

Jody: Throughout this month, we're talking about reading and today, we get to talk to a great friend and powerhouse in the homeschool community. In this episode we're going to talk about how reading can help our kids ace standardized tests.

Jenni: Our guest today is Jean Burk, the CEO of College Prep Genius. She is a Fox News contributor and author, teacher, speaker, veteran, homeschooling mom and she is a dear friend of J and J. We love Jean. She is passionate about teaching families how to get college for free. So if you have any interest in that, stay tuned, because we have some cool things to talk about. Jean, tell us, um, a little bit-- I know there's, we have the new SAT and then there's the ACT. Tell us, um, first of all, what the difference between the SAT and the ACT are.

Jean Burk: Actually very little. There-- The funny thing about the test because people are so misinformed, um, is that they are so similar that what you learn to ace one test will actually work on the other and you can-- there's such a crossover of information. And back in 2012, when David Coleman took over for the College Board, uh, it was the first time in history that more students took the ACT than the SAT. So being a, a man, a businessman, he said, "You know what, I don't want to lose a piece of the pie here." So what he did was he hired ACT writers to rewrite the new SAT. And so, now, you have a test that two different tests that are written by the same people. So that means, you know, when you're studying for one test or pretty much studying for the other one, and what you use to beat one test can be used to beat the other one.

Jody: Wow.

Jenni: What role does vocabulary play in these two tests?

Jean Burk: Well, you know, I love vocabulary. We have a whole book series called "Vocab Cafe", a book series for linguistics excellence. Uh, so I'm, I'm all about vocabulary, but when it comes to SATs and ACTs to be totally honest, um, although I'm a big believer in learning vocabulary, it's not necessary, like it was before, to know a lot of big words. And here's why. There's 171,000 plus words in the dictionary and only the College Board or the ACT Company knows which actual words will be on the test. So students could actually, you know, study a bunch of words, you know, a thousand, 5,000 words and then not one of them would be on the test. So that's not really the key. Although, on the flip side that, I do believe kids should learn vocabulary words and to amass an arsenal of them. Because when you get to college, you know all you do is write papers and you know, you don't have time at that point to learn any words.

Jenni: And your words are your tools when you're writing a paper.

Jean Burk: Absolutely.

Jenni: So how does reading specifically help to improve vocabulary?

Jean Burk: So, reading can help your vocabulary and even helping you on standardized tests because the, if a kid just read 20 minutes a day, they can automatically be somewhere in the 90 percentile, you know, on a basic standardized test. If the kid reads a-- If a kid only reads about 10 minutes a day, they'll pretty much fall somewhere between the 50 percentile. And if a kid who just reads about a minute a day is, is somewhere in the 10% percentile. So it's interesting that reading directly correlates to your standardized test scores. And so, uh, obviously it's a, it's about reading and the importance of it. And so, uh, it's, it's interesting because, you know, our kids are so digitalized right now, nowadays, and it's just such a disservice. But that's a whole 'nother, that's a whole 'nother seminar we can talk about.

Jenni: Okay. So how do parents, um, figure out what reading level their child is really on? Um, and then what books would help them to grow their reading level? And we're talking about high-schoolers and middle-schoolers for the most part.

Jean Burk: Right. Well, you know, I'm a big believer in reading, you know, having our kids read over their heads, because you know, when you, it's kind of like when you were in track and you ran with weights and you'll take, you took the weights off and it was a lighter load. When you read over your head, you don't necessarily get it all, but you're getting more and it opens up, you know, your mind. And so, I think to start off, you could start at their age level, which, which is fine, but you may find that quickly that they're going to excel to even a higher level. So as parents, here's what I'm a big believer in, is making reading a, you know, a family affair and you-- the kids have to catch you reading as a parent.

Jenni: Yeah.

Jean Burk: And you know, and you can't, you know, you can't give a child a book that you would never pick up. So you gotta make sure you-- make sure you have family time, reading time together and, and, and have the kids read. They love it. You know, when you put them on center stage and said, "It's your time to read tonight," or you know, even, uh, allow them to pick out the books. And so I think, you know, reading is to the mind, like exercise is to the body.

Jenni: Yeah.

