

Homeschool Advantage - Working With Learning Disabilities

Sitting at the SHiNE table in the vendor hall at Learning and Literacy Day 2006, I was approached by many anxious faces: parents of special needs children who had questions about homeschooling. Many of these parents had children with learning differences specifically, and were coming to the hard realization that school was brutal. They needed options. Is homeschooling children with learning differences a good idea? What if my child has medical or physical needs? Is it even possible? What am I up against? Can I do this?

After attending the Learning Disabilities Association of Alberta's annual conference, my answer to these families is a resounding YES! Homeschooling LD kids can be a positive, nurturing choice! As I listened to the presenters, I found myself thinking quite regularly about specific recommendations. "Homeschoolers do that one naturally," I thought, or "That recommendation would be so much easier to implement in a homeschooling environment than in a school environment."

So what kinds of advantages do homeschoolers have that can make this possible?

Number one: Time

Homeschoolers don't have to wait for the bus (not to mention the commute is great). They don't have to wait in line-ups. They don't have to wait for everyone else to quiet down. They don't have review material they've already mastered. By golly, they don't even have to finish breakfast before they start learning! Their teacher/parent can be reading to them WHILE they munch their corn flakes, if that's how they want to do it. All this extra time can really add up. It can be spent on things like therapies and remediation, projects of personal interest that buoy self-confidence and skill, naps when you've really just had enough, play dates with accepting and self-selected peers, exercise, or anything else the child needs.

Number two: Flexibility

A homeschooler's day doesn't necessarily have to start at 8:30 and end at 2:30. They don't have to go Monday through Friday, with pre-set days off. They don't have to follow bells. They aren't constrained by "what is best for the rest of the class". They can slow down (or stop) when they need to, and go quickly when they want to. If medications affect your child's learning for part of the day you have the flexibility to focus your teaching on those times when your child is best able to learn. It is also far easier to work around therapy or medical appointments when you set your own schedule. Just think - instead of worrying about what's being missed in the classroom and how much extra homework this will mean, you can use that travel time to sing skip-counting songs, have your child read out loud to you, or work on a lap book or any other portable lesson.

Homeschoolers can cater to the child's own learning style. If your child is very visual or hands-on, you can spend a large quantity of your time at museums, field trips, and working on projects. If this kind of approach would over-stimulate your child, you can opt for a far simpler, more structured approach. You have the power to choose what works best. Something as simple as working on a particularly difficult subject at a time of day when your child is most receptive is easy and natural in homeschooling. It is much tougher to make that kind of accommodation in a room with 25 different kids.

Number three: **Resources and Support**

Support groups for homeschoolers are abundant in Alberta. They provide everything from trade shows, to professional development, to fieldtrips and activities for the kids, to parent support. Believe it or not, there are people out there just like you who are choosing homeschooling. To start your search visit <http://www.shine-hs.com/?q=supportgroups> . Find a group that fits you and get involved! You will be happy you did. A specific recommendation that came from the LDAA conference was, "Never worry alone." A great place to worry, share ideas, laugh, and become empowered is SHiNE's support group for parents of special needs students. To learn more, e-mail special.needs@shine-hs.com .

In addition, homeschoolers find themselves in the unique position of being available during the day. Pools, gyms, dojos, rinks, studios, workshop spaces, and other places that are historically underutilized during the day often offer programming specifically to homeschoolers. Often, these programs have great instructor/student ratios. Also, homeschoolers have the place to themselves! If you don't know where to begin looking for such opportunities, SHiNE's members' forum is a great place to start. In the past, SHiNE families have organized Science Crates, Bennett Centre trips, swimming lessons, language classes, clubs, and field trips of every variety imaginable. Choose options that work best for your child. If you find yourself looking for something specific that doesn't yet exist, the SHiNE team can probably help you make it happen!

School boards can also be a very useful resource. They offer a variety of programs and services to assist homeschooling families. Do some shopping around when it comes time to choose a school board. Ask all your questions. Find out if they offer what you need. Ask people who are already registered with specific boards about their experiences. For more information on school boards, visit <http://www.shine-hs.com/?q=aboutschoolorboards> .

Number Four: **Privacy**

In the homeschooling environment, no one ever needs to compare where they are at in reading or math with anyone else. It is simply not public knowledge unless you choose to make it so. No one ever needs to know that you participate in therapies or remediation unless you choose

to share that information. If your child needs to sit on an exercise ball, squish silly putty, chew gum, keyboard, use audio books, wear a weighted vest, or whatever, no one will ever say to them, "Why do you do THAT?". No one ever has to be teased. Differences and weaknesses never have to be put on public display. If you find yourself in an unpleasant position with people who are intolerant, you can simply choose not to participate further in that activity. Or you can choose to advocate. Or you can choose some other course of action. You HAVE the choice. Homeschoolers are in the fantastic position of being able to choose all the positive social experiences that will build their children up while protecting them from the negative social experiences that do nothing but tear their children down.

But homeschooling an LD student is really tough, right? I won't lie to you, it is no cakewalk. It takes perseverance and dedication. You have to be strong. It's often a two-steps-forward-one-step-back kind of proposition. But doesn't this describe ANY concerned parent of an LD child? Yes, homeschooling LD children is hard, but so is watching them come home emotional Jell-O every day from school. So is fighting for hours every night to get homework done, when somewhere deep in the back of your head, you are suspicious that there are better uses of your time. So is spending hours with teachers and administrators advocating and trying to get implemented even the most basic accommodations. So is the guilt of the blame-game. So is the heartache. So is the anger that stems from wasted time and opportunities. Yes, homeschooling an LD child is tough, but as you ponder this truism, think about all the negatives you face constantly that can be eliminated by homeschooling.

A running theme throughout the LDAA conference was the need to be positive with LD kids: the need to laugh with them, to protect them, to build them, to focus on their strengths. I can understand why these basic ideas were so passionately advocated. Most of the audience was teachers and others working their way through the public school maze. These critical, basic ideas often get lost in paperwork, timetables, playground politics, and other school phenomena. But laughter, safety, love, and positive experiences NEVER have to get lost at home.

By Deborah P., November, 2006