

Homeschooling Across the Spectrum of Autism

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I was in tears when my mother answered her telephone that cold February morning. My two year old son, Macklin, was screaming and crying in the background, while my four year old daughter, Evelyn, was trying to comfort him. I felt nausea sweep over me . . . gratefully I was only a few more weeks away from delivering our third child. "What's wrong?" my mother asked. "Mom," I cried, "Every day is like this, as soon as Macklin wakes up and sees Jeff is gone. I can't get him to stop crying and he won't look at me." I began to sob. "Oh, Mom . . . I think Macklin may be autistic . . ."

That fear was confirmed a few months later, following the birth of baby Vivian, Macklin's hearing tests, doctors referrals, and finally a meeting with a pediatric neurologist. Even though I had suspected autism for some time, it was still a shock, and feelings of fear and depression almost overwhelmed me. We had been planning to homeschool for several years. How could I possibly homeschool a soon-to-be-kindergartner, a special needs preschooler, AND take care of a new baby?

Over the next few months I learned as much as I could about autism. What I learned is that Autism Spectrum Disorder is defined as a lifelong developmental disability, and is believed to be the result of a neurological disorder affecting the function of the brain. Parents do not cause their children to become autistic; a once common misconception. Individuals with autism may display characteristics of the disorder that range from mild to severe. While it is not a "behavior disorder" there are often behavior problems which must be addressed. Autism interferes with speech, learning and social skills development. There may be abnormal responses to sensations such as touch or hearing. There are often unusual ways of relating to people, objects and events. It may be difficult for the individual to transition from one activity to another. There is often a lack of spontaneous or imaginative play, and poor eye contact.

I also learned that while it was once thought to be a rare disorder, autism is now the third most common developmental disorder in the United States. Here in Illinois, there has been a 665% increase in students with autism aged 3-21 between 1993 and 2002. Approximately 72% of children with autism in Illinois schools are ages 3-11. It is estimated that at least 1 of 150 children is currently being diagnosed.

Certain I could no longer homeschool both my son and my daughter, my husband and I toured our local school district's program for communication disordered children. I left the facility in tears, and a new resolve. I witnessed disorganization, chaos, and questionable behavior on the part of teachers and staff towards non-verbal, frightened children. God was clearly showing me that we were to homeschool. "I will never put Macklin there!" I cried. My husband agreed. Even later, when I doubted my abilities again, Jeff encouraged me, pointing out that I could surely do as well as the school, and probably even better. This is just what I needed to hear!

As I continued my research I learned there is great controversy over the best way to educate children with autism. However, there is one consistent opinion: these children do best in a one-to-one environment, or in an environment which will facilitate this as much as possible. What better place to educate a child with autism than in the home! Our family decided we would rather invest our time, energy and resources into treating and educating our child at home, rather than attempting to force the school district to do what we felt was best. We feel we have made the better choice.

Here are some points our family has found to be helpful. It is my hope that our experience may assist others who are homeschooling a spectrum child, or who are considering this option!

1. Pray! Families with autistic children must often try to choose between a myriad of treatments, most of which are unproven as successful, or may work well with some children, but not with others. Ask the Lord to direct your paths on what often appears to be huge decisions. Remember James 1:5: "If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him."
2. Discuss options with your spouse. The family is more likely to be successful if both parents are in agreement with the homeschooling process and the direction home therapy will take. It helps if expectations are clear . . . Will mom do all the

homeschooling and therapies? Will dad be able to do some in the evenings and on weekends? Can siblings help? Is outside help available?

