

Considering Homeschooling Your Child on the Autism Spectrum?

Some Helpful Hints and Suggestions For Parents

By Karen Hurlbutt, PhD

With the increase in the numbers of diagnosed children on the autism spectrum, schools are being challenged to provide proper educational services for these children. In *Educating Children with Autism*, the National Research Council (2002) recommended that educational programs for students with autism include three basic components. These are direct instruction of skills, behavior management using functional behavioral assessment and positive behavioral support, and instruction in natural settings. There are also a host of strategies and methods available today, and some of these include Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA), sensory integration, Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS), social stories and other cognitive behavioral interventions, auditory integration therapy (AIT), TEACCH methods (Treatment and Education of Autistic and related Communication handicapped CHildren), gluten- and casein-free diets, and supplemental vitamin therapy (Heflin & Alaimo, 2007; Simpson & Myles, 2007).

Many parents have identified a therapy, method, or program they have found to be effective for working with their child, however, have experienced the school as being unable or unwilling to provide this treatment. More and more parents of children on the autism spectrum have become frustrated with the school system and have been exploring

homeschooling as an option. Ray (Home School Legal Defense Association, 2002) indicated that homeschooling may be the fastest-growing form of education today because of parents' frustration and other concerns. Schools typically have 20-30 children per general education classroom, which can be very over-stimulating for a child with autism, and general education teachers may be struggling with teaching all of the children in the classroom. Unfortunately, many teachers have not received training in working with children on the autism spectrum (Simpson, 2004) and are ill-prepared to have them in their classrooms.

Many times, students with autism are placed in self-contained special education classrooms, often with children who may have more severe needs. Parents may be concerned about the negative behaviors their child may be exposed to, and the possibility of their child exhibiting them him or herself. Additionally, bullying is a significant concern in schools today, even though many schools have adopted a "zero tolerance" philosophy (Hoover & Oliver, 2008).

A study completed by Easter Seals Society and the Autism Society of America in 2008 revealed that 70% of parents of children with autism were concerned about their child's education, as compared to 36% of parents of typically developing children. Only 19% of parents of children on the autism spectrum felt that

their children were receiving education to adequately prepare him or her for life, compared to 56% of parents of children without disabilities (Samuels, 2008). Parents are obviously concerned about the educational programming of their children on the autism spectrum and are turning to homeschooling for a solution.

Some benefits to homeschooling include the following. Gusman ("Homeschooling Children with Autism: 5 Reasons Why it Works," 2006) shared five reasons why homeschooling may be best for children on the autism spectrum. These include: instruction which provides for optimal learning and maximized progress; the environment can be adapted at home more easily than it can be at school for the child's sensory difficulties; flexible scheduling is more easily arranged at home, and less time is wasted on non-academic tasks; better opportunities for more positive socialization are provided through homeschooling; and the child's interests can be incorporated into their schoolwork and studies.

The decision to homeschool is a lifestyle choice, not just an educational choice. It is a big decision to make but where do parents start? The following are recommendations that parents may want to take into consideration while making the decision to homeschool.

Remember that homeschooling will involve the whole family. Is your marriage strong enough to survive the time and effort

Below is a compiled list of resources for homeschooling parents that may be helpful to you.

Books by parents:

Dowry, T., & Cowlishaw, K. (Eds). (2002). *Home educating our autistic children: Paths are made by walking*. London, England: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
 Holland, O. (2005). *Teaching at home: A new approach to tutoring children with autism and Asperger syndrome*. London, England: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
 Pyles, L. (2004). *Homeschooling the child with Asperger syndrome: Real help for parents anywhere and on any budget*. London, England: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Curriculum and materials:

