

#19 Using the planner

Over the years, I have used a number of systems to manage meal planning in our family. There was a time that there were 11 of us around the dinner table. I'll tell you what didn't work. Having no plan. I would have dinner weighing over me all day, wondering what we were going to eat that night. Finally 5:00 would roll around when I finally had time to pull out the recipes—I had a million recipe books—and after I finally decided on something, I'd have to run to the store to get the ingredients and when I got home, I still had the cooking ahead. By then everyone was starving and we'd order pizza.

What has worked the very best—and it's what I use today—is to sit down once a week to plan. Rather than pulling out a million recipe books, I made a couple of recipe books that have all our family favorites. I know anything I chose from these books, the family will like. I still like to try out new recipes, so I keep them together so when I feel like getting adventurous, I maybe pull out one to work into the weekly menu. And if it's a hit, it will eventually go into my main cookbook.

I make out my shopping list and shop for the week and write down the meals on a whiteboard on my fridge. Now there's no worrying about what are we going to eat? There's flexibility in the system because I can choose anything from the seven meals on any given day. So if it's been a hectic day, I'll pick a simple prep one. Or if I'm going to be gone all day, I'll choose the crockpot meal. And when I choose the meals, I keep a variety in mind in that way—quick fixes, crockpots, and so forth.

And then there's one more thing—I go for color. Have you ever noticed that everything man makes ends up being brown or gray? We make brown cookies, brown bread, brown casseroles, brown brownies. We make gray houses and gray buildings and gray streets. But everything God makes is full of color! The blue sky and the green grass and the pink roses. Same with His food—purple grapes, orange oranges, bright yellow lemons, red peppers, green artichokes. The more we put color into a meal, the healthier our meals are. It's that simple. Granted, ketchup might fit that bill, but the base of it is still God's—the red tomatoes. So I fill my shopping cart with color to fit around my menu choices and the goal is always how much color can I fit into my meal? If I make a green salad, instead of just lettuce and tomatoes, I'll add carrots or radishes or purple cabbage. All the real nutrients of a meal are in the color. And isn't it interesting that the most nutrient dense foods of all are fruits? I think God made them sweet so that we will eat them. Some people tell us to avoid them because of the sugar content. They would keep us gnawing on kale chips all day—not that kale isn't healthy. But by avoiding the fruit, we miss out on all the health benefits. I hope you can see—the most nutrient dense type of learning you will feed your children and your own heart are the Arts and they taste the sweetest. They add the color to all your learning.

Now my meal planning is done for the week. We still go out to eat on the spur of the moment sometimes, but it's not nearly as often as before I used this system. And we are eating so much healthier. I can now go about doing the other things I need to do without worrying about what's for dinner. I know I have what I need.

This is the reasoning behind the planner. You may have your own system—go with it. But if you are looking for a way to manage these things you're learning, you might want to give this a try. It was designed to be adaptable to many different personality types. If you are one who needs detailed schedules, you can use it for that. It can be used to plan in advance or can be used as a record of what you did. And while I am suggesting ways for use in a homeschooling family, a woman can use this to fit jewels into the lives of her family if they are in public school or private school or if you have no children, it can be used to plan for your own personal study each month.

So if you haven't already printed out a couple of pages to reference while we talk, you may want to do so now. Or at least take a look at it so you have a visual. And by the way, you can print out planning sheets for free or my daughter has designed a lovely colorful planner with watercolor floral designs in the background if you like pretty. There is also a less expensive black and white version if you want to buy several for your children rather than print them out yourself. They are available in the store. You may want to spiral bind them after you get them. But it's not necessary.

While you will probably be the main planner in the beginning, your goal is to help your children do their own planning of their months as soon as they are ready to be more independent. Plan together for awhile until they get used to it. Make a date night of it if you want where you can talk about what was learned in the previous month and where they want to go the next month.

This learning lifestyle is meant to integrate into life, not to be separate. I hope you can let go of the idea that you need to block off a time for school and that school is something you have to do. If it becomes something you need a break from, I would say you need to re-evaluate what you are doing. Learning and life go seamlessly together. And it tastes sweet.

The first thing you want to do is put all the things on your month at a glance calendar that you know are happening—doctor appointments, music lessons, classes, church activities—whatever there is. Now you can put your mind at ease—they are planned for - no surprises. You know what you have to work around.

