

Homeschool Super Heroes

Speakers:

Ashley Ortega
Toni Anderson

[audio start]

Ashley: Ok, are you still there?

Toni: Yes.

Ashley: Ok, perfect. Then I will go get it started, and typically we try to make them about 30-35 minutes long, so...

Toni: Ok.

Ashley: All right, perfect! Thank you so much for joining me tonight. This is Ashley, from Homeschool Super Heroes, and I'm so excited to have Toni Anderson as our guest this evening.

Toni is a military wife and a stay at home mom to seven kids. When she's not homeschooling the kids, she likes to read, sew, cook, and write. Toni currently lives in west Florida, but being in a military family, she has lived everywhere from Panama, to West Virginia, and lots of places between.

Toni has the Happy Housewives blog, as well as Savvy blogging site. Thank you so much for joining us, Toni!

Toni: Thank you for having me!

Ashley: No problem! If you don't mind, just having our listeners getting more familiar with you and your family and maybe start with your approach to homeschooling.

Toni: Okay, well I have seven children. My oldest is 18 and actually just graduated from high school, and my youngest is 3, so we've been homeschooling for about 12 years.

We started when my oldest was in the first grade, we pulled her out of school about halfway through, and my approach to homeschooling has always kind of been take it year by year, kid by kid.

I haven't had like a set approach to anything because I found out very early on with my first two that they were just so different that I knew what worked for one wouldn't work for the other, except that they obviously like Bible and history.

But in a lot of the subjects I wasn't able to reuse curriculum, or sort of a group approach didn't really worked. So, over time I've just learned that, you know, every year, with every kid is going to be different and so I can't really count on just because it worked with one, it works with the others.

So we have used a variety of methods, a variety of curriculum, just trying to make sure that each child gets a real individual education that best fits their needs.

Ashley: Perfect! What would be a typical day.. well maybe there is no such thing as a typical day in the homeschooling world, but maybe what would a typical day during your homeschooling time look like?

Toni: Well, usually the rule in our house is that if you want breakfast, you have to be in the kitchen by 8:15. My kids are not early risers at all, so I usually get up really early and work, because I do work from home, so I usually get up early and work. And then at 8:15 anybody who wants to eat usually would be in the kitchen, and we do a breakfast together, usually a hot breakfast, pancakes, eggs, roffles, and then eat, clean it up together, and then we usually try to start up with school, try to start with school by 9 o'clock.

I usually have one of the older kids take out the toddler and do some fun toddler activities with our little girl, away from the other kids because we usually first thing in the morning we do Bible, science and history, I do this with my four middle kids.

And then after that the toddler rejoins us and we kind of have a "who gets the toddler next" for the rest of our day, to keep her out of trouble, and I try to work individually with each kid for 30 to 45 minutes, depending on what grades they're in and in how much help they need, and we kind of work through lunch and my younger kids tend to be done by lunch time and then the afternoon I usually check on the older kids. They pretty much do school on their own.

Last year I had two highschoolers and they were on their own, we met at the beginning of the week and then I had one who needing a little more accountability so I met with him every day for 15 minutes to make sure he had done his work, and then with the older one we met at the end of the week just a kind of go over and making sure she didn't have any questions about the assignment when I check them.

So, the afternoon we usually spend working with the other kids that need any help, and then my sixth-grader, if he needed any extra help. But my younger elementary kids usually come by one o'clock. So that's kind of a typical school hours in our house.

Ashley: Perfect! Now I noticed you talked a little about accountability and that kind of thing for your older ones. How do you sort of manage the whole trying to make

sure that everyone is staying on track and staying where they need to be, you know, whether it's their grade level or just sitting down and doing their work?

Toni: Well, I found out a couple of years ago that if I didn't stay on top of my kids, one of us would fall behind, either me or them, so I developed kind of accountability for all the kids.

Every Monday there is a weekly schedule that they get, customized for each child. Basically this just has their weekly assignments, so that even if they can work on their own, I still check it off at the end of the day to confirm. And with the younger kids they really like that because they love the fact that they get a little circle or a star highlighted on that assignment, because it showed that they accomplished something.

