

A homeschooling journey with my special needs child

By Wendy Hilton

Having a special needs child is challenging. Homeschooling a special needs child is even more challenging. It is also, however, one of the most rewarding things I've ever done!

Many moms understandably think that they can't or shouldn't homeschool their special needs children because they aren't "experts." I used to feel that way too. I was wrong. I am now firmly convinced that our special needs children belong at home just like our "typical" children. Let me tell you why.

My daughter Hannah was diagnosed with autism at age 2½. At the time of her diagnosis she was totally nonverbal, could not (or *would not*) feed herself, was not potty trained (and was nowhere near being ready), and had no appropriate means of communication. Hannah was much more like an infant than a toddler, though she was able to walk.

I chose to begin teaching her simple things such as how to imitate actions, follow simple one-step instructions, play with developmentally appropriate toys, take turns, appropriately look at books (without putting them in her mouth—a serious sensory issue of hers), indicate her wants and needs without crying or throwing a fit, and sit still for increasingly long periods of time. Most of these were things neuro-typical children learn on their own but that many autistic children don't.

It was definitely a slow and steady process, but Hannah slowly began to learn these skills and others. It was also hard work, but with God's strength and direction, we kept going. Hannah usually enjoyed the one-on-one attention she got, and she loved being rewarded for correct responses and for working hard at whatever she was learning.

When Hannah was about 5, I decided that she had learned enough so that she could probably attend school part-time and continue with her home program for a few hours each day. She began going to a local public school that provided a class just for autistic children. At first, the program seemed to be working very well. Hannah seemed to enjoy going to school, she worked hard and was transferring what she'd learned at home to the school environment, and we were pleased with how things were going for her.

For a couple of years, we were happy. Then the teacher who taught the class for autistic children moved away. There was no other teacher trained to take her place, so Hannah was put in a regular classroom with her own assistant. The assistant tried her hardest to keep Hannah busy and help her learn and do well in the mainstreamed classroom. After several months, though, I knew it just wasn't working out.

Hannah was coming home in the afternoons upset and sad. She was frustrated and had behavior issues that she had never had before. She was simply no longer happy at school. Because Hannah was nonverbal, her new teacher didn't believe in her ability to read or even to understand what was being spoken to her. For that reason, she was having the assistant do very basic work with Hannah (such as identifying colors, numbers, and letters), and Hannah was simply bored! After doing everything I knew to do (talking to the principal and the teacher, having meetings with them, sending notes and information with Hannah to school, offering to let the teacher come to my house to observe a "school" session, and even sending work with her to do at school), I finally decided to bring Hannah home for good. She would no longer attend school part-time and do her work at home part-time. From then on, Hannah would homeschool.

Looking back, I see what I didn't see clearly at the time. The fact was that I was the "expert" on my own child and knew best how to educate her at that point in her life. I was providing direction and even much of the material to be taught because I knew my child and the teacher did not. In addition, it would probably have been unreasonable for me to expect the teacher to know her as I did. One teacher simply cannot be an "expert" on an entire room full of children.

It didn't take long to realize that Hannah loved being at home full-time with her brother and me! She was happy again! She was doing her work nicely. She was making progress both with motor skills and social skills. She was using the academic information she possessed to make more academic progress. She was becoming herself again! It was wonderful to see.

Not long after that, when her brother began officially homeschooling for kindergarten, a new baby was added to the family. It was definitely difficult homeschooling two children and caring for a newborn, but we survived that challenge just like we had survived other challenges until that time.

Fast-forward a few years. Hannah is now 17, her brother is 15, and her younger sister is 10. Hannah and her brother are both homeschooling at tenth-grade level this year, and my younger daughter is in the fifth grade. Even though it is necessary to test Hannah differently and to use different teaching techniques with her, she is capable of doing some tenth-grade work. (Since her brother is in tenth grade, I use some of his curricula with Hannah as well.) In the subjects that are more difficult for her, I use materials that are at a lower grade level.

Since all three of my children are homeschooled, we attend local homeschool-group outings such as field trips, holiday parties, and classes together. Our family attends church together, goes on vacation together, visits friends and neighbors and relatives together, and in general has a wonderful time learning and growing together!

Is this the way I thought my children would be educated? No. Would I choose to homeschool again if I had it to do over? Definitely! Homeschooling is not for every family—whether you have "typical" kids or "special" kids. It certainly works well for some of us, though. I encourage you to consider whether the homeschooling option might be right for you and your children. Having a special needs child should not keep you from pursuing the homeschool option. It might just be the answer you've been looking for!

Wendy lives in the South with her wonderful hubby and three great kiddos! She is a Christian, homeschooling, work-from-home mom. She and Scott were high school sweethearts and have been married for more than twenty years. Her oldest child, Hannah, has autism, and Wendy began homeschooling Hannah at age 2. Wendy's son, a typical boy, would rather do anything than school! Her youngest child is a little social butterfly and people lover. Wendy loves reading and quilting and will hopefully return to scrapbooking some time soon. You can find Wendy on her personal blog at wendyhomeschoolingblessings.blogspot.com or at www.HipHomeschoolMoms.com, where she is co-owner and social media director.

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