

Homeschooling a Child with Attachment Trauma

Interview with Christine Moers, Therapeutic Parenting Coach

Interviewed by Anna Paravano, MS, ATN Education Director

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Anna: Hi, everyone! This is Anna Paravano Education Director and Board member of the Attachment and Trauma Network. We are here today with an interview for ATN's Summit, Educating Traumatized Children: The online gathering of expert voices on how to provide trauma-sensitive school experiences for our children.

We're here today with Christine Moers to discuss home schooling our traumatized children. Children with difficult pasts frequently spend their days in a hyper-vigilant state due to early life changes in brain functioning and chemistry. Additionally, they can possess a significantly impaired view of themselves and the world around them. All this can make it difficult for a child of trauma to learn and grow in a traditional classroom setting.

In addition, many of these children have difficult times allowing themselves to trust and attach with their parent or care-giver and end up needing more time, not less, with these key individuals to help them grow and heal. For these reasons and more, home schooling can provide the answer parents and care-givers need for the educational piece for of the child's life puzzle.

Before we get started, let me tell you a bit more about Christine. Christine Moers is a married mother of five children, bio and adopted, a parent coach and author of the popular blog, *Welcome to My Brain*. She is also a co-presenter in the DVD, *Chaos to Healing, Therapeutic Parenting 101* which presents practical application of the *PACE, P-A-C-E* model developed by Dan Hughes.

Her YouTube channel is free to the public and is utilized across the country by therapists, parents and foster-parenting organizations. In her personal quest to find healing for her adopted children and in part, learning for all her children, she turned to home schooling and has found that option to be one of her greatest tools in helping her adopted and bio children grow together as a trusting, healthy family in which each member is loved and safe.

Welcome, Christine!

Christine: Thank you, Anna! I'm so glad to be here!

Anna: We're very excited to be talking with you today so let me get started. Christine, with so much on your plate as a mother of five young school age children, what originally led you to explore home schooling as an educational option?

Christine: Well, originally, I had zero intention of home schooling ever! I actually never even considered, it was not even an option for me. I knew very few people who home schooled. However, we had two children by birth and had started the process to adopt. We were adopting from foster care. There was a sibling group of two that they had identified four families, we were one of them, that they were going to make a decision on placement with these two girls. And we had gone through our training as well and as we learned about these girls and their issues, they were pretty typical when it comes to children with a history of abuse and neglect. They had developmental delays, they had academic issues, they had already shown that on a pre-school level. I had learned just how important it is to bond, especially in that first year and things that you can do even in the first month, that you have a child into your home to facilitate bonding and connection and attachment.

And so, I had a moment as I was looking at this possible placement and I thought home schooling would allow us to all be together, maybe the first year. Maybe we'll just do it the first year. We can spend a lot of time together and do a lot of learning together because it would have put me in a situation where I would have had four children, all very close in age and all able to work on the same types of projects and just learning activities.

So, I considered it. However, one of the reasons I had never even considered home schooling was because I had a very stereotypical picture of what a home schooling mom was. And I was not that at all. I knew a few people that home schooled and they all intimidated me horribly.

They were organized, they baked, they had calendars. They were color-coded! And things like that and the way they talked about curriculum just frightened me because it was like they were speaking another language. There was just, in general, a stereotype of home schoolers when you're not used to that and you're not around that, that they were either extremely religious. My husband was a pastor but I was certainly not extremely conservative. So I didn't know that there would be home school groups that I

would feel comfortable with, that there would be curriculum options. I just didn't know. I had no idea.

So I learned about it. And come to find out lots of different people home school from lots of different faiths and beliefs and traditions and everybody has a different reason that they do it. For us, it was really about a safe space for attachment and bonding and healing and maybe some catch up on some struggles, developmental struggles. So that's how I landed in it. And then, the funny thing is, those two girls were not placed with us. So I had purchased curriculum, prepared to home school and then they were placed with another family. We adopted a seven month old and I thought – yeah, we're just going to home school anyway and see. I got this stuff. Now, it seems like a wonderful idea and that was about 11 years ago.

My oldest daughter was starting kindergarten and she's going to graduate early, she's just starting her senior year this year.

