

Interview of Jamie Maltman by Pam Laricchia

The following is a lightly edited transcript from Pam Laricchia's interview of me on her podcast, "[Exploring Unschooling](#)" in the Fall of 2016.

PAM: Hi everyone I am Pam Laricchia from livingjoyfully.ca and today I am here with Jamie Maltman. Hi Jamie!

JAMIE: Hi.

PAM: I am super excited to have Jamie on the show. I met him and his family a few years ago at the last Toronto unschooling conference. I've really enjoyed touching base with them every few months since. Jamie is an unschooling dad to two kids and he works full time. I am looking forward to digging into his perspective on that. Plus, he is an avid board game player I bet he has great info to share with us about that as well.

So first off, can you share with us a bit about you and your family and how you guys came to unschooling?

JAMIE: Sure. I have two boys, they are seven and a half and almost five. We first started looking into homeschooling because of people we met through business back before Alex was born. We met a bunch of people in Alberta who had been homeschooling in various different ways and that opened our mind to the idea because we really hadn't considered it. I'd only met a few homeschooled people through my life to that point. I absolutely love learning; my wife likes learning a lot too. I had had a really good school experience after a certain point but not the full time. My wife had had an unfavorable school experience for much of the full time.

So, with the combination, once we had heard of these people and

started meeting some of the kids as well and saying, wow, these are really great kids, it sounds really interesting, they have a great connection to their parents. Let's start looking into different forms of homeschooling. It was actually through the [Ontario Federation of Teacher and Parents website](#) that when it was describing different forms of homeschooling and how it works in Ontario, that is where I first came across the term unschooling and from there started to read about it in various different places.

So we started looking into resources on-line. It was actually me doing a lot of that at that point. When we looked into unschooling there a little bit it sounded interesting in some ways but I was not necessarily going deep into it at that point. It didn't really attract us yet. We took a detour, looking into Montessori. I actually went to a Montessori it was really good, using the full Montessori method. Not like some of the private schools say they do and use it for branding. (But that is a whole other story...) We went into that a little bit. I guess I went for about two or three years when I was young.

So we went and looked at that quite a bit. My wife actually took a course related to that just to sort of feel more comfortable with the ideas of homeschooling, because it was more foreign to her at that point. **But then, over time, as we read more, some of the more natural parenting stuff started circling back and dove-tailing with unschooling.** We eventually came back to that. I think it was around just before that Toronto Unschooling Conference, maybe in the six months before that. That was when we started reading a lot more about unschooling and feeling that was the route we wanted to take. So we were excited when that came up and we were able to meet some more unschoolers live and in the flesh.

PAM: That is a cool story. So you guys first heard about, it you were out in Alberta, you said?

JAMIE: About homeschooling in general, that was where we first came in contact with it.

PAM: I hear it is quite popular earlier there than it was here, maybe because they have more governmental support, don't they?

JAMIE: Absolutely. Yes. I think again, it varies by province, but Alberta is one where there is because there are so many

communities, there is also religious families that really want to do it or there is just sort of combinations. It is just sometimes efficient for them to support them financially and with assistance programs rather than have schools that are servicing only a few people out in some community out in the foothills or what have you. I think that combination seems to work well. We met a lot of homeschoolers while we were out there.

PAM: It is so interesting to see how it varies even from province to province within the same country right?

JAMIE: Absolutely.

I would love to hear what your kids are enjoying right now. What kinds of things are they interested in and how are they pursuing them?

JAMIE: Duncan is still very, very interested in trains as he has been pretty much through his whole life. I guess that fact that he was partially named after the Thomas trains as we were going through a million names that was the one we took to. He plays with trains, he wants to print out lists of all different Thomas trains from these different lines of stuff. He researches them on his tablet, looking into what these different things could be about. He wants to read books about them with us. As an interest, that is one he goes in all sorts of different directions with and he is really having a lot of fun with.

Alex on the other hand, who is seven and a half, he is very into Dr. Who with me. That is one interest he has had. I was a big fan when I was a kid and so I introduced Monica to it after we got married. Then the new series came along. So we actually had been going through it—you know, as a lot of unschoolers do, going deep into one show for a while. Monica and I had been watching through the original series so Alex picked up with us somewhere in the mid '70s and we just last week got to the end of the original series. So that is about 14 years of content there, plus the movie that came out in 1996. At the same time we have been going through the new series as well. We are most of the way through the 10th Doctor.

On top of that we are getting books out at the library where there is different tie ins. Any time he sees a different kind of activity

book (either of them) any activity book or even learning-related one that is connected to either one, they want to get it and delve into that. Both of them—Duncan getting read to, but Alex reading them—is these Basher Science books, these little square books made by this company Basher.

They will pick a topic, like biology. There is a bunch of them for science but then there are some for mythology or microbiology. So every night before bed lately, Alex has been sitting there reading through one of those. They have got these cute little cartoons. The cartoons actually remind me of the Mr. Men books back from when we were much younger. Not exactly like that but sort of cartoony, cutesy pictures to represent it, but the topic it is representing might be anaerobic bacteria, so it is really interesting. He has been going into all these different topics and having a lot of fun with that, that is something that is huge here.

Then as you mentioned, we do play a lot of board games together as a family. So that is some of the main ones. They have been into Minecraft quite a bit, but then maybe a little less right now as well. That rounds out some of their major things.

PAM: That is very fun. I remember Joseph, my eldest, spent quite a while interested in Thomas the Tank Engine and we delved into that world. Then with my other son, we went deep into Dr. Who, so yeah, those are all great memories!

I was wondering how you built trust in the process of unschooling? You talked about how you guys started looking at homeschooling, Montessori, and circled back into unschooling. So I was wondering what were the pieces that resonated with you at that time that helped you feel more confident in choosing this lifestyle?

JAMIE: Basically, I was initially doing a ton of the reading online and then I was relaying stuff to Monica. I tend to go into things fairly confidently, but I'll do a ton of research at the same time. It is not overconfidence in things, but as I started reading about it and the core principles and that is where I guess because it was so principle based rather than rule-based and rather than saying this is the best way to do this, this is the most efficient way, it was all about again those principles.

