

How to Handle a Dawdling Homeschooler
An Interview with Dr. Melanie Wilson
C2C Podcast Episode #14



Jody: We are confident that today's guest is going to bless the socks off of a lot of homeschoolers. She's talking about an issue that so many families deal with. Are you ready? It's the dawdling homeschooler. Who doesn't have one.

Jenni: I was just going to say that I don't think there's a family that has more than one kid that doesn't have at least one of those. Dr Melanie Wilson is a Christian psychologist, turned homeschooling mother of six. She has a podcast called The Homeschool Sanity Show. She's the author of Grammar Galaxy language arts curriculum, and she speaks on parenting and homeschool sanity for great homeschool conventions. Welcome, Melanie. We are so, so grateful to have you on the show.

Melanie Wilson: Well, thank you so much for having me. I'm excited to chat with you about this topic.

Jenni: So tell us, first of all, what are some of the underlying causes of dawdling?

Melanie Wilson: Yeah. You know, I think a lot of times parents automatically assume that it's a power struggle and it absolutely can be when you have a dawdler, but sometimes kids who dawdle are actually struggling with a learning difficulty, a learning challenge, whether that is a visual impairment or it's a classic learning disability like dyslexia or dyscalculia, which is a difficulty with math. Because kids, like adults, would prefer to be seen as a problem child rather than having a learning challenge.

Jenni & Jody: That's interesting.

Melanie Wilson: Yeah. So, you know, no one wants to think- Because kids don't understand learning disabilities, they think it means that they're dumb. And so they don't want anyone to know. And so they will just pretend like they're being difficult, because that's a lot more socially acceptable in their minds anyway.

Jody: Wow.

Melanie Wilson: So that is definitely something to consider. Another cause of dawdling is you have a parent whose expectations are unrealistic, whether that is because of the workload that is being expected of a child or it is because a parent thinks that a child should be completing everything on his or her own when that's not realistic for the child's level or it's

because the parent is just more authoritarian and expects everything to be done immediately with, you know, great zest for schoolwork.

- Jody: And where were you 15 years ago? Because I'm over here going, "Oh my gosh, she's totally describing me in the beginning of my homeschool years. I'm awful!"
- Jenni: Jody's face is bright red. She's making the most hilarious faces of shame. I mean, it's just- It's kind of fun to watch. I wish this video.
- Jody: Oh, my gosh.
- Melanie Wilson: Well, sorry about the...
- Jody: Well, at lea- Okay, in my defense, I have changed. But, I am willing to look back at myself and say "Whoa, that was so me! That poor kid!"
- Jenni: Well, and we hear a lot of parents with the dawdling child use, what we call the "L" word, "lazy", you know? They're just lazy.
- Melanie Wilson: Right.
- Jenni: And really, I would imagine, that's probably not the case a lot of the time.
- Melanie Wilson: Right. A lot of the time it is not the case.
- Jenni: Yeah.
- Melanie Wilson: Yes.
- Jenni: You said a new word I'd never heard of. What is the- It was like dyslexia, but about math?
- Melanie Wilson: Yes. Dyscalculia. It's the same kind of struggle, only students cannot grasp mathematical concepts.
- Jody: That's interesting.
- Melanie Wilson: Yeah. Yeah. It's a real challenge, you know, like dyslexia, in some respects, is a difficulty associating the symbols of letters with words and you know, sounds. And so with math, it's, you know, those math symbols and connecting those symbols to, um, what they mean numerically.
- Jenni: Yeah. I think I have one of those. My oldest child is autistic and I would put- I've used manipulatives and I would say- I mean when he was little, I would put four out on the table and I would say, "Okay, Griffyn, if you have four of these squares and I take all of them away, how many do you have left?" I would literally take them all away and he would look at me and he would go, "Three?" "No, honey, how many are left on the table?" "Oh, two?"
- Jody: He's just guessing. Poor kid.

Melanie Wilson: Right.

Jenni: So I think, I think he may have fallen in that category. Is there help for that?

Melanie Wilson: Yes, there is. I have actually been speaking with a friend of mine who is a homeschooling mom and we suspect that her daughter may have dyscalculia and there is an entire website devoted to these students and I can get that link to you to include in the show notes.

Jenni: Yeah, that would be awesome. That would be so great. We were just thinking that. We were actually kind of, like, looking at each other like, "We need that in the show notes!". Because I bet there's a lot of people who don't even know that that's what's happening.

