

Home Schooling Children with Special Needs

3rd Edition

Home Schooling Children with Special Needs

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To Alison.

You may never be able to read this, but you are the reason
that this book has even come into being.

Thank you for teaching me more than I could ever hope to
teach you.

Notes from the Author



WE ARE ALL people in process. God meets us where we are and moves us along this slow and often painful road to becoming the image of His Son.

We are also parents in process. No one taught us how to be a parent. We learn, develop, and change our methods over time. For those of us with special needs children, no matter what the disability our child has, we are in the process of learning how to parent a child with a disability. Each of us knew we were having a baby, but chances are good we didn't know we were going to have a child with special needs. So after we get over the shock, the grief, the anger, and the denial, we pick ourselves up and begin the process of becoming a parent to this child.

Now you've decided to home school. So now you are also a teacher in process. Although I have been a professional teacher for over twenty-five years, I am still learning, growing, and changing my ideas and my beliefs about teaching. Each child I teach is a new learning experience for me. I have also

labored for over fifteen years to create a home school that met the educational needs of my children while still getting the kitchen and bathrooms cleaned on a semi-regular basis and maintaining a relationship with my husband! So I know where you are coming from!

This manual is intended as a framework to aid you in teaching your special child at home, but it will not give you all the answers. Teaching is hard work, but teaching special needs children has uniquely discouraging aspects to it. Growth can be painfully slow, pressure from yourself and/or outside people can be intense, and most of our children are resistant or have other difficult behaviors. You have taken on a task that is definitely not for the fainthearted, and it is very easy to get discouraged.

I'd like to share a verse with you that has been very helpful to me in keeping my perspective as I teach, "Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men; knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve" (Col. 3:23 NASB).

Special Note for the Third Edition

This book originally came out when I was expecting my youngest child who is now fourteen years old! Throughout this book, you will see mentions of my children at various ages. As this edition goes to print in 2008, Alison is now twenty-one, Laura is twenty and Logan is fourteen. Many things have changed over the years, but the basic principles that I have used in over fifteen years of home schooling and have used with countless families remain the same. Therefore, although resources have been updated and new sections have been added, the bulk of the book remains unchanged from the original.

I have now experienced almost every stage of home schooling from preschool to high school, from multiple children to only one at home doing school. And we have experienced the many stages of having a child with severe disabilities from diagnosis to conservatorship. I hope that whatever stage you are at – just beginning or seasoned veteran – you will be blessed and encouraged as you read.

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Acknowledgments



For the third edition

EACH YEAR, THE number of families contacting us for help in home schooling their special needs children grows. I could never hope to meet the needs of these families alone. God has provided a wonderful group of women who have come alongside this ministry to keep it running and keep the families we work with supported, encouraged, and organized! Thank you Becky, Elaine, Kathy, Lea, Pam and Roneta – I absolutely couldn't do this without you all.

A special acknowledgement also must go to my mother, Janene Crawford, for this edition. When it was discovered that the digital copy of the second edition of the book had been damaged, she re-typed the entire book so that it could be revised. Wow! Thanks doesn't even begin to cover it. Love you, Mom!

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Finally, I want to thank all of the families that I have worked with over the last twenty-plus years who have allowed me to get to know them and their children. I am constantly learning through the process of our collaborations. Thank you for letting me be a part of your home school journey.

Introduction



IN THE COURSE of my consulting work, I received a typical phone call from a mother looking for help. She explained how her daughter had been in public school special education for several years but had made little progress. Convinced by some home schooling friends that her daughter would do “just fine” if they brought her home, she and her husband decided to give home schooling a try. She joined a group of other home schoolers and was told that a certain phonics program was all she needed to “take care of” the poor teaching her daughter had undoubtedly received in the big, bad public school, and that learning disabilities weren’t real anyway. So she plunged in and started working, but her daughter still made little progress. At her support group, she tried to voice her concerns but was told that she probably just wasn’t working hard enough. So back home she went, feeling just a little guilty, to work even harder.

By the time she called me, she was afraid to ever take a day off school, even for a field trip, for fear of being accused of not

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working hard enough, and her daughter broke into tears every time the phonics book came into sight. She called to ask me what she was doing wrong, and if I thought her daughter might have a learning disability after all.