I know you talk a lot about that with all the work that you do. **The principle of just being connected with your family and really listening to people and going where their interests go. That learning, that nurturing that love of learning, that is there naturally in kids unless things happen to push that to the side or constrict that or constrain that in some way. Those things really resonated with me.**

Going into school, I was not miserable in school but I certainly didn't see or equate school with learning. I learned so much—I started reading when I was young—I learned so much from reading and from watching TV shows and just being involved in different things. I saw that as the most natural thing in the world. So I didn't, I never had that feeling that a lot of people have because the way our school system works, that you need someone telling you what you need to learn now and that whether you learned that right. It was a very natural thing for me to come to unschooling because it really sort of encapsulated my philosophy and the way that I felt about learning.

In conjunction with that, when I started to read about and process the different things about how things happen in school and why those might turn some kids off learning, or really make them feel bad about themselves in this way, or with situations with bullying, or with different things in general and how that might be a problem.

Just the fact that one or two or three in a family with a parent facilitating is such a different model than fifteen or twenty or twenty-five or thirty kids and one teacher trying to cater to some of their needs. So it just seemed to really make sense and be a natural way to do it.

One thing I didn't mention is we used to travel a lot and one thing we thought about was, finding curriculum or different things that would be in conjunction with the places that we were thinking about traveling as a family. So we had already been thinking about a customized learning style, and my wife was definitely on board with that. But then as we got into unschooling, that fell by the wayside because we see how we can just learn from everything. A trip across the street can be as much of a way to learn and have fun as going all the way across the world. It's just a lot cheaper and a lot more efficient at this time in our kids' lives.

When I initially did connect with some of this information on [Sandra Dodd's site](#) or with [Always Learning](#), I posted a little bit. I had some, because of a little bit of the language I was using relates to the gifted program, I got a bit of a negative response because I was not being as careful with my words. I didn't feel put off from that personally as much, but I just was not ready to really get into that community as much at that point. Which really fits in with the "read a little, try a little, wait a while, watch" philosophy there.

I read a bunch more in different places, read her book, read other websites. I remember there was a dad's one post that really resonated with me. I do not know if he still has it up at this point "Just a Bald Man." (NOTE: No, it's publicly available online at the moment.) I do not know if you've read that one before, it is about a guy on a plane.

It was this dad who's either a teacher or works in the education space a little bit in some way. I think that was it and he was going to some kind of conference and as sitting next to a guy on the plane. Ended up having a conversation about unschooling. It started with the guy challenging him about, oh can you even homeschool and how does that work? Saying all these things, oh I would never do that. But then the conversation turned and just through that conversation he started deconstructing HIS life, and it turned out the other dad that was challenging him on all this stuff really was not happy with his life or his connection with his kids. Why would he send his kids to them trying to repeat that same sort of traditionally successful life that he had, as opposed to this other guy who seems to have a great relationship with his kids, that is really happy with the way things are going, and is really enjoying things a lot more.

That stuck with me so much. I shared that for a while. He would sometimes pull that site down and then put it back up again. As a resource it was not always there, but I love that story. So sometime after that I started to get more into and subscribed to the [Always Learning group](#) and put out a little bit myself and saying something once in a while. Mostly just reading about it, thinking about it, talking about it with Monica my wife, we did that over the course of months.

I guess leading up to, I think, by the time we got to the Toronto

Unschooling Conference Alex was only maybe, (well Duncan was not born yet, she was still pregnant Duncan, so that was like fall of that year) so Alex was two and a half or so. He still was not even school-age by the time we were really comfortable with unschooling.

By the time we were there, we were meeting some of the other unschooling parents, seeing with their kids were a little further along in age and sort of the process. That was just the good feedback that we needed at that point. We were all ready feeling more confident about unschooling than some of the other people that might've just been coming to it at that point. Really haven't looked back since. I know Monica is now the one who read the group more. It is more just fine-tuning and tweaking or you know. Maybe something else surfaces that we just have not looked at yet through an unschooling lens, some other little tiny thing that we just need to get comfortable with. But really most of that was years ago now and it's just been really wonderful journey.

PAM: That is really cool to hear your story. I did the same thing too. It is all about how we prefer to learn. I was reading groups and stuff pretty quietly, I think probably for about a year. Just picking stuff up, you know, because at first I would read some things and was like, "oh wow that is really out there for me, I do not know that we'll be doing that kind of thing," but so much of this other stuff resonates. But over time, over those months when I started to really grasp the principles, that is when I understood where those actions came from and they made so much more sense to me. Once things made sense, that is when I began to participate more. So I think it all depends on how people like to learn, right?

JAMIE: Yes and I remember the sort of ah ha moments would come along at some point. You will be reading along through the groups and someone will say something and it will really stick out and be jarring to you. You will think okay who is going to come in? I know roughly what they are now going to say in response to that. You start seeing where things come into conflict with the principles those of us who've been doing this for a while are now working from. You can just sort of see where the conversation is going to go.

The only thing you do not know is how the person's going to react yet, how much they have deschooled to be able to respond to this stuff or whether they are going to have some negative response to

it because they are just not ready for it yet. If you're not willing to really examine these things, and think about them, and talk about it with your partner and just really think about it yourself, it's hard to work with these principles when we have been in such a rule-based society.

PAM: It is just so many huge paradigm shifts. But yes, as long as you are open to questioning, even if you do not understand yet, it is so helpful. I was always so grateful for those whose learning style was to pop in and ask questions right away.

JAMIE: Yes, that is the thing. **I am very much an answer seeker, but that usually does not involve me asking people questions.** Google was great for me and I guess for you too, because we could ask, not a person, all these questions and that really works.

PAM: You know what, I've always kind wondered if that style was innate or whether it was something I pick up from school. You know, because I too did well, and felt even from the younger grades, really felt that I could not ask questions. I would be horrified if I got things wrong or let people know what it was that I didn't know yet.

What has been the most challenging aspect of moving to unschooling for you?

JAMIE: For me personally, I do not know that I really have answer to that. Within our family context, I know that there has been a lot more for Monica. When I first started learning more about unschooling and I started sharing it with my mom, she said wow I wish I had this information. I probably would have done this with you guys back in the early 80's.

