
Bringing Your Special Education Child "Home"

By Lenore Colacion Hayes



School is getting ready to start again and as you reminisce about your child's relatively relaxing summer, you wonder if you should give serious consideration to not returning him to school. Homeschooling is something that has always appealed to you, but your child has been diagnosed with a learning disability (or other special needs) and the notion of educating him without his usual cadre of special education specialists has been a major roadblock for you to overcome.

Still, you think back to days throughout the summer when your son awoke on his own at 10 each morning, fixed his own breakfast, picked out his clothes, dressed himself and filled the remainder of the day with playing Legos, reading magazines, and running with the dogs in the yard. Those summer days have been in stark contrast to his usual routine. The angst-ridden morning ritual of dragging him out of bed at daybreak, so that there is sufficient time to tussle with him over what clothes he'll wear to school. While you prepare breakfast (and a sack lunch to go), you will undoubtedly encounter 30-to-45-minutes of deliberations over the virtues of peanut butter versus cheese sandwiches and whether or not he can digest a bowl of cold cereal without regurgitating it. The search for his book bag and an overdue science report will account for at least another 30 minutes, which will get him to the school bus stop with 0.02 seconds to spare.

You find yourself at the crossroads of trying to decide whether keeping your son out of a classroom to enhance his emotional growth will somehow mar his academic progress. Reframe your outlook to one that is less negative; as your child's emotional development matures, so will his ability to

better comprehend the academic realm. At home, your son will follow a daily schedule that fits his temperament and internal clock, rather than the one imposed by the school that disrupts his natural rhythms. He will have the extra time that he needs to comprehend multiplication and he won't develop antsy boredom rereading the same chapter of a book waiting for the rest of his classmates to complete the task. The benefits of homeschooling a special education (SPED) child can be innumerable.

Now that you have decided to proceed with homeschooling, your next step will be to determine which legal option best suits your family's needs. While there are a number of ways to legally homeschool in California, parents of SPED students may opt for one option over another based on a number of considerations. Do you want to try to retain your child's school-provided SPED services? Or, do you prefer to get as far away from public services as possible with the least amount of hassle? Do you want to develop your own learning plan? Or would you prefer a curriculum that more resembles traditional school?

Probably the most popular method by which to legally homeschool is to file the R-4 Private School Affidavit (PSA) with the state office of education. This option requires a simple online filing, maintenance of minimal paperwork, and a basic understanding of a handful of California Education Codes. Families filing the R-4 are free to use whatever materials and resources they deem appropriate for their children. (See our page on the Private School Option).

Families whose children already have an Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) may not feel comfortable going it alone with the R-4. If a family wishes to try to keep the child's SPED services through the public schools, the best option is to enroll with a charter school program designed for

homeschoolers. Many of the public school district operated independent study programs (ISP), as well as some charters, may not provide special services to IEP students. But, many of the charters do provide speech, occupational and other services. Ask before enrolling! The charter programs are also popular in some homeschooling circles because they provide curriculum materials, along with classes and access to field trips, computer labs and other perks.

Private ISPs are another option that are especially appealing to many new families because they offer something of a safety net by providing the new homeschooler with a certain amount of anonymity from the state (the private ISP, not the individual family, files the R-4), as well as interacting with previous school officials to obtain the child's cumulative records. Families who have developed adverse relationships with school staff by demanding services due their children may prefer to enlist the assistance of a private ISP administrator to "officially" remove the child's files, while also offering guidance to the new family. Smaller private ISPs tend to allow a lot of flexibility to families wanting to choose their own learning materials. The larger (and more expensive) programs generally offer a prepackaged curriculum to enrolled families.

The downside to enrolling in a private program or filing your own R-4 is that your child will be considered a private school student and no longer eligible for special education services. However, nonpublic school students are still entitled to assessments and periodic consultations with the public schools. Therefore, your child's IEP can be reevaluated when the current one expires or your child can benefit from occasional meetings with the school's SPED teachers.

Countless families decide to opt out of these services, either because they are substandard in quality or the families

simply tire of jumping through bureaucratic hoops. However, because they decide to forego school services doesn't mean that they eliminate them altogether. There are a variety of low-to-no cost therapeutic (speech, occupational, etc.) services available within most communities. Other families create partnerships with their medical and mental health professionals. Learning to work with your own children and checking-in with the specialists on a regular or as-needed basis is a more cost-effective approach and helps the child apply the therapeutic interventions within their own environments (as opposed to an unfamiliar office setting). Many other families realize that a child previously diagnosed with a mild-to-moderate learning disorder no longer suffers from such, leading many to believe that children are misdiagnosed simply because they learn on their own timetables while utilizing their own styles.

Regardless of the legal approach or educational style you chose, homeschooling is a very do-able proposition for families of children with learning differences. And, should you start to fall back into the notion that your special child's education must be provided by a credentialed or licensed individual, just think back to those summer afternoons when your son filled his time with lots of water-based experiments and tending to a small garden. How does that child compare to the sulky one returning home, laden down with hours of homework ahead of him?