And for my older kids, they've actually told me that they love having that accountability, because even when they would want to get lazy, know that they're going to have to see me at the end of the day, and turn something in or they let me see that they have done it.

I don't always check it at the end of the day, but I at least check for completion. So for me, I just found that if I wouldn't do that, then I would get behind and all of a sudden. I think one year I realized probably eight weeks that I hadn't checked the tests for one of my children, like they've done three or four tests and I never actually checked them.

And then I realized that how I know if they were struggling if I did not know how they were doing on the test. So I realized both they and I needed that kind of daily or weekly accountability to make sure that we didn't get too far behind or too off track in our school.

Ashley: Perfect! Now I know that your husband is in the military. Has he always been in the military? That probably presents different challenges for you, especially as a homeschooling mother. Now, what is that sort of look like in your homeschooling room?

Toni: Actually, he's been in the military since I've known him. So he's obviously complete out of family, and actually him being in the military was one of the reasons why we decided to start homeschooling.

For many years he worked shifts, so he usually worked the weekends, and then at one point was on this shift where he went to work at 3 and got home at midnight. So he never saw the kids because they would get home from school at 3, and he would've already left for work and then he would sleep in because he wasn't getting home from work until one in the morning and then they would be getting up for school, and so we realized that our family time was almost nonexistent,

because if they were home he was at work and if he was home they were at school.

So he was on that schedule for 6 years I think, so knowing if that was our future for a long time, that kind of helped me decide. We decide pretty quickly to pull our daughter out of school, so that was one of the reasons when we just realized that our family was gone, because she was at school all day, and then, if he could have a Wednesday off when we were home schooling, she could take the Wednesday off too, and we could do school on Saturday when he was at work.

So, essentially, we loved the flexibility of homeschooling because we've also moved a lot, due to the military, and so I think our oldest daughter if had she stayed in school, would've been to 12 schools in 12 years. So I think that with the military life, the homeschooling has provided a lot of stability for my kids because even though their environment might change, and their friends change, and their house might change, at least homeschooling has stayed the same for them.

Ashley: Perfect! You mentioned back about moving every year and about how that affects your kids. How about as a homeschooling mom, how does that affect you? Are there certain support groups that you can use? Or how does that affect you, where do you find your support if you're moving all the time?

Toni: We try to get plug in whenever we move to a different area into a local homeschool support group. Sometimes it's been through the military base, other times it's been through our church, a couple times we just found groups in the community that worked that.

So that's been really important to kind of get the kids plugged in and to have them meet other kids quickly. It's been a great resource, so we definitely try to plug into like a co-op or support group. And there are definitely some certain military bases overseas, the support groups seems to be really strong. Sp there is definitely a strong support for the military homeschoolers. It doesn't always happen through the military, but there's lots of options available.

Ashley: Perfect! Is there any advice that you would have particularly for homeschool moms who has been involved in the military? Is there anything that would really stick out through your experience and that might be more pertinent than them as opposed to a different homeschooling mom?

Toni: I would say that it would definitely be flexible. We've moved numerous times during the school years, which has always been a little bit of a disruption so I think definitely flexibility and week school year-round for many years, because we just never knew where we're going to be moving, and so the year-round schedule just gave us the flexibility to take off in October, take off in March, you know, for a month, when you don't see people taking off during the summer.

And then the other thing I think with the military homeschooling is just you definitely plug in when you get places and keep excellent records. One thing that I wasn't prepared for when we started, because I didn't know a lot about homeschooling was that every state was so different in what they required from homeschoolers.

So, if you have good records from your previous state, it's much easier when you go to next state, because you don't really know what they are going to require of you, and you'll usually have it if you keep good records throughout your husband's military career.

Ashley: Perfect! Tell us a little bit more, I was able to look over your blog a little bit, the Happy Housewives, and I noticed that you have several different areas there, from cooking to further living and home management. What do you need to have to be able to balance it all?

I know probably there's times when you're more of a single mother, because you are in the military, and trying to balance that, but then also also for other moms who are just trying to stay up close. What are the best tips you have for that?