Whereas when we started talking about even the idea of homeschooling with her mom, they thought we were crazy. They come from a very traditional background. Actually it's interesting there's another layer of context. My wife's parents are both Chinese background, lived in different countries in Southeast Asia and then came here for one year of high school and then university, been settled here ever since. They also came from very large families. So in their situation, it was a privilege for your parents to be able to pay for you to go to school and not all of

your siblings necessarily got that chance. With the fact that we have a free system here that worldwide is pretty good and for us to opt out of that but still pay for it through taxes sounds completely crazy.

And then of course it also means that we are going to need to spend a lot more time, so we can't work, so there would be a lot less money so the practical aspect of it to them sounded nuts. Then her mom was actually very, very worried that we were going to stunt their intellectual development, that we were going to stunt their social development all these different issues that she had.

The toughest time for us was every September, especially when Rex was first entering into junior kindergarten—Alex and his cousin Rex are the same year, school-wise—that was a really stressful point for Monica.

There was a lot of back-and-forth. They are also not big readers of stuff in English. Obviously they are capable of it, they went to university here, but that is just not their preferred learning style. It's not like we could send them articles to get them comfortable or that sort of thing. So it was just a lot of uncomfortable conversations, a lot of avoiding it, maybe spending a little less time with them through some of those times. But then it's been proving that just through life for them.

A couple of weeks ago—we see them pretty much once a week with the cousins—Rex was sitting with his dad at one end of the table and he is actually at a “Montessori” private school but I am putting quotes around Montessori there because I know how the Montessori method works and him having a lot of homework for grade two, he's basically doing homework every day, does not have any bearing on the Montessori method at all.

I see that happening a lot because parents are paying so much for it, for private school, that they want a lot more of the private school features and sort of the markers for private school success and the “Montessori” just ended up saying that we are doing this a little differently, but not that differently really.

They were doing some homework and his dad was basically yelling at him to stay there and keep doing this homework on Saturday afternoon, for symmetry or something like that, some topic that

could be interesting and simple, but when it's broken into a worksheet, he was having a horrible time. Everyone was embarrassed. Meanwhile Alex sat down at the other end of the table and was doing a project writing out something for himself that he had come up with and was just happily working away writing a ton of stuff in his notebook. I do not even remember what it was about.

So then the grandparents were freaked out by this, sort of shying away from what had been happening at one end of the table. But then they were asking Alex, "what are you doing? what are you working on?" Alex got irritated that they were intruding into his work. It could not have been more different.

To the point where he actually left the table, came to me, kind of upset saying, "you know what, I am trying to work on my stuff but everywhere I move, you know my grandma was bugging me here then my grandpa was bugging me there, my aunt was bugging me there, I do not even feel like working anymore." On one side you need this intense pressure to get anything done and on the other side the intrusion was messing it up. Losing an opportunity for it, because to them, they were just trying to understand and trying to see the value in it. Where obviously he does, so just let him do it.

PAM: That is a cool story. Yes. When you are paying attention to that, you do see it all over the place do not you?

JAMIE: Absolutely. Well I guess the other part to that too is good because we have hit a bunch of major milestones, that is what really got Monica completely comfortable with things too. She was feeling still a lot of anxiety about some of these different things. Is this going to be enough for them? Are they going to be able to do this?

She was the primary, we were both around them a lot but she was the primary one focusing on that at that point. She has to build her confidence more, so reading was very helpful for her and connecting with some other parents.

But as we saw, once Alex started to read on his own. I had complete confidence in it because I had learned before I went to Montessori. So I knew that was completely possible and I had read so much about the theory of it and how they do it in Finland.

If you provide access and stuff that they are interested in and read it to them as much as they want, eventually at their pace, which could be when they are three and it could be when they are nine or ten or whenever, it is going to happen. So again that overconfidence that is where I am coming from helped me a lot.

We saw first Alex started to read some letters and then the odd word and then short sentences in a context where he's interested. Actually we saw a ton of that through tablet games that he was playing where the functional reading of getting the response to figure out what was going on in this screen, in Plants vs. Zombies2 and you know and just going a little bit further from that. Seeing that picture and knowing that means this. He put a lot stuff together through that. That is where a lot of his good learning on the reading side was happening.

Even more so. It is neat nowadays that they have got at the library every single kind of toy or video game or movie that kids would possibly be interested in, they have the little tie-in readers. That is been great I think, especially for boys. They have all these Legos things or all these Star Wars things or whatever available like that. Seeing him come through those phases to reading.

Like you hear in so many of the stories, it was not far for him being able to read a few sentences on the page that I am reading with him but then saying you know what, that is enough for me you can read the rest of it now, to now he's sitting down with these Basher books and reading a chapter or two at a time about these more advanced science topics and getting everything. That is really empowering, obviously for him most of all but that is the validation that really helps parents, same thing with swimming.

I had a really negative experience with swimming lessons as a kid. Whereas Monica went all the way through the swimming system to getting some of the higher swimming levels or whatever you call that, I do not really know how that works. I would take them swimming every week up here and then go up to my parent's timeshare in the summer, where they would have access to the pool for the whole week.

We would go once or sometimes twice a day. I saw little by little, not this year but I think last year, towards the end of the week he

said, you know what let me try this a little bit without the water-wings. So he had gotten comfortable enough with the water himself and then over the course of that last day or two, swimming just fine functionally. Then soon he was getting back and forth across the pool. Now he is totally comfortable with swimming.

Just two completely different things to follow on from the other stuff you learn without having to be schooled in it, like walking and talking and everything else that happens in your life. Just seeing a couple of those extensions that people are fixated on teaching being required. Obviously you know that it isn't. That has been really cool. Those are the two big ones. Now we are seeing where Duncan is at. Again, not comparing the two of them, just saying we are very curious where along the path that both of those things will happen for him.

PAM: I think that is one of the reasons when people first come to unschooling and they are trying it out, a lot of us and I do this, we all talk about giving it that time, six months to a year. Try it out for a long enough period that you can see these developments.

I find it's easier to develop that trust in unschooling when you give it enough time that you can look back and see something develop, like whether it is swimming, whether it is reading, whether it is whatever. Whatever their interest is, they are going to learn in those large chunks of time. So if you're giving them that space and all the support and hanging out with them—I am going to try this for a year and see how this goes—when you got that bit longer period of time, you're going to see some awesome things happen. It is just, you know, being able to take that time at first when you're not quite sure what is going to happen.

