

Homeschooling with a Large Family and Multiple Ages

An Interview with Lynna Sutherland *C2C Podcast Episode #12*



Jody: So, large families are a common challenge for homeschool families. Jenni, you have seven kids and to the rest of the world, that is a lot. But in the homeschool community, you're just pretty average, if not under par, really. So, today's guest is going to share some thoughts and ideas for families who are facing this particular challenge. And for those who don't have a lot of kids, we're hoping this episode will give you a small peek into the large family universe.

Jenni: Lynna Sutherland is a homeschool graduate herself, former classroom teacher and now homeschools her eight children ages teen to toddler. Through her site, Homeschooling Without Training Wheels, Lynna encourages moms to ditch what slows them down and look to Jesus. She also loves to show moms how the Gospel transforms sibling conflicts from an obstacle into an opportunity on her podcast, Sibling Relationship Lab. Lynna, thank you so much for joining us on the podcast today.

Lynna: Thanks for having me.

Jenni: Okay, so let's jump right in here. Tell us, um, some of the biggest challenges that large homeschool families face.

Lynna: Yeah, I think, you know, as you said before, that this might be a peek into what large family life is like for families that maybe don't have this many children. But you know, I have a feeling that as we chat, a lot of what I say is really gonna resonate, because, you know, it's not like a different world, it's just the same things but multiplied. So, you know, I mean a lot of the things that are challenging, moms who don't have a large family could probably already anticipate like, um, you know, you have a lot of needs that come to you throughout the day, but then multiply that by eight and it can feel like you're constantly under demand or, um, with the sibling thing, I think I calculated one time and I don't remember the math exactly, but you know, if you have two children, then you have one possible sibling combination. If you have eight children, it's somewhere in the 60s of the number of possible combinations of children that you could be. So, you know, it's just- it's the same kinds of things. But just more, and then, in terms of the homeschooling piece, um, you know, the larger family you have, um, and we don't have any twins anywhere in there. So, you know, it just kind of extends the age range that you're homeschooling. So, um, I think many large families have the experience that we have, which is we're heading into our, let's see, 10th year of homeschooling and you know, people talk about, "Oh, how do you homeschool with a baby or toddler?". I've never homeschooled and not had a baby or toddler, a lot. Like, I've never gotten to the point where we had only school-aged kids. I'll be there in a few years. But you know, it's not just, like, this brief window where you,

like, "Hold your breath, grit your teeth and get through it!" You know, it's like "This is our reality..."

Jody: This is life.

Lynna: ...decade or more." Right. Yeah. So, and I think the one thing that people ask about all the time, funny enough, not as much from moms of large families, but from, you know, other moms who are just curious about, like, "How does this all work?" Is the one-on-one time.

Jenni: Yes!

Lynna: How do you find time to work individually with each, with each kid? So yeah, I think those are some of the biggest challenges I would point to.

Jenni: I remember when, um, when I was early in my homeschooling, I had found a math curriculum that I loved, but it required a lot of my interaction. So for about an hour, you know, I sat- We did this really fun, hands-on, game-driven program. But at one point, I had four kids, all on different levels and I had to switch curriculums, because I could not spend four hours a day on math just doing- They were all at a different level and I just couldn't do it. So that- And that was really sad to me. I was super sad to have to give that up, but there was no way I could make it work.

Lynna: Right? Yeah. And I think, you know, just like with any homeschool family, so much of it is what you're talking about. It's a learn-as-you-go. When I started homeschooling, you know, we knew that we wanted to have a bunch of kids. We didn't really know what that meant at that time. But, um, and someone said to me, "Oh, well, if you're going to have a large family, then you need to make sure that from the start you do things that are sustainable for a large family." And I get what she was saying. I mean, there's a good point to that, but frankly it was overwhelming to me because it was like, "Okay, I have a kindergartner and then I have these other little rugrats, and I really don't know what's sustainable or not. Like, how am I supposed to get that?" And it put all this pressure on me as though, like, I was supposed to kind of be able to predict the whole journey from the outset. And...

Jenni: Like a corporation.