Toni: Tips in general with homeschooling?

Ashley: Oh, just the management of things, like managing your home and trying to homeschool and run a business, and all that together.

Toni: Right. I think I'm definitely fortunate because I do have older kids, so I have babysitters, kids that could clean, make their own beds, get their own breakfast, one of my older kids could make dinner, so I'm definitely where I was seven years ago when I had very young kids and lots of babies and toddlers.

I probably couldn't do everything that I'm doing right now. So looking back on that, when my kids were all really young and all I did was change diapers for several years, I learned that you just need to do the basics, get the bare minimum, cover the basic subjects, don't worry about doing every project in every activity, you're going to be able to go in every field trip, that's okay.

Now that my kids have gotten older, I seem to have a lot more freedom as far as like with school we've been able to do things that we wouldn't necessarily been able to do several years ago, with field trips and just projects and activities, because I have older kids that can either help with a project or help with the little ones when you're trying to get things done. And that kind of goes for my business as well.

Obviously, having the older children just gives me more flexibility with my time and even my younger kids aren't..they've grown out of that stage where they just

constantly need you 24/7. I'm not waking up in the middle of the night with anybody, I'm not changing anymore diapers, it's very easy to give them a school assignment and have them sit at the table with me while I work with somebody else and not complete it, just because..and also, when they were little we just worked really hard on being independent learners, and I think it's starting to pay off with my older kids.

Ashley: With the first year of school right on the corner for most people, I know that you guys have more of a year-round schedule, is there any specific advice that you would give to moms who are just starting out at the beginning or veteran moms as well that are in your position, just how to literally make those first couple of weeks really exciting?

Toni: Yes, definitely. I would say first of all to make the first day very exciting. We do things like we either go get donuts, either we do homemade donuts, we measure everybody to see how much they've grown from the last school year, we take pictures of the first day, separately, as a class, you know, all of them together. Just the kind of track where they were and where they are.

Sometimes they look back at pictures from other first days and they just love seeing how everyone has changed, how everyone has grown-up, and then we don't even really attempt to actually do school the first day. The first day I usually give them their books, we come over, we talk about what we want to do this year, several years we made like field trip lists and what I really want to do this year lists, where they can kind of dream big and say things like "I want to go to Alaska this year", or "we want to go to Disney World", and things unlikely to happen, I mean obviously we are not going to Alaska every year, but just letting them dream like if you could go to any field you want to go to this year, where would you want to go, and letting them to kind of make a big list, and of course, the little kids always want to go to the zoo, and that can usually happen for them, and the big kids could sometimes have bigger goals and we make them happen when we can.

So the first day I tried to get them really excited about the year, and mainly talk through of what is expected of them and then what they expect from me. And then, through the next couple of weeks we kind of dive in the second day, but my advice for anybody would be to have your expectations set really low, because I found that when we have taken the summer off, a lot of times they forgotten a lot of stuff, so it's very frustrating to open a book and think that they knew all this 3 months ago and now they completely forgotten how to read, even though they seem to have read all a summer to you.

So, you know, I think you have to be ready for whatever you're going to get, and be relaxed and kind of realize they're going to ease into it. Even if they were in a public school or a Christian school, the first couple weeks are filled with reviews

and getting to know the teacher and the classroom rules, and so, don't think you could just dive into homeschooling.

Sometimes you can, but if you can't, that's okay and it's very normal and it doesn't mean that a whole year is going to be ruined or you're a failure, it just means that you're like everybody else needs a little bit of reviewing, and everyone needs time to get into that schedule.

And even with my kids, we have had an initial reaction to take the summer off so we only start up in a couple of weeks, in our first couple of days we were not going to be doing school for five and six hours, we're going to be doing it for one hour or two, to kind of remember how to do school and, you know how, how our routine works until we finally have a rhythm, and then I just keep adding time to the day and adding assignments until we finally hit our stride at about 2 to 3.

Ashley: Ok, I like that idea. You're making an easy transition, and not just slammed in and everyone's overwhelmed, both mom and the kids, trying to figure it out what's going on. One thing that I noticed that you talk a lot about, especially on your blog is frugal living.