Jody: Well, and they're frustrated with their kid and they're thinking that, "Oh my gosh, what the heck? Like, why can't they just figure this out?" Maybe that was my thing. I don't know.

Jenni: Let me ask you a question. So you mentioned that some parents, you know, are authoritative or they have expectations that are, um, perhaps unrealistic for the child. What would you say to those parents and when you do talk to parents in that category, how do they generally receive it?

Jody: I think her laugh just said it all, right there.

Melanie Wilson: Well, I have been giving two talks as part of Great Homeschool Conventions. One of them is on parental anger and the antidote for that and the other is how to motivate students and the anger talk, I usually don't get a whole lot of pushback on that one, because I think parents who are willing to attend an anger talk know that they have issues and, you know, just kinda how you were describing yourself, like, being red at shamefaced. I get a lot of that. I know it's hard, but I have really a redemptive story for them, so I'm hopeful that they are encouraged. But in the motivating students talk, I do get some pushback from parents who essentially tell me that kids should just do what they're supposed to do, because they want to do it. And I agree. I would love to live in that world.

Jenni: Yeah.

Jody: But that's not reality.

Jenni: Right?

Melanie Wilson: It isn't reality. And it doesn't mean that there's anything wrong with your child. It doesn't mean that there's anything wrong with you and your homeschooling, that your child just isn't motivated to do, you know, two pages of math problems, no matter how simple they are, just because. Just because it's the right thing to do. It's human nature and our kids are all so different that we have to really be students of them and learn what makes them tick and how we can motivate them. So, um, that's really my response to that is that, um, you know, it's a lovely ideal and I

do believe that down the road, kids grasp on to the natural benefits and rewards of, you know, learning and reading and understanding math. That can absolutely happen down the road but in the meantime, when it's not happening, naturally, we need to take some steps to motivate our kids to do the work.

Jenni: Well, you know, you're speaking directly to me, because when I first started homeschooling 15 years ago, I pulled my then kindergartener out of school in the first few months, partly because I noticed that she- They have this card system where, you know, you got a green card in the morning and if you misbehaved, you had to turn it in for a yellow card. And then if you misbehaved, you had to turn it in for a red card and go see the principal. And I knew that, deep down, she was an obedient kid. She was a kid who wanted to obey and I couldn't under- She was bringing home yellow cards. So I went into...

Jody: Poor Skyler!

Jenni: I went in to observe her and I saw it- Instantly, she was so overstimulated and they were sitting at a table with like six or eight kids and she's highly social and she just could not sit still and concentrate. So I brought her home and then knowing this, I mean, I made this decision. And then I brought her home and I expected her to sit still and pay attention for me. And, in fact, one day, I like- poor kid, I must have tortured her. It's like months into it. And one day, I got so frustrated and I, like, pounded my fist on the table and I was like, "Skyler!! Sit still and pay attention!", and she was like, "Okay." And then I realized, in that next few moments, oh my goodness, she is totally capable of sitting still and she's even capable of paying attention. She just can't do them simultaneously. So, I chucked the chair and I got her like a big gymnastics ball and I said, "This is your chair now. Bounce all you want. If you need to hang upside down when we're doing out loud reading, go for it. If you want to do jumping jacks while we're doing math facts, you have at it." And that really changed things for her. And I thought, "Gosh, if I had left her in the school system, she would've thought that she was the bad kid." Meanwhile, she went on to graduate with 63 college credits and a 4.0 GPA. Because she is capable of paying attention. But when she was little, she just couldn't sit still at the same time.

Jody: She's still that same kid.

Jenni: She kind of is. Not so much a kid, but...

Jody: She's highly accomplished. But she is like zip! Zip! Zip! Zip! Zip! Zip!

Jenni: Yeah, she can actually be a little bit tiring to talk to as an adult, because she's so high energy. But anyway...

Jody: But very fun, too.

Jenni: She is super fun. Um, what are some strategies that you can offer that parents can use to manage some of their own feelings with a disempowered- Without disempowering their child? Because we know

that parents, sometimes, take ownership of their children's struggles and think it's their fault. They're a bad parent. Um, sometimes they think they take it personally and they think their child's doing it to them. So, like, how can parents manage this inside themselves in the moment when they can't, like, you know, just hit pause and like let the world freeze while they figure it out, but without making the child feel belittled?

