

**Nature Study the Charlotte Mason Way**  
**An Interview with Sonya Shafer**  
*C2C Podcast Episode #7*



- Jody: In this episode, we're continuing a series on nature study, but today's episode is super special to us, because our own families were first introduced to the importance of nature study through "The Charlotte Mason Method of Homeschooling".
- Jenni: Well, I'm really excited, Jody, that I get to interview, I mean-"interview". Introduce our guests today, Sonya Shafer has been homeschooling for about 25 years using the Charlotte Mason method. She's the co-founder of [simplycharlottesmason.com](http://simplycharlottesmason.com), which she likes to describe as a hobby that got out of control. I love that. Welcome Sonya, thank you so much for being with us today on the podcast. Let's jump right in, because we are so excited to talk to you.
- Sonya Shafer: Well, thanks so much for inviting me. I'm **excited** to be here.
- Jenni: Tell us about Charlotte Mason's approach to nature study, because it really is a hallmark of the method of education.
- Sonya Shafer: It is. It starts with just nature walks and I know that sounds very impressive. It's just taking a walk in nature. That's all there is to it.
- Jody: You know, what does that look like?
- Sonya Shafer: Sometimes you make it too complicated. Well, we just make it too complicated, sometimes, and then we start dreading it. It's just, it'll start with a walk in nature where Charlotte went for one every day. Just go for a walk as often as you can and begin to train your senses to look for movement and color, to listen for bird calls or for leaves rustling, um, to feel the hot sun or the cool breeze and which direction is that breeze coming from to smell the flowers or the skunk.
- Jenni & Jody: (Bursts out in laughter.)
- Sonya Shafer: Just unhurried strolls in different natural places. That's where it begins.
- Jenni: Okay. Now, once you've mastered this, about how long are you just doing that and then what happens next?
- Sonya Shafer: It's up to you. How long you want to do that before you progress to what is next, which is nature study and a nature study is just like it sounds, it's more focused than this meandering walk. You can continue the walks as long as you want to and just every once in awhile bring in a study as well. And for a study you go outdoors with a specific nature friend in mind. It might be a tree in your yard or some flowers at the nearby park or some mushrooms you noticed a few days ago or the turtles that live

at the pond. Just determine what your focus is going to be and then go study it. You zero in on that nature friend. You look closely and carefully in order to learn more. Perhaps you paint it or sketch it, just see what you can observe about it for yourself and then revisit it over time to observe any changes that happen. That's nature study. And Charlotte Mason thought that that was so important. She scheduled it every week for her students.

Jody: So are you saying that, like, when, when you do this, like, you know, in this day and age, I would imagine we'd be taking pictures. That's, I know our kids like to do that, like to take pictures, but are you saying, so you go out, you study it, you take a picture, you sketch it, whatever, are you going back home and going deeper or you're just observing in nature on a weekly basis or a daily basis, the same spot?

Sonya Shafer: You are observing in nature, that particular nature friend. And yes, you can take a picture of it, especially the friends that tend to scamper away or fly away. It helps to get a picture. But then, if you can actually sketch or paint that it just helps you look a whole lot more closely at it.

Jenni: Yeah.

Sonya Shafer: You know, just snap! "Okay. I'm done with a picture. We're done." Um, and you're also recording, not just what the name of that object is. You want to observe its habits over time. It all comes down to pausing, breathing, staying there, looking, listening and just being in the moment. And I think that's sometimes hard for us to do.

Jenni: Oh my goodness. Even talking about it is hard to do.

Jody: Yeah.

Jenni: Like just as you're talking, I'm like, I feel a little bit of stress rising cause I'm thinking, "Wow, that's so counter-intuitive to our culture right now."

Sonya Shafer: Yes.

Jenni: But, but Charlotte Mason felt this was super important. Talk to us a little bit about why she felt like every child needed this to round out their education.

Sonya Shafer: Well, there are many reasons that she gave. Let me mention just a couple here. First is that nature study, getting out there and studying for yourself that lays the foundation for your formal science studies, because you're teaching this child, you're giving them a habit to look closely and carefully to observe for yourself, to ask questions and look for the answers and to be patient and so you're giving this child firsthand experience with the things that God has made so that later when a certain nature friend or circumstance or something is mentioned in their science lessons, that child has a personal connection with it and so he can relate to that concept very easily. It's kind of like through nature study, the child is laying up in his mind this store house of images and ideas that he can access and make use of as he does his formal

