FREE SAMPLE · CHAPTER 1

The Home Education Blueprint

Discover Your Child's Gifts and Build a Plan That Fits Your Family

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Home Education Revolution, Book 2

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CHAPTER 1

THERE'S NO CLOCK RUNNING

HOW RENEE STOPPED MEASURING THEO AND SIMONE AGAINST EVERYONE ELSE'S CALENDAR

Renee had both hands in Marla Whitcomb's mouth when the conversation started, which is how most of her conversations start.

It was a Tuesday in early October, the ten-fifteen, a routine cleaning. Marla was a good patient: easy gums, no complaints. She talked the way people talk to hygienists, which is to say continuously and to no one in particular. She had gotten through the weather and her sister's kitchen remodel. Somewhere around the lower left quadrant, she arrived at her son.

Bennett was eight. Bennett was reading chapter books now, actual chapter books, the kind with no pictures. His teacher had said at conferences that he was reading at a fifth-grade level, which Marla repeated twice. She said it the way people say things they've decided not to be proud of out loud, so they say them sideways instead. Then she said, and this was the part that followed Renee home, "I don't know how they measure that, honestly. But it's nice to know where he is."

Renee nodded. She had a scaler in one hand and a mirror in the other. She was not going to say anything, because there was nothing to say and nothing to say it with.

Her son Theo was six. Theo could tell you the name of every bone he had broken and how. On Thursday he had looked at the word *under* for eleven seconds and then looked out the window. Simone, her daughter, was eleven and read constantly, which should have been a comfort and somehow wasn't. Renee had no idea whether reading constantly at eleven was ahead, or normal, or beside the point.

She finished the quadrant. She polished, she flossed, she said the thing she says about the back molars. She walked Marla to the front desk and scheduled her for April.

And then she thought about it for the rest of the day.

By the time she got home she'd done the thing she always did, which was to convert a stray comment into a question she couldn't answer. It came out that night while she was standing at the sink, out loud, to nobody.

It's not that I think they're behind. It's that I have no idea what I'm supposed to be looking at.

That's the real fear, and it almost never gets said in the words it actually lives in. Renee was not lying awake convinced her children were failing. She was lying awake because she was eight months into homeschooling and she didn't know what she didn't know. And when you don't know what you don't know, you'll take direction from anything that offers it. A chart. A conference-room comment. A woman in the chair with a scaler in her mouth.

What can a milestone chart actually tell you?

I want to be careful here, because I'm not going to tell you that milestone charts are worthless. They aren't. They catch real prob-

lems in real children, which is why I would rather live in a world that has them than one that doesn't.

But they were built for a purpose, and it's worth knowing what it was.

1. A chart is built to find the far edges, not the middle.

Developmental norms exist so a pediatrician seeing four hundred children a year can spot the eight who need a closer look. That is what a screening tool is for, and this one does it well. It is built to be sensitive at the edges, which means it is built to be loose in the middle. And the enormous middle, where nearly every child actually lives, is not what the instrument was made to describe.

So when a chart says a child reads at a fifth-grade level, it is not telling you something true about that child. It's telling you one thing only: that his performance on one instrument, on one morning, looked like the average performance of a particular sample of ten-year-olds. That is a real fact. It's just a much smaller fact than it sounds like, and nowhere near the size of the fact Marla thought she was holding.

2. A chart has no memory.

This is the part that gets missed. I missed it for years. A chart can tell you where a child is standing. It cannot tell you which direction he's walking, or how fast, or whether he's been walking for two weeks or two years. Bennett reading at a fifth-grade level tells you nothing about where Bennett was in June. The distance between June and October is the information.

A single measurement is a photograph. What you want is the film.

Renee had eight months of the film for both children, in her head, unwritten. She'd watched Theo go from refusing to hold a pencil to writing his name in enormous crooked letters on everything he owned. She'd watched Simone move from reading only what she was assigned to reading at the table, in the car, and in the bathtub with the book held out of the water. She had all of it. She'd simply never counted it as evidence, because it didn't come with a number attached. She'd been trained her whole life to believe that things with numbers attached are the real things.

> **The principle:** A trajectory is not a deadline. At the early stages of a child's life, no one knows what the apex will be, so the early observations need to be true, not fast.

What changes when you ask a question that actually has an answer?

Here's what I'd like to hand you, with an honest accounting of what it is and what it isn't.

I can't promise you'll stop wondering whether your children are behind. I did this for fifteen years and I still get a version of that feeling, usually in a parking lot, usually in October. What I can tell you is that the question itself is broken. You can put it down and pick up a better one.

3. "Am I behind?" can't be answered, because there's nothing to be behind.

Behind requires a race, a starting gun, and a field. There is no gun. There is no field. There is your child, who started where he

started, carrying what he carries, moving at the rate a person like him moves.

You can compare him to a sample of other children on a particular instrument. That will produce a number that feels like an answer. It is not one. You will ask the question again in six weeks, because unanswerable questions always come back. That is what makes them unanswerable.

4. "Where is he right now, and what comes next?" can be answered, by you, this week.

Not by a chart. Not by a teacher who has him six hours a day. Not by me. By you — the only person on earth who has watched all of it. I know that can land like one more thing on your shoulders. I mean it as the opposite.

*Where **is he** right now* is a describable fact. It's usually more than one. On Thursday, Theo looked at *under* for eleven seconds and then looked out the window. In March he wouldn't hold a pencil. On the twenty-ninth of September he wrote his own name on the bottom of a drawing, without anyone asking him to. Both are true about the same boy in the same season. A chart would have room for only one of them.

