



GIVING UP ON SCHOOL:

I HOMESCHOOL MY TWO SONS. IT WASN'T MY FIRST choice; they attended a local, publicly-funded school for several years. I didn't start to homeschool because I was unhappy with the curriculum or didn't believe in the public system. I started to homeschool because the school environment was hurting my children. After seven years in the system, they were sinking deeper and deeper emotionally, behaviourally and academically.

My boys both have diagnosed special needs. Between them they have diagnoses of Nonverbal Learning Disorder (NLD), Asperger's Syndrome (AS), generalized anxiety disorder, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD), and giftedness.

These children have difficulty with social situations. They need to be specifically taught many of the skills that most children learn simply by observing those around them. They sometimes do strange things, like flapping their arms or barking like a dog in public. Their reactions to things can be very intense and sudden and do not always make sense to the rest of us. They are overly sensitive to many types of stimuli; they do not behave or learn like most children.

They are also highly intelligent. They care about the peo-

ple and things that are important to them. They have hopes and dreams and plans for the future. They want to have friends. They want to fit in. They want to do what's expected of them.

Aspergers Syndrome (AS) is the highest-functioning form of autism. Nonverbal Learning Disorder (NLD) is also considered by many to be an autism spectrum disorder. The two disorders share many characteristics. These children are verbal – sometimes overly so. They want to interact with others, but often they just don't know how. Their difficulties lie in the areas of nonverbal communication; body language, tone of voice, facial expression, and the many unwritten, unspoken rules of playground etiquette are difficult for them to understand. Their world is one of words, not images. Current estimates are that one in every 150 children falls somewhere on the autism spectrum.

Neither of my children had a diagnosis when they began school. Looking back, there were signs of problems in their preschool years, but they were not serious enough to cause concern until they entered the classroom environment. For a child who sees and understands the world through words, a large group of peers is an intimidating and scary environment. Children do not spell out the rules of interaction. Teachers and other adults often do not explain what behavior is expected. They assume that, by the time children start school, they know how to behave and can control their behaviour.

I sent my older son, Jeremy, off to school in JK full of hope and excitement. I love the school environment myself, and I was eager to expose my child to it and to

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C D I E P



EN BREF L'enseignement à domicile n'a pas été mon premier choix. J'y ai été forcée par un système scolaire insensible aux incapacités de mes enfants et par l'absence de volonté de faire les accommodements exigés par les politiques en vigueur, choisissant plutôt de blâmer nos compétences parentales. Ces enfants brillants ont commencé à dépérir, tant sur le plan scolaire qu'au niveau psychologique, se persuadant qu'ils étaient « mauvais » et « stupides ». Après deux ans d'enseignement à domicile, ils sont transformés. Ils apprennent beaucoup et s'épanouissent. Que peut-on conclure, alors, au sujet de notre engagement à respecter et à accommoder les différences ? Qu'arrive-t-il dans les nombreux cas où les parents ne peuvent prendre la même décision que nous ?



ONE FAMILY'S STORY

become part of it as a parent. The events of the following years left me disenchanted and angry. The school system I believed in and wanted to be a part of failed and rejected my children, not because they were un-teachable, but because the system and many of the people in it were inflexible and unwilling to make the necessary, frequently quite simple, accommodations required (and in some cases legally mandated).

In JK, Jeremy quickly gained a reputation as an antisocial child. He pushed other children out of his way; he didn't participate in circle time; he wasn't good at waiting for his turn. But he was clearly intelligent. He could explain exactly how a situation should be handled. So when he actually did something completely different (and far less appropriate), teachers assumed that he understood and was intentionally misbehaving.

Our many meetings with the principal and the school board's behaviour consultants began during that first year, and with them began a theme that persisted throughout our years in the system: blame the parents. We are not perfect parents, of course, and our children were a particular challenge. But now, in retrospect, I see that the inevitable self-doubt that comes with having "difficult" children was fueled by the school system's eagerness to find a solution that fit its own preconceptions. The strategy is particularly tempting, I'm sure, when children suffer from "invisible disabilities" for which there is no obvious cause. Parents – particularly parents with "problem" children – are very visible indeed!

RECOMMENDATIONS WERE IGNORED, PROMISES WERE BROKEN, IEPS WERE BARELY CONSULTED – DESPITE THE FACT THAT ALL CONTAINED SUGGESTIONS THAT WOULD HAVE MADE LIFE EASIER, NOT JUST FOR THE CHILDREN, BUT FOR THE SCHOOL AS WELL.

While I try to believe that most of the school staff meant well, I will always wonder how the principal thought it was helpful to tell me that my child's problems were simply a result of the fact that I was an over-involved mother – that if I just gave Jeremy more time away from me he'd be fine. As I struggled to come to terms with the fact that my child did not "fit in" and maybe actually had a "problem", the principal was laying the blame squarely at my feet. Even after Jeremy was diagnosed with NLD, severe generalized and social anxiety and obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) in Grade 3, the attitude persisted. Dealing with these issues was difficult enough; to be told that we were somehow to blame was frustrating and hurtful, and did nothing to deal with the urgency of finding solutions to his problems.

