FREE SAMPLE · CHAPTER 1

The Home Education Starter Guide

How to Homeschool Well, Understand Your Child Better, and Begin Discovering the Unique Gifts They Were Given

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THE DAY WE LEFT

HOW AMANDA HENDERSON STOPPED WAITING FOR THINGS TO GET BETTER, AND WHAT HAPPENED NEXT

Amanda Henderson didn't pull her daughter from school in a dramatic moment. There was no final straw, no terrible incident, no confrontation in the principal's office. There was just a Tuesday afternoon in October when her nine-year-old climbed into the back seat of the car, buckled her seatbelt, and said nothing.

Not a word about her day. Not a complaint. Not a question. Just silence.

Amanda watched her daughter in the rearview mirror. Lily had her forehead pressed against the window, watching the school building disappear behind them. Her backpack sat in her lap like a weight she'd forgotten to put down.

"How was school?" Amanda asked.

Lily shrugged. The same shrug she'd been giving for six months.

That evening, Amanda sat at the kitchen table after Lily was in bed and tried to remember the last time her daughter had come home

from school excited about something. The last time she'd talked at dinner without being asked. The last time she'd mentioned a friend, a project, a book.

She couldn't remember.

What she could remember: the note from the teacher in September saying Lily was "having trouble staying focused." The parent-teacher conference, where the teacher, a kind woman, clearly exhausted, clearly managing too many children at once, had explained that Lily was "capable but distracted." The stack of worksheets Amanda had found in the bottom of Lily's backpack, completed and never turned in. The stomachaches that started every Sunday night and disappeared every Friday afternoon.

Lily wasn't struggling academically. She was disappearing.

"I think we need to try something different," Amanda told her husband David, that night.

"Like what?"

"I don't know yet. But this isn't working."

David was quiet for a moment. "You mean homeschooling."

"I think so."

Another silence. Then: "Do you know how to do that?"

"No," Amanda said. "But I know someone has to."

That conversation happened on a Tuesday. By Friday, Amanda had fallen down a rabbit hole of Google searches, YouTube videos, and Pinterest boards filled with color-coded lesson plans that looked like they belonged in a magazine.

She had found three different curriculum comparison websites, fourteen different homeschool philosophies, and enough acronyms, CM, WTM, AO, SWR, TWTM, to fill an alphabet.

She had also found a very specific kind of panic.

"I thought I was making a decision," she told me later. "It turned out I was starting a research project with no end."

I recognized that feeling immediately. It's the feeling every homeschool parent describes in those early weeks, the sense that there is an enormous amount to know, and that everyone else already knows it, and that you are very, very far behind. I've been there. Russ has watched me be there. And I've sat across from enough families since then to know that this panic is not a sign that you made the wrong decision. It's a sign that you care deeply about getting it right.

But here's what I've learned from the hundreds of families who've reached out since Russ and I wrote The Roadschool Revolution: the families who thrive don't start with perfect plans. They start with the next step. And then the one after that.

Amanda didn't need a perfect plan. She needed a starting point.

This chapter is that starting point.

The Problem Isn't Commitment. It's Clarity.

Before Amanda could take any practical step, she needed to understand something that most new homeschool parents don't realize until they're already exhausted: the overwhelm isn't caused by the

decision to homeschool. It's caused by trying to solve every problem at once.

In the first days after making the decision, most parents are simultaneously trying to figure out whether they're legally allowed to do this, what curriculum to buy, how to know if their child is behind or ahead, what a homeschool day is actually supposed to look like, and whether they're qualified to do any of it at all.

That last one is the quiet one. It doesn't always announce itself directly. It arrives as a stomach flutter when you look at a curriculum website. It shows up as the voice that says: what if I miss something important? What if I do this wrong?

Here is what I want to say to that voice before we go any further:

You are not starting from zero. You have been watching your child learn, struggle, light up, and shut down for years. You know how they think. You know what frustrates them. You know what makes their eyes go bright. That knowledge doesn't disappear because a classroom couldn't use it. It becomes your greatest teaching asset.

The credential that matters most in homeschooling is knowing your child. You already have it.

Now let's deal with the practical things, in the right order.

Step One: The Legal Question (It's Simpler Than You Think)

The first thing Amanda did, after the Google spiral, after the panic, was call her sister, who had been homeschooling for three years.

"The first thing you need to do," her sister said, "is find out what your state actually requires. Not what the internet says homeschooling requires. What your state requires."

This is genuinely good advice, and it's where every family should begin. Because the legal landscape for homeschooling is not uniform, and the horror stories that circulate online, about families being investigated, about impossible requirements, about children being forced back into public school, almost always trace back to misunderstandings about what the law actually says.

The reality is considerably calmer.

