

HOMESCHOOLING AND AUTISM

WHY HOMESCHOOLING?

There are many reasons why families of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) choose to homeschool their child, and there are an increasing number of families who decide that this is the best option for their child. Common reasons why families choose to homeschool include:

- Local public schools only offer large class sizes and cannot provide individual attention
- The high sensory demands of large public schools
- Lack of teacher training in working with children on the autism spectrum
- Lack of appropriate settings for children with high functioning autism that are unable to function in a mainstream setting.
- Fears that their child will be exposed to maladaptive behaviors in self-contained special education classrooms
- Limited private or high-quality specialized school that work effectively with children with autism
- Bullying and safety concerns

WHAT ARE POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF HOMESCHOOLING?

There are a number of advantages to homeschooling. These include:

- A very individualized education that fits your child's unique developmental profile
- A curriculum that is adaptable, hands on, and that includes functional skills
- The freedom to choose what, when, and how fast academics are taught
- Being able to adapt to accommodate for sensory difficulties
- Flexible scheduling of learning times, vacations, and fieldtrips
- Conservation of time (reduced time traveling to school, transitioning, waiting for other students)
- More controlled, supervised socialization opportunities
- More ability to incorporate a child's interests into academics
- Less repetitive busywork
- Greater levels of self-esteem and reduced anxiety

WHAT POTENTIAL CHALLENGES SHOULD I CONSIDER ABOUT HOMESCHOOL?

There are a number of challenges to homeschooling. You should think through these challenges carefully before making the decision to homeschool. These include:

- **Your child's understanding of your role as a teacher.** Some children with autism may have rigid expectations about the role of their parent in their lives and may have difficulty changing their expectations to accommodate a parent's new role as their teacher.
- **Your child's ability to take instruction from you.** Some parents find that their child is much better able to accept instruction from other adults, and that increasing the number of demands they place on their child also increases parent-child conflict.
- **Your child's behavioral/learning challenges.** Some children with autism have significant behavioral challenges that are difficult to handle and accommodate at home or severe learning challenges that require specialized instruction parents feel ill equipped to administer.
- **The time and effort of required of homeschooling.** Homeschooling requires a lot of time to prepare educational opportunities and lesson plans on top of managing the rest of a family's responsibilities and the additional responsibilities that come with having a special needs child.
- **The financial commitment.** Homeschooling can be done on a budget, but there are costs to account for. Supplies and curricula need to be paid for, and specialized curricula can be expensive, although they can be written off on taxes. Services such as speech and occupational therapy as well as psychoeducational and behavioral assessments may need to be paid for out of pocket. You child may be able to access some of these services in the public school even though he or she is not enrolled. More information about homeschoolers' access to local school services can be found on the Home School Legal Defense Association website at <http://www.hslda.org>.
- **The stress.** Homeschooling any child, particularly one with special needs, can be very stressful at times. You rarely get breaks from your child and his or her



challenges. Homeschooling requires a significant amount of patience and perseverance. Stress management for oneself and for your partner is crucial to prevent burnout and relationship problems.

- **Deciding on handling siblings.** Will siblings also be homeschooled? If your child's siblings are not homeschooled, you will want to find additional "alone time" to give siblings who are not homeschooled. You may want to consider hiring a nanny or babysitter to help with childcare.

WHAT ARE SOME TIPS FOR HOMESCHOOLING SUCCESS?

- **Join or research the Home School Legal Defense Association** website at <http://www.hsllda.org>. HSLDA is a nonprofit advocacy organization established to defend and advance the right of parents who homeschool their children. It has information on laws for homeschooling in your state.



- **Join a homeschooling support group, in person or online.** Homeschool groups give you access to other parents who can support you and give recommendations, help you find materials and resources, and help you arrange for social activities for your child.
- **Plan for socialization opportunities.** There may be homeschool groups you can join, or involve your child in community activities such as church activities, community sports, and volunteer work.
- **Plan for teaching life skills.** There is more to educating a child with ASD than academics. Part of your child's homeschooling curriculum should be focused on social, communication, behavioral, emotional, and adaptive skills. Transition planning should begin around age 12 and should involve thinking about vocational and independent living skills.
- **Build a team of professionals for your child.** These may include a speech language pathologist, occupational therapist, a psychologist, or a special educator to provide additional services to your child based on his or her needs and to provide

recommendations on your homeschooling approach. Your child with ASD may need accommodations and different learning methods than a typically developing homeschool student.

- **Schedule time for yourself and for your relationships.** Homeschooling requires a lot of time, effort, and financial commitment over a long period of time. Make sure you avoid burn out or relationship challenges by scheduling regular times for yourself to spend alone, engaging in personal growth activities, exercising, or with friends. Also make sure there is time for you and your partner to spend time together alone. Consider hiring a babysitter for date nights.
- **Physical structure.** Set up a separate room or section of a room just for school related activities. Children with ASD benefit from cues from their environment that tell them what the expectations are. A separate workspace just for school, where distractions can be kept to a minimum, helps keep children focused on learning. Use a monthly, weekly, and/or daily visual schedule that lists lesson plans. Have an independent work area set up for “work alone” time. A bookshelf or set of storage drawers on the left, a work space in the middle, and a place to put finished work on the right will help your child understand work expectations.
- **Be willing to change your expectations.** Parents who have been to traditional educational settings may have expectations about how much or how quickly work should be completed on a daily basis. They can also feel tremendous pressure for their kids to progress rapidly. Be willing to change your expectations as you learn more about your child’s abilities and learning style. Step back and look at the bigger picture when you feel your child has plateaued or is not learning. Recognize when you are feeling guilty or doubtful and seek assistance from your support system.
- **Be willing to recognize if homeschooling is not the best option.** Homeschooling does not work for every family for a variety of reasons. Do not blame yourself if it does not work, or if your child is having difficulty learning. Remember that you can change your mind if homeschooling does not work out for you, your child, and your family.