Lynna: You know, for a long time, I tried really hard to like, "Okay, is this going to be sustainable when I'm homeschooling eight kids? I don't know. How will I know?", you know? Um, and so, you know, I- My personality type I think is the kind that really like is attracted to that idea. Like, "I'm going to do it right from the beginning. I'm gonna figure out, ahead of time," you know? And that's great. I mean, I'm not saying there's no value in thinking forward to how this will play out, but, um, I think, just like every other homeschool family, what that means and how that works, first of all, it's changed over time. Um, and also it's completely been a learn-as-you-go. So, even if I were to explain to you things that I'm doing now that work, it's not like, "Oh yes, I've known this from day one and I've always had it set up." Right? Well, three months ago, I didn't even do this. So, you know.

Jenni: Right. Well, you know, I had somebody- When I had my second child, somebody said to me, "Every child is born into a different family." And that stuck with me

all along, and my second daughter is 17 years older than my youngest. And my- She was saying at one point- She had gone away to college and when she came home to visit, she was saying, "Boy, Rhema is our baby. Rhema's life is so completely different than mine was. You're a different parent and her experience is so vastly different." And I think that's true. We grow along the way- It's no- There- I feel like there's no way you could really make a system scalable from day one, because you don't know who you're going to be 10 years from now and you don't know what your family dynamic is going to look like at that point.

Lynna: Yeah. All I can say is "Amen! That's absolutely true."

Jenni: Right?

Jody: Yeah. I mean you gain in wisdom for one and I don't know- I became so much more relaxed.

Jenni: I was gonna say- I was a hot mess from the start.

Jody: Oh, I was, too. And I felt like I was angry all the time. I don't know what my problem was, but, man, I was mad. We walked into a room, I'm mad.

Jenni: Yep.

Lynna: I was on a podcast a while ago and the question was something like, "What would you tell your younger self?", or "What would you- What do you wish you'd known?", or something like that. And it was like, "You know, I can think of a lot of things, but I don't know that she would have listened."

Jenni: Exactly!

Lynna: I think she would have felt like I was a cop-out and I had just gotten soft and I don't think that I could've gotten from there to here without the intervening 10 years of bumps and bruises along the way.

Jody: That's true.

Jenni: What a great insight too, because we think that a lot. What would- could we go back and do differently? Well, you know what? Unless I had all the experiences along the way to have the maturity I have now, I wouldn't do anything differently.

Lynna: Yeah, that's right.

Jenni: I would've done it exactly the same way.

Jody: Well, you know, I'm all like...

Lynna: God knows. I mean, he only teaches us what we need at the moment. He doesn't say like, "Hey, kindergartener, this is the table of contents of the calculus book. Just want to let you know how far you have to go."

Jenni: Yeah. Just get yourself ready, put some systems in place, now. It's kind of like handle it, then.

Jody: It's kind of like when you have that first kid and they're so well behaved and they're- They're just, you know, the perfect little child and you're like, "I got this parenting thing down." And then the next one comes and you're like, "Oh no. Uh-uh."

Jenni: That took number six for me. My first one was- Is on the autism spectrum. So it was gnarly. I mean it was a rough road right out of the gate, but then, they just got easier and easier. And after I had number five, I will tell you what, I will confess right now, I thought I had this parenting thing down.

Jody: Then came Matty Jay!

Jenni: I was patting myself on the back and then came number six. Wow!

Jody: No, that number six. I was like, "Wow."

Jenni: There were times where Jody and I were in the car with number six when he was a baby and- And- And Jody started to cry. No joke.

Jody: It's true.

Jenni: Because he screamed like the whole trip.

Jody: Oh, my gosh.

Jenni: Yeah, so you just don't know what you don't know.

Lynna: Yeah. Yeah, and it's a mercy, right? It's a mercy that you don't know, ahead of time, what bumps are coming. Cause you would just, you know...

Jody: You'd probably quit!

Lynna: Be consumed with anxiety, right? Yeah.

Jody: I'd be like, "I'm done!".

Jenni: But thankfully, thankfully, God knows. And he does. He matures us along the way and gets us ready. Because if I didn't have had Matty Jay early on, I don't know what I would've done. But he's awesome. He's a super, super, super smart kid and- And- And he's- And he's awesome, now, it just took a little while.

Jody: So, Lynna, I've got 3- And actually, I'm- my granddaughter lives with me, too. So, I've got, you know, those personalities in my house. There's a lot of personalities in a large family, I mean, how do you manage those?