When I reviewed this girl's testing, I could see right away that she had a rather severe language processing difficulty. When I tested her myself, I found that she was working almost four grade levels below her "expected" grade, and that phonics was only one of her many difficult areas. She definitely had a learning disability!

In contrast, I was also contacted by another family who was convinced that their daughter had a learning disability. The father was teaching math, and he said that they had tears every day, but she just couldn't seem to understand or remember what they had done the day before.

When I tested this girl, however, I found that there was no learning disability but instead, a very strong preference for visual learning and some difficulty with long-term memory, which meant that she had to see things several times before she could remember them. In discussing the test results with the parents, we discovered that her father's learning style (and, thus, his teaching style) was almost exactly opposite from that of his daughter. Most of their difficulty and frustration had stemmed from the fact that he explained things in a way that was hard for her to understand, and he didn't understand her need for repetition. Once he understood, and we chose some material that fit her learning style more appropriately, everyone was much less frustrated and learning could take place.

These two very different cases illustrate an important fact when we are discussing children with learning problems—there

Introduction

is no one blanket statement that encompasses every child. We need to be careful when we hear statements like, “There are no such things as learning disabilities,” or “Children just learn differently. Bring them home, and all their learning problems will disappear like magic!” For those parents out there struggling to teach children who have true learning or more severe disabilities, those sweeping statements cause guilt, pain, and discouragement.

Of course, there are many children, like the girl in my second example, children who are somehow “mis-matched” with the school system, the material being used, the teaching style being used, or who have been slow to mature. And there are those children who have been poorly taught. But, these children are not learning disabled, and usually do show impressive gains when brought home and taught more appropriately. For these families there are great resources already available (see the resource section under Learning Mis-Matches and Weaknesses for specific suggestions).

But then there are those children who have true learning disabilities—perceptual or processing difficulties that truly interfere with the learning process, or more severe disabilities that impact how much can even be learned. Those of you who are currently home schooling a child with a learning problem already know it is hard. Those of you who are thinking of doing it are probably scared and apprehensive. If you are home schooling (or thinking of home schooling) a child with a true disability, this book is written with you in mind.

My goal is to give you three things: basic information, encouragement, and resources. We will start by looking at the facts about the various learning difficulties and disabilities as well

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as further resources for learning about each type of disability. Then we will address the issues that can prevent us from being effective in our teaching. Finally, we will look at the actual planning of your program, how to identify the areas of need, and choose appropriate curriculum.


Before we begin, I have one word of apology. If you are a father who is the primary teacher for your child, you may feel left out. Because my experience is as a mother, and ninety-nine percent of the families I work with have the mothers as the primary or only teachers, I know that I have used the word “mother” to refer to the teaching parent throughout this book. It seemed cumbersome to keep saying “teaching parent,” so I have chosen to say “mother” most of the time. However, I have worked with a number of fathers who were the primary home teachers of their children, and they have all done a fabulous job!

Section One
Getting The Facts

CHAPTER 1

Difference, Difficulty, or Disability?

(What's in a Name)



BEFORE WE BEGIN defining the various learning difficulties, we might as well tackle the “label controversy” head on! I know that many parents of children with learning problems are reluctant to label their children, and phrases such as learning disability, attention-deficit disorder, slow learner, mentally retarded, etc., are viewed with distaste. Since I am going to use these terms throughout the manual, let me explain why I do.

While it is true that a label is not a solution, I am concerned that in our haste to make ourselves more comfortable, we have been left with nothing but a bunch of “politically correct” terminology that is no more helpful than the original “distasteful” labels. Instead of worrying about whether or not a child has a difference or a difficulty or a disability, I believe that what we need, more than anything else, is accurate knowledge if we are to work with our children successfully. Accurate terminology can help when it helps us understand our children’s difficulties

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more fully. What we call something is never more important than what we do, but sometimes our energies can be misspent if we have received an inaccurate impression of our child's abilities and disabilities.

Not only as a professional, but as the mother of a disabled child, I feel strongly that the drive toward "politically correct" language instead of exact terminology more often obscures the true nature of a child's difficulty and actually does more harm than good. For example, I had a family come to me whose child had been given a diagnosis of "developmentally delayed." Taking those terms literally, they went home and proceeded to work as hard as they could to "catch-up" the areas of delay. By the time I saw them, they were exhausted and wondering if home schooling was even working. When I tested this child, I realized that these people were victims of political correctness. You see, "developmental delay" is the PC term for mental retardation. Now if these parents had known that from the beginning, they would have been working in a much different way with this child.

