

Ten Steps to Successfully Homeschooling Children with Special Needs

If you are a parent of a child with special needs and considering homeschooling, you undoubtedly have many questions and concerns. You're not alone, but you probably know more about homeschooling than you realize. For example, you've spent the first five years of your child's life as his most important "teacher." In addition, if your child has been in public school, you've probably spent many evenings and weekends helping your child do homework. Guess what? You've been homeschooling. My husband, Clint, and I have "been there-done that," and now we're on our tenth year of homeschooling. Our sons Cj (22) and Shane (15) have been diagnosed with attention differences, and had we left them in public school, it is my opinion they would have inherited more labels as well.

Has homeschooling been hard? Sometimes.

Interesting? Who said living with children with special needs is boring?

Can it be done? Yes! Homeschooling isn't a cure, and it is easier for some families than for others. However, homeschooling has rapidly become a respected alternative, especially for those children with special needs who are being pushed out of public schools. It's not my place to diagnose, label, or tell you how to homeschool your child with special needs. And the issues of medication and counseling belong within the scope of each family's decision-making process. However, with the one-on-one learning that parents provide in a homeschool environment, children with special needs can soar.

In the beginning, most of my homeschooling experience came while flying by the seat of my pants as I learned what worked and what didn't. ("Help!") Now, with the increase in the numbers of homeschooling families and positive media coverage, resources abound and it's so much easier to get started. Though each family has different strengths and challenges, we have many things in common: the love for our children, the commitment to our families, the challenges and the joy, and the courage to homeschool.

So, can you successfully homeschool your child? That's a question only you can answer, but I'd like to share some thoughts and offer encouragement.

Don't Do "School at Home"

One of the main reasons families new to homeschooling struggle is because they attempt to duplicate the same structure, hours, course of study, curriculum, and environment found in public schools. This is especially true if a youngster has previously attended public school and has been in special education. We experienced this "school at home" phenomenon when we began homeschooling Cj. I felt we needed to provide him with everything the public school was offering or I'd fail him. Wrong! I quickly discovered this caused undue hardship and sabotaged my child's natural love of learning. Fortunately, we sought help from others familiar with homeschooling, which quickly put me on the road to becoming free of my preconceived notions. The first year was the hardest for us, not because of anything our child did or did not do academically at home, but from our own expectations. We had to "de-school" ourselves as well as our son. This meant taking time to relax, do things together as a family, and encourage our son to follow his own interests.

Define What Is Important

If you stop to think about it, children need only a few basic skills to become successful in life: reading, writing, math, and a love of learning. Does this mean we should over focus on these subjects to the exclusion of everything else? No. Don't sacrifice the time a child spends on his own interests, but if your child is having difficulty in mastering these skills, seek help. Usually that means finding new ways to approach the skills your child needs.

Expect Impossible Days

Everyone has bad hair days, but children with special needs experience them with more intensity and perseverance. Why? Many children with special needs may have a different sense of time. For example, those with attention differences find they have a "Now-Not now" sense of time and can become frustrated when they perceive they are being rushed. Others may feel a sense of failure if they don't perform perfectly the first time, not realizing it's the process of learning, not the end result, that's important. They interrupt, not because they are rude, but because they fear they will forget what they want to say. They may also exhibit skill discrepancies. Matthew Kutz, at age 13, describes this in his article, "What's ADD, You say?", published in Think Fast! The ADD Experience (Hartmann, Bowman, "I may not immediately comprehend that $3+4=7$, but I may fully realize that $n+26=51$ and that the missing number is 25." A few more examples: One preteen reads on the high school level, but has difficulty using the dictionary because he

can't remember the alphabet. Another is proficient in music, but has difficulty with math and reading. A third is gifted with three different diagnoses. Can you imagine why these children and their families have bad hair days? What helps soften impossible days?

- Taking time off.
- Exercise and humor.
- Weekly and monthly calendars. We have ours near the kitchen phone where our entire family can see it.
- Trading kids. My friend used to take my son and I would take hers when things got hectic. Both of us appreciated the alone time so we could relax and recharge.
- Structure, which means predictability and not "set in stone."
- Taking time to work through the causes of stress in a non-judgmental way, and helping them understand cause and effect. "What can you do differently next time so we don't get into a spin?"
- Compassion toward your child and working through your expectations.

Work with the Hyperfocus

Children with special needs often have an interest that can occupy their time and thoughts around the clock. If appropriate, let them. Make sure they get enough sleep and remind them to eat, and then let them explore their favorite topic in-depth. You can use their hyperfocus to introduce less interesting topics. Using Howard Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences is a wonderful way to do this. For example, Shane's three-year love of ants led to increased learning and social skills. We read books on ants and explored local anthills. He visited Jack Longino, a well-known ant specialist at The Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington; and met Edward O. Wilson, a world-renowned ant specialist. From this hyperfocus, we explored reading, math, writing, art, science, geography, social studies, etc. (Remind me to tell you about Shane's queen ant and her first hatch. Hint: They can escape ant farms...) Parents should be concerned, however, if a child hyperfocuses for an extended period of time on a subject that doesn't provide appropriate learning or social experiences, such as some video or computer games. Children diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome, especially boys, can find computers fascinating to the exclusion of anything or anyone else. If you feel a child's hyperfocus is problematic, please seek professional help. Find a counselor or physician who is homeschool friendly and knowledgeable in learning differences. This could make a tremendous difference in your child's future.