Stages of Learning Materials: Real Picture Products for Autism - <http://www.stageslearning.com/> Includes educational flashcards, posters, puzzles and games
<http://www.edhelper.com/> Math, Reading comprehension, themes, lesson plans
 Gradebook and Quiz maker-<http://www.classbuilder.com/>
 Make your own worksheets and awards, games, and software for free-<http://www.freeworksheets.com/>
Handwriting without Tears—the hands-on curriculum for writing success <http://www.hwtears.com/>
One Step At a Time: ABA and Autism in the Classroom by Jennifer Krutins (2008). Published by Autism Aspirations, Ontario Canada. www.autismaspirations.com
Rod and Staff curriculum—www.rodandstaffbooks.com/
Functional academic workbooks—Remedia Publications (www.rempub.com)

Online supports:

<http://www.ochomeschooling.com/specialneeds> (Mary Gushman)
 NATHAN National Challenged Homeschoolers Associated Network - <http://www.nathan.com/>
<http://homeschooling.about.com/> - About.com: Homeschooling—homeschooling basics, state information, is homeschooling for you? grade by grade goals, printable worksheets, projects, and forms
http://www.eho.org/support/united_states.asp Each state includes information for contacting that state's Department of Education, state homeschooling laws, statewide support group listings, websites about homeschooling in the state, mailing lists, discussion boards, and a special listing of websites of interest to state residents

Virtual schools (online curriculum):

Virtual High School Global Consortium <http://www.govhs.org/> Virtual High School is the worldwide leader in collaborative online education and professional development.
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_virtual_schools Includes a list of virtual schools, coursework from an accredited not-for-profit or publicly-funded institution, taught primarily through online methods.

that must go into successful and effective homeschooling? Parents must agree on the methods and strategies to be used in home-schooling their child. Parents already have enough stress and worries because of having a child on the autism spectrum, so adding more stress by not being in agreement together should be avoided.

What are your plans for providing equal time for siblings? How will you handle it if a sibling wants to be home-schooled as well? Some siblings may be jealous of the attention the homeschooled child will receive, so it is a good idea to schedule in special, and alone, time with the sibling(s).

What is your financial situation? It is a big financial sacrifice as well, as either one parent will need to stay home to home-school, or parents will need to pay for a tutor or staff person to teach/work with the child.

What are the requirements regarding homeschooling in your school district or state? Contacting your state Homeschooling Association is a beginning step. Staff there should be able to outline what the requirements are in terms of notification, paperwork, progress reporting, forms, assessment, and support. States have different requirements regarding the above topics so it is a good idea to contact this agency for initial help.

If possible, join a homeschooling support group. Parents there will support you and give recommendations on dealing with the school, finding materials and resources, and arranging for social activities for homeschooled children.

Plan to involve your child in social and community activities, both with home-schooled children and without. Ideas could include church activities, karate, gymnastics, dance, sports teams, drama club, tours of community buildings and organizations, and volunteer work such as Salvation Army. Meals on Wheels, shelters of all kinds, Humane Society, etc.

Find professionals to help you, and create your own team for your child. These may include speech language pathologists, occupational and physical therapists, music therapists, developmental pediatricians who have additional training beyond

do not be afraid to try.

Build in, and schedule time for, alone-time with your spouse. This may include monthly "dates"—dinner, movie, etc., "lights out" for all children after 9 PM, parents-only time after dinner, for example. It is important to have this time alone as a couple.

Learn all you can about your child's disability so you can be a knowledgeable and effective advocate for him or her.

Try all the therapies out there! You never know which one may work with your child. Use caution and some skepticism but

out for you, your child, and your family. •

Trust yourself as the parent. Believe in what you do. You know your child better than anyone, so trust that you know what is best for him or her. Know that you truly want to do this, and commit to it. But remember that it is not a life sentence, and you can change your mind if homeschooling does not work

Schedule activities for the stay-at-home parent for social and intellectual stimulation activities. It can be very isolating to be home with a homeschooled child 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

For a list of references used in this article write to lapedi@parent.com.

Karen Hurlbutt, PhD, is an Assistant Professor, Special Education, at Minnesota State University, Mankato.