

How Do I Start?

~ Homeschooling a Child with Special Needs in Ontario ~

By Linda Hoffman

There isn't one perfect way to start homeschooling. For our family, we just started. Day by day, month by month, year by year. There is such a variety of special needs and such varying degrees of abilities that no one can set forth a boxed method for you. However, below are some thoughts put forth by various families who have taken the plunge to homeschool their child with special needs.

1 Yes, this is legal! You can begin homeschooling your child at any age or grade level, at any time throughout the year.

- **If you have never had your child in a public school system** you do not *have* to inform anyone you are choosing to home educate your child with special needs. However, there is a reason you may *want* to. If you wish to utilize the "Community Care Access Centre" (CCAC) therapists or support workers in your home, you need to follow the same procedure as someone who withdrew their child from the school system. This can be done at any time throughout your homeschooling journey, so don't feel pressured to make that decision immediately if you do not know if you will need CCAC.
- **If you are withdrawing your child from the public school system (or are in need of having CCAC come into your home),** you are required to fill out a simple "letter of intent to homeschool." This letter simply states you have decided to educate your child at home and you will be withdrawing your child from school. It includes your child's full name, gender, and birthdate, as well as the date and your signature stating you will be home educating this child. This letter goes to the **school board** in the district your child should be attending. A copy of this letter should go to the principal of the school your child is now attending (or would have attended) as a courtesy. And, keep a copy for yourself. You will need to send a new letter each school year.

That's it. You do not need to give them any information about curriculum you will be using or any other information they request.

The school board is required to send you back a "letter of acknowledgment." You will need this letter of acknowledgment to gain access to CCAC in your home (and other government services), until your child reaches 18 years of age.

- Sample Letter of Intent – the letter of intent is not a formal document. You can write up your own if you like. Here is a sample that you can use in Ontario. <http://ontariohomeschool.org/letter-of-intent.pdf>
- For further information on your legal rights & responsibilities:
 - Ontario Federation of Teaching Parents (OFTP):
<http://ontariohomeschool.org/letter-of-intent/>
 - Homeschool Legal Defence Association (HSLDA):
<https://www.hslda.ca/>
- Note that in Ontario, throughout your homeschooling, you are not required to report or test or inform anyone of your child's progress.

2 Know that you are the expert of your child. You have spent years with your child, teaching them, loving them, and learning who they are. You know more than you think about them - how they learn, what they are thinking, how they react when they are confused, what they like and dislike, body language, what they find funny, and what is realistic for them to do and learn. And as you spend even more time with them by homeschooling, you will deepen your insights. Trust that God has put you in this role as parent, and be confident that no one knows your child better than you do.

3 Focus on character. Strengthening the relationship between you and your child is important for them to learn from you. If there are issues, address them. Learning won't happen if there is strife, disrespect, etc. Learning *will* happen if there is trust and confidence between you and your child.

4 If your child has been in the institutional school system, allow time to decompress and de-school. A guideline to decompress/de-school is one month for every year they have been in the system.

Really.

Even if it was not a stressful experience, you both need time to get out of the institutional classroom mindset.

I know you will be tempted to bypass this step! Please don't. It really is worth it and has amazing benefits. Studies show you cannot learn well if you are stressed.

What do I do during this decompression/de-schooling time?

- Relax with your child.
- Give hugs, squeeze their shoulder... whatever physical contact they need and have not been able to get in the school system.
- Allow your child to sleep as they require it.
- Get outside together.
- Read aloud to your child or listen to audio books together (a lot).
- Observe how they like to learn and what they like to do. (Do they like to climb a tree or draw a tree; do they tell stories while they build with blocks or Legos or train sets, or is the fun in the building itself?)
- Observe their personality. Do they need quiet time in the day? What is the most alert time of day for them? Do they need snacks throughout the day? Do they need more sleep? Do they need physical contact? Do they need more activity...?
- Involve them in things with you that are part of the daily routine – chores, cooking, grocery shopping, gardening, shoveling snow...
- Play board games together.
- Create – find out what they like to do in the way of a hobby.
- Go on field trips together without an agenda. Art galleries, museums, nature trails, theatre, a construction site... use your imagination!
- Laugh

What not to do during this decompression/de-schooling time:

- Don't do "School" –e.g. workbooks, tests, formal subjects

- Don't just let them play video games or watch TV all day every day...

Goals and results of this phase:

- Enjoy one another.
- Learn about one another on a deeper level.
- Open your child's eyes to the fact that they can love learning. They (and you), may be surprised that learning has happened although they haven't opened one text book, or done one worksheet!
- Find what your child is good at.

5 Educate yourself. Studies show you are likely already doing this! Education however, is a life long journey, so don't feel you need to have all the theoretical and technical know-how before you start homeschooling. Knowing your child is the most important criteria. Discover more about your child's special needs as you have the energy and time. Read an article or talk to someone else who has gone before you. Search the internet for resources and ideas. As a start, feel free to access the Rideau Valley Home Education Association (RVHEA) Special Needs section and send the Special Needs Representative an email through their website just to chat, receive encouragement and/or ask questions. <https://www.rvhea.org/about-us/special-needs>

6 Focus on one realistic goal at a time. Depending on the severity and extensiveness of your child's special needs, the quantity of areas to work on and goals to reach can be absolutely overwhelming. Because we as parents know our children better than anyone, we are in the best position to determine realistic goals and an order for these goals to be accomplished. And yet, as well as we know our children, God knows them even better. Seek His wisdom and trust the prompting.

For us, we started with working on getting our daughter to eat so her g-tube could be removed. For others it has been working on the ability to take turns, or figuring out triggers for their child with autism "running." And for many, it has

been – learn to read. Homeschooling allows for you to determine the what, when and how of goal setting.