Jean Burk: And I think, you know, I heard someone say it's a, it's a discount ticket to everywhere. So I think that if we instill a love of reading from ourselves, onto our kids, they're going to pick it up. You know, they become these voracious readers to where their, their minds are expanded. So I think, start kind of where you're at, but make sure you're definitely having the kids read, read even higher levels, because I think it will intrigue them to say, "Wow, I, I don't know those words. I want to know what those mean."

Jenni: Tell us a little bit about the evidence-based reading section of the SAT, because that's new in the new SAT. What is it that they're actually testing in that section?

Jean Burk: Well, they're actually not testing your reading, believe it or not, what they're testing are, you know, are your critical thinking skills, because you've got six passages, 52 questions and 65 minutes to do it in. So you've got a little over a minute per question plus the six passages. And so you're going to find that passages having to do with history or science or literature. And you'll have three types. You'll have what's called-- what I call the long passage, which is several paragraphs. And then you'll have the long passage with the graph or chart. And then you're going to have what's called the dual passage, a section where you're going to have two passages that have some kind of common topic where they either agree or disagree with each other. And so in this passage, uh, in a short amount of time, you know, students, where they go wrong is they treat the, the test, like it was a, you know, English class and they're going to try to analyze it and try to interpret it, which is the wrong thing to do because what you've got is five types of questions that are all answered differently. And so if you understand the strategies and shortcuts behind the test, and you could skip pretty much 75% of the passage and get every answer right.

Jenni: Wow. And that's really, by the way, for those that are listening, that's really what you're teaching in College Prep Genius.

Jody: Strategy.

Jenni: You're teaching them strategies, you're teaching them how to understand the test. Right?

Jean Burk: Exactly. It takes a different skill set to beat an SAT. This is why you've got these very smart kids. Even valedictorians bombing it all the time, because they approach it differently like a normal test and you cannot do that. You don't-- First of all, you don't have enough time. You're just going to burn up the clock. If you're trying to read all those passages and if you're trying to, you know, try to analyze it like you would, you know, um, something in the literature class and you're not going to do well, you have to know that the questions can be answered in 30 seconds or less.

Speaker 1: You know, we've had probably, most years that we've been doing this, we've had a parent at some point during the year call panic-stricken saying, "I don't understand! This is a straight A student. They're in IB classes or they're in AP classes!" And they just bombed the SAT. But we had one student years ago, Jean, one of the first classes that you did for us here in Florida. We had a student who had scored an 800 on the, on the reading portion at that time in the old SAT, but she got a really low math score and not really low, I think it was like 550, but for her, really low and she was, her strongest subject was math. And you explained, at the time, that's because she's trying to actually do all of

the math questions as though this were really a math test. So she came and she took your class and she got either a perfect score or a near perfect.

Jody: No, she got a perfect score.

Jenni: She got a perfect score I think. Yeah. When she retook it. Yep. So...

Jean Burk: I love that testimonial.

Jenni: Yeah. Yeah. And it's true. It's, she just needed to understand that they weren't really asking her to do those questions. They were asking her to understand the test. How-- What is the reading section of the ACT like?

Jean Burk: Uh, very similar. Uh, except you actually get less time. You know, you get about a minute on the SAT and you get even less time on the ACT. So you're still going have passages that have related questions that you've got to, you know, find the answer. And so what I think a lot of people don't understand is most standardized tests are written very similar. You have got one objective, indisputable answer, and you've got several distractors. And so what-- what kids tend to do is they tend to read the passage and then they look for the right answer. Well, you don't do that, because you'll probably fall for the wrong answer, because the questions are purposely misleading and the wrong answers can be very appealing. And so what-- what the students need to learn is to look for the wrong answers first and eliminate the trick answers and that will lead them with the right answer.

Jody: Mm.

Jenni: What, at what age would you suggest that kids start preparing for the reading portion of standardized testing?

Jean Burk: You know, we have a lot of sixth graders and above who do our program. And here's my philosophy. The sooner you start, the more time you have to improve. Uh, you know, timing can be the killer of opportunities. And the thing about it is you cannot get time back. And so if you, you know, so many people want to wait till the last minute. And as you know, this, uh, you know, once kids get into high school, they get busier, they get more school and more homework and maybe they take on a part time job and then they play sports and they have friends, in clubs, in church, and they're already so maxed out that it's very difficult to squeeze one more thing in. And, and learning how to beat the SAT reading section or any other section is not instant success. You know, it takes time to internalize the information and to, uh, you know, solidify it so that you can apply it appropriately. So, you know, the, you know, you cannot shortcut the shortcut and so you need more time. And so the students who start early, uh, they, you know, they can work on it. They have more time to work on their weaknesses and by the time they're high school, you know, hopefully at that point it's all second nature.