My own daughter was given a diagnosis of severe, pervasive developmental delay. When you hear that, it doesn't sound all that bad, but my daughter is autistic and mentally retarded and that conjures up a whole different set of images, doesn't it! When we "tone down" the terminology of disabilities, we also give misleading impressions of what we, as parents, are dealing with on a day-to-day basis. I'll be honest here; I need people to know as much as possible what I am dealing with because I need prayer and support (and yes, sometimes a little sympathy doesn't hurt!).

Difference, Difficulty, or Disability?

One objection I often hear is that if we call all these children disabled, aren't we saying that God made mistakes with them? I think even a quick look through the Bible dispels this idea. Moses apparently had some speech problems, but God says to him in Exodus 4:11, "Who has made man's mouth? Or who makes him dumb or deaf or seeing or blind? Is it not I the Lord?" When Jesus' disciples asked Him who had sinned (a man or his parents) in order that he had been born blind, Jesus answered, "It was neither...but it was in order that the works of God might be displayed in him" (John 9:3).

I have to admit, when I first came to grips with this concept, it made me very angry at God. How could He have made my daughter the way she is on purpose? How could He do that to her, and more importantly, how could He do that to me? However, I have come to realize that as I accept my daughter for who she is, a unique creation of God made for His purpose and pleasure, I have begun to see our circumstances differently. I have come to see (on most days, anyway) that God has given me challenges to face that are molding me into the person He intended for me to be.

By being uncomfortable with the term "disabilities," I think we also give our children a mixed message. We tell them we want them to be unique, but what we mean is that we only want them to be unique in good ways. Our society is obsessed with over-achievement. We don't want even average children, so heaven forbid we should have a child with any disabilities.

When I was teaching English in a regular classroom one year, I had a girl who was very popular and outgoing. She was on the cheerleading squad and had lots of friends. She was a great kid. In my class, she did her work and turned everything in on

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time, but English was not her strongest area, and she did average work. When grades came out, she got a C. I'll never forget my shock when her mother stormed into my classroom demanding to know why I was out to "ruin" her daughter's chances of ever attending college by giving her a C in my class. When I tried to explain that her daughter had done average work, and that a C was not a failing grade, she screamed at me that anything less than an A was a failing grade as far as she was concerned.

If you think this attitude is rare, it is not. In my years of teaching in private schools, I have seen how our desire for excellence before the Lord has turned into an unrealistic expectation that everyone must be above average. When we encounter a child with a difficulty, we try to minimize that difficulty with obscure language or deny that the difficulty even exists. We desperately try everything we can get our hands on to "fix" our child so that he or she can be "normal."

I admit that I did it too. When my daughter was first diagnosed, I went on the search for the "magic cure." I was obsessed with finding the drug, diet, treatment, therapy, you name it, that would make her normal. Nothing proved to be the cure I sought (although some things did help a little). Finally, one day as I sat on the bathroom floor sobbing, I screamed at God, "Why are there all kinds of books and stories of miracles, but you won't give that to me? Why don't I deserve a miracle? You are so unfair!" But the Holy Spirit brought to mind Romans 9:20 "... who are you O man who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, 'Why did you made me like this will it?'" I realized then that I was thinking of my daughter as less because she is different. Accepting the fact that she is autistic and will always be autistic was a big step for me in

Difference, Difficulty, or Disability?

accepting her as she is—the way God made her. Not a mistake, but Alison.

Now, I can hear many of you saying that this is an extreme example. But while your child may not be as disabled as mine, the underlying issues are the same. No matter what we call the difficulty our child has, we all need accurate knowledge about the difference (difficulty, disability), we all need to accept our children as unique creations of God, and we all need to take appropriate action to teach our children and help them achieve their fullest potential.

Usually I will use the term “special needs child” or “special needs learner” when discussing children with learning problems. The primary reason I use these terms is that they remind me of two truths about our children. First of all, children with learning disabilities of whatever kind DO have special needs. They need more of our time, more of our energy, more of our patience, more of our creativity, and more of our love. But they are also special children—created by God for His purpose and pleasure—just the way they are. It helps me if I don’t lose sight of that!