Anna: Wow! Christine, that is quite a story on how you got into it. I relate to this story but what was particularly a nugget for me is that you got into this not because you thought home schooling was such a hot option to begin with and that was what was in your mind but you looked at your children, you looked at your family and said, "You know what, this is the therapeutic option."

Christine: Yes.

Anna: This makes sense. I can manage this, it will help them. And you went from there.

Christine: Yeah.

Anna: You made it happen, and successfully so. I really admire that. That's great. Now, by working with your children and in coaching other parents, what have you found to be some of the biggest benefits to home schooling a child with a difficult past?

Christine: I started the home school then and I wasn't particularly schooling children with a history of trauma, the first many years. So I was able to just see the benefits and just general flexibility. And particularly, I know it depends on the state you live in but I've lived in Texas and Oklahoma while home schooling and there's a huge amount of flexibility and my options in curriculum.

But as we brought in our children that had much more difficult pasts and were exhibiting much more challenging behaviours, I was again able to shift gears and so there were several things. We used a curriculum the very first year that I brought home

my two deeply struggling kids, their first year, the curriculum that we used was based on living books. So there was a huge amount of reading and really, a huge amount of reading out loud that I would do.

Before we had them come to us, I had read about their difficulties and their struggles and realized that there might be a lot of push and pull with mom and a lot of rejection of mom so I was trying to prepare for that and it hit me, oh my goodness, if I was doing a lot of reading of these beautiful stories and teaching these stories, they're hearing mom's voice in that story. And it is engaging and it's positive.

So that was a beautiful option that I had the first year. On some of our other subjects, I've been able to choose self-paced curriculum so I'm not having to be so stringent about a grade level. But there are a lot of curriculum options where your child just works through packets or works through workbooks and if they're behind on a subject, they can just work at their pace, if they can move ahead on another subject.

Most of my kids have been on different grade levels especially throughout grade school. Each year, they might be on three different grade levels, on three different subjects depending on their level of work. And repetition, a lot of our kids need. They have a bad day and they just can't absorb certain information on some days. So you can repeat the next day, repeat a lesson, things like that.

I was able to look up and learn about bonding activities, things like theraplay, I would Google every theraplay activity that was out there. And then I would say, "Today, for English, we're going to do this activity!" And it was encouraging touch and eye contact and playfulness and all of these things but I would just work it in our lesson plans. So yeah, this is a part of school we have to do and I just built it into our day.

It also pushed me on those days that I didn't want to do those things and I was feeling burned out and tired. It nudged me because it was on the list, we had to check off the list on our weekly lesson plans or whatever we had.

And I think the biggest benefit for me has just been the ability to kind of eliminate a lot of battles. I don't have homework battles. I can find, right now, what has worked really well for some of my kids is to do a lot of things online, a lot of DVD curriculum and in that sense, I remove myself from the teacher role, especially as they've aged and some subjects are very challenging. To work in Math, I always joke that Math is a great way to walk into your child's every day insight. "Would you like to have a big argument with me? Here we go, we're going to start now. Here it is on a silver platter with a bow."

Because we're going to write and utilize numbers, so there's a million ways we could sabotage this.

And I got...I have to admit that entering high school and knowing we were approaching algebra and geometry, I was getting nervous and I have found some wonderful options for DVD-based and online curriculums that do the grading. The lessons can be watched over and over and over again. If a test is failed, I can reset a grade and there's no pressure. Just take your time and if you want to get ahead one week, get ahead. If we get a little behind, just repeat the lesson just about...it's grasping it. So it has taken that battle away.

And there are a lot of online things that have really saved us in those ways, so I've been able to pick and choose certain activities that my kids are able to do with me. Maybe with a sibling, and then other activities, other subjects tend to be our greatest battle so I can tailor-fit those to kind of remove the battle from it. And not all the time but, you know it minimizes, for sure. Definitely minimizes.

Anna: So a lot of creativity sounds like goes into it -- really looking at the freedom to look at, "where is my child." "Where are my children today?" and "How can I retrofit whatever it is that I had planned to where they are today, and still make it a success, and still make it work."

