COLLEEN KESSLER, M.Ed.

FOREWORD BY SARAH MACKENZIE

тне HOMESCHOOL A D V A N A G E

A Child-Focused Approach to Raising Lifelong Learners



Praise for The Homeschool Advantage

"As a Type-A box checker, I have struggled to embrace the unique benefits of homeschooling. Colleen Kessler has been the mentor who inspired me to understand that I can best serve my kids by embracing those benefits instead of staying stuck in a public school paradigm. With *The Homeschool Advantage*, she will inspire you, too."

-Pam Barnhill,

Host of the Homeschool Better Together Podcast

"The Homeschool Advantage is a must-read for any parent considering or currently homeschooling. It stands out not just as a guide, but also as a source of encouragement. Discover and be reminded of the profound impact parents can have when they step into the driver's seat of their children's education. This book is both a memoir and a manifesto from Colleen Kessler for her love of teaching but subsequent disillusionment with the education system. This book is a one-size-fits-all approach to education, and highlights the significant advantages of homeschooling in fostering a child's unique abilities and interests. Empowering, enlightening, entertaining, and so much more!"

> —**Dennis Dinoia**, *M.Ed.*, *Mr*, *D Math*

"Colleen Kessler shares from the depth of her experience as a long-term homeschool parent, a mother of differently wired kids, and a recognized authority on gifted studies. In *The Homeschool Advantage*, she strengthens our resolve and self-trust as homeschooling parents, reminding us that home education is not just one alternative for our kids' learning, but that it may, in fact, be the best option of all!"

-Jamie C. Martin,

Veteran Homeschool Parent, Editor of SimpleHomeschool.net and Bestselling Author of Give Your Child the World

"Many people support homeschooling or recommend certain methods of homeschooling, and that's all fine, but Colleen Kessler is a passionate advocate for homeschoolers. She is in the trenches, fighting for the real families and their always-unique kids. She pairs energetic advocacy with a bright mind alive with inspiring ideas and a generous heart to serve. Uncertain, worried, and overwhelmed families are desperate for a champion like Colleen Kessler."

> —S.D. Smith, *Author of* The Green Ember Series

"Colleen combines her passion for homeschooling with her real-life experiences to share the value and benefits of homeschooling. Whether you are thinking of homeschooling or need a reminder of why you chose to homeschool in the first place, this book will encourage you and share practical insight into the beauty of homeschooling."

-Shanda Jacobs,

This Devoted Life (thisdevotedlife.com)

"Colleen Kessler delivers such a rock-solid blueprint for why homeschooling better aligns with how our kids learn and what they need to succeed that you'll never even be tempted to place your kids in the system again. This book is a must-read for all homeschooling parents, offering practical steps for immediate action and profound insights that will forever transform your ideas about education. After delving into these pages, you will be profoundly thankful because you will witness firsthand how embracing homeschooling truly grants your children *The Homeschool Advantage.*"

-Christy-Faith,

Author of Homeschool Rising: Shattering Myths, Finding Courage, and Opting Out of the School System

"This book is a support for any homeschooling parent. Through Kessler's experiences and other parents' stories, it reminds us how to build up our kids, set up their environment, and choose the best adventures."

-Sarah Collins,

Occupational Therapist, Owner of HomeschoolOT

"In *The Homeschool Advantage*, Colleen Kessler masterfully captures the holistic nature of education—academically, emotionally, and socially—while highlighting the significance of following your child's interests and strengths. With her insightful guidance, you'll feel equipped to embrace your child's unique path, making this book an absolute must-have for any homeschooling family."

—Michelle Brownell,

Founder of Homeschool Essentials

"Colleen Kessler combines a passion for homeschooling with real-life experience and research. *The Homeschool Advantage* is filled with actionable tips you can implement right away, plus mindset shifts that will bring long-term improvement to family life. Colleen encourages us that we really are the best teachers for our kids, and reminds us that we have the freedom to pursue what works best for our own unique families. I especially love her encouragement to prioritize adventure, connection, love, and listening in our homeschool life. If you need fresh inspiration or if you need a reminder that you CAN do this homeschool thing (and do it well), you won't want to miss this book!"

> —Amy Sloan, HumilityandDoxology.com

The Homeschool Advantage

The Homeschool Advantage

A Child-Focused Approach to Raising Lifelong Learners

Colleen Kessler, M.Ed.



A Wiley Brand

Copyright © 2024 Colleen Kessler. All rights reserved.