Lynna: Yeah, it's interesting. So I'm- I can't speak for everyone, but it's funny that ours kind of seemed to fall into two personality categories and I- I don't know enough to know. Like somebody listening could probably be like, "Oh yeah, that's Myers-Briggs, ES, ABC, whatever the thing is." Um, but I have my ones who are like these busy-driven, "I'm going to get all this done quick cause I've got stuff I want to do," who also have a really hard time reacting to change in plans and are quicker to get angry and frustrated. And then I have my group who are more kind of like, "♪ La, la-la.♪ Stop and smell the roses. I forgot

that I had schoolwork to do.” But also pretty laid-back and like, ”That’s cool. Whatever. We’re,” you know, “Oh we’re doing this? Yay, I’m excited.” or “We’re doing that? Oh I’m excited about that too!” You know, so...

Jody: So, let me guess, you have team A on the North end of the house and you have team B on the South end of the house.

Lynna: Yeah. They’re all just mixed in there. And it’s funny, ‘cause it doesn’t line up by boy/girl. It doesn’t line up by birth order.

Jenni: Age, yeah,

Lynna: Yeah. Right. Yep.

Jenni: I have- in my seven, I had kids- all the kids- well the first five anyway, we’re this kind of kid. They get up in the morning and be like “Okay, what’s happening today? Where are we going? What are we doing? And is somebody coming over? What’s the great, fun, exciting, adventurous thing that’s going to happen today?” And I kind of acclimated to that, you know, so I- we made some fun, exciting plans and we became the people who went out in the community a lot and did lots of things. Then number six, “Where do we have to go?”.

Jody: No, he does this. “Mmm, I don’t think I want to do that today.”

Jenni: “Can’t we just stay home? Why do these people have to come to our house?” And I don’t know what to do with it. I’m, like, scrambling to try and figure out, this is like so different than what I’m used to. So, you have enough kids, boy, and you just get one of every kind.

Lynna: Yeah. Yup.

Jenni: You got to make it all work. Okay. You have something very compelling and so whatever- You can share with us, we would love it. I know that this is part of a subscription-based program that you offer, which we’ll talk about briefly, um, in just a moment, but share with us, whatever you can, about the five myths that are killing multi-age homeschools. I have to tell you that is so compelling, I am dying to know.

Lynna: So the basic summary is just this, there are all of these things, which you guys know – you know, I’m sure you’ve experienced this across the years – that we all deal with as, you know, either we’ve- we’ve come up through the ranks of a traditional school ourselves. Maybe our kids have spent some time in a traditional school setting, I, myself, was a classroom teacher. And the funny thing is, I knew when I started my public school job that if someday I was going to quit and stay home and have babies and homeschool them. But-

Jody: Oh, wow.

Lynna: You know, even with that perspective, it’s- It’s amazing how much you absorb about the right way to educate people. And so this- this uh, this free ebook- It’s free. You know, I’ll- I’ll share with you guys a link so you can put it in the show notes.

Jenni: Okay, great.

Lynna: So subscribers can download it. But it's just the idea is just thinking through some things. And I really- I think that these things are, um, you know, things that are going to be a stumbling block to any homeschool family. But, you know, like I said before, the same challenges that any family has are just multiplied in a larger family. So for example, you know, you were talking before about this math curriculum, that was wonderful, but it took so much time. And so I think that we can, you know, and this is my case when I had, um, fewer children who were, like, officially school-aged, but you know, I could follow a system that was more school-y, you know, that was more like what I had done in a traditional classroom, and I was able to get by with it. And I'm not saying it was, like, bad for my children or whatever, but by the time I got to having four on board, um, and you know, four different math curriculums and four different handwriting books and four different language workbooks and all this stuff, like I was running myself into the ground.

Jenni: Yeah.