Next, choose your topics for the month. Even if you are using the rotation schedule, you can fit it into your year however you want. The only part that is in an order is American History and actually the first half is mostly colonial times and the second half is after we were formed as a nation. The American history topic does tie into a world history topic, though. The only advantage of following it by the months I designated is that when I do podcasts or recommend things or others in the group recommend ideas, it will likely be from the month that is designated.

Now you are going to go shopping for all the ingredients you'll need for the month so that you're not always scrambling to figure out what you're going to do. You'll have all the craft supplies, all the ingredients for the food, etc. on hand.

So let's go on a sample shopping trip. Let's shop for France. Going to the online library is like going to the family favorite recipe books I created. These books are there because they are consistently the favorites. You won't go wrong with whatever you choose. Although, of course

your children have different tastes and if they don't like something after they've tried a few bites, pull out something different. You'll want to select more than you will probably get through just to allow for adjusting to individual tastes. Along the way, you'll find books that aren't on this list. Jot them down in the month they'll apply to and when you get to that month, there they are. You can work them into your schedule.

If you haven't listened to the developmental ages presentations, you might want to do that. It, too, helps to narrow down choices. I'm going to say that I have a preschooler, so I'm going to pick some books out of the picture book section. Some I may want to see if my library has them, so I'm going to put an L next to the books I list in the Books section on the planning page. This is really my shopping list. So now I can see which books I need to pick up from the library. Other titles I really think I want to buy and keep in my library so I make a note of those titles and put a little dollar sign next to them. We have created a pdf list of all the titles you will find in my library. You can find a free pdf of each topic on the landing pages. Or you can buy a complete book list in the store. You'll want to have this reference nearby as well. Go through your personal library and see if you already have books in the list and mark them in the box. That's an easy way to see what you have on hand. As you read the books, just highlight them with a colored highlighter so when you come around next year, you can remember quickly what you have already read. Your older children will want to have their own individual book lists to keep track of their reading. This replaces the reading logs I used to suggest. There is plenty of white space on the pages to add books that aren't on the list.

My preschooler is in that imaginative age, so I want to be sure and include some French fairy tales, but I know all my kids will enjoy those. Now I go through and select some books for my older children—and if they're old enough, I have them help narrow the choices. Would you like to read this book about such and such or do you think you'd rather do this one? The more you give them ownership, the more motivated they'll be. The main thing at this stage is just to make sure you have the books on hand, whether they need to be borrowed from the library or bought or pulled from your own shelves. Go for color and variety—a little fiction, a little biography, a little history, a little nature, a little culture. I think my 7 year old will like *Our Little French Cousin*. My teen is ready for an overall history of France and Mary MacGregor's looks like a good one. I think we'll do a family classic for an evening family readaloud. When I create my menus, I go for variety. I don't want a whole week of chicken or a whole week of Mexican food. I like to mix it all up.

Now you can turn to the enrichment page. If you are a crafting family, then pick out a few crafts you want to do at some point in the month. The main thing is to write down the supplies you need so that you are sure you have everything on hand. The same for the food. If you're going to have a cultural night, pick a night and plan it on your calendar and now you can transfer the ingredients you need from this shopping list to your main shopping list.

Take a look at the plays. Is there one that will work for your family? Print it out so that you have the parts for everyone.

Take a look at the art—you can choose a couple to print out and display and study or have your

kids help you. Same with the music. The thing about the art and the music is it can be spontaneous or you can plan specifically for which one you want to do and when you want to do it. Art goes on the planning page if you want to have a printed copy of it. In the music section, there are some selections that have a story connected to them. They are short and sweet. I suggest previewing a couple and seeing which ones you think will appeal the most to your children and jot those down. The rest of the music can be spontaneous.

Also, plan for family movie times. Pick out the movies that look interesting—check them out at imdb to make sure they're appropriate for your family, and note whether you will be able to stream them or if you need to track down a copy.

Now you know you have on hand what you need for the month. And you won't be scrambling every day to figure something out. It's like you have loaded your pockets with jewels and you're like the fairy godmother watching for opportunities to gift them. These jewels are the Arts—Music, Pictures, Poetry and Story. They provide the nutrient-dense color to your day. And they are sweet to eat.

It's common among homeschool moms to constantly feel like life is getting in the way of school. I'd like to make the suggestion that you reverse that and make sure school isn't getting in the way of life.