Photography: Pages 111, 159: Colleen Kessler | Instagram: @colleenkessler Pages 129, 132, 186, 199: Katie Krupa | Instagram: @katiekrupacreative Pages 20, 90, 107, Author Headshot: Trevor Kessler | Instagram: @trevorjkessler All Other Photos: Heather Tully | Instagram: @heathertullyphotography

Illustrations: Pages 117, 118: Colleen Kessler | Instagram: @colleenkessler

Published by John Wiley & Sons, Inc., Hoboken, New Jersey. Published simultaneously in Canada.

ISBNs: 9781394205738 (Paperback), 9781394205769 (ePDF), 9781394205752 (ePub)

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, scanning, or otherwise, except as permitted under Section 107 or 108 of the 1976 United States Copyright Act, without either the prior written permission of the Publisher, or authorization through payment of the appropriate per-copy fee to the Copyright Clearance Center, Inc., 222 Rosewood Drive, Danvers, MA 01923, (978) 750-8400, fax (978) 750-4470, or on the web at www.copyright.com. Requests to the Publisher for permission should be addressed to the Permissions Department, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 111 River Street, Hoboken, NJ 07030, (201) 748-6011, fax (201) 748-6008, or online at www.wiley.com/go/permission.

Trademarks: Wiley and the Wiley logo are trademarks or registered trademarks of John Wiley & Sons, Inc. and/or its affiliates in the United States and other countries and may not be used without written permission. All other trademarks are the property of their respective owners. John Wiley & Sons, Inc. is not associated with any product or vendor mentioned in this book.

Limit of Liability/Disclaimer of Warranty: While the publisher and author have used their best efforts in preparing this book, they make no representations or warranties with respect to the accuracy or completeness of the contents of this book and specifically disclaim any implied warranties of merchantability or fitness for a particular purpose. No warranty may be created or extended by sales representatives or written sales materials. The advice and strategies contained herein may not be suitable for your situation. You should consult with a professional where appropriate. Further, readers should be aware that websites listed in this work may have changed or disappeared between when this work was written and when it is read. Neither the publisher nor authors shall be liable for any loss of profit or any other commercial damages, including but not limited to special, incidental, consequential, or other damages.

For general information on our other products and services or for technical support, please contact our Customer Care Department within the United States at (800) 762-2974, outside the United States at (317) 572-3993 or fax (317) 572-4002.

Wiley also publishes its books in a variety of electronic formats. Some content that appears in print may not be available in electronic formats. For more information about Wiley products, visit our web site at www.wiley.com.

Library of Congress Control Number

LCCN 2024007588 (print) | LCCN 2024007589 (ebook)

Cover design: Paul McCarthy Cover Art: © Getty Images/D3sign To Brian – you inspire me to love.

To Trevor, Molly, Logan, and Isaac – you inspire me to learn every day.

To all the homeschool families I've met near and far – you inspire me through all you do to encourage your children to find out who they're meant to be.

In Loving Memory

Leonard Anthony Kessler (1941–2019)

To Grandpa Lenny – You were one of our biggest homeschool cheerleaders, and I'm grateful that our kids had the gift of so much time with you simply because they were home during the school day and could spend it learning and loving alongside you. You are loved and missed.

Contents

Acknowledgn	xiii	
About the Au	ithor	xν
Author's Not	ę	xvii
Foreword		xix
Introduction		xxi
Chapter 1	Why Homeschool?	1
	The Gift	3
	Cognitive Advantages	4
	Mental and Physical Health Advantages	7
	Social-Emotional Advantages	10
	Try This!	13
Chapter 2	Exploring Strengths	15
	A Strengths-Based Learning Approach	17
	Rooted in Positive Psychology	20
	Cultivating Resilience and Gratitude	22
	Helping Neurodivergent Kiddos	25
	Finding Our Children's Strengths	28
	Try This!	31
Chapter 3	Finding Wonder	33
	Following Interests and Rabbit Trails	36

Х	Contents	
	Transitioning Beyond the Home The Power of Self-Direction	38 43
	What If My Child Isn't Interested in Anything?	43 45
	Try This!	45 50
Chapter 4	A Love of Learning	53
	What About Curriculum?	54
	Crafting a Unique Learning Experience	57
	A Literature-Rich Home	59
	Simplifying to Foster a Climate of Learning	62
	Try This!	65
Chapter 5	Play Matters	67
	The Purpose of Play	68
	Child-Directed Play	70
	Emotional Resilience Through Play	73
	Play-Based Learning	75
	Gameschooling	79
	Try This!	84
Chapter 6	Six Key Learning Skills	87
	Why Learn About the 6 Cs?	89
	Collaboration	90
	Communication	94
	Content	97
	Critical Thinking	102
	Creativity	105
	Confidence	109
	Try This!	112
Chapter 7	Can Creativity Be Taught?	115
	Elements of Creativity	119
	The Power of Questions	121
	Setting the Stage	128
	Try This!	135

