

A Special Journey

We have a homeschooling friend whose son received the diagnosis of an Aspergers type condition when he was nine years old. Recently another homeschooling friend's son and daughter have both been diagnosed with dyslexia at age twelve and sixteen. No matter what age or what the diagnosis, being thrust into the realm of special needs is a shock.

Our story began in 1992 when our daughter Monica was 14 months old. Although she had always been healthy, Monica suddenly died in my arms. Thirty minutes later, she was revived which in itself is a miracle. She has, however, been left with brain damage that presents physically (she is in a power wheelchair and has limited fine motor ability); cognitively (she has difficulty processing information); emotionally (some social immaturity), and she has challenges in her verbal communication.

Monica is almost sixteen years old now, and we continue what we began the day she was born - homeschooling. We have learned a lot along the way and have much more to learn. My hope is that if you are contemplating homeschooling your special needs child our story will help you determine in your heart that you have the ability and that your child will benefit from homeschooling. If you are already in the midst of this walk, I pray you will be encouraged to keep on.

“Necessity is the mother of all invention” became my motto, as everything we did needed modification to some degree. I would see a craft or a worksheet I wanted Monica to attempt, and so we made a way. Since she had limited control of a pencil and could not form numbers or letters, I created my own sheets where she could either “circle” or “draw” lines to the right answer. We also had stamp pads that had numbers on them. She would be able to choose the number and hand-over-hand we would ink the number she wanted. I became her scribe for everything so she could get her ideas down on paper. I did not want things locked up inside her just because she physically could not get them onto paper herself. We did many crafts with heavy emphasis on the ‘we’ part. Stickers were a blessing as she could at least point to what she wanted. Eventually I learned the technique necessary to hand her a sticker so she could put it on herself. I had to overcome my perfectionist bent and let the stickers go on upside down and sometimes even wrinkled!

These challenges were time consuming and required me to spend some time each evening planning and preparing ideas; but, I believe with all my heart that it was this intense one on one time spent with Monica day after day, year after year, that has allowed her to progress to where she is today. This time and love could not have been given to her in a school system.

It was not until Monica was about seven years old that we started to detect more to her disability than just physical limitations. Around this age, we began to see that she struggled greatly with math concepts. She just could not get it. She could not memorize anything to do with numbers, and yet she could memorize people's names and what they

were wearing two years previously when she met them at such-and-such a store Friday afternoon!

Other learning was progressing. She had learned to read quite easily using A Beka, which was one of the mainstay curriculums back a decade ago. However, by age nine she still had not progressed in math. She could count but not add or subtract even the simplest numbers. We had some testing done by her occupational therapist. I was shocked to hear the results.

“Monica should not be able to read,” she said. “And she has severe ADD.”

“But she *does* know how to read,” I replied.

“She wouldn’t if she hadn’t been homeschooled,” she answered.

We did have further testing done by an educational psychologist who came forth with numbers that overwhelmed us. Monica was below the first percentile in some areas, and even her best area was below the fiftieth percentile. I believe that the following years from age nine to about thirteen were my hardest. I did not grasp that homeschooling and prayer just would not fix everything. I tried to keep up with the number of subjects taught, the level at which they were taught and the timeline in which they should be accomplished. I consistently failed in all areas. Homeschooling had lost the fun of the early years when we did crafts and park outings. Physically, things were getting harder. She was getting heavier and taller. I could not keep up with all the therapy required either! Now she was falling farther and farther behind all her peers. In addition, I kept reading testimonies that with home schooling we should be able to be done by noon and have a fun afternoon, but we plugged on until 5:00 p.m. I kept hearing reports of how far ahead academically people were in homeschooling, and yet we were not. I was isolated and felt very alone. I knew no one back even five years ago who homeschooled a handicapped child. I had succumbed to one of the worst homeschooling fatalities.

Comparing!

Somehow, my convictions to home school, and the mere thought of sending her off to someone else, kept me going. There were a few things that helped turn me around and out of this wrong mindset of home schooling my special needs child. First, I became a member of NATHHAN, which is an American group of homeschoolers who all home school their special needs children. Some families have more than one special needs child, and many are more severe than Monica! Next, we attended a homeschool conference in Syracuse, NY where Steve Demme, the author/creator of Math U See spoke. He did not speak about curriculum. Instead, he spoke about the emotional aspect of homeschooling his special needs son who has Down Syndrome. His talk began awareness and healing in me. Slowly - and I do mean slowly - I began to accept that Monica was indeed special needs. My curriculum, my goals, my homeschool did not need nor should it look remotely like anyone else’s! I realized I had not failed her because she was not on par with the “normal” child.

The final breakthrough came when we attended a transition clinic with Monica at her treatment centre. Here we were taught about things we should start to be thinking about in the next five years before Monica would become an adult. I was so encouraged to find out that we had already done it all. She was already doing what they did not expect her to do until she was eighteen! It suddenly dawned on me... I had been comparing Monica not only to other kids her age level, but also to other *home schooling* kids her age level! Ouch! I needed to take a more realistic outlook and see what should be done for *Monica*. I found out that there were other kids out there in the 'the system' who only took one subject. I found that they would take years to complete one year of work. I found that curriculum was modified substantially. All this sounds obvious but as a lone person inventing the wheel, it was anything but obvious to me! Finally, my expectations came in line with what they should be for my child.

When Monica began high school I contacted HSDLA and started asking questions. And guess what I found out? There have now been studies showing that for the special needs child, homeschooling is beneficial, *especially* in high school!

Today, Monica and I have a much more relaxed school day. Part of Monica's curriculum is independence training. She is learning cognitive communication (how to start; continue, and end conversations); she is learning safety issues and how to handle money. She has her own debit card and has learned how to budget and use it appropriately. She also takes an online writing program, which has been helpful for *me* to get the feedback and encouragement from an outside coach who believes in home schooling. We do one or two sessions a week of science of my own design, all related to things she would be experiencing in her physiotherapy and that would be helpful for her to understand, such as the muscular, skeletal and nervous systems. We are studying Canadian history and implementing a KONOS-like style of learning. Monica enjoys having me read aloud to her; she plays with her three-year-old sister, and she volunteers at a retirement home doing friendly visits. She is involved in youth group at our church, and we take time each morning for worship and Bible reading. Best of all she "really likes school this year!"

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Linda Hoffman, and her husband Dave, homeschool their two daughters in Carp, Ontario near Ottawa. Linda also has special needs – she is visually impaired with only about three percent of her vision left. She desires to encourage parents to homeschool all their special children.