<u>The Journal of</u> Home Education

This article first appeared in the Journal of Home Education



Every Child is Special - but some are more special than others

by Abbie Green

There are as many different ways to home educate children as there are children. In the last issue we saw how Henrietta home educates her large family. Her experiences are probably similar to many people, all be it on a larger scale, but there is another section of the home educating community that can be very different; children with special educational needs.

One of the first differences is that often these families are not home educating because of a philosophical view, but because they had no choice. Some children are actually excluded, either officially, or by the school making things so difficult that the parents in the end find it simpler to deregister. Others try to find suitable schools and take their children from school to school hoping that the next one will be better. Some find that the primary schools are helpful but that their children can't cope in the noisy ever changing environment of secondary schools. Some have statements of special educational needs, but some parents can't even get on the road to getting a statement. Some parents find that their children's physical disabilities can not be addressed adequately in schools.

My own experience is that we couldn't find a suitable school. Our son Ram showed signs of being very bright very early. I was actually disappointed with this! I knew that my husband was gifted and struggled in school, and I didn't want that for my son. I wanted him to be normal!

As he approached the age of three it became more clear that he was also going to have special needs. He couldn't hold a pencil or do any of the scribbling that toddlers often enjoy doing. He was also very spirited, and fitted the model in Mary Sheedy Kachinka's book, *Raising Your Spirited Child*. I started looking around for schools. I knew that our local village school had become very academically minded, so I removed his name from the list there, even though I had put his name down at birth. I looked at the Catholic school in the next village which had a good reputation for special needs, but I felt uncomfortable about pretending to be Christian, let alone Catholic. I looked at the local private school but in their prospectus they prided them selves on getting the children to sit down at age 2 ½ and hold their pencils properly! My son couldn't sit down for more a few minutes, let alone hold a pencil!

As I had come from Canada and didn't start formal school until I was 6, I despaired that I would ever find a suitable school for my son. I had heard of home education by then, but didn't consider it a serious option. Then I came across a Steiner based school. I felt we had finally found somewhere that my child would fit. Unfortunately, and understandably, they didn't accept Ram as they felt they couldn't cope with his increasingly difficult behaviour. I remember feeling so disappointed when we were turned down. I felt that we had been backed into a corner and left no option but to home educate.

However, like many others with SEN children who have felt they had no choice but to home educate, I soon realised that it was the best option by far, and I am really glad that we have done it! I would never send my son to school, unless he wanted to go there, no matter how good the school was.

One of the greatest things in home educating a child with SENs is that you can really educate them according to their age, ability and aptitude. I am able to satisfy his intellectual ability, without it being stifled by his lack of reading skills. I can facilitate his learning while he is on the move and adapt to his obsessions as and when they change.

But most importantly, he can be himself without having to meet artificial standards set by someone in the government that doesn't know the first thing about him. After all, as his mother I am the expert on my son!

Because we have had no involvement with the LEA or schools, it hasn't been necessary to seek a formal diagnosis. He is on the Autistic Spectrum, up at the Asperger's end. That is all we need to know. Everything else is dealt with as and when it needs dealing with. For instance we didn't need a label to see that his coordination was not the greatest, so we did some research on the Internet and read the book *The Out-of-Sync Child* by Carol Stock Kranowitz. We also knew that he needed glasses so we went to a behavioural optometrist and got as much information as we could from him and the Internet, then adapted the ideas to fit into our life. For instance I knew what exercises we were 'supposed' to do, but as Ram is very oppositional I knew that setting aside certain times of the day for doing them wouldn't work. So we got a trampoline, and started bouncing. I suggested some silly games we could do together, and within a very short period of time he went from not even being able to bounce rhythmically, to being an excellent bouncer and could even catch a ball whereas before he could only manage to stop it if he happened to be in the way!

When I read Carol Stock Kranowitz's book, she told how they would test the children at age three when they went to nursery, and if they showed signs of Sensory Integration Disorder they would take them out of class for a few afternoons a week and do exercises with them. By not going to school I was able to do these things with him everyday, sometimes seemingly all day, I got really fit and improved my balls skills too!

