

# Curriculum Comparison Guide

Find the Perfect Fit for Your Family's Learning Style

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## Homeschool Connects

Free Resource Guide

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# Understanding Homeschool Philosophies

Before you choose a curriculum, it helps to understand the educational philosophies that shape how those curricula are designed. Each philosophy reflects a distinct set of beliefs about how children learn best. Most homeschool families start with one approach and evolve over time, often blending elements from several traditions into something uniquely their own.

## Keep This in Mind

No curriculum is perfect, and most families mix and match. The goal is not to find a flawless program but to find one that fits your child well enough to build on. Give yourself permission to experiment and adjust as you learn what works.

## Classical Education

Classical education follows the trivium model, which divides learning into three developmental stages: Grammar (memorization and facts), Logic (reasoning and analysis), and Rhetoric (persuasive communication). Students engage deeply with primary sources, great literature, Latin, formal logic, and rigorous writing. The approach produces strong critical thinkers and articulate communicators.

Best for: Learners who enjoy structure, reading, memorization, and intellectual challenge. Families who value a systematic progression through the liberal arts.

- Pros: Builds exceptional writing and reasoning skills; provides a clear, structured sequence across all grades
- Pros: Creates students who can think critically and engage with complex ideas from an early age
- Cons: Can feel rigid and demanding, especially for younger children or those who prefer hands-on learning
- Cons: Requires significant parent involvement and preparation, particularly at the Logic and Rhetoric stages

## Charlotte Mason

Charlotte Mason education centers on the idea that children are whole persons who deserve to engage with rich, living ideas rather than dry facts. The method relies on living books (high-quality narrative texts), short focused lessons, oral narration, nature study, picture study, music appreciation, and habit training. Lessons are kept brief to maintain attention and enthusiasm.

Best for: Learners who thrive with literature, storytelling, nature, and creativity. Families who want a gentle, beauty-filled approach to education.

- Pros: Nurtures a love of reading and a deep connection to the natural world; short lessons prevent burnout
- Pros: Low cost since it relies primarily on library books rather than expensive textbook packages
- Cons: Can feel unstructured to parents who prefer clearly defined lesson plans and measurable benchmarks
- Cons: Math and science instruction may need supplementing with a dedicated curriculum

## Montessori

Montessori education emphasizes child-led discovery through carefully prepared environments and hands-on materials. Children choose their own work within a structured framework and progress at their own pace. Practical life skills, sensory experiences, and self-correction are central to the method. The teacher serves as a guide rather than a lecturer.

Best for: Kinesthetic learners who need to touch, build, and manipulate to understand. Younger children (ages 3-9) benefit especially from this approach.

- Pros: Develops independence, concentration, and intrinsic motivation; highly tactile and engaging
- Pros: Children learn to manage their own time and follow their curiosity naturally
- Cons: Specialized materials can be expensive, though many can be made at home
- Cons: Less structured than other approaches, which may challenge parents who want a clear daily plan

## Unschooling

Unschooling is grounded in the belief that children are natural learners who will acquire knowledge and skills when given freedom, access to resources, and supportive adults. There is no set curriculum or schedule. Instead, the parent facilitates learning by following the child's interests, providing materials, arranging experiences, and engaging in rich conversation. A child obsessed with cooking, for example, might organically study fractions, chemistry, geography, and history through that single passion.

**Best for:** Self-motivated, curious children who resist structured instruction. Families willing to trust the process and release conventional academic timelines.

- Pros: Preserves intrinsic motivation and fosters deep, lasting engagement with topics the child cares about
- Pros: Eliminates daily power struggles over assignments and produces highly self-directed learners
- Cons: Requires a high level of parental trust, patience, and active facilitation behind the scenes
- Cons: Difficult to document progress for state requirements; may concern relatives or partners unfamiliar with the philosophy

## Eclectic

Eclectic homeschooling is the art of pulling the best ideas from multiple philosophies and combining them to fit your unique family. You might use a structured math curriculum alongside Charlotte Mason literature studies, Montessori practical life activities, and unschooling-style science exploration. This is by far the most common approach in practice, even among families who do not explicitly identify it as their method.

**Best for:** Families with children who have varied learning styles or multiple children at different stages. Parents who enjoy customizing and want maximum flexibility.