Now you can turn to your week at a glance page and you can either plan things out, or you can develop a sort of rhythm to your day. Connect breakfast with a story of a great life or lunch with a nature story. Allow time for free reading. Take time to read individually and as a family. But your day isn't going to be all reading. Your younger children need lots of time for free unstructured imaginative play. You want to get outside as much as possible. You want variety in your day.

The little letters at you see—m a p s n— are gentle reminders to work a little music, a little art, a little poetry, a story, some nature – in every day. When you do, just put an x through the letter. If you go for several days without any poetry, you may make it a higher priority to do some poetry on the next day. Or if you've missed music for awhile, or art, this reminds you. It's not a chore lord! Just a simple way to keep track and make it a mindful effort.

A mother shared that family circumstances required that she send her son back to public school. She noticed that each day when he came home, he seemed a little sadder. Finally one day, he said, Mom, I just feel like something is missing. And she noticed a little later he had pulled out a French story and was reading it and it made him feel better. He instinctively knew his heart needed to be nourished. That was what had gone missing.

Back to establishing a rhythm to your day— Maybe you'll choose to practice handwriting after lunch.. Put some music on from the month's selection as a background or an audio story to listen to. Little ones can draw circles and lines or pictures to help develop those fine motor skills. In fact, the more things you find to keep your children's hands busy, the more readaloud time you'll be able to engage them in. Teach them to knit—even the boys. That's a part of the Waldorf

schools. Let them color. Even build with legos. Or combine their crafts with music or audio stories.

I have tried to make the resources as spontaneous as possible for you to fit into the flow of your day, if that's your personality. If you have My Book House or Junior Classics, or Forgotten Classics, when you are first starting out, you may want to lean more heavily on those stories. And like I said, if little hands are busy, if your children's attention spans are short, it will help to stretch them. These stories provide a quick grab and go. Just highlight them in your book list after you read them.

Don't stress about fitting into the developmental schedule. It's a general guideline. Kids have a way of self-selecting. If you start reading a story to your whole family and it's above the head of a younger child, he or she will likely wander off. Let them. But often they'll take in more than you expect. Listening level far exceeds reading level.

On your weekly calendar, jot down when you want to have a Poetry tea time. You can even plan on adding a little music appreciation or art appreciation in connection with your poetry tea time. In the beginning, maybe plan just one afternoon a week for notebooking. You can plan for it in your week at a glance page. Eventually, your children will do it far more often, but this gets them started. Make it an event! Put on some music. Put some cookies or some kind of treat on the table and colored markers and stickers and pictures. Be sure you work on notebooking pages, too.

Jot down on your calendar when you want to have a cultural night. Maybe they have crafted some decorations. Let them help cook the food and plan the night. Maybe it will be in connection with your cultural night that you perform your play – or just do your readaloud theater if it's just your family. Talk about the things you've been learning about—or your favorite things you've done.

I left a full page blank in the calendar to adapt it to your needs. Some of you like to do bullet point journaling. The blank note page gives you a place to do it. Some of you may want to use it as a record of what you have done. . You could take pictures of your cultural night or crafting or outings and print them out and glue them on a page. So this planning journal could become a remembrance journal as well. If you have to report what you are doing, this gives you the reference to go back to.

Or the blank page can be where you jot down ideas you come across. Maybe you're in the France month and you come across a fun idea or resource for Germany—jot it down on the Germany page so that when you get to that month, you can remember you want to work it in.

In the back of the planner are some pages for notes from your monthly Mother's University study if you're doing that. And if you have are part of a Mothers of Influence group, you can put contact info on that page.

I hope you can catch the vision of this. You've already selected the books. What might I take

along to the doctor's office to read while we're waiting? What might we listen to in the car on the way to music lessons? My daily goal is to gift my children with at least a few lines of a poem, some music, a story and something beautiful to look at—Goethe's 4 jewels for happy living. It's all the colors added to the meals of your life. Just one story, one poem a day becomes thousands of stories and poems stored up in a child's heart before he leaves home. If I at least did that much, I'm doing something lasting and worthwhile. These jewels can fit into the busiest of schedules—if you have the ingredients on hand.