JAMIE: Yes, and there is the other side of that too. We were just really lucky that we found the concept of unschooling on the website when Alex was maybe one-year-old. We were able to spend the next two, three years before he would have been at regular school age to work on our own deschooling, read a lot of this stuff and think about how that applied to just the way he was learning where nobody would be expecting school to be involved. And just get really comfortable with those concepts.

Not only is it the more school that you do, the more time you are going to have to work on that. Both sides right, if your kids do go

to school there is going to be even more time you're going to have to wait to really be able to see that yourself and to give them the space and comfort level that they are going to be able to do that.

We are really lucky you know, if everyone that was ever going to be interested in this, would look at it when their kids are born that would be great. Obviously that usually does not happen because that would only usually happen if you come across some other friends of yours who were already doing that. Otherwise you are going to have some experience with school along the way first.

PAM: Yes, I was not living in Alberta.

JAMIE: Well even then you may have seen a very traditional homeschooling, then you may not have.

PAM: Yes, I had not heard of the word homeschooling up until Joseph was nine. Okay, anyway ...

As a working parent I was wondering if you could talk a bit about how you stay connected with what the kids are up to?

JAMIE: So, this is the one where I have a cheat. When Alex was born we had a business, so I was at home. So I left my regular job and we were just focused on the business for a couple of months before he was born. So I was home and around in that beginning stage and we had that business until Duncan was born. By the time Alex was school-aged, we had actually sold that business and had some money coming in from that and then I started consulting for the company I work for you now, that is an accounting firm and I do data-related work. So I was doing that remotely for the next three years and only part time while I had other stuff going on. I think I went for two or three meetings out of the house over the course of three years.

So really, I work, but I am doing that at home so I was around them a lot for those earlier periods. Now, for the past year I have been working, still not quite full time because this is so important to our lifestyle, that was an important filter for what I was looking for in the work that I am doing. So I work probably about 80% of hours for the year, but I have a busy season when the accounts are

very busy and I am getting all sorts of data and doing that sort of stuff. From January to April I might be working 45, 50, 55 even 60 hours in a week, but only maybe one or two days from the office. The rest of the time I am at home. Now I might be up in a room and not seeing all the stuff. I am talking with my wife about that stuff.

As part of her building her confidence but also having stuff to share with me, she was trying to take pictures for a long time of the various different things that they were doing. Very little of it, I know some people like to post that to share what is going on with their kids publicly for other people. She is much more of a private person. She would just have it for her own purposes or for her to be able to look back at the kids or occasionally to pull one thing out and show it to her parents. It just might be helpful for that. But because she has been doing, that we are able to talk about it. I am always talking with the kids about it or I am hearing about what they are into on their tablets.

We have one of those recipe holders, recipe stands on a lazy susan, on the kitchen table where we would have books in there. So for years, I was the one that was taking them to the library every week. I would be getting storybooks that we would be reading at bedtime and we have a bunch of those upstairs. I'd be getting books about just different topics, just interesting things and I'd have those in a stand in the kitchen and we would just pick which one was going to be the next book that we read. Because I would try and make meal times asking about stuff but also reading with them about different things, those are some connection points.

Then I am doing the bedtime reading a lot of the time as well. Through that, I am always connected to them and they are always telling me about stuff. When I'd get home they would want to be telling me about stuff and if they do not, then Monica ends up being the one that does it. Again would be so I am more on the pulse of everything anyway. But then, even when I am out they want share all that stuff with me as well. That is kind of my cheat on one side, and just how other people would have to do it on the other.

PAM: So, just for families whose working parent is out at the office a little bit more regularly, just trying to think of maybe some tips that we can pull from that for them.

JAMIE: I guess **if the parent who is at home is doing things like that, like taking some notes and taking pictures and sometimes little videos and different things like that it can be useful for all different purposes.** If you did need to track anything for your jurisdiction or you just wanted to track it so that if you ever had to have that conversation with someone about what they are learning that works just as well or even better for sharing with your spouse or sharing with your parents or that sort of thing.

As well as obviously having the conversations with the kids themselves and asking them what they are excited about and delving into that. Maybe building on that and extending it to if there is something that you can be doing to get into their world for whatever those things are that they are working on. But usually they are excited to be sharing you know talking about it with me anyways so.

PAM: Yes, kids are usually very excited about sharing what they are interested in, aren't they? **I think maybe your point about having the library books out, you know maybe if Legos are big, having the Legos out, places set up easily for connection so that the working spouse can more easily slide into their interests and conversations right away.** Rather than sitting them around the table at dinner and saying what did you do. It is like that ["leaning on a truck"](#) kind of thing, from Sandra Dodd's website. It is more working side by side doing things where conversations develop more easily rather than trying to start a conversation cold.

JAMIE: Well and part of it too I think again, I haven't had to do this as much now but we made that a focus when I was first going out of the house. That was a little bit stressful for them because I hadn't really been working out of the house at all and then all of a sudden last year sometimes one or two or even three days through that last fall.

So the first thing I do when I get home and see them and say what do you guys want to do, so really offering myself to them and so that we can do something. Either is there something you want to show me from today that you are excited about our talk about. The fact that it was a bit more showing and a bit more like us now doing something is great because then Monica gets a break to do whatever she needed to do that is not with them because she has been around and with them all day. They are doing more stuff

themselves now. **So I think having that sort of connection routine is really important for really giving the most that you can to your kids right when you get home too.**

PAM: Yes, that is kind of a nice way to open the transition with them right?

JAMIE: Exactly

PAM: I must say I do really, really enjoy the glimpses I get on Facebook of your love for board games. You play regularly and you share insights as a contributor to the podcast [“What Did You Play This Week.”](#)

I was wondering if you could share with us a little bit about your gaming journey and how this passion developed?