Do you have some tips for moms to be able to save some of that money, and be able to help out their families in that way, because I know a lot of homeschooled are sometimes more pitched for money more than other, I mean we all go through those phases. And do you have any tips on that?

Toni: Yes, definitely. I think homeschooling provide us with a really unique opportunity that we get to be with our kids every day, so sometimes we're able to influence them a little bit differently than if we they were in school. And one of things that our family has always done is that we've we really made our frugal living just part of our family and so, things like shop at a thrift store or making a menu plan or clipping coupons, we do that together, so my little kids often in the afternoon will cut coupons out of the newspaper for me.

And they understand why they're doing it, they understand that's a way for us to save money. I had my older kids, my oldest daughter creating a plan and think while she's creating, think about what these things cost, think about what we have in our house that you can use to save money on these groceries and even going to the grocery store, sending her to the grocery store and having her shop just to be conscious about prices. We've done things where we've taken field trips to the first store to buy clothes.

So I think it's kind of thing where, in our family, we just all embrace it as a family, so that it's kind of a way of life, so that they understand.

A couple of years ago, when I was pregnant with our seventh baby, they knew that we needed to buy a bigger vehicle, they all knew that we were saving for this

van. So we gave up some things to save money to buy our van. I think that's when you're with them all day that you can kind of talk about money and talk about how the family use money and how you want to save it or spend it and kind of weave through everything that you do, even from talks about how take care of our books so they're going to be usable for another child.

So, I think that you can kind of weave it through everything that you do. And I think that's important because if your kids are on board, it's a whole lot easier to save money than if your kids are constantly asking for things and asking you to spend money.

Ashley: I like the idea that you're not just teaching your kids just the quick term, you're teaching them life lessons though the process of homeschooling and just doing day-to-day activities and just turning that into home school, that's not set in a specific curriculum.

Well, if you could do one thing in particular, what would that be or is there anything you'd do differently from the time you started and until, a just advice giving for homeschooling moms?

Toni: If I had to do one thing differently I would definitely not push my kids to read. When my oldest was pulled out of school she could already read, but then so when my next one started with homeschooling in kindergarten I was sure that he could do reading by the second week of school. And I pushed and pushed and pushed and he ended up having some learning disabilities, which made it extremely difficult for him to read. But what I did was... basically he hated school because schooled to him was frustrating and hard and he wasn't successful at, and he's going to be a junior in high school, and we're still working on liking school, because I think those first couple years I just was so determined that he was going to be on track with every other kid his age in school and out of school.

And I think knowing what I know now when what I've done with my other children, I'm much more relaxed and if they don't learn how to read until 9 or 10, and if they don't know some things until they're a little bit older, that's okay, because I realized they'll all catch up eventually.

So I would've been much more relaxed with my second my second child, and just made school fun, and if something was a real struggle I wouldn't just pushed and pushed and pushed, I would've held back and brought it up later and kept introducing in at certain times until he was ready, and not try to compare myself to other homeschoolers or other kids in school, because it really isn't about how they stack up to these other kids, it's about if they love to learn and if they're learning. And I didn't get that for a long time, I felt like we had to prove how great homeschooling is because our kids are all geniuses, and I've realized that not all homeschoolers are geniuses, and not all public schoolers aren't geniuses. I

mean there's smart kids everywhere, no matter where they go to school and there's kids that struggle, no matter where they are.

And so, as a homeschooler I just want to make sure that each of my kids is having their needs met and if that means to slow down, then I'm okay with slowing down. And I didn't know that for several years.

Ashley: Perfect! And that's so true that you really have to meet each kids needs, like you said several times throughout the interview, that just taking year-by-year and kid-by-kid, because they are so different. And I'm a teacher in a more classroom setting, but I noticed that a lot, you have to be able to give each kid what he or she needs

Toni: Right, exactly.

Ahsley: How do you, and we talked a little bit at the beginning about accountability with having your older kids and your younger kids. Are there things that you do more as a family? Are there certain aspects of the homeschooling that you would do with all kids versus breaking them up and treat them as individual subjects?