Let me try and unfold how this may all look like in the course of a day. Well, we always eat breakfast and lunch, so I'm going to attach a story to each one. I think I'll attach a fairy tale to breakfast. It's primarily for my Imaginative age child, but everyone can listen. My toddler may wander away, and that's OK. My teen will probably stick around because no one is too old to enjoy a well-told fairy tale. In fact, I may see if my teenager wants to take a turn reading one. With the fairy tale fresh in their minds, my imaginative kids will run off for free play time. They may want to draw the fairy tale or maybe they'll play dress up and act it out or maybe they'll pull out the blocks and create a fairy castle and re-enact the story. Don't assign it for heaven's sake! Force always kills the fun. But you can light the desire to draw the fairy tale, for instance, by you drawing it. With an imagination stored with stories, imaginative play is the natural course of action. It's how a child digests the story. Play is the work of childhood —unstructured, free, wonderful play. Don't get in the way, although in the beginning, you may need to play with them just to show them.

While they're off playing, older children will engage in their projects. Maybe this is when you can work in some math. Or I may see my 8 year old playing with legos or invite him to play with legos and ask him if I can read a story to him? And read him the story of Roland. Or maybe that's when I'll let him listen to the story of Lafayette. Or we'll put on some music and work on notebooking, whether it's copying poetry, writing out recipes, copying passages from books we've read for our great souls notebook or our literature keepsakes.

Maybe I'll ask a child to read to me while I'm fixing lunch or I'll ask if they want me to read to them while they're making their bed or folding their clothes. And we'll definitely want to sing while we work! That used to be so common for families to sing while they worked. It adds the sparkle to what they're doing. The work around home doesn't have to be a dreaded chore that has to get done before we can do anything else. It's part of life—teaching children the art of making a home is one of the great life gifts you can offer them and it is happening throughout the day. Making a bed may be a chore; running outside and picking a flower to put next to it turns it into an art.

When I'm nursing the baby, I can see if my 4 year old wants to sit next to me and we'll watch one of the music videos together on my tablet after I read the story that goes with it. If I've stocked my house with games and creative and appealing learning materials, mostly I need to get out of the way.

I've watched this with my daughter's little girls. The six year old will pull some books out and start copying the words because her heart saw others doing it and she wants to do it, too. Or her

four year old, came to her mom and asked, “Will you teach me to read?” That’s a whole different scenario than mom saying, OK, you’re four, I’m now going to teach you how to read. I can tell you how that would go over.

Boredom is the friend of imagination and initiative. And I can tell you with 100% confidence—electronic devices can be your worst enemy. You have to restrict their use in your house or they will wreak havoc. Don’t take the role of entertainer and cruise director. Avoid structuring every moment. It is healthy for children to feel some control over their lives. Don’t constantly feel like you need to ask them questions about what they’re reading—Silence is often the best teacher. But do engage in spontaneous conversation.

Continuing on with the day....I know we’re going to eat lunch everyday, so I’m going to add a story about nature to lunch most days. Just one story is good—then I’ll send them out to play and digest it. If you happen to notice the dandelions springing up in the grass, let that story be about a dandelion. Don’t assign them to go out and find a dandelion and write up a report—just send them on their way. And you’ll likely hear, “Mom! Guess what! We found a dandelion—and look!” And they’ll re-tell you the things they just heard in the story. Or maybe you told them a story about ants and they’ll find an ant hill and lie down on their stomachs and watch it for a long time because you’ve given their hearts something to watch for. And now they’ll really remember it because they are seeing it with their own eyes.

Older kids may stay inside and read something that’s interesting to them or work on math or whatever they have planned for themselves. When the younger kids come back inside, some will hopefully take a nap, or you can establish a time for quiet activities. Every day will probably look different. Life is like that—full of variety. And you know what they say—variety IS the spice of life. Going grocery shopping with you and watching how you engage with the grocer and other people is school. Helping you cook is school. Helping you do laundry is school. Helping you plant flowers is school. Starting hobbies is school. Making and taking cookies to the widow down the street is school. Sitting and being quiet sometimes is school. Because life is school in childhood. And in some magical way that nature has provided for, all those childhood academics that you’re tearing your hair out trying to get your kids to do, will naturally happen, all along the way. I am watching it happen with my grandchildren. And they each are doing it on their own timetables and in their own ways. Individual personalities and gifts are manifesting themselves because there is freedom for that to happen.