Give Yourself and Your Family Permission to De-Stress

When I began homeschooling, I felt I had to succeed where public school had failed. This is a common experience. Many children with special needs are being pushed out of public schools because the system is unable to accommodate their particular learning styles. Homeschooling can be a life-saving choice, in this respect. But it still feels as if we're venturing into unknown territory, like being pushed head-first out of an airplane without a parachute. First, don't be so hard on yourself. There's no way for you to duplicate what public school has to offer. Moreover, would you want to, anyway? Second, give yourself permission to take a break. If you and your child are having a hard day, take a hike. Literally. According to Ned Hallowell, author of *Driven to Distraction*, exercise is one of three best non-pharmacological treatments for ADD.

Be a Super Sleuth

Become familiar with your child's learning style and diagnosis. Parents can feel frustrated and disappointed, especially if they haven't found the answer to how best help their child. If you're having difficulty, seek help. Ask others for suggestions or get a professional evaluation from someone who understands overlapping symptoms. This can take time, but is worth the effort. Ask yourself, What is my child telling me when he's exhibiting angry or frustrating behavior, or when he refuses to do his work? What is he/she actually saying while loudly proclaiming, "I hate math!" Let's look at some possibilities: "I don't like the way it is taught." "This is too advanced for me." "I'm bored. This is too easy for me." By standing back from the behavior and working from a problem-solving mode, you can help your family successfully homeschool.

Follow Your Own Way

In my opinion, the factory, assembly-line approach common in schools limits opportunities to experience real life. Children can't easily move ahead or beyond the confines of same-age classes and school walls unless school officials (note: not necessarily you) find a compelling reason to do so. Homeschooling hasn't limited

our children in any way. They have taken high school courses while in middle school (age 12), college classes while in high school (age 14), high school distance learning courses (age 12), and have participated in community events (all ages). Cj is still involved with the DO-IT program at the University of Washington even though he's graduated from homeschooling. DO-IT is a program for high school juniors and seniors with disabilities who have an interest in math, science, and Internet technology and homeschoolers are welcome to apply. The point is, everything is learning and you'll never know where you'll meet a friend or professional who'll light a fire in your child, who'll respect them for who they are, and encourage their success. We know people like these, and are forever grateful to each and every one of them.

I haven't specifically mentioned curriculum because we don't use curriculum, per se. Our learning experiences utilize multiple resources. We read books and magazines, watch educational videos and the Discovery and History Channels, attend community classes and events, go on field trips, hike, camp, do science experiments, use the Internet, and have a few textbooks on the bookshelf. We've also used workbooks and programs specifically for children with learning disabilities, such as dyslexia. If you need a step-by-step curriculum, by all means, use one. If it doesn't fit with your homeschooling style, it's OK to move to something else. Children with special needs beg for something different. Reach out. You needn't be a slave to the status quo. From experience and research, you'll find your comfort zone.

Let Them Dream

So your child wants to be a rocket scientist? Encourage them! One of the saddest situations I'm aware of is from a message on the Internet from a mother whose daughter has disabilities. She wanted to discourage her daughter from dreaming about the career of her choice. According to the mother, the daughter didn't have the skills to pursue her goal and would never have the skills. Period. The mother wanted her daughter to face reality, to face her DIS-abilities instead of her dis-ABLE-ibilities. Doesn't the process of getting from idea to career help children decide whether to pursue a dream or not? And don't children, and adults for that matter, often change their minds about what they want to be when they grow up? Of course they do. In my previous life, I was an academic advisor at the University of Utah, and saw students who changed their majors many times before they settled on something permanent. This mother missed an opportunity to grow closer to her daughter. More importantly, what message was she giving her? That she's defective...We use the labels when we need to, but we don't have the right to destroy anyone's dreams because of it. This isn't our call to make.

Learn Family Advocacy

The right to homeschool didn't come easy. Many people were involved in the process, but you will still encounter misunderstanding and prejudice against homeschooling. Know your rights. Additionally, if your child or family is getting services from a public school, know your special education rights. I strongly encourage you to visit <http://www.wrightslaw.com> and subscribe to their newsletter "The Special Ed Advocate." This is the Web site of Peter W. D. Wright, a special education attorney, and his wife, Pamela Darr Wright, a therapist. Here, you'll find information on tactics and strategies and how to effectively work with your school while advocating for your child. Don't leave home without visiting their site.

What's In It for Me?

The beauty of homeschooling is that it works both ways. My husband and I learned more from homeschooling our children than from any parenting or education experts. We're comfortable being responsible for educating our children and being the experts on our family. We're also comfortable with our homeschooling lifestyle. Yes, "lifestyle." Homeschooling has become as natural to us as breathing. And we wouldn't have it any other way. Thucydides said the secret of happiness is freedom, and the secret of freedom is courage. Parents who homeschool children with special needs are courageous, indeed. We are fortunate to have homeschooling as an educational choice and to have our children surrounded by loving parents, adult mentors, and homeschooling families of all ages (including babies and grandparents) instead of thirty same-age peers. More importantly, homeschooling allows children to be children. All children. Our children. All special. Enjoy them.

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Thom Hartmann, Janie Bowman, Susan Burgess, Think Fast! The ADD Experience. (Grass Valley: Underwood Books, 1966), p. 88 (c) 2000, 2002 Janie Bowman

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