	Contents	xi
Chapter 8	Embracing Adventure	137
	Experiences Big and Small	139
	Keeping It Simple and Purposeful	141
	Trusting the Process	142
	Nurturing Resilience and Imagination	145
	Try This!	149
Chapter 9	The Family Team	153
	Growing Relationships	155
	Recognizing and Supporting Differences	158
	Being a Family Team	161
	Nurturing Through Shared Experiences	163
	Try This!	167
Chapter 10	The Most Important Thing	169
	Connection, Connection, Connection	171
	Active Engagement	173
	Connecting with Older Kids	175
	A Soft Place to Land	176
	Being Their Person	179
	Try This!	181
Chapter 11	Start Now	183
	You've Got This!	185
	Know the Laws	186
	Know Your Why	187
	Know Your Kids	188
	The Need to Deschool	188
	Try This!	193
Chapter 12	Final Thoughts	195
Additional Resources		201
Index		205

Acknowledgments

The future looks bright because of all you parents taking on the education of your own. You're raising the leaders, innovators, creators, and parents of tomorrow. Thank you for making the world a better place. Together, we can raise a strong generation that is resilient, kind, and ready to nurture and love one another and continue to learn for the love of it.

To all the people I have had the opportunity to learn from, coach, speak for, and get to know from around the world, I want to say thank you for being the inspiration and foundation for this book. It wouldn't exist without you.

Having an idea and turning it into a book is as challenging as it sounds. The experience is both difficult and rewarding. I especially want to thank the people who helped make this happen. Thank you to the team at Wiley and Jossey Bass for the opportunity to tackle this important project and bring it into the world so beautifully. The back and forth of hammering out ideas, details, and focus can be difficult, and I'm grateful I had the chance to have the guidance of Sam Ofman, Navin Vijayakumar, and Tracy Brown Hamilton, whose encouragement, support, and commitment to producing the best book possible was so appreciated. Thank you, also, to the design team and production staff for your tireless work in bringing a book to life that I'm excited to share with the world.

My poor, underfed, ignored children were subjected to the words, "You're on your own for dinner tonight. Pretend I'm not home. I need to work on my book," so many times Isaac told me he "can't wait until it's done. I miss you." Thank you for eating endless meals of instant oatmeal, frozen mac and cheese, ramen, and sandwiches. I promise I'll cook for you again soon.

I couldn't possibly do any of the work I do without the best, smartest, strongest, and most supportive husband ever. This book was written during some of our busiest months ever. You think that parenting toddlers is crazy, but the teen years are an exercise in triangulating schedules, mapping out routes, and waiting in parking lots for endlessly long hours while they have fun, but don't want you around. Throughout it all, Brian, you were a rock – exactly the foundation I and the kids needed to hold on and be strong ourselves. I've never loved you more than I do right now. Thank you for always believing in me.

I have so many amazing friends, colleagues, and cheerleaders that I can't possibly mention them all, but there are a handful who have shared stories of their homeschooling and have given me so much support through this process and put up with hearing about the book again and again and again. Thank you to Cheryl Pitt and Aurie Good - I honestly don't know what I'd do without you two in my life. Thank goodness for Voxer! Cindy West, you are one of the best humans I know. Thank you for always being there for me. You make my life richer. Shawna Wingert, thank you for encouraging me at the start of all of this. You're a huge reason this book is in the world today. And thank you to all of the people who have helped bring kids to rehearsals and practices and dinners and parties while I was locked up in my office, chained to my desk. Thanks to the directors and teachers at The Aurora School of Music and The Fine Arts Association who opened up empty classrooms and spaces so I could work while my kids rehearsed. And to our homeschooling friends near and far . . . I love you all so very much.

About the Author

Colleen Kessler believes that you are the absolute best parent and teacher there is for your own children, no matter how their brains are wired.

The author of more than a dozen books for parents, teachers, and children; award-winning educator, educational coach, and consultant; international speaker; and passionate advocate for the needs of differently wired kids, Colleen has a B.S. in Elementary Education, an M.Ed. in Gifted Studies, and is the founder of the popular podcast and website *Raising Lifelong Learners* as well as The Learner's Lab – a community for homeschooling parents and their bright, quirky, outside-the-box kiddos.