And now I want to suggest one more thing—the golden hour of the day. If there is one hour in the day that is worth all the others to reclaim in your life, it’s the family story hour just before bedtime. Do whatever you can to protect it. And if you only had this family story hour, it can compensate for a LOT of what else happened in the day. This is the hour I reserve in my imaginary scenario here for the family classics—I’m going to choose books like Heidi and The Secret Garden and Understood Betsy and Swiss Family Robinson because these books will impress upon children’s hearts what strong family relationships look like; how loving families treat each other. The books don’t all start out that way, but in the end, strong bonds of love overcome all challenges and difficulties. These families all look different—some are with a grandparent or an aunt and uncle. Many of the families are in crisis—but the underlying spirit of

the story is always bonds of love will see it through. And these stories begin to suggest to children's hearts ways to spend their time—they show children what life looks like. And then you can add in other works of literature as your children get older.

Noone is ever too old for read aloud time. It's that voice thing.

I love the story of Maria von Trapp from the Sound of Music. Here a gem I copied down when I read her story:

“After supper came the most beautiful time of the day, the evenings spent together. A fire was lit in the fireplace. The older girls brought their knitting, the younger ones, their dolls; the boys and their father usually worked on wood, carving or whittling; and I, settling in a most comfortable chair, started to read aloud. It is most amazing how much literature you can cover during the long winter evenings. We read fairy tales and legends, historical novels and biographies, and the works of the great masters of prose and poetry.”

And then they'd sing.

After you finish reading tuck your children in bed with beautiful scriptural language floating through their heads and a prayer. And a sense that home is good. I love how it smells. I love how it feels. And I love my family. Life is good. Life is happy.

And so go our days and our month is over. You may still have jewels in your pocket that never got handed out. That's OK. Because you're going to be back again next year and the year after and the year after that. No worries. It's a journey, not a destination.

This journey will look different for every one of you. I'm sure I've stirred up more questions than answers. I cannot begin to prescribe what will fit with your family and style. I've just tried to paint some possibilities. And do I think your days will be all sunshine and rainbows? Of course not! There will noises and messes and some days, pure chaos. But no one ever climbed higher by reaching beneath them. Just giving you an ideal to reach upwards towards.

Some mothers say I just don't have time to do these things. Well, there is a law of the harvest. You cannot reap what you do not sow. Start simple. Even one tiny seed will eventually give you a flower. Plant what you can.

Use the planner to make it work for you. Knowing you have whatever you need will take a huge weight off your shoulders and you'll learn by doing. Let me stress again. If you are thinking grade level, you are thinking like a technician. These are general guidelines. If you have a 13 year old who missed all the developmental stages I talked about, you haven't ruined his life. Think Familiar first—what's familiar to him that you can connect to and build from. Or maybe you need to familiarize him with more things with short, high interest stories. And just because Age 8 is a good age to introduce King Arthur doesn't mean that you'll never read King Arthur at any other age. It's just that a four year old probably isn't going to be interested. Yet. Neither can you hand a book of history to a 14 year old and expect him to care about it if you don't pick

up some shorter, engaging stories to kindle the desire first and if he has no imagination to picture what he is reading about.

I hope that makes sense.

This planner helps you plan the learning you will do, but also provides the record so that next year, when you plan again, you can refer back to what you already did. Make it something memorable! Include pictures!

I can only offer a glimpse of this path less traveled, but if heart-based learning resonates in your heart and you want to incorporate it in your home, I suggest a gradual change while you are learning. The hardest diet for me to maintain is the one where I throw out all the familiar foods in my kitchen and try to incorporate a whole new eating lifestyle at once. That's a recipe for disaster that I can't maintain. Gradual works best. Start adding in the jewels to your day as you feel comfortable and it feels familiar to you—read a little more, play a little more classical music. Memorize a few lines of poetry. Spend more time in nature. Play more games together. And use the summer months to de-clutter and simplify your life by clearing out the junk if that's a problem and keep warming your own heart. The more jewels in your heart, the more they will flow out naturally and effortlessly.

I hope this planner will help create a little order to your day.

I'll close this section now with a little poem to remind you of the treasure you are gifting your children. This is called *The Treasure of the Wise Man* by James Whitcomb Reilly.

O the night was dark and the night was late,
And the robbers came to rob him;
And they picked the locks of his palace-gate,
The robbers that came to rob him—
They picked the locks of his palace-gate,
Seized his jewels and gems of state,
His coffer of gold and his priceless plate,—
The robbers that came to rob him.

But loud laughed he in the morning red!--
For of what had the robbers robbed him?--
Ho! Hidden safe, as he slept in bed,
When the robbers came to rob him,—
They robbed him not of a golden shred
Of the childish dreams in his wise old head—
“And they're welcome to all things else,” he said,
When the robbers came to rob him.