Christine: Yes. And that is a wonderful advantage simply – you know, I don't have a whole room full of kids and we are kind of needing to barrel forward. I am able to kind of have that freedom to let a kid lag a little bit and then maybe catch up. Especially when they are having...at certain times of year, they're having a certain...you know, what they call a "traumaversary", our kids are having a struggle with the birthday or holiday or just a memory from a certain time of year, we can kind of allow them that space for a week while that is going on and catch up later.

And so far, I mean...like I said, with my 2 kids who have really bad – struggled the most with their histories and their past and their traumas, we've been doing this for 6 years and I can say, that yes, they do... Once there is a better week you can do some catch up and find a groove to that.

Anna: So truly, as more of a therapeutic environment with the focus of moving toward healing, moving toward...

Christine: Yeah.

Anna: ... Basic security versus learning your math today.

Christine: Exactly.

Anna: Although that comes.

Christine: It does right.

Anna: But you know it just posts a question in my mind because it sounds like such an investment of time and creativity on your part with 5 children, how do you manage the stress internally and emotionally from having that many needy folks around you all the time. Sometimes physically needing, I'm sure. How do you find the balance in your own life?

Christine: How do I still put my own pants on every morning?

Anna: Yeah.

Christine: Yeah. I don't. Well, let me get on the creativity aspect first because I thought of this earlier. I want to be completely clear, I am really not that creative. I am just excellent at stealing everybody else's ideas.

I am an avid reader, I read all the blogs, I talk to friends, I get on home school forums and I don't do it all the time but you know. For a while, once a week and I just swipe every good idea I can find out there. And that has... the internet. The internet has dramatically altered home schooling. So that is a big benefit. But the emotional stress, yeah, anybody who parents children who are struggling and who are working their way through healing, they know you and I are sitting here laughing. And we make jokes and it's all funny and...

Anna: Mhm.

Christine: We spend a lot of days crying. And I've had many days that I didn't want to crawl into bed because it meant that I had to get up again the next day and do it again. And that goes for homeschoolers and people who are utilizing public school or private school. This is hard, it is really hard!

And for me, I've had to allow myself to accept help and I did not think that would be difficult, but it has been... And even for my husband when...well, 6 years ago when things radically changed in our house and we were having to learn what it meant to be therapeutic parents, he started giving me one night a week. He would walk in from work, hand me the keys and say, "I don't want to see you until everybody's in bed."

And we didn't have a lot of money. And I couldn't afford to go...I couldn't go even to a spa or anything like that. But I would go to the local burger joint and I would get a meal and sometimes I would sit inside and eat, and sometimes I didn't want to be around any people, anybody that was talking; I just wanted to be alone. And I would sit in the van and maybe play music and eat my food and then go to a bookstore because it was quiet

there too, and people were so lovely and polite and reading and smiling and it didn't cost me much at all. I might go see a friend but sometimes even that was a little much. I just...I was craving peace and quiet.

And so he gave me that every week, and to this day for 6 years – every single week my husband has given me a night off. And I do know some people that don't have a spouse or a partner living with them that can do that for them. Some of them have parents that can step in, or best friends and extended family, and....I've done things like that. I try to be really deliberate about finding other homeschoolers that are a good fit for our family. They need to be really understanding, really open and accepting because we are a little quirky and...so I try to find really casual meet-up groups because just going to the park there, of course, are issues. You might have social issues and kids acting out.

But at least for maybe 20 minutes I can have, maybe, sort of a conversation with another adult while the kids are running and playing, I am seeing sunshine. Field trips were always really great because there was a lot of activity going on and it would keep my kids moving, and I would go on field trips and then offer to watch the younger kids on the field trip, the moms who had a really young kids. I would say, "Please let me watch your 3 and 4 year olds. Do you mind hanging with my kids?" And they, of course, said, "Absolutely!"

"I would love for you to keep up with my...I'll change their diapers." And so it gave...it was a great way. It was inexpensive but kind of gave me a breather. We have done things like ask older teenage homeschoolers to come over to our house and hang out with our kids. Kind of a baby sitter but while you're there. We've asked a few to help our kids with some of their lessons when things were really rough.