Jody: When my oldest was studying for the SATs, we didn't know about you back then, but we did - we found practice tests and he, I had him doing a practice test almost every day. That became school and he ended up getting that, uh, full blown, what's the, what is it?

Jenni: Bright Futures.

Jody: The Bright Futures Scholarship. It was an academic scholarship, to college, because his score was so good and it was kind of, you know, back then, he's 31 now, so it, it, we needed you back then. I had to try and figure this out on my own. So that being said, what age should kids start preparing for the reading portion of the standardized testing and what are some, what are some ways to prepare for that? Oh, I'm-- That's actually not what I meant to say. We're going to cut that right out. So...

Jean Burk: Take two! Take two.

Jenni: Yeah, no, really, actually I think the real question, now that now you're trying to get out of Jody is really, what are some other things in addition to taking classes over those years, what are some things that they can be doing throughout those years to continue preparing? If we start in middle school and, and they, you know, they take a prep course, like a College Prep Genius class and they do it a few times cause we're, we're big believers of, you know, do it early, do it often, but like, what are some other things that they can be doing over the course of the year, um, starting in middle school to help them get ready?

Jean Burk: Well, you know, I'm a big believer in logic. You know, you can get logic curriculum, games, puzzles, you know, logic makes you think and you know, these standardized tests are all logic and critical thinking test. And so, uh, anything that you can do to make them think outside the box, uh, can go a really long way. And so, uh, I think that can really help them. There's a lot of good things out there, but I think anything that helps them to, uh, to take a step back and think very critically, you know, the reason why colleges use these standardized tests are because, you know, a 4.0 at one high school is not the same 4.0 at another. I mean they, every school calculates their scores differently. So there has to be a fair way to compare all students equally, whether they're public school, private school, homeschool, and so SATs and ACTs and PSATs level the playing field. And so it makes it fair. Otherwise they could look at, for example, homeschool or transcripts that say, "Well, you know what, how do we know y'all did not make that stuff up?"

Jenni: And even schools, like, are so... If you're in public school, we know someone who graduated in the-- I think I may have told you this, graduated in the top 10% of her class and her SAT math score was under 400.

Jean Burk: Oh, I hear that a hundred times a week.

Jenni: Yeah. I mean, that really tells you that you can't look at their grades alone and even in, and they sometimes look at percentages, you know, cause then they think, well you know, where you graduated in your class helps determine how you fared compared to your peers. But in this case, that didn't really tell you anything either.

Jean Burk: Well no, your, you know, your students could take really, really hard classes. And then the guy on the street goes to very easy school and takes basket weaving, you know, and he, you know, he has the same GPA as your child. And so there's, they look the same on paper. There's no way to distinguish between the two. So you have to have something that measures something equally. And critical thinking is, you know, a necessary skill for college readiness, because when you get to college, you, I mean, you're, they're going to push you to the limits on, you know, what you think and what they want to throw at you, and you better be able to discern, you know, what's going on. So I think it's important that, you know, all kids have some good critical thinking skills.

Jody: So there's the, I forget what it's called, but there's a critical thinking, uh, curriculum out there, I forget the name of it, that we've used, even. Uh...

Jenni: Something "Detective".

Jody: Yeah, well that, but I mean there's a whole--

Jean Burk: Fallacy.

Jenni: Fallacy's good. Yep.

Jody: Yeah, but there's a whole thing. And what I'm wondering is I've always wondered if, if it really is good, like if it, if it's really gonna pull out that critical thinking that we're looking for, for these types of tests and to just improve their critical thinking in general. Do you know of any off the top of your head that you think are excellent? And actually...

Jenni: The ones we used, Jody, where "Critical Thinking Detective" and "Reading Detective", those were the ones that you and I used.

Jody: There's one called "Critical Thinking".

Jean Burk: The "Critical Thinking Company" is a company in of itself.

Jody: Yes, that's it.

Jenni & Jody: Yeah.

Jean Burk: You've got the "Fallacy Detective", the "Thinkers Toolbox".

Jody: Yeah. Yeah.