JAMIE: Alright, so I started getting into the non-mass market board games, not the kinds of board games that you would see at a regular toy store. I played those when I was a kid. I was at a garage sale when I was maybe five or six. I saw this game called Dungeon that was .50 cents. It was a game about this kind of like role-playing game, like a Dungeons and Dragons kind of game, but it was a board game where you pick one of these characters and you are going to walk through this dungeon and fight these monsters and roll dice and flip over all these cards for different things. When I was I guess six or so I just thought that was the coolest thing in the world. Loved it and started playing that and that got me into it—that was by a company TSR that made Dungeons and Dragons.

Then I started looking into some of the different books that were related to that. They also made some other board games. I actually got into looking at board games and role playing games when I was five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten and found people to start playing with. And also found some of the stuff that was happening in Toronto back then. I have been playing more complicated or more different sorts of board games since then.

Then we got into the Magic cards a little bit at some point in high school until I figured out I didn't have money to keep up with that as a hobby. My friends and I kept playing through university age occasionally when we would see each other because we were at

different schools and programs and stuff. Then in around 2000 so near the end of or I guess right when I finished university there was a friend who just started playing [Settlers of Catan](#). Which had come over from Europe in 1995, so that was the first of what they call Euro games or modern Euro games. We played Catan. I liked that, Monica liked it "okay."

Through some of her friends when she started working at IBM, they started playing some of the other games that were coming in like [Puerto Rico](#) or [Princes of Florence](#) or [Tigris and Euphrates](#). Some of these other even more complicated Euro games that were actually a bit shorter too and had less sort of conflict type interaction and less randomness as well. So that really appealed to us like the very strategic and very interesting that way. She had friend at IBM, that was one of the first people importing these consistently in to Canada. We used to buy games from him in the early 2000's. I introduced my friends to those. They started, through other groups of friends; they started being introduced to other games as well. Started getting more and more into games. It sort of held at a certain level. A couple times a year maybe buy a new game and play the same ones that we had, up through most of the 2000s.

Maybe five years ago my sister-in-law started looking at more games online and started watching some review videos. I hadn't even thought of the fact that there would be people reviewing board game videos online. We would just, when I would go to a store I would go to [board game geek](#), which is a huge database website of information about board games. I would go and research games there to see what other people were saying. Because people can write there, give it a rating, you know write their comments on it and you can find out some more details about it.

I started researching before we would buy stuff or I would literally stand there at the store reading about games I had never seen before at some of these big stores that we have in Toronto. We'd pick some up periodically like that, but once Heidi my sister-in-law got into it as well, that meant that we started playing regularly with them. And that, because I started listening to board game media out there like podcasts or review videos. And this is really the most amazing time that has happened in board games. There are so many different board games out there coming out all the time in all sorts of different topics. From kids games up to

vary complicated war games or heavy economic simulation games or different things like that. We started doing more and more so our collection of games has really grown more and more over the past few years here.

We play a ton as a family, even some of those older games that I had like [Puerto Rico](#) from the early 2000s. **From the time Alex was about two years old I would show him those games and the pieces and talk a little bit about what they were for. Even though he is not going to be able to read the stuff at that point and not going to be able to play strategically, I'd start to show him a little piece. What you would do on your turn like if it is your turn you could do this or this or this. Do you want to try one of those? And then sort of simulating parts of the game.**

The biggest thing is getting them comfortable with these little wooden pieces and little plastic pieces that he was not going to put them in his mouth and he was going to respect them as a game. So just knowing that we can't lose these pieces and it is just important to keep it all together. So just from a very early age I had my kids around the games and seeing what they were about. Seeing where I might be able to show them something they could play with there as well.

Then on the podcast side, how I got in on that was, for a couple years I was actually on a different podcast talking about what books I'd read, mostly on the fiction but non-fiction side too. When I got busy last fall, I'd gotten away from that. But I'd been listening to a lot of board game podcasts while I do my data work or while I am commuting. I found these guys that basically have a podcast where they talk about what games they had been playing this week and I was one of their interviewees—they have a "meet the gamer" segment. I was just talking about my experiences growing up as a gamer here in the Toronto area and the kinds of things that I do and started to play with my kids as well.

Then through that I ended up becoming one of the contributors where I send in a ten-minute segment or so every week to just talk about what we have been playing. So that has been a lot of fun, it has really connected me to amazing people on-line and it has really given me some neat ways to think about what we are doing here as a family with games.

PAM: Yes, that is really cool! Your segment on the podcast is actually about learning through and with board games.

I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about the learning you see with your own kids and what tips you have for playing with younger kids. Do you stick to the less complicated games that you play with them? Or, do you change up the rules for the more complicated ones? I was curious about that.

JAMIE: I kind of figured it out as I went along so I'd started with just taking whatever game that he was interested in off the shelf, you know, when Alex was younger. From these modern games that I have or modern European board games, or whatever you want to call them. Or actually I had some other ones where there is some modern American style games that have a lot of plastic pieces that look really cool for kids, like army men or different things like that. So for some of **those I would just get them out and let him play with the pieces comfortably. I would supervise that just to make sure everything okay with it, but I would, as I was saying, expose them to the pieces first.**

Then really **I didn't specifically start with less complicated games. I just started with stuff that I was interested in that he seemed interested in. So just sort of where that met. We would investigate that game or I would just take out a game and then show him the pieces and if that was interesting to him, we would go a little bit further with that.**

So then my next step would be, you have to separate the mechanically how you play this game from strategically how do you play this game to win. Throw the strategic side completely aside to start with. And figure okay, any game that is a real game, is a series of choices and I guess the distinction I make there is the one game that I do not know if anyone ever realized is no choice at all is snakes and ladders. All you do is spin a spinner or roll a die and do what it says. Your only interaction with the game is that physical action of doing that. You do not make a single choice the rest of the way. So every actual game other than I guess it is some kind of a activity that does have a winner or loser but really, you have no agency, you have no ability to affect the outcome of that game, unless you think you are able to spin a

certain way or roll the dice. For any other game, it is a series of decisions: what are you going to choose to do this turn from the choices that are available?