It also struck me that much of what was recommended was what children used to do before the governments started taking children into school at such young ages; lots of swinging, sliding, climbing trees, playing ball, carrying heavy objects and so on. With swimming we spend 20 minutes travelling for an hour of swimming and we see the schooled children coming in after us who spend an hour travelling, queuing up and waiting, for 20 minutes in the pool.

We have also been able to address some of his other problems, such as his oppositional tendencies and meltdowns. The book *The Explosive Child* by Dr Ross Greene was a life saver for us and stopped me becoming a basket case. We also found from reading the work of Tony Attwood and attending his workshops that we could use Ram's obsessions to help him learn.

Another advantage of being at home is that we have more continuity. Unlike schools where the teacher changes every year, we can run projects over several years. We have an on going weather project for several years now. We take the temperature, pressure and humidity, and make a note of the weather everyday. We actually got the idea from an Enid Blyton book from the 1930s. She edited what would be a very early equivalent of the National Curriculum.

We also use purposive conversation a lot. Because I am with Ram all the time we can discuss what is going on around us. Often I will bring up much later something we have seen during the day or a program that we have watched the night before and discuss it. That way I can tell what he has

taken in and understood and what needs more work. An example of this would be the plank on the log. We made a simple see-saw this way, and several years later when we were discussing fulcrums I was able to remind him of how his see-saw worked, as I knew that we had experimented with it already.

We call ourselves structured autonomous educators. We are autonomous, in that we follow the interests of the child, but like many other special needs children, Ram needs structure to the day. We have a big white board up but it doesn't say 10Aa.m. - English, 11a.m. - maths. It is just the structure of the day, when meals are, when we are going swimming, when there is something to watch on TV and so on. We also follow the structure of the seasons.

In spring we make a spring wreath to put up on the door, check out what is going on in the pond, compare the temperatures from the previous years' weather charts and sow the vegetable seeds. In summer we lay out on the trampoline at dusk watching the stars and the owls and bats fly around. In autumn we can harvest the vegetables and prepare for winter. We have no need to study nature, biology and other sciences from a book. We just need to look around us.

People often wonder how we actually home educate. We get asked if we let him off studying for holidays, if we work nine to three, or if we do SATS.

Every home educator has a different way of doing things, but this is how our days generally go. I get up early and read my email and do a few chores. Then I go up to Ram when he starts to wake up and snuggle into bed with him, reading aloud to him until he is ready to get dressed. We usually read for one to two hours, depending on how exciting the book is. When we were reading the last Harry Potter we were still in bed at lunch time! But when we read the original *Gulliver's Travels* we were up much earlier as we found that book better when sitting down stairs with a dictionary to look up and explain the archaic language. We don't stick to fiction and children's books. We read such things as Stephen Hawking, Roger Highfield and even encyclopaedias! Not an easy feat when you are in bed!

Then we go down for Ram's breakfast. I usually read aloud anything of interest in the paper. Ram is very interested in politics, the environment, and science and space, and there are usually several articles of interest. This often leads to interesting discussions. Recently he tried to understand why the government was closing down cottage hospitals and tried to come up with some alternative ideas.

In the space before lunch what we do will depend on the weather. If it is nice out we might go out and play a ball game. If it is raining we may stay indoors and I will read to him while he invents new Lego Bionicles, his current obsession. If it is nice out and we are reading an exciting book, I might read aloud outside while he pond dips or hangs from the climbing frame.

After lunch we go swimming once a week, and once a month we go to an informal home education group. On Fridays we have the gardener in to cut the grass and Ram often has a chat with him about things – like different things you can burn with a magnifying glass. As a mother I have learned that sometimes it is best not to ask and let the boys be boys! On other days it might be the computer, or watching videos, or visiting the ducks that we helped to hand rear that now live on the village pond, stopping in on the farm next door to see how the animals are getting on.

We then watch after school television! We like *Blue Peter* and the wildlife programs as well as *Tracy Beaker* and some of the cartoons. But he is selective, and we watch together so that we can discuss anything that comes up.

We always have supper at 6.30 so that we can listen to Radio 4's comedy slot. Being on the Autistic Spectrum he is very strict about this! But we have learned a lot, and it has also shown us

how much we have already learned. I found it amazing how many quotes he already knows when listening to *Quote Unquote*. Sometimes he even gets the ones that the contestants don't get. We also enjoy the different look at the news we get with the *News Quiz*. These are not programs that a nine year old might generally listen to, and I would never let him listen to them alone as I feel that he wouldn't get as much out of them without being able to discuss them with me.