Melanie Wilson: Well, I think you said part of the solution in the question. And that is to understand what's motivating the behavior. Typically when people do something that we don't want them to do or vice versa, we assume that the person is out to make us miserable. That is their sole intention, you know, and it's simply not. Um, most of the time there is a very good reason why your child is dawdling and I love that you brought up, um, A.D.D. type behaviors, because that's another reason why your child might be dawdling. Um, but, you know, to understand that your child has a good reason to be dawdling and you have to discover what that is, it's either personality or it's, um, A.D.D. or, um, you're giving too much work or there's simply no reason to, um, be motivated to complete the work. So, another thing that parents will often do is they reward completion of work with more work.

Jenni: Oh, I never thought of that.

Jody: No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no. I so did this. This is what I would do. If the kids got done with their stuff, I'm like, "Oh, we can fit more in." I wasn't consciously thinking that, like, I'm going to give them more work, but I thought, "Wow, we can get more done. Let's learn Latin," right?

Melanie Wilson: Right, right.

Jody: And you just don't realize you're- That's abuse. I feel bad. I need to be- My kids need to be taken from me right now. But they- They're all grown.

Jenni: I was just going to say, that's the problem. They're all adults.

Melanie Wilson: Well, exactly. And so, you know, you have to start thinking about, "Okay, what is the motivation?", because every behavior has a motivator, okay? It might not be a positive motivator.

Jody: Right.

Melanie Wilson: But there is a motivator. There is a reason your child is doing what she is doing and you have to determine what that is. And so, you know, one of you- I'm sorry I can't, I can't.

Jenni: Yeah, it's okay. We get it.

Jody: We get this all the time.

Jenni: We could barely figure out our own voices when we are listening to transcripts.

Melanie Wilson: Okay. Well, one of you said that, you know, you had a daughter in school who kept getting the cards, okay? So that is a use of negative motivators, what we like to call, punishments.

Jenni: Yeah.

Melanie Wilson: And um, those are not as effective as rewards and positive reinforcement, okay? And when we have a dawdler or really any kind of a difficult child, we can easily get into a spiral of giving more and more negative consequences, thinking, you know, finally, this child is going to hit bottom and realize that things are so bad that they're not going to continue the behavior. And unfortunately, to get back to your original question, that kind of a cycle can lead us to be more and more angry. Um, so we want to break free from that cycle, that negative cycle and begin to use positive rewards to motivate. I mean, one of the rewards that I like to use best, in this situation, is free time. When kids finish their work, we don't give them more work to do, but we give them time to use in whatever way they would like. And when you give your child that kind of free time, that is how you can determine what really motivates him. Because if he chooses, "I want to play a video game," and you say- Okay, well then you know, "Okay, video games are very motivating for this child." Or, um, you know, "I want to go over to a friend's house to play." Okay, that is a big motivator for your child. Whatever it is that your child chooses to do, will tell you, uh, this is a way to motivate this child, but you certainly don't have to switch gears and use that, because you can always use that free time. It works with many, many kids who are dawdling. Um, and I really like it, but you can choose other rewards. Um, you have to learn your child's personality, pay attention to what your child is asking for, specifically, you know, does your child ask for a particular snack? Does your child, um, say that, um, he wants a specific privilege? Uh, what is it? You know, does your child want to stay up late? Well, that could be a potential motivator, um, and use it and don't feel like you are bribing, you're training your children. Um, so that, I think, goes a long way toward reducing the anger and frustration and just realizing it's normal. They're not bad, you're not bad, and there is a solution to motivating your child that's a positive solution that doesn't involve ever increasing punishment.

Jenni: You mentioned free time- Giving them free time. I've seen so many parents say that they're going to give their children free time, but then put parameters on them. "You could have free time, but you have to do something creative," or "You can have free time, but that doesn't include anything electronic," right? So then it's not really free time, I guess.

Jody: Are you really scolding me again?

Jenni: No, you are not alone, sister. Because I'm going to tell you, I have seen it over- I've been tempted to do it and then I've thought, "Oh wait a minute. That's not free, though."

Jody: And I am redeemed. I just want everyone in the audience to know I am totally redeemed of this behavior.