- Pros: Complete freedom to tailor every subject to each child; adapts easily as needs change over time
- Pros: Lets you keep what works from any approach and discard what does not without loyalty to a system
- Cons: Requires more planning and decision-making since there is no single program guiding your year
- Cons: Can lead to decision fatigue if you have not established clear priorities and boundaries for yourself

## Unit Studies

Unit studies organize learning around a central theme or topic rather than separate subjects. A unit on ancient Egypt, for example, might incorporate history (pharaohs and pyramids), science (mummification chemistry), math (measurement and geometry of structures), language arts (research writing and hieroglyphics), and art (painting and sculpting). Everything connects to the

central topic, which makes learning feel cohesive and meaningful.

Best for: Learners who need context and connections to stay engaged. Families with multiple ages who want everyone studying the same topic at different levels.

- Pros: Creates deep, memorable learning by connecting subjects naturally around a theme
- Pros: Excellent for multi-age families since younger and older children can explore the same topic at their own depth
- Cons: Systematic skill building in math and grammar may need separate, dedicated instruction
- Cons: Planning quality units from scratch takes considerable time, though many pre-made options exist

## Traditional / Textbook

Traditional or textbook-based homeschooling follows a conventional academic structure using published textbooks, workbooks, and teacher manuals. Lessons proceed sequentially through chapters, and progress is measured through quizzes, tests, and assignments. This approach closely mirrors what students experience in a conventional classroom, making it familiar and easy to follow.

Best for: Families who want a clear, day-by-day plan with minimal preparation. Students planning to transition into or out of traditional school.

- Pros: Minimal planning required; everything is laid out in order with clear expectations and assessment
- Pros: Easy to track progress and demonstrate grade-level work for state requirements or school re-entry
- Cons: Can feel dry and repetitive for creative or hands-on learners who need variety and engagement
- Cons: Less flexibility to follow interests or adapt pacing to a child who moves faster or slower than the textbook expects

# Subject-by-Subject Recommendations

With thousands of curriculum options available, narrowing the field can feel impossible. Below are well-known, widely used programs organized by subject. Each description is a brief, factual summary to help you identify programs worth researching further. We encourage you to read reviews, request samples, and talk to other families before making a purchase.

## Free Trials and Samples

Many companies offer free trials or sample lessons before you commit to a purchase. Take advantage of these whenever possible. A curriculum that looks perfect on paper may not click with your child in practice, and trying before buying saves money and frustration.

## Mathematics

- Saxon Math — A traditional, incremental approach that introduces concepts gradually and incorporates heavy review and daily practice to build retention over time
- Math-U-See — Uses a system of colorful manipulative blocks to teach math concepts visually and kinesthetically, progressing through mastery-based levels
- Singapore Math — Developed from the national math curriculum of Singapore, this program emphasizes deep conceptual understanding, mental math strategies, and bar-model problem solving
- Teaching Textbooks — A self-paced, computer-based math program with video instruction and automatic grading, designed for independent learners
- RightStart Mathematics — A hands-on program rooted in the use of an abacus and card games to develop number sense and mathematical thinking from the ground up

## Language Arts

- All About Reading — A multisensory, Orton-Gillingham-based reading program that uses letter tiles, phonogram cards, and engaging readers to teach phonics and fluency systematically
- The Good and the Beautiful — Combines reading, writing, spelling, grammar, and art appreciation into a single integrated course with an emphasis on high-quality literature and nature themes
- Institute for Excellence in Writing (IEW) — A structured writing curriculum that teaches students a repeatable process for organizing and composing essays, reports, and creative writing
- Logic of English — A comprehensive phonics and spelling program that teaches the rules and patterns of English systematically, building confident readers and accurate spellers
- Brave Writer — A writing-focused program built on the philosophy that children learn to write best through authentic expression, freewriting, and living a literary lifestyle at home

## Science

- Apologia Science — A creation-based science curriculum with conversational text, hands-on experiments, and notebooking activities, widely used in the homeschool community
- Real Science Odyssey — A secular, lab-based science program organized by discipline (biology, chemistry, earth science, astronomy) with detailed experiments and full-color student pages
- BFSU (Building Foundations of Scientific Understanding) — A framework-based approach that guides parents through teaching core science concepts through hands-on lessons and discussion
- Noeo Science — Combines living books, experiments, and a structured schedule into a literature-based science curriculum that covers biology, chemistry, and physics in rotating cycles
- Mystery Science — A digital platform offering short, engaging video lessons paired with hands-on activities, designed to spark curiosity and require minimal teacher preparation