What comes next is a decision you make from those facts, not from a comparison.

And I want to say the thing this book will keep saying, because I think it's the question sitting underneath the other one. What most parents want to know isn't really whether their child is behind. It's whether something is genuinely wrong.

So here it is. If something genuinely isn't where it needs to be, this is how you find out. Not later than a chart would have told you —

earlier, and more precisely, and with a next step already attached. A named challenge with a next step is a relief. It is a verdict only when nobody knows what to do about it.

Let me put one boundary around that now, so it's never in question later. Watching your child closely and writing down what you see is how a difficulty *surfaces*. It is not how it gets *named*. If what accumulates in that notebook starts pointing somewhere specific, you take the notebook to someone qualified to read it. You will walk in carrying months of dated observation — more than almost any parent brings. Your job is to see clearly. It was never to diagnose.

The principle: You can't answer whether you're behind. You can answer where he is right now, and what comes next.

So where do you put what you notice?

Renee bought two composition notebooks at the grocery store on a Wednesday — the cheap black-and-white marbled kind, ninety-seven cents each, in a package of two. She wrote THEO on one and SIMONE on the other in marker, and she felt slightly foolish doing it.

That night she wrote four sentences in Theo's, and dated them.

I want you to sit with this for a second, because the honest version of what I'm asking you to do involves waiting. I won't ask you to wait without telling you what arrives immediately.

The waiting part is real. It can take a few months of watching before the entries pile up into something with a shape you can see. I'm not going to pretend otherwise.

But something arrives the same night that has nothing to do with waiting. The four sentences Renee wrote in Theo's notebook are

already a dated record of who her son was in the first week of October, when he was six. That is not preparation for something. That *is* the thing.

Ten years from now, when Theo is sixteen and mostly in his room and unrecognizable in the ordinary way sixteen-year-olds are unrecognizable, that page will be the only place the six-year-old still exists. Not a photograph of him. Photographs are everywhere, and all they preserve is what he looked like. This is what he was *like*: what he noticed, what he said at the table, what he did with his hands when he was bored. Nobody else is writing that down. There's no copy of it anywhere. The school he doesn't attend isn't keeping one, and nothing will reconstruct it later from what you can still remember at forty.

You don't have to finish this book to get that. You get it tonight, and again every night you write four sentences and put a date on them.

There's something else I should say now rather than later. The question that put Renee at the sink is going to come back. Not because she'll have failed at anything, but because it comes back at every seam — when a child turns nine, when a co-op adds a level, when a friend's kid does something a year early. What changes is not that the feeling stops. What changes is what she has in her hand when it arrives. We'll come back to this, near the end, when she has enough years behind her for it to mean something.

For now, two notebooks and a date.

A Conversation to Have With AI

Here is where AI helps with the exact problem this chapter is about: not knowing what you don't know. You don't need any technical skill for this, and no script to get right.

Open whatever assistant you use — ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini, whichever is already on your phone — and talk to it the way you'd talk to the one friend who actually thinks before she answers. Tell it about one of your children, by age, in your own words, the way you'd describe him to someone across a lunch table. Then ask it what "on track" would even mean for a child like that, and ask it what it would want to know before it tried to answer.

This usually is not a one-and-done. It may ask what you meant by a word you used. If it hands you something short and flat, give it more detail. If it hands you a checklist, tell it you didn't ask for a checklist, you asked for a conversation.

The point is not to get *the* answer. It's to hear your own child described out loud by something that has no opinion about him yet, and to notice which parts you'd argue with. The parts you'd argue with are the parts you already know.

There's no wrong way to ask. You'll find as we go that the more you do this, the closer the answers get.

Your Journal Entry This Week

Watch for: any sentence where you measure your child against a calendar or against another child. Not to punish yourself for it, just to notice it. The comparison you want is to the same child last week, last month, last year.

Evaluate: read each entry back and ask whether it's a fact or a fear. *He looked at the word for eleven seconds and then looked out the window* is a fact. *He might have a reading problem* is a fear. Both are honest. Only one belongs in the notebook this week. Write the fact. Set the fear down, it'll keep.

Habit: date every entry, even a one-line one, even on the day when the entry is nothing new, he built a fort. The dates are what turn a pile of notes into a record. Ten years from now, the dates are the part you won't believe you have. They make it real.

One More Thing Before Chapter 2

Renee kept the notebooks going for eight days before she noticed something she hadn't expected.

She'd assumed writing things down would make her more anxious, that seeing it on paper would make the gaps official. It did the opposite. Once a worry was written as a fact, it stopped circling. It sat there on the page, finite, one sentence long, taking up exactly as much room as it actually deserved. She stopped carrying it around at the sink.

That's the second thing a notebook does, though nobody warns you about it. It is not only a record of your child. It's a place to set a worry down where it will keep, so your head can stop holding it open.

But eight days in she noticed something else, and this one was less comfortable. Her entries about Simone were short and vague and mostly about what Simone had read. Her entries about Theo were long and specific and full of conclusions.

She was writing about one child and interpreting the other.

The calendar is not the only false measuring stick in the house. There's a closer one that comes from you: the child you've already built in your imagination, who fits one of your children better than the other.

If You Remember Nothing Else

Not knowing what to look for is not the same as failing at it. It's the first week of a new language. Nobody is fluent in the first week. I wasn't. You don't have to be able to name what you're seeing tonight. You only have to write down what you saw. The naming comes later, and it comes from you.

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