- Jenni: Jody gets a do-over. She has a granddaughter that she gets to do this with again, so she gets to try again.
- Jody: So I have a question. I have, um, a 31-year-old who his- We homeschooled him and he's gone through college and law school and is very successful. But even to this day when he was a kid, when he was a student, I would label him as being a procrastinator. So my question to you is, is that the same thing? Because even to this day, I mean, this kid's got a newspaper column, he's got a radio show. Like he's, he's highly accomplished.
- Jenni: He's interviewing every presidential candidate this year and he's an adjunct law professor, but he's still procrastinates.
- Jody: He's still procrastinates. And even his wife will say, "Oh my gosh, he waits 'til the midnight hour to like get that column done and get that radio show ready." And so is that dawdling or is he a procrastinator is it different? Is it the same thing?
- Melanie Wilson: I think it can be the same, but it can also be different. Um, you know, I think when a parent comes to me and says, "Okay, my child is dawdling over their math, over their grammar or whatever," um, it's not procrastinating, because you're actually giving your child time to do that particular task. You know, to me it's more procrastinating when you tell a child you have to get all of these assignments done by the end of the week...
- Jenni: A deadline.
- Melanie Wilson: ...and- Right. And you know, you aren't sitting down with your child specifically saying, "Okay, this is your math time." That's different, so that is dawdling versus procrastination when the child is putting it off, you know, and they're playing video games and they're doing all the things that they want to do until the very last minute and they're like, "Oh, boy." And so, you know, why does someone do that? I mean, actually that's really like epidemic, right?
- Jody: It is so stressful to me. I do not understand it. I say to him- I'm like, "Chase, how in the world?" Like I'd be so stressed out and he's like, "No, I work best under pressure." I'm like, "You're lying to yourself. But I think there might be some truth to it. I just don't want to see it."
- Melanie Wilson: Yeah. So, I mean, there are a number of reasons for procrastination, just as there are a number of reasons for dawdling. Like some people really thrive on the adrenaline rush of it. And you know, it sounds like that might be your son and some people kind of create all these um, scenarios in their mind about what it's gonna be like to do the task. "Oh, it's gonna take forever. Everything's going to go wrong," you know?
- Jody: Yeah. I have one of those.
- Melanie Wilson: Yeah. So why would you want to do it then? And so, until the pressure of the deadline and the fear of not meeting the deadline overcomes the

other fear that you have that it's going to be just a heinous experience...

Jenni: Yeah.

Melanie Wilson: ...you know, then you finally get busy.

Jenni & Jody: Yeah, yeah.

Jody: Yeah. So how do you think that, like, the dawdler affects the entire homeschool? Because, you know, you got a lot of kids often in our- In these families and if you've got one dawdling all the time, it can be frustrating. Then the rest of the kids are doing their work and you want to move onto the next thing.

Melanie Wilson: Well, you know, I think that really depends on how you structure your homeschool and your homeschooling that, you know, where you're having kids work on individual work. And I think one of the ways that you can avoid that dawdler becoming the focus of attention, you know, where mom is always on that child's case. And you know, there is a lot of talk about, "Well, we're not going to be able to do this fun activity."

Jenni: Yeah.

Jody: Right, right.

Jenni: And then all the kids would hate that child.

Jody: Well, that happens, though. It really happens.

Melanie Wilson: Yeah. We don't want that. We really, really don't want that. Um, one of the ways that I suggest to avoid that scenario, altogether, is to have time devoted where everyone is working on the same subject. So it's very similar to a classroom in that, you know, depending on how many kids you have, um, you know, you're all sitting down at maybe one table and it's math time. So everyone get out your math and then you as teacher walk around the table making sure that everyone is making progress, that no one has any questions. And if your students- If your dawdler does have a question, then you work with that particular child. And, um, you know, I liken it to, you know, when I don't feel like working out at the gym, when I'm at the gym, I don't feel comfortable just sitting and staring at my phone while everyone else works out.

Jenni: Positive peer pressure.

Melanie Wilson: Right. Right. And so, that's what I feel that strategy does for your homeschooling family. And you might find, you know, especially if you have a student who really doesn't get the curriculum that you've chosen, you know, it might be time to choose a different curriculum. We haven't even mentioned that as a strategy. But, um, it might also be the case that your child needs one-on-one tutoring. And I find many parents are too quick to give a student independent work and the child just isn't ready for that. Or, you know, because of their developmental level because of their personality. And I think parents are afraid that, "Well if

I just do one-on-one tutoring, if I do all of her math with her, then I'm going to be doing all of her high school work with her, you know, and her college work with her." And that just simply isn't the case. You know, it's kind of like I was not an attachment parent, but I have seen parents who do choose that parenting philosophy and you know, they don't have 15-year-olds clinging to them.

Jody: Right. Right. Right.

Jenni: Baby-wearing at 15.