While that one goal is the focus, it doesn't mean nothing else is done. It just means the rest of the day is less intense and we can all relax more in the other areas – for now.

7 Find a support team. Just because you are homeschooling, does not mean you are opting for isolation and a one-man endeavour! Call on various people that can come alongside and truly help – physiotherapists, occupational therapists, speech therapists, another mom, a respite worker, facilitators of various programs, a homeschool teen that can help with housework, extended family... Just make sure they respect your philosophy of education so you aren't always having to explain yourself!

8 Once you're ready to implement academics, if they are a possibility for your child, start by having only two core academic areas in your day - language arts (reading, writing, and comprehension) and math. Do not overwhelm yourself or your child by trying to start teaching every subject. Do not try to mimic the institutional school system at home.

If there is a particular subject or area they really enjoy, then allow them plenty of time for that activity and fostering their love of learning.

Establish what your child knows and does not know in these two core areas.

This is not necessarily a grade level, but discovering any gaps. Where are they weak? What are their strengths? What are they not understanding? What do you feel is a realistic expectation for your specific child?

What do I do to establish what level they are at?

- Ask for their own opinion of their gaps and strengths if possible
- Scope and Sequences are available online for each grade. One option is to go through them in order to figure out what you need to assess and what areas may need to be filled in.

- Assessment “tests” and worksheets are available for free online e.g. Math U See and other homeschool vendors often have placement tests if you’re considering using their curriculum.
- Another option is to use Achievement Tests to help find a bench mark before homeschooling. The most common are: the Canadian Achievement Tests (CAT) and the Canadian Tests of Basic Skills (CTBS).
- Skills Check Lists are also available as an option e.g. Weaver Skills Evaluation <https://www.aop.com/curriculum/shop-weaver/skills-evaluation> (available through Alpha and Omega Publishing or Amazon).

What don't I do?

- Don’t make this a big deal. Just plop down a page of some questions and let your child know it is not a test. It is just to help both of you figure out where you can focus some attention and what can be skipped. This can be a mutual goal – after all, it’s pretty motivating to realize what they’ve mastered they don’t need to re-do.
- Don’t assume they are in the “grade” the system put them in. Remember the school system can’t fail our students, nor can they put our kids in multiple grades at one time even if our kids are at various levels in different subjects. The institutional school system is constrained by time and resources, pushing our kids along an assembly line of boxed learning. You have the freedom to direct your child’s educational path. You may come across gaps, but you may also come across areas they have mastered. Don’t stress about gaps – just fill them as needed. Don’t overlook strengths – this is where confidence is built and most likely how God has wired your child

9 If you want to use a curriculum, research a few to find what you think can work for your child, or what you can adapt to work for your child. There is no perfect curriculum. No curriculum has been written with your child in mind. You have freedom to change it, adapt it, add and subtract from it.... In other words – use it as a tool to help you and your child. It is not a master. The goal is education, not to merely get to the end of the text book.

How do I find curriculum?

- Attend a Homeschooling Conference. These are amazing. They have a vendor hall packed with people who know and understand curriculum, along with many curricula for parents to browse. These conferences also offer many sessions and workshops lead by veteran homeschoolers to help in the homeschool endeavour. (In Ottawa it is the annual RVHEA Conference and OCHEC offers the Ontario Provincial Conference held each year near Hamilton).
- Find a local support group. In Ottawa RVHEA has a monthly meeting and its own homeschool library which offers a sampling of curriculum to take home and try before you buy.
- Get connected and ask other parents what they use and why. Keep in mind that just because a curriculum works for one family doesn't mean it will work well for another.
- Online searching.
- Book: 102 Top Picks for Homeschool Curriculum: Choosing the Right Curriculum and Approach for Each Child's Learning Style by Cathy Duffy (2015) There is a section on special needs and struggling learners.
- Use your local library to find books to read to your child, books for your child to read to you, and also many homeschool "how-to" books
- A good source to discuss curriculum options for children with special needs is Louise House from "The Learning House." Louise homeschooled her own children with learning needs, presents seminars for parents homeschooling their children with special needs and has great insight into curriculum as she owns the curriculum distribution company. Call and request a time to speak to her directly at 866-875-5550 and visit her website at: <https://www.learninghouse.ca/>
- Check out the RVHEA website Special Needs Section. There are some curriculum suggestions that other families have found useful

Note that in Ontario, you do not need to use a store-bought or packaged curriculum at all. You have the freedom to custom design the learning experience specifically for your child and educate them according to your ideals and your child's bent. 😊

10. Rules of thumb:

- ADHD? For all ages, spend twice as much time outside in activities than on academics per day (eg. Before doing one hour of academics, do two hours outside in play/sports/activity).
- If you can only do one thing, use the time to read out loud. Read out loud often!
- Grade 1- no more than one hour of academics per day.
- Grade 2 – no more than two hours of academics per day.
- In the early elementary years, academics are best done in small chunks (10 – 20 minute blocks max.)
- Little boys reset their focusing ability with movement, so chunks of 5-7 minutes of seatwork followed by movement will do wonders.

11 **Trial and error does not equal failure.** This is one of the most important concepts to remember as you carry on in this journey. Each time you try something new – a way to teach, a curriculum, an activity, a new routine, an educational philosophy, a goal to focus on... whether it works or not, you have learned something about your child. Take that new insight and carry on.

There are no hard and fast rules to start homeschooling. The above points are merely suggestions for your family to consider. Have freedom to manipulate these ideas, toss out those that do not help, add your own ways that suit your needs, and just - start!