If you start from games that have simpler or fewer choices of what you can do but still offer those up to your child as you are playing it with them, then you can go from there and decide what to do. Even a game like Monopoly you roll your dice, you land on a space, you have a choice of you know, well a bunch of them are not going to be a choice but some of them you will have a choice of are you going to by this or are you not going to buy this? Or can you count your money to see if you can buy this? **Starting with that idea of just breaking it down to what is their choice right now, is the first part for learning any games with kids.**

As they get more experience with just making decisions in games, you can start to add those other layers of the why behind the choice, if three turns down the road you want to be able to build fences in this game, then you are going to need to collect wood now. If some of your choices are collecting the wood to do that, then you can start to build that path toward their goal. Really like anything else that you are learning with your kids. If there is some kind of project that they are going to need to learn some other skills for, it is very much like that it is just a model for that.

Once we really started looking into buying more of these modern games that we can play with our kids, we were looking at what are the types of decisions are you going to make. **Another thing is hidden information, if you have cards that you need to keep secret for yourself that is a little bit of a harder topic for kids to deal with at the beginning, especially if they are not able to read yet.** You could look at, maybe they have a game that has got that kind of thing but it is based on icons or pictures or symbols of some kind that you or a pre-reading child is going to be able to work with. I just put on the learning hat for all these different aspects of games and looking into ways that we can play them.

I have games that would say age eight or ten or twelve or fourteen—actually just an interesting aside on that, a lot of the games that you see that say 12+ or 14+ at the younger ages they are trying to get to a certain level that they think for sort of the mass market games. For some of these complicated games they do that

mainly because of the import restrictions. If it says 12+ or 14+ they no longer need to do some of the testing for some of the composition of the components in case kids put them in their mouth that sort of thing. It is just a simplification on their process. Some other companies will say, you know what, we do it anyway because we just want to do everything perfectly, but for a lot of them it just saves them some regulatory hassles. Because I played some of these games at a younger age than it said on the box I have always kind of disbelieved that anyway.

Now that is not to say that we do not play kids games as well. Like some of the games we have found at thrift stores like Mouse Trap which I would generally rather not play and I'll put the TV on in the background if I am going to play that for awhile. Because I was introducing kids to so many of these other modern games, they were really getting excited about them. I am not just playing these games like a lot of the traditional ones are longer than they need to be because there has been a lot of streamlining in the ways that games are designed. They are less interesting for the parents, and really for the kids, than they could be. I have even got them playing some games that people get surprised that they are playing, and making some good decisions and sometimes even beating me with them as well.

You asked about also changing the rules, I guess there is the other side that is complicated with kids, the whole winning and losing thing. I know one of my friends who grew up in Eastern Europe and plays a ton of games now, she said that her grandfather, when he played chess, he would relentlessly destroy her, because her response to that should be I want be able to come back and be able to win. Eventually over the course of years and through that challenge she was able to rise up and win.

Well, I think there is a very narrow personality type that that kind of interaction with games is useful for and would probably alienate a huge proportion of game players the rest of the time.

There are lots of different gamer types, just like there are lots of different learning types. For some people, competition is everything. For a lot of other people, it can be very off-putting. Kids at certain stages really want to win, or really want to be first, or not want to be last. There are all sorts of different variations on that.

What I have tended to do and I guess in bringing up good winners and good losers, is an important part of gaming with your kids. I know some people are very adamant on they do not tolerate any sore loser-ness at all. **I think the big thing is making sure people do not lord it over you when they win. That is something that I think you can have a conversation about right away and make sure that is not a problem.**

With the losing side, at different stages maybe if you are counting up scores at the end, if it was not obvious—the first person to the finish line, that sort of thing—I might fudge the explanation of what happened there to one or more of the kids so that they can feel better about it. **So I implement the rules right all the way through the game, but then at the end we counted up and then whoever asks, who wins, I ask who do you think wins? Then I maybe just counted up myself and oh, they finished one point ahead of me or whatever it was because that just made a more fun interaction at that point. At the same time, you do not want winning to feel like it is their right to win every time. You won't always win. You need to be able to deal with those situations so you just kind of have to play it by ear. Some people call it letting the Wookies win.**

PAM: Oh really?

JAMIE: It is a Star Wars thing, maybe they are going to flip the table if they do not or maybe they are not going to come back. **At the end of the day, the most important thing is that everyone is having fun and that you are going to come back and you are going to continue to play games together going forward.**

PAM: Yes, it is the whole experience, right? I love that idea of just playing it by ear, that is a great way to approach it, you know, who do you think won and stuff like that, because you can then gauge what the situation's like at the moment. You do not want to spoil the last hour or however long you have spent playing by turning it sour at the end. From what you said, I think it is great how much leeway you have really to just follow their lead, right?

JAMIE: Yes. I guess some parents will and I know Monica will bend the rules more if there is something that they really want to be doing. I guess I do, I struggle with that. I am kind of middle of the road. **I will try and make staying within the rules fun and comfortable and interesting so that we can play that game. If we**

want to do something that is a different way with it we could do that separately or do that. I guess I do not like changing course within the game as much. As where she will be okay with let us make this something different. I do totally support and encourage.

My kids will sometimes take a game and say okay now we are going to play our version of this. They will come up with their own revised rules or their own way of working with it. If Duncan really wants the sheep from this farming game and that is really his focus, he will take them afterwards and start playing with them and doing something with that. There is lots of opportunities for doing this in different ways around that as well.

Whereas, I have another friend, he plays a lot of the same games I play. I have played games with him since like grade seven or grade eight. So we have grown up with a lot of the same games. His thing is if they start, then they have to commit to finishing. They have to play by the rules as they are written in the book. I have seen more negative interactions come out of that that really are not necessary.

If our kids want to drop out of the game, but other people are still playing, I will say okay if you want to drop out of the game you can go play something else. We will either pull them out of the game or we will just keep play for you, and I am fine doing that. I am fine playing two hands of the game if I have to. Monica does not like having to do that she would just try and get them out of the game, but I will try and keep it flowing the way that it was, but that is fine with me. You have fun for as long as you want to and you know when you are not. They will be more comfortable getting into a game if they know that they can get out of it that way without it being difficult.

PAM: Yes, that is that obligation piece. When you start to feel obligated, it is not fun any longer. I remember when we would start games because, like you said, sometimes the kids would like to play without the rules so that was one thing that we did. We would check in to confirm before we got started how we were going to play. Are we playing strict to these rules, are we going to tweak it this way and this way. We would try and avoid arguments in the middle of the game when somebody was looking to change something, you know?