Most states have straightforward homeschool requirements. Some ask for a letter of intent, a simple written notice to your local school district that you're withdrawing your child and beginning homeschooling. Some require annual testing or a portfolio review. A small number require nothing beyond keeping basic records. But in almost every state, the process of legally beginning to homeschool is something a capable adult can complete in an afternoon.

The most important thing to understand is this: homeschooling is legal in all fifty states. You are not doing something radical or prohibited. You are exercising a recognized parental right.

If your child is currently enrolled in a public or private school, you will also need to formally withdraw them. In most cases, this means contacting the school, a phone call, and a follow-up email is usually sufficient. Some schools are gracious about it. Some are not. Either way, you are not required to justify your decision beyond what the law asks. Keep a copy of whatever documentation you submit.

Using AI to Research Your State's Requirements

Research Your State's Requirements

This is one of the first places where an AI tool earns its keep, not by making decisions for you, but by helping you find and organize information quickly. Amanda used this prompt to get her bearings before she spent hours on the Department of Education website. Copy it into ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini, or your preferred AI assistant, fill in your state, and let it point you in the right direction. Then verify what it tells you against your state's official site, AI is a starting point, not a lawyer.

PROMPT

I am planning to withdraw my child from public school and begin homeschooling in [your state]. Please give me a clear summary of: the legal requirements for homeschooling in this state, whether a letter of intent or notice of withdrawal is required and who to send it to; any testing or evaluation requirements, basic record-keeping requirements, and where I can find the official state guidelines to verify this information. Please keep this practical and simple. I just need to know what I'm actually required to do.

A Note for Parents of Children with IEPs or Diagnoses

If your child currently has an Individualized Education Program or receives services through the public school, the withdrawal process involves additional considerations. Your child's legal right to services through the public school system ends when they are formally withdrawn. Before withdrawing, it's worth understanding what services you may be giving up and whether your

state offers any homeschool-specific support for children with special needs.

We'll address homeschooling children with learning differences in depth in Chapter 8. If this applies to your family, consider reading that chapter before you complete the withdrawal process.

For families where a diagnosis is part of the reason you're leaving, where the school's response to your child's needs has been the problem, not the solution, you are not alone, and this decision is not impulsive. It may be the most informed decision you've made.

Step Two: Before Curriculum, Evaluation

Here is the mistake almost every new homeschool parent makes, and it is completely understandable: they buy curriculum before they know where their child actually is.

It feels like forward motion. Curriculum is tangible. It has a plan built in. It looks like someone has already done the thinking for you.

The problem is that curriculum chosen without evaluation is like buying shoes before you measure the foot. You might get lucky. Or you might spend the next three months wondering why nothing fits, why your child is bored, or frustrated, or refusing to open the workbook.

Amanda made this mistake. She bought a complete curriculum package, a well-reviewed, popular program, before she'd sat down with Lily and actually looked at where she was.

"Two weeks in, Lily was crying every morning," Amanda told me. "The math was too easy and boring her, and the reading was too hard and frustrating her. It was like the curriculum was designed for some other child who happened to be the same age."

The curriculum wasn't bad. It just didn't fit Lily. And Amanda had no way of knowing that without first understanding where Lily actually stood.

The evaluation step feels like a detour. It isn't. It's the thing that makes every subsequent decision faster and more confident.

What You Already Know

Before any formal assessment, sit down with a notebook and write out what you've already observed. You've been watching this child for years. You know things no diagnostic can tell you.

Write down: What subjects felt strong? What felt like a struggle? How does your child respond to frustration, do they shut down, push through, ask for help, or pretend they understand? Do they learn best by reading, listening, doing, or talking? What time of day is their mind sharpest? What makes them give up?

This isn't a test. It's a map of what you already know, written down so you can use it.

Discovery Note: *Keep this list. The patterns you just named, what frustrates her, what makes her light up, how she responds when something is hard, are observations you'll come back to long after this curriculum decision is behind you.*

The Calm Diagnostic

Once you've written out what you know, a simple at-home diagnostic can fill in the gaps. The goal isn't to produce an official document, it's to find the real starting line.

When you administer it, don't call it a test. Tell your child: "I just want to see what you already know so we don't waste time reviewing things you've already mastered." That reframe is small. The difference it makes is not.

Using AI to Evaluate Where Your Child Actually Is

Build a Diagnostic Assessment

Once you've written down what you already know about your child, this prompt helps you build a simple assessment to fill in the gaps. It takes about two minutes to generate and gives you something concrete to work from, a real starting line instead of a guess. Don't call it a test when you sit down with your child.

PROMPT

Please create a diagnostic assessment for a [grade level] student in math, reading comprehension, and writing skills. Include 10 math questions covering core concepts for this grade level, a short reading passage with 5 comprehension questions, a short writing prompt, an answer key, and clear guidance for interpreting results. Make it slightly challenging so that genuine gaps become visible. The tone should feel like a learning conversation, not a test.