## History and Social Studies

- Story of the World — A four-volume narrative history series covering ancient times through the modern age, written in an engaging storytelling style with companion activity guides
- Mystery of History — A chronological world history program that weaves together civilizations and cultures across four volumes, integrating primary source readings and mapwork
- Sonlight — A literature-based curriculum that uses high-quality historical fiction and nonfiction books as the spine for a rich, globally-focused history and geography program
- Beautiful Feet Books — A Charlotte Mason-inspired history curriculum that uses carefully curated living books and study guides to explore historical periods in depth
- Notgrass History — A comprehensive American and world history program for middle and high school students that integrates primary sources, literature, and Bible-based perspective

### Mixing and Matching

You do not need to use the same publisher for every subject. Many successful homeschool families use one program for math, a completely different one for language arts, and a third approach for science. Choose the best tool for each job rather than committing to a single brand across the board.

## Curriculum by Budget

One of the most common questions new homeschool families ask is how much curriculum costs. The honest answer is that it ranges from completely free to several thousand dollars per year, depending on the approach and materials you choose. The table below organizes options by budget level to help you plan realistically.

| Budget Level               | Options   | Notes  |
|----------------------------|---|--|
| Free (\$0)                 | Khan Academy, Ambleside Online, Easy Peasy, public library, PBS LearningMedia       | Excellent for core subjects; may need supplementing for hands-on activities        |
| Budget (<\$200/yr)         | The Good and the Beautiful, MEP Math, guest passes to co-ops, used curriculum sales | Many high-quality programs are free or donation-based; used books                  |
| Mid-Range (\$200-\$500/yr) | Teaching Textbooks, Math-U-See, All About Reading, Story of the World, Anologia     | Most high-quality curricula fall in this range; covers multiple subjects           |
| Premium (\$500+/yr)        | Sonlight, Masterbooks complete sets, online academies, Veritas Press, Memoria Press | Comprehensive packages with all materials included; less parent prep time required |

Keep in mind that spending more money does not guarantee better outcomes. Some of the most effective homeschool programs are entirely free. What matters most is how well the curriculum fits your child's learning style and your family's rhythm.

### Budget-Saving Strategies

Join local curriculum swap groups on social media. Attend used book sales at homeschool conventions. Share resources with another family. Buy consumable workbooks but reuse the instructor guides for younger siblings. Check whether your state offers homeschool funding or education savings accounts that reimburse curriculum purchases.

# Online vs. Textbook vs. Hands-On

Curriculum is delivered in three broad formats, and understanding the strengths and limitations of each will help you make better purchasing decisions. Many families use a combination of all three depending on the subject and the child.

## Online / Digital Curriculum

Online curriculum delivers lessons through video instruction, interactive exercises, and digital assessments. Students typically work at a computer or tablet, and many programs include automatic grading and progress tracking. Examples include Teaching Textbooks, Khan Academy, and Outschool live classes.

- Pros: Self-paced and often self-grading, which frees up parent time significantly
- Pros: Engaging multimedia content appeals to visual and auditory learners; easy to update with current information
- Pros: Progress tracking and reporting features simplify record-keeping for state requirements
- Cons: Excessive screen time is a concern, especially for younger children who need physical activity and tactile learning
- Cons: Requires reliable internet access and appropriate devices; technical difficulties can disrupt learning
- Cons: Some children find it isolating to learn from a screen without social interaction or hands-on engagement

## Textbook / Workbook Curriculum

Textbook-based curriculum uses printed books, workbooks, and teacher manuals to deliver structured lessons. Students read explanations, complete practice problems, and take written assessments. Programs like Saxon Math, Apologia, and Rod and Staff follow this model.