JAMIE: Exactly.

PAM: Every once in a while we will make up rules as we go. If somebody wants to change it then everybody is hopping in. There was still so much learning and fun that way to because you saw how these rule changes affected how the game played, so that was always fun.

JAMIE: I just remembered something that I wanted to share that I had completely forgot about. Similar to what I said about video games or tablet games being a really neat way to see reading (like learning reading). Board games have been a fantastic one for that as well—little snippets of contextual, functional learning.

If you are just looking at from a very “what are they learning” perspective, it makes sense because you want to learn that you want to be able to do that sort of thing for that secret card that has a little bit of information. That is something that your child will want to use right now. As they get to those stages of where they are just really on the cusp of reading. I know there is a particular game, [Smash Up](#), that Alex really liked at that stage and likes now. It is so fun now that he is fully reading.

Just to give you a concept or that one, it is a game where you have got a whole bunch of different decks of cards for like aliens or zombies or shape shifters or time travels. There are all these different expansion packs you can get so that each one will have I do not know, 30 cards or something. You choose two so you might choose the alien dragons and you shuffle those together and now you have an alien dragon deck. You are going to draw these cards and play minions from that and try and take over things and do these actions and stuff like that. But it is not a collectable card game so you are not constantly (ahem) spending too much money on it. But it gives some of that feel of that sort of a game.

In the early stages of that he was able to read most of it but now he is able to read all of it. Just seeing that progression as that was one of the major things where he was reading some stuff on his own. It just really worked that way and because he was just so interested in that particular game.

I get to see that as another neat vehicle in your kid’s journey wherever they are at. As well as having all these different games on all sorts of neat topics. Whether it is historical stuff or scientific stuff and not designed as a learning game but designed

because it is an interesting thing in human knowledge because someone wants to build a cool game around. I have always found that fascinating.

I got into a lot of history through board games. There are games about inventions, there are games about civilization topics, there are games different trading in this part of the Mediterranean at this particular time. All sorts of neat stuff that you can be learning, setting wise, through these games as well.

PAM: That is one thing that I found too. Not only you can see reading and that kind of stuff progressing you can also see their strategizing. You can see that develop over time through games too.

JAMIE: That is exciting to me when I've heard Alex start to, at the end of the game, talk to me about, "well, I decided I wanted to try this because I thought it would do this. This was my goal at working toward this." Those different stages of that strategic thought from someone who is seven, seven and a half is really, really cool for me to hear. I love it because I love to play these games all day long anyway so, I just eat that up.

PAM: I love that experience!

I was hoping that for some people listening who would like to bring a more game board fun into their lives, I was wondering if you could give us a couple of recommendations for games to play with young kids, kids and teens and adults.

JAMIE: How many? Just a couple? I could talk all day about this.

Okay, so within the modern hobby board game industry there is a not a full classification but there is something they call gateway games that are games that the rules are not too long, usually the game play is not too, too long and make useful entry points for someone who may have only played Monopoly and card games and Clue and Battleship and stuff like that.

There is a bunch of good ones in sort of that space. A lot of people would have said Catan for that. Catan came out 20 years ago now. There is a lot of development in game development since then.

It can be long and it can be a bit random and there can be a little bit of mean stuff or people may not like negotiations so that is NOT one that I would actually recommend for people to start with as much now, although a lot of people do and did and got into the hobby quite happily with that.

[Carcassonne](#) is one game that came along the way about 15 years ago now but is a tile laying game. On each turn, each person is going to pull a tile out of a bag. These tiles have cities or have roads or have a river or have cloisters and different things that you then have to connect that match it up with the other pieces that are on.

As you are growing the city of Carcassonne it has got all these like winding parts to it. You place a square tile that connects to something and then you can place one of your little wooden people, who has become a Meeple since then, on one of those. You can place them on a city, and then they are going to get points for how big that city gets. You can put them on a road, you can get points for the road. Lay them on their side to be a farmer or you can put them as a monk in one of the cloisters. Then you are just going to keep scoring points for that over the course of the game.

Your decision is to pick this tile out and see where does it fit and then do I want to put a Meeple on here for scoring points at the end of the game. The flow works very quickly like that.

With kids, it is just about where can I put this and where do I think I might get points for. With adults, or teenagers, you might be thinking about not only how can I maximize this, but how can I then make it harder for the other person to continue building their parts. You might get into a little bit of blocking or it might get a little bit more cutthroat that way. You can play it lots of different ways, it has tons of different expansions but that base game of Carcassonne is a great game that can be an entry point for people into the hobby. I think it plays in about 45 minutes to an hour so not too bad on that side.

Another one that is a modern classic is [Ticket to Ride](#), which is a game where they have got all different maps. The best two starting points are probably [Europe map](#) or the [USA map](#). The USA one is just called [Ticket to Ride](#) the other one would be [Ticket to Ride Europe](#). That plays two to five players an hour (it could be shorter) maybe

up to a bit more than an hour. This is one where you have a number of tickets that show destinations like Chicago to Miami and the beginning of the game you are going to choose a few of those and have those secretly in your hand. You are trying to build that route. Say it gives you Vancouver to Miami might give you 27 points at the end of the game if you have completed that connection, laying your trains on the board you are going to get 27 otherwise you are going to get minus 27 if you didn't finish it.

Really your goal is finishing these. On your turn all you are going to do is either draw some cards, there is different colors of cards you use to match the colored routes on the map. There are draw new cards, draw some new tickets, get some new destinations, or play a certain number of the same color of cards to build out one of those routes. Then place your trains on the board and get points for that. It flows pretty simply that way but can get again very strategic and some different maps can get more cutthroat as well. It is a really fun family experience.

It is already fairly simple and I've had my kids playing it from that "decision" perspective but strategically maybe they are not fully getting that side of it. They now have, just came out this year, [Ticket to Ride My First Journey](#). Where instead of just getting a specific number of points for doing each route, you are just trying to complete the routes. When you finish just six tickets you win, that sort of thing. It just makes it a little bit more of a race from that perspective instead of the strategy on that side but it is a beautifully produced game. It goes over well with almost everyone I've tried that with, so that is another really nice one.

