

Is School Working for Your Child?

Do you need to pull your child out of school?

Homeschooling can be a frightening thought. Fourteen years ago, it intimidated me. Though my child struggled with schoolwork in first and second grades, I never thought I had the energy or the patience needed to teach him at home. Getting him and his homework out the door on school mornings was hard enough. I did not want to take on his education.

My son was a bit of a shock, coming nearly three years after his conscientious, attentive big sister. My son Pete¹ always was thinking of new activities to try, involving hazards I had never thought to prohibit. Many adventures ended with the same conversation:

“What do you learn from this, dear?”

“Not to.”

Our boy had many strengths. He loved to talk to anyone. His bad moods usually lasted only a few minutes. But there was an odd combination of intelligence and slowness. He was still trying to master the alphabet song in second grade—was it “emma, emma, pea”? In third grade, he still could not count to sixty. At home, he often would forget instructions. He liked to please his parents and was clearly frustrated by his lapses.

All in all, dealing with my sweet, charming, and highly distractible little boy took plenty of my attention and energy before and after school. I certainly did not want to homeschool him.

1. Unless first and last names are given, names of homeschoolers and their children have been changed to preserve their privacy.

Yet I did, for nine years.

Many who homeschool were reluctant at first but decided it was the best option for their struggling learners. What makes some parents and guardians move from saying, “Not me!” to taking the plunge?

In this chapter:

- Struggling in the classroom and at home
- Is public school a good fit for your child
- Alternatives to the classroom

Struggling in the Classroom and at Home

For some children, learning is fun and rewarding. For others, it is a struggle, a chore to be overcome. Children can struggle different ways:

- Carl cannot sit still even though he is fourteen.
- Jessica daydreams constantly.
- Anna knows the answers, but her handwriting is not only painfully slow, it is illegible.
- For Michelle, the buzzing of the overhead fluorescent lights is intolerable.
- Sam has trouble reading, but remembers details and asks great questions.

These children have at least average intelligence, but they perform below their ability. When your children struggle, you devote many hours to helping them succeed in school. You meet with the school staff regularly. They may write an Individualized Educational Plan (IEP), guaranteeing some special help for your child. They may disagree among themselves about the best approach and behave inconsistently with your child, to her confusion. Your school staff may be difficult for you to work with. You may be battling the school system, because either they are not providing the services promised in the IEP, or the services promised are inadequate. But even if your school staff is professional and helpful—as was everyone at my son’s school—you spend hours keeping in touch with teachers; studying special education laws, regulations, and acronyms; attending seminars; and trading information with other parents.

Every night you help your child slog through homework. Don, a teacher in Illinois, remembered life before he started homeschooling his daughter with high-functioning autism:

She had struggled with homework from the beginning. It always took her much longer than it would take other kids. As she got into higher elementary grades, we were spending two, three, four hours a night on homework. [By seventh grade] homework was sucking up all our time.

Your child may sense your anxiety over her future. She may be a perfectionist, furious with herself because of each small error. Or she may rush carelessly on, not expecting to learn. When the homework is done, you want to help her in her areas of need, but she has no energy left for tutoring—and neither do you.

Perhaps she often comes home from school tired, angry, or tearful. For a variety of reasons, she may have social problems, missing the cues that other kids pick up. If she has an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)², she needs help recognizing the point of view of others and responding appropriately. If she is distractible, she needs training in awareness and self-control. My son's second grade teacher described a typical scene: Pete goes to the pencil sharpener, accidentally bumping a classmate's chair. She complains, but Pete does not hear. On the return trip, his mind still elsewhere, he does not notice that he jiggles her desk again. Five minutes later, Pete gets up to throw away some trash, and squeezing through, jars her again. So she yells at him. He has no idea why, so he gets mad, as well.

The brighter the child, the more frustrated the parents can be as they contrast their child's ability with her difficulty in school. And the brighter the child, the more frustrated the child can become. Even the brightest children may conclude: "School isn't that hard for most people. I must be stupid."

Apart from school work, your child's difficulties create strains at home. Learning difficulties may make it hard for kids to hear, understand, or respond when Mom or Dad give instructions, causing tension and misunderstandings. My son once wrote what goes on in his head. (I have left out two-thirds of it.)

2. *Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) are a range of complex developmental disabilities that usually appear in the first three years of life. They affect development in the areas of social interaction and communication skills. Source: Autism Society of America, "Defining Autism." www.autism-society.org, accessed January 17, 2008.*

Oh, Wow! Look at the clouds out there. I wonder if it's going to rain. I should have looked at the newspaper this morning at breakfast. What kept me from looking? I dunno. Those eggs were good. Wait, Mom said something to me. What did she say? Oh, I remember: to do the dishes.

So when you said, "Do the dishes," did you mean you want me to clean the dishes? With what? Is there enough soap in the wash basin? Oh, yes, and how old is that water? Do I need to dump it out and get new water? And I have to remember to ask Mom about the weather once I am done with the dishes. Oh, dear! Am I still standing here, not answering what Mom said? Why do I think like this?

Meanwhile, back out on planet earth, Mom is thinking, "Come on. Look at me when I talk to you. I asked you a simple question: Will you please do the dishes?"

Children's difficulties can affect home life in different ways. Parents of children with ASD work daily and intensively on communication and social skills, coaching for situations which the average child could handle easily. They also may be trying to modify quirky repetitive behaviors, which can isolate the child further. All children forget chores, but children with Attention Deficit Disorder³ (ADD/ADHD) forget all the time. Their parents spend years teaching basic organization skills. It seems they have replaced so many lost hats, sweatshirts, and books that they could have outfitted another child.

