering information about those mushrooms and classifying them in different groups and figuring out which ones are poisonous, members of the same family, the Latin names, drawing those in their nature notebook. Those skills are transferable. They'll go towards other scientific things in the future and in their high school years.

In the high school years, I'm a little more likely to have them do some textbooks, or at least a couple opportunities for that before college level. But I'm always amazed that despite using real set curriculum in some areas when they're young, they tend to learn amazing things. I'll never forget. When I first realized this concept was when my oldest children were all little, and we had one of the first big Asian beetle invasions. And they looked like lady bugs, but they're not. They're this kind of Asian beetle. And they were everywhere.

You couldn't even walk outside without being just pelted. And yet in our science curriculum that day we were supposed to be doing cocoons and butterflies. Well, it got ridiculous. Here I'm trying to read in the science book, and we have this huge scientific event going on 2 feet from the door. That's when I realized, some opportunities crop up and it's a shame to waste them because somebody in a book said you should cover this today. I always have, I guess this is the thing I would say to parents. Have a plan and use it when you run out of life.

I do. I have some underlying books and goals and plans. But if something comes up, we follow little rabbit trails, but I always know where to go back to. It's kind of like having structure with flexibility. And that's the best thing, as long as you know what you have to go back to, and that's the same reason I do the subjects in the same order every day. If I do this frantic call, or a pipe bursts, or the refrigerator quits running, or life creeps in, I know, it was math and then it was handwriting, and then it was spelling. Wherever we are in the morning, as soon as that crisis is over, we pick right up where we left off. And so that order of things enables us to still get through.

Maybe it took longer that day, but we know where we left off. And that works well for us.

Ashley: That's neat. That's really cool. I really like the idea of structure with flexibility. That's a great way of putting it. Life does happen, and there's going to be times when it doesn't.

Chelle: It took a long time for me to fall into that. I was naturally very perfectionist in the early years. I had these huge expectations, and I found myself frustrated almost all the time. And then in turn, my kids would be frustrated almost all the time. I know there are lots of moms that love the minute by minute schedule. I'm not one of them. In theory, I love the idea of having everybody on their half hour, 15 minute schedule. In reality, by 10 in the morning, I'm walking around and my teeth are clenched. My life starts getting ruled by the clock, and I get pretty freaked out.

And in turn, everything gets very angry. Everybody's really stressed, and I just never thought that was the way I wanted to run things. But at the same time, without a focused plan, and this many people, it can fall into serious chaos real quick. So that's why, despite the fact that it took me 10 years to come into this place where we could have that structure but move away. I didn't get freaked out anymore if somebody asked an off-topic question. We could talk about it and get back to what we were doing.

Ashley: That's neat. That's really cool. Well before we wrap up for the day, I was going to see if there's a way our listeners can get back in touch with you if they want to learn some more about what you're talking about.

Chelle: Sure. My website is still in development, so bear with me a little bit. Right now I'm creating a program called Reader 9-1-1. And it's exactly for some of what we talked about, figuring out how to identify where your child struggles might lie in the areas of reading and exactly what to do about it. I remember being a home school mom in that situation, and I happen to live in a place where I was the ultimate traitor. I was a public school teacher who chose to home school. And even though I had a teaching degree, I did not feel competent to deal with my older child's reading problem at the time.

And I knew a couple things. I knew we needed some help. I knew we wanted some help. But I also felt like I didn't have anyone I could trust to get that help from. And especially as time went by and he got further and further behind, the problem just became compounded. It's like a math book, if you finish $\frac{3}{4}$ of it each year, you're not a quarter behind, you're a quarter behind four years in a row. Now you're a whole year behind. And that's what happened, only worse. He was only getting maybe half a year at the most.

And so pretty soon we were 2 years behind, 3 years behind, and I felt very panicky. So the reason I am putting this whole program together is for that reason, to help moms identify where the breakdown is, what's going wrong, and what can they do or where can they get the help they need where somebody's not going to be judgmental of the way they've been teaching or what they've been doing.

My website is www.reader911.com. And in the meantime, you can always email me at diligenthands@gmail.com.

Ashley: Perfect. That sounds great. Thank you so much for your time today, and all your tips and advice. I know they'll really be able to help our listeners out. Thank you so much.

Chelle: Thank you, Ashley.

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