Another sort of genre game is co-op games, where instead of being against each other you are working together. There are a whole bunch of different ones in that space. A good young kid entry level one is this one called [Forbidden Island](#). The sequel, adding a few more rules that we actually like better and I started my kids with, is [Forbidden Desert](#). This is one where you are an archeologist or similar and you are trying to find your way around and out of this desert. You have a certain number of moves that you can do per turn. Meanwhile, sand is blowing in and covering up the things you are working on and actually shifting around the board as you go along. You actually have to dig out of this sand and you have to flip over tiles. You have to make sure you have enough water. So

there are different ways you can lose the game as a team but you are ultimately trying to make this air ship and fly out of that desert.

From there, there is [Pandemic](#), which is about fighting diseases and is really great family fun, with all the expansions.

For cooperative games there are some about being fire-fighters, policemen or all sorts of topic that way. So co-op games are really cool ones to look at as a family.

And then for little kids not only are the modern games to look at but there is one specifically that I wanted to mention. Clue, instead of playing Clue there is a game that came out last year called [Outfoxed!](#) and where it is actually a cooperative deduction game, you are still rolling dice. You are trying to match patterns to either flip over suspects or flip over items. Basically, a fox has stolen pie I think is the premise for the game, and you are trying to figure out which of all these different fox suspects is the one that did it. You are going around collecting these different items and then you put it on this little decoder thing and then pull out this slot that will either show red or green around that. So the kids can work on that together. Now that I've set them up on it, they could play this themselves or they could teach it to other kids. It is just a lot more fun because it streamlines the sort of taking a long time part of Clue, but it is still using that same kind of deduction. In a really bright, colorful, kid oriented one but that one is really fun.

There is a whole company that makes games call [Haba](#). That has these bright yellow boxes. They make a lot of smaller kid games but then up to kids at heart type games. There are a lot of really fun ones in that series that people could look at. Some of them are very dexterity sort of interactive. There is one called [Dancing Eggs](#) where you have these yellow eggs that you are actually trying to hold under different parts of your body and walk around the table and things are falling down. It is really fun to watch kids do it but it can be really hilarious to see adults do that as well.

[Rhino Hero](#) is another one or [Animal Upon Animal](#) lots of different fun ones. Oh and just one more because I just remembered how much fun we have been having with this one. In that space of sort of stacking games, like people will know Jenga. The Animal Upon Animal

is one where you are trying to place these different animal shaped pieces on top of each other if it falls off you still have to hold on to them. You are trying get rid of your hand of these animals.

A new game came out this summer called [Junk Art](#) and it is by a couple of Canadian guys. [Jay Cormier](#) is from Ontario and [Sen-Foong Lim](#) is from Vancouver. In this one there are all these different funny shaped pieces in four different colors. They are collectively on the table in front of everyone. Each game you are going to turn over three city cards. It is going to give you three different ways that you are going to have to build Junk Art out of these pieces. So some of them might be a speed game where you are going to get a bunch of cards that are going to say which piece you have to get and you have to try and build yours as fast as you can. Some of them might be you choose one or two cards, give them to the next player, they choose now one that you have to build and one that they are going to build. All different combinations like that. Sometimes you're using your own color, sometimes everybody is building on one thing. It is all these mini stacking games with these beautiful pieces. Again, it can be a ton of fun for adults but it can be fun with kids as long as you sort of see which cities and which styles they like better. That is what we had to do a little bit. Duncan, he was really good at it at first and then Alex had to sort of build the skills which came along we had to see. He was frustrated at first now he is probably better at it and Duncan was good at it at first and now he is a little bit frustrated that Alex got better at it. It is neat just seeing the different developments in that. So Junk Art, that game is a lot of fun.

PAM: I heard you mention Junk Art. I listened to one of your recent episodes. I heard you mention that and I immediately went and looked at it. I am definitely going to grab that for Lissy for Christmas so I hope she's not listening!

JAMIE: Fair enough. Just another tip as well just about games in general. Few of these games like Ticket To Ride or maybe Forbidden Desert you will find maybe even in a Toys R Us now, Pandemic so the ones that have become really big hits. Some of them a few more you might find at a MasterMind Toys or some more specialty kids in learning toys area. You really need to look out for these different hobby game stores. You can find them with Amazon and in the States on Amazon.com you can find pretty good deals, but in Canada the prices on Amazon are not very good for board games so you will need

to find some other on-line retailers like BoardGameBliss.com or CoolStuffInc.com or some different ones in the States that have good on-line prices for them and a good selection. BoardGameGeek.com might be a bit overwhelming to look at in the first place, but you can go. There is lot of different ways to get in find information about these games. There many YouTube videos and podcasts talking about games that you might be able to play with our kids as well.

Oh, one more resource because it is also Canadian, there is a guy, Rodney Smith who has a YouTube channel called "[Watch It Played.](#)" He is at a PDI and he does play through videos. SO he will say, okay, here is this game Tokido that is walking this road in Japan. That was actually the first one I watched of his. He will show you the setup in the video and then walk you through the rules and then even show you a play through of him and his son and his daughter or his friend playing these games. So for people who are more visual learners and do not like to read rule books it is absolutely fantastic way that makes these games even more accessible. He does such a great job teaching them probably better. A lot of game groups will now put on the video of him teaching it rather that try teaching it themselves to the people who they are playing with.

PAM: Wow, those are great tips Jamie we are going to have a lot of links in the show notes this week! I'm lucky we have got a board game store that is run by a local person who is into it, in the town next over. That has been great for me to run in there.

JAMIE: When you can find one that is run by good people that are friendly to families and stuff too, absolutely support them. If you see one of these games and they do not have it, mention it to them because they source it for you as well.

PAM: Yes, exactly. I bet they would bring it in. They have it set up for kids can drop by and game anytime. That is really, really cool.

Thank you so much for taking the time to speak with me Jamie, it has been a lot of fun and a lot of information for people. So that is great. Before we go, where's the best place for people to connect with you online?

JAMIE: So for people on Twitter can find me at [@JMaltman](#), I do a

lot of stuff on Twitter especial board game related stuff. You can also find me at my website jamiemaltman.com, for my writing but also that is a place for you to connect to me as well.

PAM: Very cool. Than you so much, have a great day!

JAMIE: You too.