Medical concerns may complicate schooling. You may be trying to squeeze time for medical appointments or therapies into your school week. Perhaps your child is prone to frequent illnesses. Is a sleep disorder the reason she cannot pay attention in class? Are her stomach aches caused by stress, irritable bowel syndrome, or something else?

Perhaps your child needs medication for seizures, allergies, or other conditions. You may be trying medication, alternative treatments, or special diets. If so, you are trying to make sure the regimen is followed at school. Before and after school daily, you are evaluating your child's mood and

3. ADD/ADHD is used in this book to refer to AD/HD, Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder, which, despite the "H," can occur with or without hyperactivity. Some parents interviewed for this book have children with different kinds of ADD/ADHD: inattentive, hyperactive, distractible, impulsive, or combined.

behavior, which is complex and variable. But you don't see your child's performance at school—you must rely on brief reports from a busy teacher. You wish there was litmus paper you could slip in your daughter's mouth: "Yes, blue! She's paying attention today." But why? Maybe the teacher was just more interesting today, or there were fewer distractions. Trying to figure it out takes even more time.

Helping your struggling learner may take its toll in another way. Trying to help a child with learning difficulties succeed in a traditional school setting may make you start to think of your child not just as different, but defective. You can forget that your child is a growing person, with her own gifts. You can start to neglect the strengths that are the seeds of her success in adulthood. Wrapped up in your worry about her future, you can forget to enjoy your child.

Is Public School a Good Fit for Your Child?

Schools face a difficult job, serving hundreds or thousands of students. Teachers must adopt methods that help a majority, so many teachers lecture and expect children to sit still and listen. Beginning around fourth grade, teachers also expect students to learn from textbooks. Schools set schedules that enable them to teach large groups efficiently. This can be hard for some struggling learners. Moving from classroom to classroom befuddles some children. Teachers may have to announce details and changes quickly, which some children have trouble absorbing. For many students, these are just inconveniences. For your student, they may be disastrous.

I have supported public schools for years. I received a good education in public schools. I taught junior high public school with dedicated professionals who gave and gave to help their students. When my children started at our wonderful public school, I volunteered as a tutor, classroom aide, and PTA newsletter editor. I respect public school teachers and staff.

But, for some of our children, public school is not the best fit. Some kids fall between the cracks. Their needs are often outweighed by the needs of others, and the help they get is limited by budget crunches and classroom sizes. Every year, schools are told to meet more mandates and

improve test scores. Schools have many children to serve, with a wide range of needs and abilities. And teachers have only so much time.

Donna, who homeschools three boys in Maryland, explained about why she first brought her oldest son home:

In the classroom, there was too much chaos, disruption, and distraction. There was not enough one-on-one or personal attention, and... his reading and writing were behind his peers. Too much in the classroom was learning through reading and writing. And it's very hard to learn though your weak areas.

Anna recalled when her son was seven:

We met with all the specialists who had tested Brendan. I kept hearing the same thing over and over, like a chorus, that Brendan, one-on-one, could produce much more than he could produce in the classroom setting. [But] Brendan did not qualify for any special help.

Alternatives to the Classroom

When public school began to seem inadequate for my child, I looked at private schools, hoping smaller classes and special accommodations would do the job. But finding the right school isn't easy, even if you can afford it. Private schools may not provide the accommodations your child needs.

Some private schools would have been a poor fit for my son. I observed classes and decided that merely having seventeen classmates instead of twenty-seven would not make much difference for him. At one school, the rooms were more crowded than in public school, so his classmates would be even more distracting. Another school boasted individualized instruction, but it was all by computer. My son loves people, and I knew he needed teachers, not software. A third school offered a self-contained program for students with language-based learning disabilities, but the plodding pace set by the teacher and her hypnotic, slow speech would have driven my son crazy.

I was fortunate to live near a city with several schools specifically for struggling learners. I visited them and was impressed with their excellent programs, with experienced, wise professionals. The best private school option for us was an hour's drive away and cost more than fourteen thousand dollars a year at the time. (Today it is more than twenty thousand.) Along with the cost of tuition, I also considered how two hours of commuting would affect my son, who hates long drives.

After her son failed first grade at a small private school, Sarita, a mother in Georgia, was at a loss:

I just absolutely despaired: "What am I going to do with this child because I can't put him in public school, and he can't function in private school." I didn't really think of homeschooling as an option even though I was already a stay-at-home mom.

Although some people homeschool from the beginning out of personal conviction, others I interviewed, like Sarita, switch to homeschooling out of necessity. She began in 2005 and enjoys the freedom to customize their homeschool to her son's needs and interests. Below, Marcia describes why she removed her son from private school. He has learning disabilities and ADD/ADHD:

Number one, he needed the distractions of the classroom removed. Number two, we were doing most work at home as homework, anyway. Number three, there was a lot of ridicule. Kids are kids, and they picked up on the fact that he was a struggling learner, and they could be pretty unkind. And then I found that the private services I needed him to have were very difficult to get. Everyone was trying to get those before- or after-school hours. My child was exhausted after school, and not quite plugged in before school. And then, to have to turn around [after early morning tutoring] and go to school! Life was getting extremely complicated, trying to give him everything he needed, the way he needed it.

Another option we considered was keeping Pete in school and hiring a tutor to help with reading, writing, math, and homework. A good tutor can help. But it would have made life busier without removing our son from the tense school situation. And the tutor would have had only the dregs of our son's energy and attention after school, just as we did helping our son with homework.

My husband and I saw four options:

- keep our son where he was, a great school, but one where he was “emotionally exhausted,” as one teacher said,
- enroll him in a private school,
- hire a tutor to help with schoolwork,
- homeschool him.

We decided our best option was for me to stay home and teach our son myself. But we only reached that decision slowly, as we learned more about homeschooling.