Analyze the Results

Once your child has completed the diagnostic, bring the results back to AI for analysis. This is the moment where the vague worry about whether they're "on track" becomes something specific and actionable. Specific is always easier to work with than vague.

PROMPT

Here are my child's answers to the diagnostic I ran. My child is [age], recently withdrawn from [grade] in public school. Please identify which skills appear solid, identify which skills show gaps or inconsistencies, estimate their current instructional level in each area, suggest a starting grade range for curriculum placement, and recommend specific focus areas for the first six weeks. [Paste their answers here]

What Amanda found when she ran this assessment surprised her. Lily was significantly ahead in reading comprehension, her ability to analyze and discuss what she read was well above grade level. Her math facts were solid. But her ability to show her work, to write out her thinking rather than just arriving at answers, was weak. The school had never flagged it because her answers were correct. But it was a gap that would matter later.

"It was like suddenly having a map," Amanda said. "Before the diagnostic, I was just guessing. After it, I knew exactly what to look for in a curriculum."

That's the whole point of this step. You're not looking for problems. You're looking for clarity. And clarity is always easier to act on than anxiety.

Step Three: The First Six Weeks Are Not About Acceleration

This is the part nobody tells you before you start, so I'm going to say it plainly: the first four to six weeks after leaving school are not about getting ahead. They're about stabilizing.

Children who leave public school, even children who left because they were unhappy, often need time to decompress. The rhythm of institutional learning is deeply embedded. The bells, the schedules, the expectation of constant performance. It doesn't disappear in a day.

Some children spend the first week of homeschooling waiting to be told what to do. Some resist anything that looks like school. Some are giddy with freedom for two days and then quietly anxious when the freedom doesn't come with a structure they understand. Some sleep late, grow clingy, become demanding in ways that have nothing to do with curriculum.

All of this is normal. It's called deschooling, and it's not a problem. It's the transition.

Lily spent the first week drawing. Elaborate, detailed drawings of horses that covered both sides of every piece of paper Amanda gave her. She barely touched the curriculum materials.

Amanda panicked.

"I called my sister and said, she won't do anything. She's just drawing horses. Am I already failing?"

Her sister, the three-year veteran, laughed. "She's not not learning. She's recovering. Give her the week."

I want you to hear that the way Amanda's sister meant it, not as permission to do nothing, but as permission to trust your child's

instincts about what they need in the days right after a significant change. Recovery is real work, even when it doesn't look like it.

By week two, Lily started asking questions. About horses, at first, their biology, their history, how different breeds developed. Then about other things. She started reading on her own without being asked. She started bringing Amanda books and asking her to read them together.

"By week three," Amanda said, "I had a completely different child. Not better than before, she was always a good kid. But present. She was present again."

What a Strong First Six Weeks Actually Looks Like

A minimal, sustainable starter plan usually includes these elements, and not much more: Reading daily. Together or independently. Fiction, nonfiction, whatever interests your child. Reading is not a subject in the early weeks; it's a rhythm.

One core math focus. Not a new program, not a full curriculum, just a clear sense of where your child is in math and daily practice at that level. Twenty minutes a day of math that is neither too easy nor too hard does more than an hour of fighting with curriculum that doesn't fit.

Real conversation. Discussion about what you're reading, what you're observing, what interests them. Critical thinking is not a curriculum. It's a conversation.

Short focused lessons with frequent breaks. Your child does not need six hours of structured instruction. Research consistently supports what experienced homeschool parents know intuitively, children working one-on-one or in small groups reach the same

learning benchmarks in a fraction of the seat time that large classrooms require.

A rough daily rhythm, not a rigid schedule. A rhythm gives the day shape without treating every deviation as a failure. We'll talk about schedules in depth in Chapter Three.

Build a Six-Week Starter Plan

When you're ready to move from stabilization into structure, this prompt builds a simple six-week plan around where your child actually is, not where a curriculum assumes they should be. Fill in the details honestly, including your own energy level. That last one matters more than most planning guides acknowledge.

PROMPT

Please help me build a simple six-week homeschool plan for my child who has just transitioned from public school. Child details: age and grade just completed [fill in], key strengths [fill in from your notes], key gaps identified in diagnostic [fill in], learning style [reading / hands-on / discussion / visual], available school time per day [fill in], my energy level right now [low/medium/high]. Please include core subjects to focus on (keep it minimal), recommended lesson lengths, balance of independent vs. guided learning, built-in flexibility for hard days, signs the plan is working, and signs it needs adjustment. Prioritize stabilization and confidence over content coverage. The goal for these six weeks is a child who feels safe learning at home, not a child who is caught up to grade level.

What Amanda Learned, And What You Can Learn

Six weeks after withdrawing Lily from school, Amanda sent me a message that I've thought about many times since.