Recent titles include Raising Resilient Sons: A Boy Mom's Guide to Building a Strong, Confident, and Emotionally Intelligent Family; 100 Backyard Activities That Are the Coolest, Dirtiest, Creepy-Crawliest Ever!; Raising Creative Kids: A Collection of Creativity Prompts for Children; and The Anxiety Toolkit: 96 Ways to Help Your Child Calm Their Worries.

Colleen lives in northeast Ohio with her reading specialist husband, four delightfully differently wired kiddos, her lazy Pug, chaotic Border Collie, a dozen and a half chickens, two red-eared sliders, a bearded dragon, and an ever-changing assortment of small animals and insects. You can find her online at RaisingLifelongLearners.com.

Author's Note

Many clients, children, adults, friends, and listeners have shared their stories, experiences, and thoughts with me at conferences via voicemail, in calls, and online. I am so grateful for their generosity, bravery, and compassion. These are the heroes of the homeschooling culture – moms, dads, and kids in the trenches, learning and loving together. All names have been changed to preserve privacy.

You'll find quotes from homeschooling kids throughout the book in pull-out sections identified as "The Best Thing . . ." These were so fun to collect from friends, clients, and listeners! I asked parents to either ask their kids the question, "What is the BEST thing about homeschooling?" or "What do you like about homeschooling?" and their answers are just what you need to keep yourself motivated through the adventure of learning alongside your kiddos at home, so make sure you take time to read those!

I've also included stories of my own parenting, homeschooling, and family life. My four children and the stories they've agreed to allow me to share – they're *their* stories, after all – are sprinkled throughout the book. I remember being at a speaking event once with two of my kids, when one told me it was a little weird that some of the people she met talked to her as if they knew her well, and shared a story or anecdote they'd heard about that kiddo's life. I told her that her stories were hers, and she had a few choices if she felt weird about those attendees connecting with her like they knew her.

Author's Note

Since she and her siblings already have a say about which stories I tell when I speak to an audience or write a book, this was about her traveling with me. I told her she could a) choose not to travel to events with me anymore while I continued to tell her stories, b) continue to travel with me and I'd stop telling anecdotes about her when I spoke, or c) we'd keep things as they were and she'd work to regulate her reactions and emotions when someone came up to speak to her. She thought about it for a few days, then told me I needed to continue sharing so those parents who felt the need to connect with her over a story that touched them could know they weren't alone in their parenting and homeschooling, and that she wanted to continue to be a part of those moments.

Because my kids have seen the power of sharing and connecting with others, they agree to let me share their names and stories when I write and speak, so you'll hear a lot about them within the pages of this book, and I'll use their real names. I have four kiddos. At the time of this book's publication, Trevor is twenty-one and a homeschool graduate who began homeschooling in the middle of his first grade year, and is now working in the field of audio and video editing and production. He edits several podcasts (including mine) and shoots videos for online course creators, various freelance clients in multiple industries, and has an ongoing media contract with a racecar company.

Molly is currently seventeen, a high school senior who has homeschooled since the beginning, and plans on pursuing a BFA in musical theater once she graduates.

My daughter Logan is a fifteen-year-old high school freshman who loves animals and hopes to either become a zookeeper or an animal trainer.

And my youngest is eleven-year-old Isaac, who, at the time of this book's publication, doesn't know what he wants to do with his life as he is "just too young to make lifelong decisions because there's so much cool stuff to explore, Mom." So, if you see references to Trevor, Molly, Logan, or Isaac, they're not only my children, but four of the coolest, most interesting people I know.

For more homeschooling support, visit http://www.homeschooladvantage .info/ – created especially as a companion to this book or https://RaisingLife longLearners.com. You'll find articles, printables, links, resources, booklists, and ideas to enrich your homeschool, along with a contact page with a link to my email and voicemail so you can reach out if you ever need support.You are not alone in the homeschooling journey. Remember that.

Foreword

Homeschooling is funny business. We're all motivated to start homeschooling by different personal reasons, of course, but regardless of how you got here – to this moment in which you're reading a book about homeschooling – I can bet that at some point along the way you've had this thought: *Maybe my child will be better served if we educate at home?*

And then exactly 1.3 seconds later, you found yourself plagued by doubt. Am I cut out for homeschooling? What if I can't give my child what they need? What if I'm bad at it? What if they hate it? What if they don't learn? What if I can't teach them? Have I completely lost my mind?