science lessons. So as you said, maybe you observed something in your nature study and your child says, "I wonder why it's like that. I wonder why he did that." Then when you go home, share a dive into it deeper, see what you can find out, but encourage that child to ask those questions for himself. And then let's go find the answers. So that's laying the foundation for formal science studies. Second reason I think it is so important, and Charlotte mentioned this too, is that it encourages your child to worship God as the creator and to want to take care of what God has created. You know, we can tell our children till we're blue in the face, the heavens declare the glory of God. But when it really sinks in at a heart level is when that child goes outside on a clear night and looks up at the myriad of stars in the sky. We say, "Go ahead and see if you can count them all." That's- You know, it's moments like those that just nestled deep within that child's heart and it causes this personal sense of awe and wonder at the might of God's. And as that personal wonder builds up over the seasons and over the years, so does a personal feeling of responsibility. It's hard to care about something you've never experienced for yourself that you don't have a personal relation with. So giving our children this firsthand experience with the wonders of God's creation can cultivate that sense of caring of stewardship within them. Those are just a couple of reasons that Charlotte thought it was so important.

Jenni: I love that you keep saying your nature friend. I think that's the cutest thing ever, and it really does have a lot packed into it, because like what you're saying, you're looking at the things that are growing and living outside of your home as um, real beings that you're connected to and that you're responsible for to some degree.

Jody: Except I don't think I want to be connected to the fire ants in my yard.

Jenni: Yeah.

Sonya Shafer: Well, it's a growing relationship. You know, just like you have, just like you have with different human friends, you learn their name, that's the first step. But that doesn't mean you have a relation with them. So it's after- as time goes on, you begin to know what their habits are, what their character is like, their personalities and you know, which friends to avoid in certain situations.

Jody: Because some bite!

Sonya Shafer: Exactly, yeah. And which friends are beautiful and feed your soul. And which friends are interesting to watch, you know. So it's the same thing. It's this growing relationship.

Jenni: But I also really liked that you talked about this quietness and this time of open space in your mind. Because I think that's something that we're sorely lacking in our society. Not only don't we actually have free time to just explore and do our own things, we don't have free time to think.

Sonya Shafer: Let me, let me put it a little different way. We don't make time to think.

Jenni: Yes, you're right. And especially for our kids.

Sonya Shafer: We all had the same amount of time.

Jenni: Right.

Sonya Shafer: It's just how we choose to spend it. And Charlotte talked about, I love this phrase she used, she called it the Quiet Schooling of Nature.

Jenni: Wow, I love- That's beautiful. So what's the best age range to do nature study?

Sonya Shafer: Well, you can start with the nature walks with the babies, you know, take them out for a walk in nature. You can do it in a stroller or in a wrap or a carrier or something.

Jody: We do it. We have a two-and-a-half year old here. And we do it in the wagon and it's super fun. She collects acorns and sticks and rocks and leaves and it is kind of fun to watch her be in awe at two years old at all the stuff that you take for granted that's just there.

Sonya Shafer: Exactly. Charlotte said the flowers are not new but the children are new. So, so we need to enter into that sense of wonder and exactly right. When they are preschoolers, then you can start teaching them the names of these different nature friends, just informally. As they see them, they collect them over the different seasons. Um, what you want to do is instill a habit of, and our family, we go outside regularly and we've see what we can see in God's creation. Cause the more that becomes a habit in those early years, the easier it's going to be.

Jody: Right.

Sonya Shafer: Then during the formal schooling years, like ages 6 to 18 or so, continue the nature walks, but add in that focused nature study. And I encourage you to keep that weekly nature study on your schedule all the way through high school.

Jenni: Thinking about the relationship that will continue to cement with your high-schooler, if you're having that devoted time together, out unencumbered, not, not distracted, just but in time, thinking, looking, observing, and then I'm sure, at some point, talking.

Sonya Shafer: Yes, but it also, yes talking, but it-- Something about being in God's creation, resets your hormones and reduces your stress level. I can feel my shoulders go down as I'm walking around one of my favorite parks and just surrounding your child with the things that God has made. It's a totally different atmosphere from sitting in a house all day surrounded by things that man has made.

Jenni: Oh, such a good point.

Jody: Wow. What a great perspective.

Jenni: Yeah. I love that.

Jody: Wow.

Jenni: So talk about some of this- Oh wait, I'm sorry. Did you have something else you wanted to say?

Sonya Shafer: Well, I was just gonna say we can, we can benefit from it as adults too, in that respect, because Charlotte said getting outside in God's creation helps us get life back into focus.

Jody: You know, you're, you're so right about that. I have to tell you when, when Ari nags us to go outside...

Jenni: Ari's, Jody's two-year old grand- granddaughter. She's so cute.

Jody: And, and she, I mean, she loves to be outside and it's hard here. It's really hot most of the year and it's muggy and it's buggy and, but you know, we take that time and we do take her out quite a bit and there's something about going out. I dread getting there. Once I get there and I'm walking her around in her wagon and let her get out and just kinda inspect things, there's something that happens to me in that and I don't want to go in.

Jenni: Yeah.