"Blaming the parents" damaged more than my feelings. It led to the assumption that Jeremy would "just snap out of it" if he was properly disciplined, which in turn led to him missing most of the fun parts of school – field trips, special fun days, and gym or art class. Even worse, it removed compassion and flexibility – the two things he needed most – from his school experience. The downward



spiral that began in his first year accelerated through the primary grades. Day after day, week after week, he returned from school angry and defeated. Night after night we tried to build him up to return again the next morning.

Our second son, Michael began school two years later. A self-taught reader by JK who loved worksheets and school routines, he was at first a contrast to his older brother.

But gradually, he, too, began to exhibit problems. He became a social “outsider,” sometimes withdrawn, sometimes aggressive, increasingly unhappy. At first we were told his behaviour was “copycat behaviour,” mimicking his brother who received so much attention for misbehaving. Michael’s giftedness was identified early, and there was some thought that he might simply be bored, but the school provided little additional stimulation, and his behavioural problems were treated with the same lack of flexibility as his brother’s. He was not diagnosed with Asperger’s Syndrome until later, but his IEP included specific accommodations for both giftedness and associated behavioural problems, and the school had informally (and wrongly) labeled him with Oppositional Defiant Disorder by the time he was in Grade 2.

It’s important to emphasize here that the right strategies, in the classroom and on the playground, worked with these boys. They are not monsters; they are not unteachable. When staff members were sensitive to their needs, school was a good place for them. I will never forget Jeremy’s Grade 3 teacher, and neither will he. Despite the fact that his IEP was not yet complete, she accommodated him more completely than any other teacher ever did. When I went to her after school one day to ask for accommodations for the Grade 3 testing, she handed me the completed paperwork providing him with exactly the accommodations I’d been about to request.

But she was an outstanding exception. Generally speaking, for both Jeremy and Michael, recommendations were ignored, promises were broken, IEPs were barely consulted – despite the fact that all contained suggestions that would have made life easier, not just for the children, but for the school as well. And despite the fact that the school was legally obligated to follow the IEPs, regardless

of the inclinations and personal opinions of individual teachers.

In a school system committed to respecting differences, the failure to make relatively simple accommodations puzzled – and continues to puzzle – me. In JK, for example, it was decided that a gym mat should be brought into the classroom to provide a defined space Jeremy could use without being disturbed when he needed a break. How simple. But it never materialized. Later, in accordance with a specific strategy from his IEP, Jeremy was given permission to leave the room when he felt he needed to let off steam. It worked. But when a new teacher took over mid-year, she decided that level of flexibility didn’t suit her teaching style. Jeremy lost this valuable release valve and the opportunity to work on the self-control mechanisms he so badly needed.

It is well documented that stimulus overload triggers behavioural problems in children with these disorders. Both Michael and Jeremy pushed others in line or while getting into their outside clothes – not out of simple aggression, but because others were in their space and there was minimal structure. Some simple changes in routine would have made a big difference: a space at the end of the line, a coat hook a little distance from the chaos of thirty children putting their boots on, or permission to stay at their desks until the line moved and then follow at the end. Instead, they were punished for aggression, which accomplished nothing.

I don’t think our expectations of the school were unrealistic. We didn’t expect miracles. We didn’t expect the school to revolve around our family’s problems. We did expect administrators and teachers to respond with compassion and to take seriously the recommendations from the children’s psychologist and their own IPRC process.

Although Jeremy’s learning style requires some accommodation, very little was provided. For example, children with NLD have poor small motor control, a problem that began causing problems for Jeremy well before he was diagnosed. He learned to read early, but from kindergarten on, he would scribble, write illegibly, crumple and rip his worksheets. He was made to erase and rewrite numerous times and given more and more copies of the worksheets, eventually having them sent home with him. He lost recess time. He was sent to the office. But nobody asked, why? He wasn’t ripping the sheets to be destructive; he was ripping them out of sheer frustration because he didn’t know what else to do and he wasn’t being helped. By the end of grade five, Jeremy was convinced he was stupid because his work was taught and marked in ways that he could not understand and the school was ignoring the IEP that clearly outlined his needs.



I BELIEVE IN PUBLIC EDUCATION. I WAS HARD FOR ME TO ABANDON IT.

BUT AFTER SEVEN YEARS OF TRYING TO MAKE THE SCHOOL SYSTEM

WORK FOR MY CHILDREN, I GAVE UP.

