

## **Homeschooling for children with exceptional needs.**

By Leisha Jones (journalism student)  
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It's a Wednesday afternoon, Dawn Burgin and her son Jacob have just spent the morning at a war memorial. Taking a rest over some morning tea they begin sketching a tree, learning about depth perception and the rendering of shapes. While sketching, their conversation wanders off and lingers around a discussion of philosophy. After reading a book together they head to a pool bar for a game of pool. Amidst taking aim and sinking balls they chat about the physics of the game, angles and trajectory.

By mid-afternoon, 10-year-old Jacob has had a history lesson, an art class, touched on geometry, physics and philosophy all before heading to his afternoon gym club. For Dawn and her son this "natural learning" style is a lifestyle choice that many people do not understand.

At the last count over 6,000 children were being home schooled in New Zealand. Parent's motives vary from wanting Christian values and education for their children, the desire to be responsible for their child's learning and a general dissatisfaction with the public schooling system.

But there are also many frustrated parents who look to home schooling as a last resort. Parents of children with special abilities or children with special needs often feel home education is the only option. For these parents it is a means of educating a child whose needs they feel would not be met in a typical school setting.

At the age of three Jacob had taught himself to read fluently. At four an educational assessment found that he had the reading level of an eight-year-old. He would whirlwind through resources aimed at older children and educators insisted there was not a lot they could do for him. When an assistant principal suggested home education Dawn began her journey into searching for alternatives.

She was concerned that Jacob, already so advanced for his age, would not have the opportunity to blossom at school, that he would be dumbed down by the material and become bored. Originally Dawn intended to send Jacob to school when he turned six, but after returning from a year long trip to Europe she didn't see the point. "Why on earth would we send him to school? He is learning so much, we've got this great relationship with him. Why would we want to do anything else?" Now, Dawn would not consider any other type of education for Jacob. She says he has flourished, is highly sociable and she doesn't want to clip his wings.

When a child is between the ages of 6 - 16 parents must request an application for exemption from the Ministry of Education. In this application parents must point out how they intend to educate their child "at least as well and as regularly as in a registered school." There is no set curriculum with home education and parents can choose which ever method suits them and their child best.

Dawn labels herself an "unschooler", a natural learning style that circles around everyday life experiences. Formal lessons and class times have no relevance and the child can define what they want to learn by following their specific interests. John Holt, the founder of unschooling, says there is no difference between living and learning, "that living is learning, that it is impossible and misleading and harmful to think of them as separate." It is compounding the learning into everyday life. Because "life is not divided into subjects," Dawn explains.

Stephen Thoms, president of the New Zealand association for gifted children, says a number of children with special abilities are being home schooled and often it is a last resort. He says a lot of gifted children start out in schools before parents realise the schools are not capable and home educating is a better option.

"More parents are doing it because the education system is incompetent. Education in New Zealand is so P.C, so rigid and inflexible to a child's needs that if you can't afford boutique education the only escape is home schooling."

At the opposite end of the spectrum, children with learning disabilities are also having trouble in the schooling system and Jeremy Drummond, vice president of SPELD believes home education is a valid option. It is a serious alternative for families who are desperate, because in mainstream education their child's needs are often overlooked or not adequately addressed.

When learning disabilities are not picked up a child can become riddled with a glut of other problems. Behavioral and self esteem issues pop up, which Mr Drummond says are all strategies to avoid doing work. "Their self esteem is hindered by constantly comparing themselves to other children. It's very hard for them in the mainstream, it makes them feel dumb. The other kids make them feel dumb, when often they just learn differently." The one-on-one attention that homeschooling offers can help to remediate their problems but Mr Drummond doesn't think it's a must.

"They miss out on positive social activities and other learning options like P.E, drama and music. But in certain areas it is not enough and parents in desperation will try to find an alternative."

Briar Mills, one such desperate parent, has been home schooling 14-year-old Oliver for over a year. At six, Oliver was diagnosed with auditory processing problems. Mrs Mills sent him to a number of specialists to help him through school. Despite her perseverance things did not look up. Recently, he was re-assessed and diagnosed with dyslexia and mild ADD.

When he was kept back a year Mrs Mills could see that if he went back to school he was not going to cope. "He would be sitting at the back of the classroom filling out only two words of a worksheet and feeling worse and worse about himself." After 14 months of home schooling "he's going like a train".