Jody: There's a relaxing part of it. There is an appreciation of God's creation in it. There's a bonding that's happening with you and the child and there is a discovery. I find things that I'm like, "I've never seen that before. That's interesting. What is that?"

Sonya Shafer: Oh, wonderful. That's exactly it.

Jenni: But Jody, you hit on, when I was going to ask, and that is um, there are some struggles that families have to overcome to make this a part of their homeschool experience. Can you talk about- So one, you said, Jody, is the weather, the discomfort of the weather, um, the interruption of your schedule. You know, getting out your man-made schedule, getting out and you know, getting over that hump. What are some of the other common struggles that families face when they're thinking about nature study?

Sonya Shafer: A couple of others are location, especially if you live in the center of a large city of something, you think, "I don't have any nature, I can't do this." But even in the middle of a large city, you can observe birds and clouds and the insects are still there and make use of them. And the weather, you can plant flowers in a pot, you can watch a hyacinth bulb grow and bloom in a glass jar. I mean, don't let location stop you. Nature is around you, anywhere you live. But probably one of the biggest struggles that I hear a lot from moms is that they think they need to have all the answers to the kids' questions before they go outside. You know, if they did not grow up in nature, then they're terrified. The kids are going to say, "Oh cool, what's that?" And Mom's going to say, "I have no idea," and feel like a failure. But the way to come- to overcome that struggle is just to remember what we talked about, that this is a growing relationship and you can model what it

looks like to stay curious and to keep learning as an adult. You can wonder and discover and learn right along with your children. And, and isn't that one of the sweetest parts of homeschooling anyway?

Jody: It really is. You're right.

Jenni: But I ha- I didn't start really learning until I started homeschooling.

Jody: I know same here.

Jenni: I feel like my education started 15 years ago when I homeschooled.

Sonya Shafer: Yeah. Yes, exactly.

Jenni: And I- and I have a college degree, but I really didn't know how to learn. I didn't really have an appreciation for learning in the way that I do as a homeschooler. So that's a great point.

Jody: So Sonya, what are some of the basic tools? Like I have no tools and maybe I do and I don't know that I do, but what are some basic tools that a family would need to do an effective nature study?

Sonya Shafer: First thing, you already have...

Jody: Your eyeballs.

Sonya Shafer: Your first tool... Well, close, very close. Go down about six inches. The very first tool, it's a willing heart.

Jody: Aww!

Sonya Shafer: Someone who's, someone who's willing to take the time to go out there, even though it's hot and muggy, or even though it's cold and snowy, depended on where you live and to pause and breathe and see what you can learn. That's the most important thing. So you've already got that. Shut that one off.

Jody: Okay.

Sonya Shafer: The other things I would recommend to get started, you want a nature notebook.

Jody: Okay.

Sonya Shafer: And that is simply a blank sketchbook in which you can record what you observe. Get one for each person who's doing the nature study, including mom, and don't get all bent out of shape and feel pressure about this thing. "I've got to make it look gorgeous!" No, just make it a reflection of your own personality. This is your growing relationship with nature friends. So you could sketch, you could paint, you could write descriptions. I personally do bullet points because that's just how I think.

Jody: So are you saying, when you're saying recording, I guess, my sketch pad I'm anticipating, I have to draw all this stuff. You're saying, okay, so it could be drawing, it could be like you said, bullet points where you're just kind of recording what you see. Are you focused on, okay, I'm really, I'm, I'm the nature study virgin here, so help me out. So am I like, what am I writing down? Like am I writing down, "I see leaves rustling. I..." Like what? What am I writing down?

Sonya Shafer: Okay. It's up to you. If you're doing just a nature walk, I go to a certain park and as I do my walk, I like to just check in with different things that I know are there. Like I know that the butterfly bush is over here at this spot. And so I just see what it's doing and I jot down what's happening at the butterfly bush today. And then as I go on, I find the autumn malice cherry trees. Now, lest you are starting to get intimidated, I know the names because this is a botanical park.

Jody: I just looked at Jenni. Okay. I looked at Jenni and I'm like, "I do not know what those things look like." I actually do know... I do know what a butterfly bush looks like because we had butterflies on our lanai and I was like, "There's gotta be a way to draw them here. Cause the kids were just loving looking at them." So we went and bought a butterfly bush to attract butterflies and it worked!

Sonya Shafer: Perfect! So you could, you could see what butterflies are on the bush and take a picture before they fly away. But then if you want to try to sketch that on your page, you could.

Jody: Okay.

Sonya Shafer: And, and always put the date down.

Jody: Okay.