- Pros: No screen time required; develops reading comprehension and written communication skills naturally
- Pros: Clear daily assignments and page numbers make planning straightforward and predictable
- Pros: Physical books are durable, resalable, and can be reused for younger siblings
- Cons: Can feel dry and repetitive without supplemental activities, videos, or hands-on extensions
- Cons: Grading and progress tracking must be done manually by the parent
- Cons: Heavy reliance on worksheets may disengage kinesthetic learners who need movement and manipulation

## Hands-On / Experience-Based Curriculum

Hands-on curriculum emphasizes learning through doing: experiments, building, cooking, field trips, art projects, nature study, and real-world application. Programs like Math-U-See, BFSU, and unit studies from companies like Gather Round or Torchlight fit this category.

- Pros: Creates deep, memorable understanding through physical engagement with concepts
- Pros: Naturally appeals to kinesthetic learners and keeps all ages actively involved in the lesson
- Pros: Develops practical skills alongside academic knowledge; integrates well with everyday life
- Cons: Requires more preparation time for the parent to gather materials and set up activities
- Cons: Supply costs can add up, especially for science experiments and art projects
- Cons: Harder to assess progress through traditional testing; documentation relies on portfolios and observation

## Decision Flowchart: Finding Your Fit

Choosing a curriculum can feel overwhelming, but it does not have to be. Work through the following questions in order. Your answers will narrow the field dramatically and point you toward the approaches and programs most likely to succeed with your child.

1. What is your child's primary learning style? Visual learners do well with colorful texts, videos, and diagrams (consider Teaching Textbooks, Khan Academy, or The Good and the Beautiful). Auditory learners thrive with read-alouds, discussion, and verbal instruction (consider Sonlight, Charlotte Mason methods, or audiobook-based programs). Kinesthetic learners need to touch, build, and move (consider Math-U-See, Montessori materials, or unit studies with hands-on projects).
2. How much structure does your family need? If you want a detailed daily plan with minimal decisions, look at boxed curricula or all-in-one programs like Sonlight, My Father's World, or BookShark. If you prefer flexibility and enjoy customizing, an eclectic approach using individual subject picks will serve you better.
3. What is your budget? If money is tight, start with free resources like Khan Academy, Ambleside Online, and your public library. If you have a moderate budget, choose one or two paid programs for core subjects and supplement the rest with free materials.
4. How many children are you teaching, and what are their ages? If you have multiple children close in age, look for programs that work across age levels, like unit studies or family-style curricula. If your children are widely spaced, you may need separate programs for each.
5. Does your child have any specific learning differences? Children with dyslexia benefit from Orton-Gillingham-based programs like All About Reading or Logic of English. Children with ADHD often do better with short lessons, hands-on activities, and movement breaks built into the curriculum.
6. How much time can you dedicate to teaching preparation each day? If your schedule is tight, choose programs with built-in teacher scripts and minimal prep, like Teaching Textbooks or The Good and the Beautiful. If you enjoy deep planning, a Charlotte Mason or eclectic approach gives you creative freedom.
7. Is this a long-term choice or a trial run? If you are testing the waters, start with free or low-cost options and give them six weeks before evaluating. If you are committed for the full year, investing in a comprehensive program may save time and reduce decision fatigue.

### Trust the Process

There is no single right answer to these questions, and your answers may change from year to year as your child grows. The best curriculum is the one that gets used consistently, not the one that looks most impressive on paper. Start somewhere reasonable and refine as you go.

## Top Picks by Age Group

Children at different developmental stages need fundamentally different things from a curriculum. A program that excels for a first grader may bore or frustrate a seventh grader, and vice versa. Below are age-appropriate recommendations based on what tends to work well at each stage.

### PreK through Kindergarten (Ages 3-6)

At this stage, learning should be play-based, sensory-rich, and low-pressure. Young children learn best through exploration, storytelling, and hands-on activities. Formal academics can wait; building a love of learning is the priority.

- The Good and the Beautiful Pre-K and Kindergarten — A gentle introduction to phonics, numbers, and nature with beautiful illustrations and minimal screen time
- Montessori at Home — Practical life activities, sensorial materials, and child-led exploration form the foundation for early academic skills
- Before Five in a Row — A literature-based program that uses beloved picture books as the starting point for art, science, math, and geography activities
- Letter of the Week / Totschool Approach — A simple, parent-created routine focusing on one letter per week with related crafts, books, and sensory bins

### Elementary School (Grades 1-5, Ages 6-11)

Elementary years are about building strong foundations in reading, writing, and arithmetic while nurturing curiosity across all subjects. This is when good habits form and when most children develop their identity as learners.

