When Schools Fail: Accidental Homeschooling
by Wendy Hilton

My daughter was diagnosed with autism at age 2.5. Right away I researched educational options for her. At the time of her diagnosis she was totally non-verbal, could not (or would not) feed herself, was not potty trained (and was nowhere near being ready), and had no appropriate means of communication. She was much more like an infant than a toddler, though she was able to walk.

Early Years at Home

After researching and talking to other moms of kids with autism, I chose a behavioral program, got training to learn how to effectively implement the program, recruited a few helpers (I had a newborn to take care of at that time), and began working with Hannah 30 to 35 hours a week. Within just a few days I began to see wonderful changes! It was definitely a slow-and-steady process, but she slowly began to learn how to imitate the
actions of others, how to play with developmentally appropriate toys, how to take turns, how to indicate her wants and needs without crying or throwing a fit, how to sit still for increasingly long periods of time, how to appropriately look at books (without putting them in her mouth—a serious sensory issue of hers), and how to do other skills that she wasn’t picking up on her own.

Over the next few years, she learned her numbers, colors, letters, lots of object and animal names, and other skills she would need to know for school. Little did I know, but during this time Hannah had taught herself to read! We occasionally had her tested by professionals that I worked with to determine what I needed to teach Hannah next. I was a teacher before Hannah was born, but Hannah was my first child and I didn’t know much about very young children and the appropriate developmental milestones. One day when she was being tested, the test administrator decided to see if she could point to a few simple words on note cards. When Hannah easily did that, she increased the number of words in the field and then increased the difficulty of the words. Hannah continued to choose the correct words until she reached a reading level of about fifth grade. At the time she was about five or six.

Testing showed that what I was doing at home with Hannah was very successful. It was lots of hard work, and looking back I have no idea how I survived, but thankfully I did! It was hard work for Hannah too, but she usually enjoyed the one-on-one attention she got, and she loved being rewarded for correct responses and for working hard at whatever she was learning.

Starting School

When Hannah was about five, I decided that she had learned enough that she could probably attend school part-time and continue with her home program for just a few hours each day. She began going to a local public school that provided a class just for children with autism. At first, the program seemed to be working very well. Hannah seemed to enjoy going to school, she worked hard at school and was transferring what she’d learned at home to the school environment, and we were pleased with how things were going for her.

For a couple of years, we were happy with the way things were working. Then the teacher that taught the class for children with autism moved away. There was no other teacher trained to take her place, so Hannah was put in a regular classroom with her own assistant. The assistant tried her hardest to keep Hannah busy and to help Hannah learn and do well in the mainstreamed classroom. After several months, though, I knew it just wasn’t working out.

Hannah was coming home in the afternoons upset and sad. She was frustrated and had behavior issues that she’d never had before. She was simply no longer happy at school. The more I looked into the situation, the more I realized that Hannah was bored and frustrated. Because Hannah was non-verbal, her new teacher didn’t believe in her ability
to read or even to understand what was being spoken to her. For that reason, she was having the assistant do very basic work with Hannah, such as identifying colors, numbers, and letters. Hannah was simply bored!

She also wasn’t being allowed to use her communication device at school because the new teacher didn’t know how to use it or how to help Hannah use it. The assistant did know how to use it, but of course she wasn’t able to do that if the teacher didn’t allow Hannah to take her device out of the carrying case.

Like any good parent advocate, I called the principal and teacher, had meetings with them, sent notes and information with Hannah to school, offered to let the teacher come to my house to observe a home learning session, and even sent work with Hannah to do at school. After doing everything I knew to do, I finally decided to bring Hannah home for good. She would no longer attend school part-time and do her work at home part-time. From then on, Hannah would homeschool.

**Transitioning to Homeschooling**

It was a very frightening feeling knowing that I would be completely responsible for Hannah’s education. It was a little overwhelming knowing that I would be responsible for her education and the education of her younger brother who would also soon begin homeschooling. But I knew I had to try it. There really wasn’t any other option.

It didn’t take long to realize that Hannah loved being at home full time with her brother and me! She was happy again! She was doing her work nicely. She was making progress both with motor skills and social skills. She was using the academic information she possessed to make more academic progress. She was becoming her normal self again! It was wonderful to see!

Not long after that, when her brother began officially homeschooling for kindergarten, a new baby was added to the family. It was definitely difficult homeschooling two children and caring for a newborn, but we survived that challenge just like we’d survived other challenges until that time.

Fast forward a few years and Hannah is now 17, her brother is 15, and her younger sister is 9. Hannah and her brother are both homeschooling at 10th grade level this year. Even though it is necessary to test Hannah differently and to use different teaching techniques with her, she is capable of doing some 10th grade work. In the subjects that are more difficult for her, I use materials that are at a lower grade level. All three of my children homeschool. Together we attend local homeschool group outings like field trips, holiday parties, and classes. The whole family attends church together, goes on vacation together, visits friends and neighbors and relatives, and in general has a wonderful time learning and growing together!
Is this the way I thought my children would be educated? No. Would I choose to homeschool again if I had it to do over? Definitely! Homeschooling is not for every family—whether you have typical kids or kids with special needs. It certainly works well for some of us, though. I encourage you to consider whether the homeschooling option might be right for you and your children. Having a child with special needs should not keep you from pursuing the homeschool option. It might just be the answer you’ve been looking for!

Wendy and her family live in the South. Wendy is a Christian, homeschooling, work-from-home mom. She and her husband, Scott, were high school sweethearts and have been married for 21 years. Their oldest child has autism and has been homeschooled since age two. Wendy is the co-owner of the homeschool website Hip Homeschool Moms and would love for you to come visit her at http://www.hiphomeschoolmoms.com and to like her Hip Homeschool Moms Facebook page. In her spare time, she loves reading, quilting, and scrapbooking. You can visit her personal blog, Homeschooling Blessings, at http://wendy-homeschoolingblessings.blogspot.com.