Sonya Shafer: So it just depends. If you're doing a nature walk, you might just, you know, do an overview of what you see in bullet points. But if you're going to do a nature study, where I'm focusing on one particular thing, I'm going to go to my butterfly bush and let's see what's happening with it today. And you might sketch that bush or sketch what butterfly you saw there and like make a record, just write down any observations you have that the picture doesn't really tell you. You might say how hot it was or that it looks like it's wilting a little bit cause it's been so hot recently or you know, whatever you want to write down about your observations.

Jody: I think, Jenni, we need to schedule, get your calendar out and we need to have a Sonya nature walk tour and bring her with us, because I think it would be so fun for you.

Jenni: Yeah, I just looked at my phone and I realized, you're an Atlanta area, yeah?

Sonya Shafer: Yeah.

Jenni: I thought, oh, the next time we speak in Atlanta, we need to go follow Sonya on a nature walk.

Jody: YES!! That is, can we make that a date, Sonya?

Sonya Shafer: That would be so fun. I'll tell you what, in July, we have our annual Charlotte Mason together retreat and at the first thing in the morning before it gets too hot, we do a nature walk. Everybody can go on this nature walk and, and I do not lead it. Actually my friend, the other half of "Simply Charlotte Mason", Karen Smith, she is my nature study go-to person. She knows more about nature study than all of us put together and she leads those walks. So make a date.

Jenni & Jody: Yeah, we're doing that.

Jenni: Oh, that's awesome. Okay. So tell us, while we're on this topic, tell us a little bit more about "Simply Charlotte Mason" and how that organization, that website and all the tools that you offer can help families improve their overall homeschool experience.

Sonya Shafer: Well, as you said, it's basically a hobby that got out of control. I love to describe it that way, because my, our two families, Karen Smith's family and my family, loves Charlotte Mason and we started homeschooling 25 years ago and as we learned more and more, other homeschoolers wanted to learn about her methods. So we put together a website to share our ideas and it just keeps growing. Um, now at [simplycharlottemason.com](http://simplycharlottemason.com) we host an online planner and record keeper. We provide a free database that has thousands of great book suggestions, living books. Um, we produce weekly audio and video podcasts and blog posts and you can subscribe to those on YouTube or Facebook or Instagram or wherever or go on our website and subscribe there. Um, we post our recommendations for curriculum for grades one through twelve and we create resources that we wish we had had back 25 years ago, when we started homeschooling and, in fact, we just launched a new preschool resource that we're very excited about. It's called...

Jody: What is it?

Sonya Shafer: "Our Preschool Life". And it has a little nature friend component. Um, the child gets their own little nature hunt notebook, which is just a blank notebook. And every month we send two stickers of different nature friends to look for during the month and then when they see them they get to put the sticker in their notebook. So just to try and encourage that getting outside and looking for what you can find.

Jody: I love that.

Sonya Shafer: It's a fun component. There's lots more about 30 different ideas every month. Plus we send this box to your home every month that has the great books and art supplies and those nature hunt stickers and a beautiful art print and just all kinds of things. It's, I'm very excited about it.

Jenni: And it looks like you can find that at [ourpreschool.life](http://ourpreschool.life).

Sonya Shafer: Yes.

Jenni: Okay. I just looked it up as you're talking. They look so great. Oh my goodness. This looks so much- We both have a preschooler. Jody is homeschooling her preschool granddaughter and I have my, my seventh child is- just turned three and they're... We live six houses apart in they're besties and we are homeschooling them.

Jody: We do life together. So we have all kids like same ages and stuff. And so it's kind of like...

Jenni: Yeah, we've, we've, we've graduated some and now we get to do it all over again and we're looking at this and going, "Oh, this looks so great for our little ones." Well, Sonya, we are so excited about all that you're doing and all that you're offering and we're so grateful that you took some time today to chat with us. Um, we will make sure that we connect the people listening in our show notes to your, uh, to your websites [simplycharlottesmason.com](http://simplycharlottesmason.com) and we'll put a link to [ourpreschool.life](http://ourpreschool.life) for anyone who is homeschooling a preschooler. Um, and is there any parting words that you have for us to inspire our listeners and us too? Cause we're the students of this podcast. Before we go.

Sonya Shafer: I would just encourage you, don't let fear hold you back from all that God's creation has in store for you. It's a wonderful thing to get out there and especially, if you have special needs children as I do, time in nature is just a wonderful thing to behold when you get those children out there for all of us, not just the special needs kids, but for babies, preschoolers, school-age adults, all of us, we can benefit from that quiet schooling of nature. So don't let fear hold you back.

Jenni: I am inspired. I know Jody is too. Sonya, thank you so much and we wish you the very best and we're coming out to Atlanta to come on this nature walk.

Jody: Yes, we are, we will be there.

Sonya Shafer: Sounds great. Thanks so much for inviting me. It's gonna be a pleasure.

New Speaker: Well, it sounds great. Thanks so much for inviting me. It's going to be a pleasure.