- Math-U-See or Singapore Math — Both build deep conceptual understanding; Math-U-See uses manipulatives while Singapore Math emphasizes mental strategies and bar modeling
- All About Reading paired with Brave Writer — A strong phonics and fluency foundation combined with a creative, expression-centered approach to writing
- Story of the World — An engaging, narrative-driven world history series that makes ancient civilizations and historical events come alive for young learners
- Real Science Odyssey or Mystery Science — Hands-on, experiment-driven science programs that keep elementary students curious and actively engaged in the scientific process

### Middle School (Grades 6-8, Ages 11-14)

Middle school students are developing abstract thinking skills and a stronger sense of independence. Curriculum at this level should challenge them intellectually while giving them more ownership over their learning.

- Teaching Textbooks or Saxon Math — Both provide clear, structured math instruction that students can increasingly manage on their own with less parent involvement
- Institute for Excellence in Writing (IEW) — Gives middle schoolers a repeatable framework for organizing and writing essays, research papers, and creative pieces
- Apologia Science — Rigorous, conversational science texts with detailed lab experiments that prepare students for high school level work
- Notgrass History or Beautiful Feet Books — In-depth history programs that incorporate primary sources, literature, and critical thinking at an age-appropriate level

## High School (Grades 9-12, Ages 14-18)

High school curriculum must serve two purposes: genuine education and practical credentialing. Whether your student plans to attend college, pursue vocational training, or enter the workforce, their high school years need to produce a transcript that opens doors. Look for programs with clear scope and sequence, rigorous content, and recognized credibility.

- Saxon Math (Advanced) or DIVE Math — Solid upper-level math instruction covering algebra, geometry, pre-calculus, and calculus with systematic review and thorough problem sets
- Sonlight or Veritas Press — Literature-rich history and humanities programs that develop critical reading, analytical writing, and a broad worldview at a college-preparatory level
- Apologia Advanced Science — High school biology, chemistry, and physics courses with full lab components that satisfy college application requirements
- Dual Enrollment or CLEP Exams — Many homeschool families supplement curriculum with community college courses or CLEP tests to earn college credit during high school

### High School Transcripts

Start planning your student's transcript early. Document course titles, credit hours, grades, and any standardized test scores. Many colleges actively recruit homeschool students, but they expect organized, well-documented records. Homeschool Connects offers transcript templates in our resources library.

## Putting It All Together

Choosing curriculum is one of the most exciting and most daunting parts of homeschooling. But here is the truth that experienced families know: the curriculum you choose matters far less than the relationship you build with your child through the learning process. A mediocre curriculum delivered with enthusiasm, patience, and genuine connection will outperform the most highly-rated program used with stress and rigidity.

Here are the principles that will serve you well regardless of which curriculum you choose.

1. Start small. Choose math and language arts first. Add other subjects gradually as your family finds its rhythm.
2. Use free resources liberally. Your public library, Khan Academy, YouTube educational channels, and open-source curricula can cover an enormous amount of ground at no cost.
3. Give every new curriculum at least four to six weeks before judging it. The first two weeks are always an adjustment period.

4. Talk to your child. Ask what they enjoy, what frustrates them, and how they feel about their schoolwork. Their feedback is the most valuable data you have.
5. Connect with other families. Online forums, local co-ops, and homeschool conventions are goldmines of firsthand experience and honest reviews.
6. Remember that you can change course. Choosing a curriculum is not a permanent commitment. If something is not working, give yourself permission to stop and try something new.

### Your Next Step

Visit [www.homeschoolconnects.com](http://www.homeschoolconnects.com) to browse our full curriculum review library, connect with families who have used the programs mentioned in this guide, and access free planning tools to map out your homeschool year. You do not have to figure this out alone.

Trust yourself. Trust your child. The fact that you are reading this guide means you care deeply about getting this right. That care, more than any curriculum, is what will make your homeschool succeed.

# About Homeschool Connects

Homeschool Connects is a free platform helping families navigate their homeschool journey with confidence. We provide tools, resources, and community to make homeschooling accessible to everyone.

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