

## Special Needs & Child-Led Learning

Tags: [learning disabilities](#) [special needs](#)

Deuteronomy 6:6-9 “And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart: And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up. And thou shalt bind them for a sign upon thine hand, and they shall be as frontlets between thine eyes. And thou shalt write them upon the posts of thy house, and on thy gates.”

Child-led learning is a philosophy that many are turning to for the education of their children. Some call it 'un-schooling', others use the 'Charlotte Mason' approach, and others are 'relaxed' or 'child-centered.' Of course, the Bible quote above is speaking of teaching Biblical Truths to our children, but we can apply the same philosophy to teaching our children anything! Allow the children to learn as they go about their day, just as they learn their basic beliefs. As a parent of children with and without learning problems, I have found that child-led learning has provided the best for all of my youth and given them opportunity for success in their individual way.

What about children with learning concerns or disabilities? How can we be sure that they will succeed in a child centered homeschool?”

I am asked this question often. Most parents want their children to succeed, especially children with difficulties in learning. You know the kids, the ones with the labels; ADHD, Learning Disabled, Developmental Delays, et. al. The problem is the definition of success. What is success to you? Think about it a moment, if you are bright quick learner, then success means something different to you than it does to someone who has struggled all through their entire education. What is success for your child? If you are a parent of a child with learning concerns, success for your child may be contributing to society as a useful adult, independent living, finding a trade that will support them. I would like to suggest the following definition of success: Success is doing what you can do and doing it well. With this definition in mind, let's look into the world of child-led education.

I once had a parent tell me about her 8-year-old son who had severe learning disabilities. She just couldn't bear to keep him in the public school a day longer, due to his crying fits and serious anxiety that the daily routine caused. He hated school. His biggest concern was reading, which unfortunately is the only way to learn in the public school setting. I remember suggesting homeschooling and the parent showed a definite interest.

Two months later, she called and asked what she should do now that he was out of the school? “How can I make him read?” she wanted to know. The conversation went something like this:

“Don't.” I said. At this, she was shocked! She couldn't understand why I would tell her not to teach her child. But I continued, “What is he interested in?”

“Taking stuff apart and trying to fix things like our lawn mower that doesn't work.”

“Do you know of a small engine repair person or someone who works on cars a lot?”

“Well, yes, we have a friend that works on cars and has a shop near us.”

“Ask him if he would mind if your son comes over a couple times a week for an hour or so to 'help' him. Later on, when your son has been helping a while, ask if he will show him how to use a repair manual, or go to the resource section of the library and look at repair manuals there. He'll want to read then, because it is something he is interested in.”

“I guess I'll give it a try, it can't hurt for a couple months.” She said with much trepidation, not really sure if I was crazy or just plain stupid.

A couple of months later I received a phone call and the parent was very excited, “You'll never guess what my son did! He is

reading auto repair manuals and words like transmission! I can't believe it! He still doesn't want to read out loud to anyone or check out books at the library, but he sits while we are there reading, really reading, the auto manuals and asks to go back the next week!"

She continued, "I really didn't believe you when you told me not to teach him and changed the subject about reading, but somehow, it worked!"

Three years later this young man still doesn't like to just 'pick up a good book', but he reads successfully and is now learning to repair cars and is interested in pursuing it as a career. He is not a prolific reader, he still has trouble with content area reading (actually, most content areas they learn hands on when he is interested in them), and he probably won't go to a four-year college and get a BA degree in English Studies, but he will succeed in life and that is what the parent wants. Most of all, he is happy, no more crying, no more anxiety, and lots of fun learning around his interests. He actually enjoys learning.

By the way, he also learned the history of the automobile, the science of a gas powered engine, geography of the and learned to read road maps. Not to mention that his interest in cars and engines has now taken him to an interest in other modes of transportation like spacecraft, ocean vessels, robotics, aeronautics, and the list goes on. It is amazing where an interest can lead!

"What if my child is severely disabled, can I still use child-led education?"

Sometimes a child will need some additional help, and if your child has severe disabilities you may need to seek outside resources and consulting for ways to reach the child's best potential. You may need to pull in some more traditional training materials, but keep the materials within the child's interest. A child with moderate or severe concerns needs a lot of repetition. Unfortunately, that means getting bored with the same old stuff! I have found that using four or five different activities for the same 'subject' helps stay the boredom factor and gives the variety and repetition that the child needs... Let me give you an example.