Jean Burk: There's, I think "RX Learning" has a lot of good things that help kids. Um, there's some books from the 60s on logic that I don't remember the name of 'em.

Jody: The 60s. We gotta go way back there.

Jean Burk: That's right. But they're at least, um, you know, point you in the right direction. So...

Jenni: We'll link some of this in the show notes, too, so people can find them. If you go to [fromcradletocalling.com](http://fromcradletocalling.com) and click on this, on Podcast, you'll see this episode and we'll have some links in our show notes.

Jody: So, you're saying you think those things are good and they actually help?

Jean Burk: Oh, absolutely.

Jody: Good. Okay.

Jean Burk: Anything that we can help our children to, uh, not take something at face value, but to be able to look very carefully with a critical eye on what they're reading and to really be able to sometimes even read between the lines. And I think, you know, because the, like I said, the questions are designed to, you know, cause the students did not get it right.

Jody: Right. Trip you up, pretty much.

Jean Burk: Yeah, exactly. So I think it's important.

Jenni: So let's talk briefly about, actually, just preparing them to be ready for the college environment. I think this is one of the, probably one of the places you'll agree, Jean, where reading really comes into play, because in order to really succeed on a college campus, you've, you've got to have a good mastery of language in general and you've got to have a lot of, you know, base information and knowledge. And, um, again, like you're saying, critical thinking skills and a lot of that I think can probably come from how much we read.

Jean Burk: I agree.

Jenni: So, where can families get a good list of books to help prepare them for that college level thinking?

Jean Burk: Well, you know, we only use 90% of our vocabulary is made up of the, about the same 2000 words. And so when we've got a dictionary that has over 171,000 words, we are not expanding our mind, we're limiting our mind. And the, as one quote says, "The limits of my mind, uh, are limited by my language". And so, you

know, not only should our kids be reading, but they should be, you know, obviously reading on a daily basis. But I think a good place to start is to look for what's called AP reading lists. Advanced placement reading lists.

Jenni: Yeah.

Jean Burk: I know when my kids took those classes, they, they had to critique X amount of novels and books and uh, and my daughter got to college after taking the AP classes and she knew how to write a paper and she would look around and people that went to public and private school didn't know how to write a paper. So it really helped her. But I think that the, you know, it enlarges their whole world and classics, you know, you want to look for classic books. I went through a website called good reads and it's, there's a lists, a hundred books that you should read before you ever go to college and the, you know, the a hundred books you should read while you're in college. And you know, we're talking classics like "To Kill a Mockingbird", "Great Gatsby", "Animal Farm", you know, "Brave New World", "This Side of Paradise". And so, I think stick with the classics, cause you're gonna have some real good words in there, but it's also going, it's not a bunch of fodder. You don't have to worry about sorcery or vampires or any of that nonsense.

Jenni: Right. Now, what do you get this? Do you get, get kids saying to you, "I'm just, I have so much going on in my schedule, I don't have time to read more"?

Jean Burk: Oh, sure.

Jenni: What do you say to those kids?

Jean Burk: I can even say that for myself. Um, I think you look at the great people, uh, that are very successful, uh, in our world. Um, you know, Oprah Winfrey, which honestly I don't agree with or love her philosophies, but she spends two hours a day reading, uh, you know, as you know, Bill Gates and you know, um, uh, Steve Jobs. I mean, it's kind of like that, that, that saying of Abraham Lincoln, he said, you know, "If I had eight hours to chop down a tree, I would spend two hours, chopping it down in six hours sharpening my tool". Yeah. And so I think, I think it's, you know, if we're that busy, then, you know, what else are we doing? You know, we're finding the kids are spending as much as nine hours a day on some kind of technological device, social media, texting, whatever it is. So I think there's, I think there's time. I just think you have to move some priorities around.

Jenni: Yeah, that's a good word.

Jody: Jean, thank you so much for enlightening us today. This has been really good, and hopefully our listeners can really glean some hot tips and tools from this. We're grateful to have you on here today.

Jean Burk: Thank you.

Jenni: And make sure that you go visit Jean at [collegeprepgenius.com](http://collegeprepgenius.com) and ask her to come to your city and teach her amazing two-day course there. We've done it a number of times. She's coming back to visit us again, this year. We cannot recommend this course or Jean enough.

Jenni: Oh, my gosh.