

## Homeschooling: A Flexible Approach Can Help Your Child Learn

Our family first started homeschooling in 1986 when our oldest child, Lydia, was ready to enter first grade. We had never seriously considered public school because we felt responsible to provide a religious education for our children. The private school option didn't appeal to us either because the bus ride was one hour each way. At the time, the Hudzinski family consisted of Dad, Mom, Lydia (6), Lisa (5), Kristina (4), and Andrew (2). Lydia began first grade using a curriculum from Christian Liberty Academy (CLA) and Lisa began Kindergarten using CLA materials as well. The first two years, we did "school at home" with traditional texts, desks, and a morning pledge to the American flag. Carefully instructed, the oldest learned to read well by Christmas, 1986. Her younger sister, Lisa, learned a year later at the age of six, while our youngest daughter, Kristina didn't wait to be taught. By five years old, she was reading on her own. Our son, Andrew, was a two-year-old when we began homeschooling and he enjoyed playing in the schoolroom, drawing on the marker board (and the wall!), and listening to the books read aloud. He demonstrated remarkable listening comprehension, despite bouncing off the walls during read aloud time.

I began instructing Andrew in reading in 1990. By 1992, he was well able to color within the lines, but seemed unable to make the leap to fluent reading. Since the three older girls seemed to move effortlessly into fluent reading once the ability to color in the lines was demonstrated, the first inkling that all was not well emerged.

In Pennsylvania, our state of residence, compulsory attendance begins at age eight, and homeschoolers must test in third, fifth, and eighth grades. Realizing that reading was slow in coming, we delayed Andrew's third grade test until just after his 11th birthday. Realizing then that he was still unable to successfully negotiate a third grade test, we arranged for a local licensed clinical psychologist to administer the Woodcock Johnson test. This is a standardized test that meets the criteria in the Pennsylvania homeschool law, but it is untimed and individually administered. It was a decision that has paid many benefits for us. Although unable to fit Andrew into any specific diagnosis, the psychologist was able to provide specific instructions for developing fluent reading from the solid phonics instruction that Andrew had received.

The primary benefits were to me. The psychologist assured me that Andrew's inability to read - and we hadn't even attempted writing - was due to a physical, probably neurological, problem, and not my inexperience or ineptness as a teacher. In fact, he asserted that my approach to education, which had dramatically changed from "school at home" to a combination of the Charlotte Mason Approach and unit studies, had been the ideal approach for Andrew. The psychologist emphasized that Andrew had benefited even though I didn't have a clue that I was "doing the right thing". Andrew was at or above his age appropriate grade level in every single subject except reading and stylus skills. What a relief!

Andrew, of course, also benefited. The psychologist evaluated what we'd done up to that point and made specific recommendations for reading instruction. Because Andrew had excellent word attack skills (the ability to figure out a word he had never seen before), he simply needed to make the leap from decoding each word to the sight-reading that an experienced reader actually uses. To accomplish this we used a phonics reader, The Victory Drill Book and spent ten to fifteen minutes a day practicing and "speed reading" one page. We set a goal of fifth grade reading speed and practiced each page until he had achieved that speed. Because part of Andrew's difficulties lay in putting a situation into a context, we did not use the word lists. Instead we focused on the review pages where the drill words were used in sentences. A year later, Andrew was a fluent reader of fiction. He continues to struggle with other kinds of reading, primarily textbooks and nonfiction. His continued difficulty with writing hampers his ability to express himself on paper.

Reflecting over the last ten years of working with Andrew, and later his siblings, Karen, who joined us in 1987, Isaac in 1989, Ariana in 1991, Mary Tonia in 1993, and his profoundly handicapped youngest brother Caleb who was born in 1995, several benefits of homeschooling leap to mind.

The first benefit is the use of other than traditional texts to encourage understanding and mastery. Following the Charlotte Mason approach, we utilized discussion and narration based on real books that I read aloud. Because Andrew could not write, I took dictation.

The second benefit was that I was able to separate academic learning from the mechanical processes of reading and writing. And because I gravitated towards an integrated approach to academics, reading lots of "real books," avoiding text books, and doing projects, such as creating a time line for history, Andrew's ability to learn was effectively enhanced. He has a native ability and much curiosity about the world around

him, but needs everything put into a context. Learning in the home environment encouraged Andrew's strengths. In a classroom, with a traditional textbook, paper and pencil approach where the subjects are isolated and taught separately, Andrew would have floundered and been held back by his physical difficulties with reading and writing. Because of visual perceptual problems that negatively affect his ability to learn in bits and pieces, Andrew has required the use of an integrated approach.

Another benefit of homeschooling for our family is the use of areas of interest to encourage the children to learn. Andrew learned to use written technical material because he wanted chickens and later, because he wanted a car to drive. Student initiated learning helped Andrew to remain focused on his studies, a difficult task for a child with ADHD! We have been able to provide one-on-one instruction that allows me to exercise a great deal of control over the kind and number of distractions. As a result, Andrew could stay on task, without medication!