Lynna: And so I had to face things just from a logistical perspective. But, you know, it was, like, one of those things where the Lord kind of, you know, he sends these challenges, but in the end, you come out better for it. And so, you know, I look back and I think, you know, I was doing all these things and I think if the Lord hadn't kind of, like, you know, pried my stiff, white knuckles off the steering wheel and forced me to look for something different, I don't know that I could have brought myself around to that change. But in retrospect, I'm really thankful for, you know, the increased, um, just flexibility and change in my perspective of the philosophy of what it is we're doing here and why. And so, for example, one of the things that I talk about in the ebook is, um, that we're really caught up, even when we think we're not, we're really caught up with this idea that certain things have to happen at certain grade levels, right? Like, "This is what a second grader has to do." "This is what a third grader has to do." And you know, a lot of the reason that that overflows even into a homeschool is because, and I'm not knocking anybody or any company in particular, but you know, when homeschooling was becoming popular, like, when I was in, you know, when I was school-aged, um, really the only resources we had at our disposal were those that were designed by, you know, say Christian publishing companies for Christian private schools. And so, they were still very, um, set up for grade-level, um, divisions. And you know, there's nothing wrong with that, because if you are teaching in an institutionalized setting and you're, you know, having some division of labor, you have to agree like, "Okay, well, who is going to teach halves, thirds and fourths, is that going to be the second-grade teacher or the third-grade teacher?" You can't just be like, "I don't know, y'all teach whatever math you want to teach and hopefully in the end, they'll all get the thing," you know, you have to have some system of organization to agree upon who's going to do what. Like "when do we do ancient Egypt," "when do we talk about, you know, firemen and nurses and libraries." Like, you just have to have some kind of structure and that's great. And in an institutionalized setting, it makes sense. But when we come into the homeschool where, you know, they're not having a different teacher every year who doesn't know what they studied last year, unless they follow a, you know, a scope and sequence and they don't have this problem of like, um, you know, "Okay, well if you don't do the second-grade stuff in second grade, then you're going to be in remediation when you're in third grade because, you know, our class doesn't do those things. So you have to go, you know, out of the classroom to get some special help or something." It's all happening right there in your

home, you know? And so, we're kind of restricting ourselves by these artificial boundaries that don't actually apply to us, but it takes them like mental gymnastics to get yourself out of those ways of thinking. And oftentimes, you know, the thing that's holding you there is the fact that you don't even realize that you're being restricted by those things. It takes a minute of stepping back and going, "Huh, yeah, that totally makes sense. I really don't have to do that, but I don't know why. Like, I just was moving forward as if that's what I had to do."

Jenni: We've kind of figured out- We ask a question and a lot of our talks, we will ask people to raise their hands if they would consider themselves a box checker. Somebody who gets great comfort and peace from checking off boxes like "Math: Done. Science: Done. History: Done.". And what we've come to realize is, actually, for the most part, I mean there's lots of exceptions, but for the most part, that personality type is who is drawn into homeschooling. So, the people who are much more, you know, laid back and spontaneous don't always take on homeschooling. So, right out of the gate, a lot of the personalities of the moms coming into this predispose them to feel like they have to live within certain boundaries and parameters.

Lynna: Yup. I think that's very true. And I think that, you know, the advice that I'd give a mom isn't necessarily like, you know, "just hold your nose and jump off the side of a cliff". I mean, your own personality matters and you know, and if you're doing something that just makes you really freaked out, that's probably not healthy for your homeschool either. Even though, you know, Jane, un-school or down the road, is completely comfortable with ditching all the curriculum and her kids may be getting a great education, you know, but you'd never be able to sleep at night if you did that, then okay, that matters. Take that into consideration. And you know, if you're- If you say, "You know what, I'm only doing this, because I'm checking this box and I really feel like we need to check the box." Then, by golly! So check the box, you know?

Jenni: Yeah. Right.

Lynna: I mean, you don't want your kid's entire education to be driven by your need to check boxes. But it's definitely okay to take mom's comfort level as a factor in the decision making process.

Jenni: And sometimes what moms can do is when they get a different perspective, they can create some new boxes. So, instead of saying, you know, "it has to be math, five days a week, science, five days a week, history, five days a week," maybe one of your boxes can be, um, unit studies. Maybe one of your boxes- You know, maybe as a family, you do unit study or you go out and do nature study or something different. Doesn't have to be exactly what the public school, per se, is doing.

Lynna: Right. Yup. Yup.

Jenni: Go ahead.

Lynna: Yeah, I was going to say, one of the things that kind of flipped the script for us was, um, we came across a math curriculum called "Math on the Level" and um, the- Really, what was kind of eye-opening for me, it was just the way that the curriculum is set up. It was designed by a homeschool mom and instead of

having grade-level material, she just took all the concepts that you learn in arithmetic. Like, basically, everything that you would do before you get into algebra. She took all the concepts and instead of dividing it into kindergarten, first grade, second grade, she divided it all into four topics. So there's um, I think fractions is one, money and decimals is one, operations is one and measurement and geometry is one, I think. And if you look at all of those topics, like, add up everything that your kids have to know to be ready for algebra, it's about 150 topics, total, you know? And so it's like, and I've got eight or so years to do that.