The Mills family works with the A.C.E home schooling system, a more formal method where Oliver does his lessons at a set time each day and has a test at the end of every unit. The boy who had been underachieving at school is averaging 97% in these tests.

Oliver doesn't miss school because he's working at his own pace and is just happy to be achieving. "His attitude to learning has changed dramatically and he is so much more confident," says Mrs Mills.

Home education can be beneficial to the needs of a child who learns at a faster or slower pace. But there are wider aspects of school life they are missing that could potentially affect their development. "Socialisation" is the most frequent and vehement criticism of home schooling.

Dawn worries there is a misconception that, "our kids are kept at home chained to a desk. For a lot of us that's just not the case. These kids aren't kept in bubbles. They have plenty of opportunities to interact with 'normal socialized' children".

The public view is that if a child does not attend school they will not learn to communicate amongst their peers or how to react in different social situations. But most home educators believe the social ramifications of home schooling on their children have been nothing but advantageous.

The Ministry of Education says parents are asked to clarify how they intend to provide social contact with other children. They will often describe a wide range of activities to suit the child's needs. If there was ever any concern that these needs were not being met, they would ask for further information.

Heather Keys recalls her eldest son's response when she decided to home school her youngest boy. He reacted with concern, saying she would turn him into a "weirdo" and a "wild rat". After five years of home schooling she says there was no better option for Jono, who is capable beyond his years and did not fit in at school. She describes his amazing self confidence and ability to think outside the square as a result of home education.

Ms Keys takes a "relaxed" or "eclectic" approach to home schooling. This style uses a little of this and a little of that, using formal text books for some subjects and taking an unschooling approach with others.

She takes a holistic approach towards her sons learning, going out of her way to arrange learning experiences for other home schooled children and provide bountiful social

opportunities for Jono. She organises music classes, a choir, art class, science fairs, surf life saving, Christmas plays and countless field trips. Her photo albums are full of spirited children gaining practical, hands-on experience and enjoying learning in the world that is their classroom.

Many home educators are frustrated by the public attitude towards their lifestyle and say people don't realise there are support groups throughout the country that provide social opportunities for home schooling families.

Through these groups parents exchange information and children form friendships. Dawn reveals one of the truly remarkable things about home schooling and the thing she loves the most is the way the children interact with one another on these occasions.

She says they accept each another with no regard for the age and gender boundaries that usually go up between children. The older kids nurture and respect the younger ones, "It's a beautiful thing to see", says Dawn.

Irene Cooper, national president of the New Zealand Educational Institute and a primary school principal, says home education is a choice that all parents are entitled to, but believes our public schools provide a good service.

However, parents of gifted children or those with learning difficulties have a view that the ability of schools to meet a diversity of needs is not up to standard.

Mrs Cooper explains home schooling is a different kind of education and is very hard to define. But she believes home schooled children are missing out on a kind of learning they cannot gain elsewhere. "In primary school children are in a class with the same classmates all day. They are together all year and they establish relationships. Then there is an even broader mix in the playground. They learn ways to behave and operate in conventional society. It's good learning for life and learning to become a good citizen of this country. What home schoolers do to establish this, I don't know."

She says schools in New Zealand are required to provide extra care for children with exceptional needs and in her view it is something they deliver on. But the flexibility and freedom that home education provides means a child's strengths and weaknesses can be individually nurtured. Many home educators feel this would never be possible in a conventional school environment.

Ms Keys says she wouldn't recommend home education to everyone, but if you're not happy with school and if you're prepared to give it the time and energy, it is a fantastic opportunity. "If you have got a kid that is not Joe Average, a kid that needs extra help or a kid that is extra bright, get them assessed by an educational psychologist. Find out what their weaknesses are and what their strengths are. Don't just fluff around.

"You've got to train them up for the rest of their life. You can't just look at this little holy huddle that is going to happen now. These kids have got a future, they've got to go into

the workforce, go into tertiary education of some kind. They've got to interact with people who are high flying managers, CEO's or just get on with Jo Bloggs down at the workshop.

"They've got to be able to communicate and mix in. If you don't teach them that, if you offer them this little 'me, myself and I' thing and don't pursue what's best for the kid, I don't think you should do it."

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