Often homeschooling is criticized because of a perceived lack of opportunity for the child to socialize. There are many arguments to counter the socialization criticism, the primary one being that the learning disabled/special needs child particularly benefits from the controlled socialization opportunities afforded by homeschooling. Andrew was well aware of his social ineptness. To compound his problem by leaving him to the terrible mercies of a classroom of his peers (the Spanish Inquisition comes to mind), he would hardly have been encouraged to seek friendships with others. Enduring the ridicule of his peers would be more likely to destroy his sense of himself as a valuable person. Homeschooling, on the other hand, permits the parents to expose their child to a limited number of peers in a controlled and supervised setting so that beneficial instruction regarding socially appropriate responses can be offered. The child's academic instruction and performance are not hideously linked to the negative classroom setting, but occur in the supportive home environment. This separation allows for maximum academic and social benefit.

There are some other strategies for working with your special needs child that do not fit neatly into either social or academic categories. First and foremost is prayer. Because we believe that there is a God who cares for us, we rely on the wisdom and guidance that He provides supernaturally. This begins with an honest assessment of our children. We do no one any good if we pretend there is no problem when there clearly is, or in the face of the observations of others, who are more objective. A second arena from which to gain help is supportive and professional help. The psychologist who tested our children has been a great source of encouragement, as well as providing teaching strategy suggestions, curriculum recommendations, and an objective perspective that my husband and I lacked. The final resource that is essential to successful homeschooling of the learning disabled/special needs child, is the parents' self-disciplined establishment of a routine, one that is conducted with flexibility. My children, whether due to their disabilities or other reasons, do not deal well with change, nor with unfettered decision-making. A general routine that allows the family to take advantage of a unique opportunity, or step back for an emergency hospital visit will result in a happier household and security for the learning disabled child to progress academically and emotionally. I have moved far from my homeschooling starting point, tending towards unschooling. While my "normal" learners are able to direct much of their own educations, I have observed that my learning disabled children, when presented with little to no structure, do not make progress in the basics necessary for functioning in our society and ongoing academic success. Presented with a wide-open day and little guidance, panic and a preference for a computer game will prevail.

Andrew, now 17, is given a weekly assignment sheet. He is also responsible for certain daily chores and is occasionally called upon to provide transportation for one or another of his younger siblings. At this point, he is given the freedom to order his day, but does so under my supervision. If I see him engaged in game playing or TV watching during our family's school or chore time, I call him to account. Sometimes he is taking a study break and we agree on an ending point, or he is wasting time and is sent right back to his work. Another tactic we have recently employed is a kind of block schedule. Because Andrew has difficulty making transitions, we have arranged his school schedule so that he works on only one subject plus composition until he completes a high school credit. This takes approximately six weeks. He still participates in an equestrian drill team weekly and competes in an archery league where he shoots two to four times per week.

Andrew has also discovered on his own another benefit to homeschooling. He has learned that sustained vigorous exercise helps him better focus on his studies. For this benefit, he walks seven to ten miles at the beginning of each day. Occasionally, he takes a second walk or a bike ride in the early afternoon.

Mary Tonia has also been tested and is ADHD and suffers from the same visual perceptual impairment as Andrew. She is only eight-years old and is required to follow my schedule. She does have free time and during read-aloud time is permitted to play quietly as long as she attends carefully, similar to the rules we had for Andrew when he was younger. We have found that the physical activity does not interfere with her ability to attend. I believe, instead, that it enhances it.

Unschooling, in a nutshell, is facilitating a child's learning experiences instead of directing those experiences. A major difference I have noted between my normal children and my LD/special needs children is that my normal children are able to successfully act on their desire to learn and pursue areas of interest effectively. Success does not readily come to special needs and learning disabled children. These children are every bit as curious as their normal siblings, but the "unusual wiring" with which they were born prevents them from being successful in their endeavors to learn about and master their world. Intervention, by way of specific instruction in their weak areas, helps them clear those hurdles but, for some reason, which I do not yet understand, the natural desire to know more, to explore more, and to understand more is also impaired and parents must provide that motivation.

Homeschooling uniquely provides parents with the opportunities necessary to address the specific academic and social needs of an LD/special needs child in a supportive, non-threatening and respectful setting while continuing to keep the child on track academically. The single most astonishing aspect of Andrew's first test was the discovery that he was doing so well in areas that depended heavily on reading for success! Andrew was learning, even though he struggled with reading. The second most astonishing discovery was the doctor's opinion that Andrew would not have been so well-educated had he been in a classroom. Andrew's need to have material in context would never have been honored in a classroom. No teacher of 20-30 students would have had or taken the time to discuss with Andrew or take dictation from him.

Another benefit of homeschooling, protected social interactions, also worked to Andrew's advantage. He is quite able to see that he does not "fit" easily. The fallout from these observations was difficult to deal with when the social times were limited and focused. I have been thankful that he did not have six to eight hours a day, five days a week of negative social interactions from which to recover.

The benefit of increased family time along with closer family relationships has benefited all of our children, but Andrew especially, with a secure foundation from which to approach an often-hostile world.

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*Mary Hudzinski, married to Martin Hudzinski for 23 years, is the mother of nine children. Six of these children are girls, and three are boys. One son and one daughter have learning disabilities that seriously impact their ability to function in any traditional academic setting. Her youngest son is profoundly, multiply handicapped. The Hudzinskis began homeschooling when their oldest child, now 22, was ready to enter the first grade. Mary thoroughly enjoys having her children at home and can't imagine her life without this wonderful experience of homeschooling*