I had a girl at church that helped me one. I just had her sit with my daughter and, kind of like an after school tutor but helped her work through some stuff and caught her up a little bit. And it just...I got a break. I got to go to my class and have a break.

There are homeschool co-ops where the parents teach classes, which sounds really fun until you realize you're going to go in being a roomful of kids and maybe with your child you're struggling with.

Anna: No.

Christine: So again I would offer and I would be...that's where I needed to find a group that I could be honest with and say, "I would love to teach a class. It is really imperative that I teach a class that will give me and my child a break from each other and allow them to experience this activity outside of me and just kind of give them a break from each other and the kind of the tension that we've had." Yeah, I've had to be really, really creative with it.

Anna: Yeah, you sound very resourceful. I hear that you're looking outside your box and going, "Where can I plug in? What can I do?" There is, here a great measure of hope and determination in that and it seems like an essential ingredient in getting this done. There is therapy parenting piece but also the in home education part of it.

Christine: Yeah. And sometimes just out of sheer desperation, you just...okay I'm not going to...it's this or I'm never going to leave my home. And it makes a kind of pushes you. It really does...kind of, "I gotta figure this out."

And I will say, I've loved home schooling, I've hated home schooling. I have been thrilled with it, I have despised it. Currently we have 5 children and we are only home schooling 4. One of our children is in public school and I've had so much support, so much amazing help. I have created this way of doing things to pace myself and even in that, I had a point last year with one of my kids and home schooling was not the best thing for that child, for our relationship and for our family.

And I probably waited too long to make that decision, I'm now extremely happy with it. But I went through feelings of, "I am a failure because I can't make this work," and that is not what it is at all. I had to look at that individual situation and what I was doing was not the best thing. So I really want to emphasize this – Home schooling can be amazing and it can be wonderful, but it's not the right thing for every family, for every kid, every situation.

Anna: So it sounds like it is important to not personalize the results and then...

Christine: Yes.

Anna: ... this isn't...do they need...sometimes you think, "Okay. This is the right way to go," and the decision of the direction is made before we really know the person or the family or the situation. And so this is...I'm impressed that you not only have children that you're home schooling, that you have one in a typical classroom setting as well. So that was the best decision for that child.

Again, another therapeutic parenting response to what it is you have learned about this individual that you're raising. That is very cool and very encouraging, I think because it can become...I think sometimes our children, we see a reflection of ourselves in their success and their failure.

Christine: Mhm.

Anna: And we have atypical children. That's such a dangerous thing to do.

Christine: Well, anyway...

Anna: Go ahead.

Christine: Right.

Anna: Children who are not neurotypical and who have experienced trauma. It really isn't about us. It really is about them and what they need, and when they need it. As an educator I had to unplug a really long time ago from my son's ability to do math, or not do math because it really wasn't about math. It was about him, his ability to think with a non-fear driven brain. And that what we were really measuring wasn't the ability to do math, but his comfort level.

Christine: Yeah.

Anna: That's what we were really measuring and I love the way that you talked about that. It's not a perfect journey but that we need help in it and we have feelings, we are human and we have feelings about it, and it's okay.

Christine: Right. I try...

Anna: And as I...

Christine: Go ahead.

Anna: Go ahead. What were you saying?

Christine: I was going to say I try really hard to make sure that other parents really do hear and understand the struggle in that.

And like what you just said, that was a really challenging personal feeling that you had and to separate yourself and just say, "Yes, I'm feeling this, but it's not based in truth." Mothers in general, parents in general carry around such guilt in general, that we are not doing the best, the right thing or not, you know, parenting the right way. There are so many things out there that we feel like as a litmus test for being a good mom.

And in making that decision for my child, I was embarrassed to write it on the internet and say, "I have put one of my kids in public school." Because I had been part – 11 years of the home school community and I just want to say that right now and let people hear that, that was the feeling that is not based on anything that I need to put value on because it was something I was putting on myself.

And in these decisions, I think that I've heard moms say, "I just don't think that I could home school." Okay. It's okay. And because you can do amazing things through healing and bonding with the child in public school but to understand your situation and find

people that will support you and stand with you and say, "You're doing the very best that you can do."