My daughter is 10 years old now and has mild developmental and mental delays. She wants to read and so we work on 'reading' by doing ABC songs, puzzles, and learning important sight words. This doesn't mean that we take out the Dolch list and learn the list of sight words. We learn the important ones like; Shelly (her name), Ricky and Tasha (her brother and sister), Mom and Dad, God, Jesus, love, hugs, Holly and (our dogs), stop, go, Wal-Mart, and McDonalds. We learn to read and write these important words. She dictates stories that I write for her in a book that she illustrates and reads to others in the family. These are the things she is interested in, and how we have child-led learning when the child has difficulties. We also use Scaredy Cat Reading, Explode the Code, Bob Books, computer games, audio c.d.'s, and lots of fun activity books from the dollar store to help with her reading. She loves to use these and we have them available for her to 'work on' as she chooses. We work on reading everyday, but she chooses the activities that she will do. As you can see, we use several different things to learn reading. I don't require that she does all of the different items listed every day, only that she do one or two of them a day. I provide enough variety that she doesn't get bored with the repetition of doing the same page of Explode the Code day after day until she learns the letter sound. You can do this for every 'subject area' that the child shows interest in or that the child needs.

A word of caution!

Don't get to 'schooly' with this, remember it is supposed to be child-led, not parent led. It is easy for us to say, "Let's do school" and fall back into the trap of school-at-home. Here is how we handled the 'school day' in a way that works for us. We have times set apart each day that we do certain things (a schedule). We have chore time, breakfast time, bible study time, and then we have 'productive time'. That means that the children and I must do something productive. You will need to decide what productive and acceptable activities for your family are. We save TV for only a couple hours in the afternoon after other things are done. Your activities could include note-booking, sewing, writing, cleaning our room, cooking/baking, counting, 'math pages' (Shelly loves to do math pages), reading, watching educational TV, or whatever they are interested in doing that is productive. This will be difficult for children coming out of a public school setting because they are so used to being told what to do. You may need to direct their productive time for a while until they get the hang of it. To direct it I suggest that you ask them what they would like to do and if they can't think of something make several suggestions.

We are now in our tenth year of home schooling. My children understand what productive time is. I spend the most time directing learning and productive time for my younger child with disabilities, but once she has found an interest, and understands what she is supposed to do, she can be busy for hours learning joyfully! For my teens, I tell them that if they can't find something productive to do I will assign something to them (usually an unpleasant chore). Needless to say, they jump at the opportunity to find their own activities!

"What about holes in my child's education?"

Every person has 'holes' in their education! Don't be surprised by this statement. Most of us can look at something we have

forgotten or never really learned in school and have learned to compensate for the 'hole' by using other resources. For example, I am a terrible speller. If it weren't for spell checking on the computer you would have difficulty reading this! Now I have to admit, I can spell fairly well, but I definitely didn't learn it in school! I have learned it since I began writing as an adult. Learning to spell is now important to me because I need it to write well. But I do lean on that spell checker often! Some of us have difficulty with math and use a calculator. Suffice it to say, we should tell our children that there are times when we need to learn things that are difficult for us, and other times it is alright to compensate for weaknesses. Having a balanced approach to home education and letting children learn and improve their strengths gives them success. It also causes them to gain confidence to try more difficult tasks and think independently.

If your child is bound for college and you are worried about holes, allow them to pursue their interests and keep a log or notebook of their learning. This makes a wonderful portfolio for college entrance and shows the independent thinking skills that colleges are looking for!

Child-centered education means that we, as parents, facilitate the education of our child. We provide the resources necessary for our children to learn and teach the child how to find and use those resources on their own. Child-led learning gives them a reason to learn something that may be more difficult and encourages children to pursue success in their own way. As the child grows, and loves to learn, the child's interests will grow, change, deepen, and mature. Eventually the child's strengths and interests will become the child's successes.

Christy Berry has over twenty years experience working with and learning from a variety of special needs children, their parents, and therapists. She is the founder and chair of a national home-education organization and school developed and focused on training parents of special needs children. Working with professionals in multiple fields, Christie has brought her experience and training to the parents of special needs children for the past twelve years, as an author, speaker, and consultant. She and the organization host a Special Non's Retreat annually to encourage and minister to the special needs of moms. She believes that God has equipped each parent with the tools to move forward in the mission to educate their children and that the parents are the experts. Christie has children through birth, adoption, and foster care with multiple special needs that she home educates.

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