If the weather is good in the summer we often eat outside in the evening and stay out there until it is dark. Ponds come alive after dark, as does the garden generally. In the winter we are more likely to sit down to a documentary or two. I know my son enjoys visual learning as do I. I remember at school being so excited when the teacher brought in the old 16 millimetre projector. I felt that I was only really learning when I could see things with my own eyes. I even liked the documentaries that my other friends thought boring. My son is the same. Happiness for him is to sit and watch three hours of *Horizon*, back to back!

We then turn in for bed, but learning doesn't stop there. From a very early age that the time he was most calm and able to take in new information was in the evening. So when we go to bed we do more formal reading. Ram at age nine is just starting to be able to read sentences aloud confidently, although he has been able to read and understand individual words from an early age. We struggled to find suitable material as so much is written with a very young child in mind in this country, which isn't suitable for a nine year old. Like Henrietta we started with the Peter and Jane Keywords series, but then I found a reader from 1890 on ebay. He took to it immediately! He liked the spellings to practice at the end of each lesson, and he liked the variety of lessons too. Some are straight forward stories, some are picture stories, and some are poems. He takes great pride in reciting the poems for others.

We do no written work. He is just not ready for it. For example, if I did spelling dictation and expected him to write them down, he would be working on two things at once; spelling and writing. He isn't ready to do two things at once so he does his spellings orally.

Then I finish the day with reading aloud again from whichever book we are reading. We find that many of the modern books are poorly written and very short, so we often read books from the 19th and early 20th century. This has the added advantage of studying history at the same time.

Then it is lights out, but the day is not over yet. I find that he can't always express himself during the day. I always say that for a boy with a communication disorder, he doesn't half talk! But much of that is just telling me about his Bionicles. Once the lights are out we can discuss how he felt about the day. I often ask him what was the best bit of the day and what was the worst. This allows him to be able to practice his emotional intelligence, which can be as important for a child on the spectrum as learning to read, or to brush their teeth.

There are many other things that can happen in our days that contribute to our education; cooking, travelling, visits with friends, nature watching, shopping, playing with science kits. The list goes on and is never ending.

As we have always home educated there has never been a requirement to register with the LEA. I do worry however that with the current climate of finding all children and registering them, that I will come to the attention of our LEA. I know from discussions with others that there is often undue pressure put on parents of home educated children who have special needs. But this seems to come from misunderstandings and unhelpful assumptions.

There is no reason why a parent cannot successfully educate a child at home whether they have special needs or not. The parent is the expert when it comes to their child, and no LEA officer, no matter how well meaning, will know a child as well as their parents.

But due to the nature of many of these children, the attitude of LEAs who insist on seeing a child, or seeing the child's work, can be in conflict with the family.

My son has a fear of meeting new people. Someone has to be around him constantly for a year before he would feel comfortable with them. So no official entering our house would ever be able to talk to or interact with my child.

As we have very little written work in our house and no timetables are used, the method of assessing my child by work wouldn't work either.

So how do I know my child is receiving an education suitable to his age, aptitude and ability? I know my child! I and others around me have watched him progress, and grow into a lovely young boy! No report, educational philosophy, timetable or home visit will ever be able to show that.

Suggested Reading:

Tony Attwood, Asperger's Syndrome, A Guide for Parents and Professionals
Terri Dowty and Kitt Cowlishaw, Home Educating Our Autistic Spectrum Children
Paths are Made by Walking

Ross Greene, Explosive Child: A New Approach for Understanding and Parenting Easily Frustrated, "Chronically Inflexible" Children

Carol Stock Kranowitz, *The Out-Of-Sync Child: Recognizing and Coping With Sensory Integration Dysfunction* Kurcinka, Mary Sheedy, *Raising Your Spirited Child: A Guide for Parents Whose Child Is More Intense, Sensitive, Perceptive, Persistent, and Energetic*

Useful websites:

www.jkp.com www.tonyattwood.com.au www.out-of-sync-child.com