I've got anybody's back on any of these decisions. Right now, I can't tell you what it will look like in another 2 years, I honestly don't know. Yeah, thank you for sharing that because, like I said, in a lot of times and things like this, things are very, very positive and there is somebody sitting there at home listening and they internalize so much and they do they hear all that positive, and "I should do this, and I should, I should, I should."

And now, you're already doing amazing, and then you're doing wonderful, you are loving your kid and you're sitting here absorbing resources. You're an amazing parent and care giver. You're already doing it.

This is just one of the things and in the middle of it, it's hard, homeschooling is hard... public school... I'm doing them both. They are both really hard. I was surprised. But then again, public school is exhausting. I had no idea.

Anna: It's a whole different system, isn't it? We just bet they made that transition.

Christine: It is. Crazy. I was like, "Wait a minute. I thought it was going to be a break. There are so many things..." And I know people who had 5 or 6 kids in a public school system and I stand in awe of what they have to do to make that work. So thank you for sharing that and I hope that people do remember that.

There is not a *best way* in this. There is a best way for your child and your home.

Anna: Yeah. And yes, that's separate from what society expects and maybe what you even thought to begin with. I know for me, I've really had to change shift my paradigms, boy, on this one.

Christine: Yeah.

Anna: And it leads us into the next question, which is, as parents we feel so much pressure to make sure that our children are meeting all their academic goals. We're touched on this a little bit already, Christine; reading by first grade, knowing the times table by second grade, exposure to classical literature in middle school, and research papers and writing as teens.

Does homeschooling hold them back? And what about when they enter real life, college, work, et cetera. Do you think that they're going to be behind their peers?

Christine: I get that question a lot and particularly when I work with parents and talk to them about interacting therapeutically. I will often have parents in frustration, which I understand, I've been there. They will say, "Well, people aren't going to treat them like

this in the real world. They are not going to go, their boss isn't going to be playful with them or sit down and show empathy." "It's not going to happen at McDonalds."

Anna: You're right there.

Christine: That is true, yes. And one of the things that I tried to help parents grasp that it took me a while to get and really absorb it was that children with a history of traumatic events, abuse, neglect, neurological struggles, mental health issues – there are some gaps, in particularly kids who have experienced early childhood trauma. There are gaps in their development. They either miss stages because of what was going on, or the things that did happen. They've got skills that are underdeveloped that a lot of other kids got. Those first couple of years of life and they need that first, period.

And being therapeutic with them and creating a safe space for them to heal, we are re-parenting them through those gaps. There is a reason sometimes you are looking at your 11-year-old and thinking, "Oh, my goodness. You are acting like a 3-year-old." It's because they are.

And there are many times that they are not able based on their history and what is going on within them, they are not able and don't have the skills to function on an age-appropriate level in those moments based on what's going on around them. And in being therapeutic and providing that space, over and over again. And this includes...you know when it comes to home schooling and just their academics until we can help them move forward in those areas, education can be pretty empty. Those things are really important.

And so we are parenting them through those gaps. But now I'm not going have to sit down and show empathy or curiosity in a situation to try to get my son to go in and sit down and apply for his first job. That...you know.

Anna: Yeah.

Christine: And will all of my children function at the same level as their peers in their 20s and 30s? – Maybe, maybe not. But in helping parent through those gaps, I am helping move them more ahead and heal farther than they would, otherwise and that is so important.

And academic-wise, like I said, there have been times when we've done some catch-up. And there are these pockets of time that I have seen my kids be able to embrace the learning and get ahead and accept the good feelings of getting ahead or doing things okay and, or maybe utilizing another person to help tutoring. And there have been times that we have been able to help them catch up and do that.

And if we sit back and look at it, there are people across the world right now, adults learning how to read for the first time. There are people in their 20s, 30s and 40s, 50s

going to college for the first time. My parents got their Bachelor's Degrees the year I graduated from high school. They went back and finished their...I'm sorry. They got their Associates, my dad went on when I went to college and he finished up his Bachelor's and kind of did that along with me, and it was a beautiful picture to me that you don't ever have to stop learning and educating yourself.