Jody: Oh, my gosh. I had my youngest, I think I- she'd let me wear her, if I could. (inaudible.) You know what I'm wondering? I'm actually- I'm sitting here thinking about project-based learning and I'm wondering if that would be good on a small level for them as- like as a family doing a project.

Jenni: As a family. Like doing a team project.

Jody: Right. Right.

Jenni: That might be helpful.

Melanie Wilson: Right. Yeah. I mean, we've done- In our family, unit studies have been amazing for that. You know, we're all learning together and um, also just trying things. Like, I have an example of where I had a student who- he has more of a laid-back kind of personality, but, um, I told him, you know, "Here's this individual art curriculum that I bought for you. I want you to do it.". Well, he would never do it. Never, never, never. And so I decided I will make this an art class and we will work on art all together. And suddenly, everything was fine. Because there was that, you know, that social nature to the class. He just simply didn't want to do art by himself. And so, you know, I think sometimes that is an issue. We're all- We all are made differently and we respond to either working alone- I have kids who are like, "No, I don't want to do a class. I just want to be by myself and do this work." Um, but you know, it can also work in the other direction.

Jenni: Okay, so you've given us some really awesome solutions that parents can implement to help the dawdler to be more focused. Are there any others before we sadly say goodbye? 'Cause this has been really fun.

Melanie Wilson: Yeah. Yeah. So, uh, one of the things that I have not mentioned is to limit the amount of work. Many times when I find that parents have a dawdler, it's because they are expecting them to do several single-spaced pages of exercises. And you know, I mean, think about it as the parents, you know, when you take a look at these math worksheets or these grammar worksheets, um, do you get the heebie jeebies? Like do you just think, "Oh, my word..."

Jenni: Yeah.

Melanie Wilson: "...I do not want to do this myself." Well if you feel that way...

Jenni: They feel that way.

Melanie Wilson: ...then, that's how your student feels, you know, the work should feel very do-able if you have a dawdler. And so there are some ways to do that. I mean, I've already mentioned you can change curriculum. That is, you know, one of the great freedoms that we have as homeschoolers to say, "You know what? Nope, this doesn't work,". And so we're gonna choose something that does, that's really motivating. Um, and if that's not an option for whatever reason, then cut the work back. There is no law that says your child has to do 50 math problems.

Jody: "I DID! Mommy, I did it! I did it! Stop yelling at me!"

Jenni: But you know, it makes that kid feel like they're going to the ocean with a teaspoon.

Jody: So my task list- I did task this for my kids. Girl, I have to tell you at one point, they were three stinkin' typed pages.

Jenni: No, I'm should- Our kids were in elementary school.

Jody: For one day!

Jenni: I know our kids were in elementary school and I'd be like, "Jody, let's go do something fun,". And she'd be like, "I can't, my kids have so much work to do," and I'd be like "They're in fifth grade, what work do they have to do? They have to play. Like what do you mean?"

Jody: This is not nice. You're ganging up on me. Both of you.

Speaker 2: Well, I'm going to say that I empathize with you. If your list had things like my list for my younger kids had, which was things like "Wipe off your bathroom counter. Wipe off the faucet..."

Jenni & Jody: Yeah, yeah. Oh, yeah.

Melanie Wilson: "Wipe off the sink put the toothpaste away."

Jody: Yes!

Jenni: With the cap on it.

Jody: Right.

Melanie Wilson: Yeah.

Jody: Wipe the extra toothpaste off around the outside. Oh yeah. Oh yeah. That was me.

Melanie Wilson: Uh-huh.

Jody: Yup. Yup.

Melanie Wilson: So, I get it where you can come up with a huge list, but we want our kids, if we want motivated students, we always want them to say, "Oh, this is totally do-able." And in fact, you know, you mentioned in procrastination, that is one of the best ways to help people stop procrastinating is to break the project or task down into really small do-able pieces that you're like, "Oh, I can do that. If that's all I have to do, I can do that,". And 9 times out of 10 when you do that, your child will do more than what you were expecting them to. Because they feel like, "Okay, you know, I can do this and I'm going to get ahead. I'm going to get ahead on my work now,".

Jody: Right. Right.

Jenni: Yeah. Melanie, thank you so much. We are sure that this is incredibly helpful and maybe even a little bit convicting...

Jody: No comment over here.

Jenni: ...to many, many, many parents, and we really look forward to hearing from you again next month when we talk about handling the trouble-making child.

Melanie Wilson: Yeah, I'm looking forward to that one.

Jenni: Thank you again.