3. Implement Biblical training. I strongly believe, no matter what the disability, children should be trained to obey parents. Obedience in a child with autism will help make the entire teaching process go more smoothly. The Bible tells us in Proverbs 22:6 to "Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it." And Proverbs 13:24 reassures us: "He who spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is careful to discipline him." Several helpful books are listed in the resource section at the end of this article. Using a visual consequence system, such as the "If/Then" chart from Doorposts can be very helpful for both parents and children. Parents should pray, decide and agree on a method of discipline, and be consistent. This can be very difficult, but is extremely important with these children.
4. Use visual supports. The Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) uses small line drawings to help teach non-verbal or verbally limited children how to communicate. Pictures not only help with communication; they can be used to help children organize their time and make transitions more smoothly. PECS cards may be purchased, found on the internet for free, or may be made by using film or a digital camera.
5. First Corinthians 14:33 tells us that "God is not a God of disorder but of peace." To me, this means establishing a routine. These children seem to respond well to structure and predictability. I have found a daily schedule to be very helpful. A schedule has allowed me to plan in therapies, school time, and even preschool time for my youngest daughter. A schedule ensures that what needs to get done gets done, and that everyone has time with Mom. Use visual supports where needed.
6. Develop an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) for your child. It helps to determine where the child is developmentally and begin to work there. There are many resources for determining developmental ability.
7. Break teaching times into small, intense chunks throughout the day. This helps to keep the child engaged, makes the teaching time manageable, and also provides breaks for both the parent and the child.
8. Don't forget to focus on life skills. It is easy to overlook these skills when our society puts so much emphasis on the educational component. Teaching a child how to take care of himself and his environment is equally (and perhaps even more) important and will help establish more independence and good work habits.
9. Consider working with professionals on a consultation basis. Often these children benefit from various therapies, but these are usually quite expensive, and frequently insurance companies will not cover them. By working with providers on a predetermined basis (monthly, quarterly, etc.) parents may be trained in techniques, given "homework" to do on a daily basis, and still control the therapy and derive benefits from working with helpful professionals who may offer valuable input.
10. Carefully consider all therapeutic options, and implement them one at a time. There is an overwhelming amount of information available on how to treat children with autism. All too often parents, in desperation, try a number of things, piling one on top of the other. We would like to suggest attempting one thing at a time as much as possible, in order to see any changes and understand what impact the new intervention is having on the child. Trying something for a relatively short period of time (a few weeks, to a few months) will often allow parents to see whether or not there are important changes and/or benefits.
11. Use discernment with media. We do allow TV in our home on a limited basis. There are useful videos available designed specifically to help disabled children learn valuable skills such as sight reading and life skills. However, "entertaining" programs need to be screened carefully. We have learned this the hard way, when we have observed our son acting out negative behavior he saw on a program, or echoing something negative he heard from a show. Television can quickly undo what we are trying so hard to do, and often spectrum children seem to "pick up" the negative things they have seen on TV more easily than the positive character traits and skills we would have them learn.

Lastly, continue to evaluate what you are doing. What is working? What is not? What can be adapted into your program to help you and your child? What should be eliminated or put to the side, for now? Is it necessary to forgo "academics" and work on getting behavior under control and establishing a routine? If this is the case, do it! It will be easier to work on academics once this is out of the way. Continue to pray, and seek the Lord's will. I continually call to mind Jeremiah 29:11: "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." This Scripture does not only hold true for our precious children, but for us, as parents, and as His children as well!

Resources:

Biblical Training

[Lovingly Guiding Their Footsteps](http://www.nathhan.com/) by Tom and Sherry Bushnell of NATHHAN

<http://www.nathhan.com/>

[To Train Up A Child](http://www.nogreaterjoy.org/) by Michael and Debi Pearl. May be purchased through Illinois Christian Home Educators or found at

<http://www.nogreaterjoy.org/>

[Shepherding A Child's Heart](http://www.christianbook.com/) by Tedd Tripp available at <http://www.christianbook.com/>

[Too Wise to Be Mistaken, Too Good to Be Unkind](http://www.graceandtruthbooks.com/) by Cathy Steere available at <http://www.graceandtruthbooks.com/>

[The If/Then Chart](http://www.doorposts.net/) from Doorposts <http://www.doorposts.net/>

Free Picture Cards

<http://trainland.tripod.com/pecs.htm>

<http://www.do2learn.com/>

Scheduling Help

Managers of Their Homes by Steve and Teri Maxwell found at <http://titus2.com/>

Testing/IEP Help

The Psychoeducational Profile Revised (PEP-R) by Eric Schopler et al. published by Division TEACCH. This may be found at The Autism Society of North Carolina Book Store at <http://www.autismsociety-nc.org/> The book is expensive, but the test may be administered from 6 months to age 12 if the child is functioning below a first grade level and allows even a non-verbal child to have success. The manual explains how to administer the test and what materials to use. To my knowledge, this is the only testing tool available that was written specifically for children with autism. The test identifies skills which require additional work, which assists in the writing of a home IEP and school planning. The Adolescent and Adult Psychoeducational Profile (AAPEP) is available for older individuals at the same web address.

For further IEP helps go to http://www.iche.org/special_needs/index.htm

Consultants

We use what is called the Neurodevelopmental Approach with our son. We meet with our Neurodevelopmentalist every four months to review our son's progress. She provides us with a home therapy program that is designed specifically for Macklin, which we then take home with us and work on as part of our school day. We have found this method to be very much in line with our desire to homeschool and do as much work as possible with our son ourselves. Our Neurodevelopmentalist is behind our decision to homeschool! 100%! <http://www.hope-future.org/>

Adrienne and her husband, Jeff, have home-schooled their 3 children since 1988. She no longer works as a Licensed Clinical Social Worker, now she enjoys encouraging and educating parents about autism spectrum disorder. Adrienne is a member of ICHE's Special Needs Committee and is active on ICHE's S/N's message board. You may contact her at: specialneeds@iche.org with Attention: Adrienne as your subject.

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