Those things are always there. Whether or not you home school or you have your children in a public school or private school. When you can remove these battles and create a healing space and allow some attachments to happen, some connections to happen, you got this window now when they are with you. And those things are not important to me. They are vital. They are the most important things.

Anna: Mhm.

Christine: And if I can help my kids get through and start to parent through those gaps and create this space over and over and over again, the academics are going to come. And if I force the academics, we all know how this works. You can try to force-feed it and some kids can, they can go to school and I mean you can push and you can fight, you can battle every day and get some stuff on paper and get the grades in and get them done.

But I try to think, I don't do it every day. You can't do this every day. But often, I try to think, "Have we ended today where we started it or a little bit closer?" That is my goal. And if I can end the day there, we've had a successful day and it has nothing to do with whether or not we got through Beowulf.

Anna: Yeah, that's it. That's is an excellent point and a deep point is that we need to embrace because it is the truth. And I love the example of your father going back to school and also... They are adults all over the world today learning to read for the first time.

Christine: Yeah.

Anna: There is so much pressure even in my own life with folks saying, "Well, what is he going to do when he turns 21?" And I have no idea! It's not a question anybody can answer because maybe by then everything will be embraced like you said. But it can't be the ruling guide that it's going to rule my decisions that I am afraid of the future.

What I hear you saying, I just value that you are saying it. What rules the decision needs to be what is most therapeutic for that child and do what is right today, moving it forward today right now. And the future will unfold anyway. But there is always hope because people can learn to read as adults. They can learn algebra when they are in their 30s.

Christine: Right.

Anna: It's not the end of the world.

Christine: Yeah! I learn every day, I learn new things just because my children are learning new things and I tell my kids that. I say, "There is not a timetable on resources to learn and grow and change." And there's not! It's always there, it's always out there.

My goal as a teacher is to teach my children how to find information and I keep that as... And if they can grasp that, and we can connect and attach and practice love, they can always find their way through life and they always know who to call, "Mom, I think I would like to do this and I'm not sure where to start," "Well hold on, let's look up some resources." And yeah, it has helped too with the fear. There is a lot of fear and as homeschoolers, we do get asked regularly by the general public, "What did you learn today? You're in school?"

And I would have random strangers see us out and about and when they find out we are homeschoolers, start asking my children what they learned that day. So there is a pressure of just random people questioning your ability to teach your children. And so I understand that. But yeah, I have to take a deep breath and my children, their response is always, "Well, tell me something that you learned today first."

Anna: Oh! That's awesome!

Christine: Yeah! And again because we should always be learning – adults can always learn, it's always there and it has helped me to breathe and remember what is most important for my children now. And I encourage all parents regardless of their schooling situations to remember that too. When you can remove school battles from your home and try to make connection a priority and ending the day closer than when you started, it's a goal across the board for all of us to remember that. And thankfully, there are... There is a lot more information in this summit to help people find ways to do that in all educational settings.

Anna: Wow! Thank you for saying that. As we come to the end of our time, do you have any last thoughts or comments that you want to share with our listeners?

Christine: I would just like to reiterate – homeschooling is a wonderful option. It is a challenging option when it comes to children with a history of trauma but if you have a network in place and support system and it fits what you are doing, it can really be a tremendous gift to your relationship with your children.

Anna: Okay, well thank you so much Christine for sharing your experiences and your wisdom with us. I really appreciate it.

Christine: You bet, you bet my pleasure.

*Attachment & Trauma Network's
Educating Traumatized Children Summit 2014*

Anna: And for those of you who would like to read more about homeschooling as an option and see a list of valuable resources, check out Christine's coaching website – www.christineparentcoaching.com.

If you would like to read some of Christine's candid and humorous and very humorous parenting homeschooling escapades, check out her blog at www.welcometomybrain.com.

You can also visit the ATN's Learning Center website at www.attachu.org for more information and resources on attachment and trauma.

Christine thank you so much. Again it was a delight and a pleasure, what an encouragement you are!

Christine: Thank you, thank you.

Anna: And to all of you listening, thank you for joining us and we hope that you continue to enjoy the rest of this summit.

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