In all the years of homeschooling my own six kids and in talking with thousands of homeschooling families all over the world, I have become convinced of this: **there are as many successful ways to homeschool as there are homeschooled kids**.

Successful homeschoolers use all different teaching methods – classical, nature-based, literature-based, STEM, unit studies, online, unschooling, or some combination of any of those or a million others. They follow very rigid schedules, no schedule at all, or something in between. They outsource everything, outsource nothing, or outsource a little. They homeschool with fancy science equipment, road school across the country, run homesteads, or (like me) none of the above. My own homeschool looks pretty ordinary, aside from our embarrassingly extensive library use.

Regardless of the myriad ways in which they do it, homeschooling families all over the world are raising confident, capable, well-educated kids.

Foreword

And yet there is one thing that *all* homeschooling parents need, regardless of how they do it. **Every homeschooling parent needs someone in their corner.**

I have known the author of this book for a long time, and here is what I know: Colleen is in your corner. She's in mine, too.

By the end of this book, she'll give you the strong conviction that you are never alone, the confidence that you are the best teacher for your unique kids, and a wellspring of actionable ideas that will improve your home-school *today*.

In the pages of this book, you'll gain an awareness of your kids' strengths, a respect for the way they learn, and a plan for bringing those elements together so that your kids grow into the kind, capable, compassionate, and creative people you know them to be.

This is a book for parents who want to be their children's champion of home education. And that's just another way to say: this book is for you.

—Sarah Mackenzie

Author of Teaching from Rest and The Read-Aloud Family

Introduction

When children are surrounded by curious and creative adults, they have their own inner genius sparked into action.

—Thomas Armstrong

Just because a lot of people are saying the same thing loudly over and over, doesn't mean it's true.

—From *The Very Persistent Gappers of Frip* by George Saunders

"He is an extreme thinker."

My son's pre-kindergarten teacher had invited me into the classroom that day to observe him in the classroom setting, and so we could talk about what the best options would be as he left the flexible learning environment he was in for the more structured one he'd find at the local public school he'd attend in kindergarten. She asked me to sit in the back of the room and simply observe their read-aloud session and told me we'd talk afterward, once she'd led the kids down the hall to their music class.

So I did.

I sat at a tiny chair in the back of the small classroom and watched as she called the twelve kiddos over to the carpet to sit in a semicircle around her chair. She pulled out a sweet picture book that featured a little boy getting into all sorts of mischief during the day as he avoided what he was supposed to be doing in the first place, only to realize what he'd done, then

Introduction

backtrack to fix it all and complete the tasks before his mother returned home. Eleven of the kids in the class sat with rapt attention as the perky preschool teacher's voice filled the room.

Unlike the rest of his classmates, my son rolled around the side of the classroom. He crawled back and forth and back and forth. He sprawled on the table, then under the table. Just as he upended himself into a headstand against the wall, head cushioned by a pillow, and I was about to rise and intervene through my haze of first-time—mom mortification, the teacher caught my eye and shook her head gently. I sat through the rest of the story, while eleven little faces stared intently at the book in their teacher's hands and one closed his eyes while standing inverted against the side wall of the classroom, and felt like a complete failure.

Sure, he was my first child, and we all fail a bit with the firstborn, right? But I was also a teacher of almost fifteen years with a master's degree, an educational speaker and trainer, an author, and had nannied all through college. I wasn't inexperienced. And I knew this kid. He loved learning, and was always trying new things, seeking out people to learn from, hanging around the adults at parties so he could pump them about their jobs, interests, hobbies, and the books they were reading.

He should have been loving this read aloud.

And then the teacher started asking questions about the story to gauge comprehension and help the kiddos learn to talk about books. She asked the simple questions you'd expect in a classroom of five-year-olds: What color shirt was he wearing? Who was the story about? What happened at the end of the story? Where did it take place? Then she asked what the kids would have done if they'd been in the boy's place, and my son flipped out of his inversion and crept closer to the carpet. A few of the kiddos answered, saying they'd have done what the boy did, or hidden from the old man, or kept the pie all to themself.

My son raised his hand, "Mrs. Mowry, that boy had a lot of adventures, but if I were him, I would have just done what my mom asked me to do in the first place. He ended up having to fix a lot of messes and mistakes, and then still did what he was supposed to in the end. If he had just done it right away, he would have been able to play after and wouldn't have had so much extra work to deal with." When she asked if he always did what he was told right away he answered, with a sheepish grin in my direction, that, no, he

xxii