"I feel like I got my daughter back. Not a different daughter, the same one. But I can see her now. I couldn't see her before."

That's the thing about institutional education that's difficult to articulate until you've stepped outside of it: it isn't designed to see individual children. It can't be. It's designed to move many children through a common sequence as efficiently as possible. The teachers inside it are often extraordinary, working extraordinarily hard, constrained by a system that wasn't built to do what they're trying to do.

It wasn't Lily's teacher's fault that she couldn't see Lily. She had twenty-eight children to see.

Homeschooling gives you one. Or two or three. And that number changes everything.

But Amanda also learned things that didn't feel good in the moment. She learned them the way most homeschool parents learn them, by getting them wrong first. I'm sharing them here because getting them wrong first is expensive, and you have the option of learning from Amanda's experience instead.

Lesson One: Clarity Before Curriculum

Amanda bought curriculum before she evaluated Lily. She wasted money and weeks on a program that didn't fit her child. The evaluation step felt like a delay; it turned out to be the most important thing she did.

The principle: Know your child's starting line before you choose the race. Curriculum is a tool. A tool that doesn't fit the hand is worse than no tool at all.

Lesson Two: The First Weeks Are for the Child, Not the Curriculum

When Lily spent a week drawing horses, Amanda's instinct was to redirect her back to structured learning. Her sister's advice, give her the week, turned out to be exactly right. The drawing wasn't avoidance. It was recovery.

Children who've spent years in an environment that didn't see them need time to remember what it feels like to be safe learning. Rushing past that stage doesn't accelerate learning. It re-creates the conditions you pulled them from.

The principle: Stabilization before acceleration. Always.

Lesson Three: You Are Already the Expert on Your Child

Amanda spent the first two weeks of homeschooling feeling profoundly unqualified. She didn't have a teaching credential. She didn't know the terminology. She didn't have a philosophy.

What she had was this: she knew that Lily was a visual learner who needed to understand the why behind what she was learning, or she'd disengage. She knew that Lily worked best in the mornings and was useless after 2 PM. She knew that Lily needed specific encouragement, "That's a really precise observation", not generic, like "good job." She knew that Lily would rather read a paragraph twice than ask for help understanding it, and that this tendency needed to be gently interrupted.

No credential teaches you those things. Years of watching your child do.

The principle: Your knowledge of your child is the foundation of your teaching. Everything else, curriculum, schedules, methods, is built on top of it.

Lesson Four: The Questions Don't Stop. They Change.

The overwhelm Amanda felt in week one, the sense that there was too much to know and she was too far behind, didn't disappear. But it changed shape.

In week one, the questions were: What am I allowed to do? What curriculum should I buy? Am I qualified?

By week six, the questions were: How do I challenge Lily in writing without crushing her confidence? How do I know when to push and when to step back? How do I make math feel less like a battle?

The second set of questions is better than the first. It means you're actually teaching now, not just preparing to teach.

The principle: You don't need all the answers before you begin. You need enough clarity to take the next step. The rest comes from doing it.

The Transition Checklist

Before we close this chapter, here is a prompt Amanda uses with every new family she mentors into homeschooling, because yes, she does that now. She has become one of those parents who sits

across from someone who is right where she was and says: I know how this feels. Let me show you the first step.

Your Transition Checklist

Print what this generates. Tape it somewhere you'll see it. The days when you need it most are the days when you're least likely to remember it without a reminder in front of you.

PROMPT

Please create a clear, calm checklist for transitioning my child from public school to homeschooling. Include legal steps to complete (I am in [your state]), what to do the first week, what to focus on the first month, what NOT to worry about yet, simple record-keeping I should start now, and when to reassess and adjust. Keep it practical and calm. I don't need everything, I need the next action step.

One More Thing Before Chapter Two

Something happens in the first weeks of homeschooling that nobody prepares you for.

You start to see your child differently. Not because they've changed. Because you have time to look.

Amanda described it as "catching up", like she and Lily had been in the same house for years but somehow living in different time zones, passing each other on the way to and from obligations that never quite stopped. And now, for the first time in a long time, they were in the same room at the same speed.

"She's funny," Amanda said, laughing a little. "She's genuinely funny. I knew that, but I forgot it. There was never enough time to notice."

That's the thing homeschooling gives you that no curriculum can provide: the time to notice.

Lily still has things to work on. Her writing still needs development. She still resists math when it feels abstract. She still has days when she'd rather draw horses than do anything else.

But Amanda sees it now. She has the information and the time to respond to it.

That's the beginning. That's what you're building toward.

In the next chapter, we're going to look at what happens once you're past the transition, when the question shifts from "how do I start?" to "how do I build something that actually matters?" Because the decision to homeschool is only the beginning. The real work is understanding what you're actually trying to build, and why.

You've made the hardest decision. The rest is figuring it out together.

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