Toni: For one year we actually did a unit study with my older two kids, who are the only school-age kids.

So they did that together for one year, but the problem I ran into was that my oldest was very advanced and my next child was delayed. So the gap between their ability was so wide that the oldest was usually frustrated that she wasn't moving quicker and the younger one was frustrated that we were moving too quickly.

I found especially for like the reading, and the math, and science it was really hard to keep them together. And then I have a four-year gap between my second child and my third child, so when we tried for a couple years to do like Bible and history together, my older two kids though that it was kind of babyish and my younger kids felt like they were being left..you know, they kind of didn't understand all of the stuff we were talking about.

So what I have done over the years was to group my older two together, for certain subjects, definitely Bible has been one of them every year, I think we did history together one year, and then with my younger four, we've done bible, science and history together for about three years.

Now, obviously the younger one, who just finished kindergarten last year, didn't always grasp all the content, but that's ok because I know she's going to get them in a couple of years. And with my older son I usually have him do some extra reading or extra activities, the kind of supplement, because he was steered towards the two middle kids. But it definitely worked for those subjects.

Right now I'm not sure in a few years that's going to keep working, but now we have been able to do some of the science and history, especially the read aloud and the science experiments, and we did that together with the middle kids.

Ashley: Perfect! Well, is there any other advice or comment you would like to make, or could you give our listeners more details about your website, where they can find more information about you?

Toni: Sure. I think my biggest the advice was what I just said earlier, be really relaxed. I think an uptight homeschooler is an unhappy homeschooler.

I think that if you get so caught up in performance, I think you're really missing what is amazing about homeschooling, that is just really being able to develop an individual education for each child based on what their giftings are and what their needs are.

So I think once... and I've noticed that the more homeschool conventions I attend and the more homeschoolers that I meet, I feel like this competition in homeschooling is growing, to prove that we are successful as a group.

And I think we are successful as a the group, because we are putting our children's education first, and I think that's what makes us successful. Whether your child is going to Harvard or if they go straight into a job out of school, I don't think that you can measure by testing how successful homeschooling is.

And so, I see a lot of young moms or I get e-mail from people asking me what kind of math they should do with their three-year-old, and I'm thinking my three-year-old clogs the toilet with toilet paper for fun. So, let your kids be kids and don't try to raise these child prodigies, because we want to prove that we're worth in being homeschool moms.

So that would be my biggest piece of advice, because I definitely felt myself, I was definitely in that camp when my kids were younger and I just wanted to prove to everybody that I was successful homeschooling mom.

I see that my older daughter just graduated and she's going off to college, and I feel like I'm a successful mom because I have a great relationship with her and she loves school. And that's what's important. I don't care what score she's got on her SAT or what college she's going to, but I feel like our relationship is how I view my success with her.

So that's definitely what I would take. When I was just starting out, I wish someone would've told me that 12 years ago, to quit worrying about testing and academics and just work on the relationship.

This would definitely be my best advice, my biggest piece of advice for young homeschooling moms.

Ashley: That's great! And know that my mom strived to develop on this as well, and it's been a blessing, especially now that I'm married, and I'm not a mom yet, but I could see some of the other sides of things. It gives me just a lot of appreciation for everything that she did for us.

We've always been close friends, but now that bond is becoming even closer, just because she did take that time to develop our relationship and not just focus so much on academics. That was definitely an important part, but she really focused on developing our relationship with each other as well.

Toni: That's awesome!

Ashley: What is your website, if our listeners would like to get back in touch with you or read more about the different things that you offer?

Toni: My website is thehappyhousewives.com and there's a contact button if you want to e-mail me, if you click on it will take you to a form and your email will come straight to me. So, I love when people e-mail me questions, I usually turn their questions into articles on the site, so that everybody can benefit from the question and there is a whole section on my site about homeschooling.

Ashley: Perfect, that sounds great! Thank you so much for joining us tonight, Toni, I really appreciate it, and for all the advices you gave to our listeners!

Toni: Thank you so much for having me!

Ashley: Have a great evening!

Toni: You too! Bye!

Ashley: Bye!

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