Their classmates were not always nice, of course; children who act strangely have problems with peers. But it was the treatment by the teachers that hurt them the most and still angers me. At recess, and all too often in the classroom, the boys were punished almost reflexively, without careful investigation into what had happened, without compassion, and without consideration for their special needs. As time went on, punishments were clearly designed to remove them from the life of the school. I lost count of the number of days my boys – in Grades 3 and 5 by the time their school experiences came to an end – were suspended. In the short term, this must have given their teachers a welcome relief, but I have to ask, who has the learning problem here? School was a poisonous environment for them, and they learned very early that misbehaviour would allow them to stay home for a day or two. Michael was explicit: when asked by the principal why he persisted in throwing snowballs, against school rules, he replied that he wanted to be suspended. (That's one of the refreshing things about children with Asperger's – they tell it exactly like it is.) We tried to make sure that "suspension days" at home were not pleasant days – no special events, no TV, no computer. But it would not have been possible to make home less welcoming than school.

The situation became so bad that both boys began talking about suicide. All children have rough times, and we tried to keep their unhappiness in perspective. But the frequent references to suicide by eight and ten year olds began to worry both us and their psychologist, and we were all convinced that it could be traced to their school experiences. Every summer their behaviour and state of mind improved, and we'd think that next year would be better. It never was.

Gradually, I became aware that the "blame the parent" strategy had shifted somewhat. At the same time as the school was failing to meet the children's needs, it was abdicating its legal responsibility to do so to me. Although I had been labeled "over-involved" in the early stages, the school was happy to involve me when it made their lives easier.

As the boys got older, the phone calls began. "There's been an incident." "He's too upset, come get him." "We

don't know what to do." The calls got more frequent, the reasons less significant, but the message was always the same: he's your child, come and get him. The calls became so frequent, in fact, that we decided it wasn't possible for me to work. Working with the school and advocating for the children had become too time-consuming. Eventually, it reached the point where we started screening our calls – even going so far as purchasing a new phone and subscribing to call display – so that we could have some control over when we dealt with these minor issues.

It became clear that I was being used to deal with things they should have been able to manage; in fact, often the problem had been solved by the time I got there. I think the turning point came when I was called to pick Michael up because he wasn't working. He wasn't being disruptive or hurting anyone. He was simply refusing to do the assigned work. This was a situation the school had created itself: he had learned that if he dug in his heels, he'd go home. For a child who hated school and felt victimized there, it was obvious what he should do! And it was becoming increas-

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ingly obvious what I should do.

Our experience with the school system raises some troubling questions that go well beyond one family's experience. Some will respond to this story by saying that these children do not belong in a regular classroom. I can't deny that they require extra attention and their behaviour can be disruptive. I can't deny that they challenge the patience and ingenuity of teachers and staff (and parents!). But they are entitled to an education, so where *do* they belong? And what message are we sending to other children if the significant adults in their lives can't be bothered to show flexibility and compassion to those who are different or difficult to deal with? Finally, what about the many parents of such children who simply cannot, for financial or personal reasons, make the choice we were finally driven to make?

I believe in public education. I was hard for me to abandon it. But after seven years of trying to make the school system work for my children, I gave up. Rather than working almost full time to make the school work for them, I am now working more than full time to give them the education the school failed to provide. And after two years, both boys are thriving. It took the first year to simply restore the confidence in themselves that years of school-induced stress had destroyed. My goal for that first year was not academic; it was to convince them that they were, indeed, good kids.

Now, they know that. They are learning, both academically and socially. Jeremy has caught up in the areas in which he had fallen behind when the school gave up trying to teach him. He no longer believes he's stupid. He says he'll be ready to go back into the system for high school, and if he still feels that way when the time comes, I think he'll be able to do it. Michael is self-motivated, content with who he is, and meeting academic challenges far beyond those that were being offered in his classroom. Both boys are active members of a homeschooling group, where they have made friends and are learning to interact with peers in a non-judgmental environment. Jeremy has completed a babysitting course and is working toward his lifeguarding certification – both "classroom" situations where he has shown he can function without special assistance. Michael has developed a love of music; he is still a bit of a loner, but a happy one.

Any regrets? Only that we didn't do it sooner. They – and we – are happier and more relaxed. My stomach no longer sinks when the phone rings. It will be one of the children's friends calling, not the school to tell me what they've done wrong now.

The boys' former teachers and principal would probably label me a whining parent. Maybe sometimes I am. I know that teachers and schools face daunting challenges, and that no system will ever suit every child. But after years of a systemic failure to meet their responsibilities, I think they need to hold up a mirror and examine their own behaviour. My kids are not the only ones being failed by a system that talks eloquently of respecting and accommodating differences, while driving kids who are "different" to despair. |

The author of this article is a qualified elementary teacher who will be home schooling and advocating for her boys as long as necessary. She has requested anonymity in order to protect the identify of her children. Jeremy and Michael are not their real names.