Jenni: That's a lot of time.

Lynna: I think we're going to be okay. Like, if you're really good at- She's really good at um, the way the system is set up. She has this cool kind of record-keeping- Like, you can either do it in a notebook or in a spreadsheet, but um, and it'll show you how many topics you can eliminate practicing. Like for example, some of them are kind of obvious, like, "Okay, they need to practice single-digit addition". But once they're into double-digit addition, well, single-digit addition is part of double-digit addition, so you don't need to practice the single-digit addition anymore, you know, but there are so many skills where it's like, "Okay, well, once you're doing that, you don't need to practice that anymore. 'Cause you're already wrapped into some higher-level skill that you're doing." And so, you know, as you go on, and as they master more skills, you're not, you know, you're not having to review and practice everything that they ever did, because you kind of are, but just in more complex chunks. So anyway, even just looking at that curriculum and getting a feel for how it was set up was like, "Wow, okay, so I'm actually still using a grade-level curriculum for math, but it just kind of released the pressure. It's the kind that made me go, 'Okay, I think we're going to be alright.'."

Jody: Yeah.

Jenni: Yeah. That's awesome. You know, one of the benefits, I think, of having a large family that maybe isn't so obvious is that it creates a- If you focus on it this way, if you look at it this way, it creates a really thriving community where there's a lot of hands to meet the multiple needs, especially as the kids get bigger. Like when I had five kids, there were all really little, I would not have said these things. I thought, like, I pretty much had to do everything, 'cause nobody was really capable of doing much of anything. But now that they're all big, like it's really a great community. We've got, you know, drivers and teenagers are very capable and they can do a lot around the house. They can cook, they can clean, they can help kids with, you know, other schooling.

Jody: Well, they go from being dependent to independent, which is really awesome. Because that's what community is.

Jenni: Yes.

Jody: We become a community.

Jenni: And we've become a community, where everybody feels responsible to some degree for the betterment and the maintenance of the community. And it's harder to do that when you have one kid.

Jody: Yeah.

Jenni: Like, thank goodness I have so many kids. 'Cause now I don't have to clean my house.

Jody: Or cook the food, or...

Jenni: Cook the food or drive the people all over the place. Yeah. Anyway, I think that's the thing that a lot of people that don't necessarily think about when they realize a big family can really be- I'm actually, Jody and I are sad as they are moving away. We're like "Ooh."

Jody: "Come back! We love you! Don't leave me!"

Jenni: "Ooh, that's gotta be rough."

Lynna: Yeah. We're kind of in this, I don't know, you know, what it's been like in y'all's family, but, um, I've heard from other moms that, you know, they have a lot of great help and then, you know, when they hit a certain point where they can drive and then maybe they have jobs out of the house or whatever. So my oldest is 14, so we're kind of in that spot where, like, I have a slew of kids that can do almost anything I can do, you know, aside from like paying the bills and running my website and that kind of thing. But um, you know, but they're house-bound, 'cause none of them have licenses yet. None of them have jobs. I mean, you know, we go places with family and all that, but um...

Jody: They can't run out on you.

Lynna: Their schedule is still very much the family schedule. So we'll see. We'll see how that all...

Jenni: That does shift. Yeah. And it really does. It does shift. I always say that we lean most heavily on our middle-school-aged kids for that reason, because once they hit high school, they become so much busier and like you're saying, as they drive and then they're really getting close to being out on their own, there's a lot happening that they can't really participate as much, but I still get them to chauffeur for me, so...

Lynna: Yup. Yup. Looking forward to that.

Jenni: Yeah, that is a nice thing. Well, it has been so much fun talking to you, Lynna. Tell us again how people can find you.

Lynna: Yeah, absolutely. So my website is called Homeschooling Without Training Wheels. And the URL for that is hswotrainingwheels.com and um, I'll give you guys a link to put in the show notes for that...

Jenni: Perfect.

Lynna: "Five Myths That Are Killing Your Multi-Age Homeschool" and also some information about a large family homeschooling group that I'm hosting.

Jenni: Awesome. Awesome. Okay, well, Lynna, we thank you so much and we hope to have you back again soon.

Lynna: Okay. Thanks very much for having me.