

When you chose to home educate, you did so (typically) at least partly so that you could give each of your children the best education for their individual needs and gifts. Then when we discover that one of those children has some sort of special need, a learning disability, a learning challenge, a handicap or a different way of looking at the world (all of which can be present in the same child, depending on who is observing him), we become concerned about our ability to provide what that child needs.

The truth is that the child is still the same child, whatever label or challenge has been added to him. The learning process may take longer, may need to be arrived at in slower stages, and some parts of the typical curriculum may not be on that child's learning plan, but there will still be learning. One of the unique strengths of home education is that we can adapt whatever program or approach we choose to the individual needs of our children. So if your child can do grade 6 math but does not read at that level, you can read the word problems aloud for him. Or you can help him read them since his stronger math skills may in this case help to boost his weaker reading skills. You can read any book aloud to a child struggling with reading so that the other subject areas do not fall behind.

One of the more common reasons for beginning to home educate is the desire to see our children learn at their own pace. When they fall short of the typical pace, it is hard to remember that this was our goal! Typical reading levels or writing levels or math levels are guidelines, just like the growth chart at the doctor's office. When a child falls off the growth chart physically we look at the factors influencing growth and at whether there is some growth. Slow growth is enough: not all of our children will be six feet tall! Likewise, slow growth in any skill area is enough. Many late readers catch up completely by their early teens.

What about the children who don't catch up? Some are home educating children who are truly never going to achieve a high level of literacy or ability. There are those who know from early childhood that there are barriers that won't be overcome. If a child has Down's Syndrome or other intellectual handicaps, or has fetal alcohol syndrome, or deals with the consequences of severe early deprivations, then there may be limits that will not go away. How much better for that child to be at home, surrounded by love and acceptance and gentle ongoing help and encouragement to learn what he can.

I truly feel that the first lesson a child learns in institutional special needs programs is that he has been judged as flawed and that that flaw is the most important thing about him. When that child remains at home to be educated, in the security of his family, he can be himself, a person with strengths and weaknesses valued for his unique worth.

Truly, none of our children are gifted at everything. We all have abilities and challenges. It is because our culture is trapped in schoolish thinking that the academic challenges become such daunting obstacles. Your job as a parent and a home educator is to lead each child to be the best they can be, in academics, but beyond that, in faith and character, in love of others and acts of service, in appreciat-

HOME EDUCATING Your *Child* with SPECIAL NEEDS

by Kathy Put

ing beauty and goodness, and not just in passing math levels.

Some practical hints

For weak readers: Have an eye exam. Vision difficulties are hard for parents to spot. More specialized eye exams can pick up conditions like Irlen's Syndrome that may be part of learning challenges.

Read aloud to all of your children, even as they move up in age. It lets your child enjoy books they could not read, it makes the book a shared experience, it slows down the flow of information so that more understanding happens, and it builds a strong sense of sentence and paragraph structure that helps each child with independent reading.

Choose books that encourage and engage your child. Books with lots of pictures, books on interesting topics are more likely to be read. Joke books encourage understanding of word play (annoying as it is to be with a child who has a book of knock-knock jokes.) Books of world records have great appeal to many children.

When you hit a wall, take a break. Learning doesn't take place at a steady rate. Some children will progress to a certain point and then need weeks to firmly establish those skills before they can move forward. Wait for readiness. This is especially true with younger children.

For math challenged children: Use manipulatives. Don't buy them. My favourite is real money. Find a couple of hundred pennies, thirty or so dimes, and ten loonies. Put them in a container you won't raid for milk money, and pull them out for math lessons. If you're feeling generous, you can make the coin stash a reward for achievement. Even young children are much better at knowing dimes and dollars than tens and hundreds.

Be consistent. Some kind of review or activity every day is important. Math games are really helpful.

Try different curriculum. If a child is pencil-challenged, workbook curriculum's best. Copying from a text to a notebook is time consuming, discouraging and can lead to errors in copying. Ask for recommendations.

With any child: Be positive. Talk about achievement and progress. Express your conviction that things are going well, and do not let negative people upset you or your child.

For help or further ideas, contact Kathy Put Kathy.put@gmail.com or read my blog at www.puttingalong.blogspot.com

Kathy and her husband Peter have home educated four children. Two have graduated from university, one is attending university, and the youngest is still learning at home. One of their children has Asperger's syndrome. Kathy has 14 years experience working with families as a home education facilitator.