

At the October teacher training meeting, I was asked to share about teacher - parent communication. I shared a little about my background. I decided it was pertinent to share that I held a Bachelors of Science degree in Elementary Education with a specialization in special Education and a Reading Endorsement. I taught Special Education mainly to mildly handicapped children who were learning disabled, mentally retarded and emotionally disturbed. I also have experience in this area because I have a son with Pervasive Developmental Disorder and ADD type symptoms. He struggles with anxiety and other co-morbid issues. He so sweetly told me that he wanted me to share his story to help others. I am so proud of the fact that he understands what others are facing and wants to help.

Our journey of discovery began when some other children at a party tied up Seth. His little brother came running to tell me what was going on, and I found Seth, not knowing how to honestly say that he didn't want to be tied up. I began searching, trying to understand why Seth lacked the social skills he needed to navigate relationships and why others would reject him. Another mom asked me if I knew Seth was gifted. It took two weeks before I could mention this again. She was saying that he was different - that other children didn't like his robotic speech and his unusual vocabulary. After much research, we contacted the Gifted Development Center in Denver, Colorado. I explained that he appeared to me to be gifted and was very early in verbal development, but lacked in coordination and social skills. He was not performing in school, yet he could read at three. He was often misunderstood. They agreed, he had a huge gap between his apparent profound verbal giftedness and his average performance. There was a relative weakness that was significant.

Then Seth attended classes. One teacher said Seth was being manipulative -he refused to use his scissors, Looking back; he was embarrassed that he was so uncoordinated. Another teacher reported that he refused to share his crayons- now we know that inflexibility is common with PDD kids. We know that Seth can tend to be a little obsessive compulsive. He must rigidly follow rules. People had such high expectations of him, and called him the little encyclopedia. He sounded - yes, sounded so smart. But did he really have the fine-tuning of comprehension down on all those big words? We were told he was a Savant in Language, and a Natural Reader, but could he apply what he knew?

My purpose in speaking to the teachers was to sort of smooth things out. So that we could have common purpose in working with children who are different and misunderstood. I wanted to say, "Welcome to my world." or welcome to the world of many families who struggle with diagnosed and well as undiagnosed disabilities. Teachers label many children by their misunderstood difficulties as lazy, selfish, stubborn or rude. I propose that some parents still don't even realize what is going on with their children and some do already know, but don't

communicate the information for a variety of reasons. I hope that my presentation helped teachers to be aware that there is much more going on many times than they first realize, and that they can be instrumental in helping each family in their journey, wherever that may be.

I have had many experiences that have forced me to think and pray about what I believe to be true with special children. I had an experience as a section leader several years ago when completing an exit interview: one of my teachers was disappointed in how unorganized her students and parents were. She felt that homeschoolers at large were being derelict in their responsibilities. She taught kids who were struggling, and felt that it was the parents who were the cause. I had to step back and try to listen and learn from her. I took into consideration that she wasn't a homeschooler, that she didn't have any special needs children and that she was a very sequential learner. But more than that she was describing all too familiar struggles. Ones I had faced. I was unorganized at times, and so are my kids. My kids were late bloomers, but certainly bloomed. And their development was clearly asynchronous to add to the confusion. I was sure she hadn't read the Moore's, Better Late than Early. Philosophies or any other home school ideologies. I forced myself to relax - to listen and to talk it out with this experienced and educated woman. When I reported on the exit interview to LaJean, our administrator at the time, I could tell that she was responding at first, the same way I had: She was defensive, but listened to what I said. I told her that I felt many of the children at High Country may very well be ADD and learning disabled and that many parents have pulled their kids out of school because of their failures. I told her that a physician hasn't labeled most of the children we work with, but many are struggling. There are children here as well, like Seth that were never put in school, because Moms just like me knew it would never work. I told her that our teachers might not need a label to work with struggling kids; they just need to know what to do. Again, at first she denied that there was a problem but began to take a deep breath and admit that there could be some truth to what the teacher had said and some truth to my responses to that teacher.

My thought is that some of the problems that her students faced are easy to recognize, but others are very difficult to separate from lack of discipline and or structure. This teacher didn't believe there were disabilities or learning problems - she saw it as home school in general. As LaJean and I hashed it out -to problem solve, we discussed how this teacher should have communicated more with the parents. The fact is some parents may know what is going on, but others may not, may feel it is just them, or they don't know the degree of the problems yet. As teachers, you are helping them by communicating with the parents: We need the parents as an ally. I explained to the teachers that they get the privilege and awesome responsibility of putting the child's needs first and diving into a sensitive

area. And of course, we have to evaluate our own motives for speaking with parents - it's all about attitude and compassion. Noone likes their job to be more difficult, but these kids are someone's children - they are God's creation - not a mistake - they have areas of strength and needs. I challenged them that they get to be a part of their growth. Let's admit it parenting is hard - and home schooling adds greatly to that challenge. We need each other as teachers and parents. This teacher had tried to go to one parent who blamed her and wouldn't help, so we really discussed how to effectively talk to parents. I'd like to share some of the thoughts I had concerning talking to parents about their child's shortcomings.

How to: approach a parent:

Ask God to direct you and prepare the parent.

Approach gently

Ask what works for their child

Express child's strengths

Try to feel out if they know the severity of the problem

Listen: the parents often has similar struggles - ask what helped them as a child

Let the parent know you are an ally - wanting the child to get the most from your class. (And it's ok to share what your needs are too.)

The teacher wanted to know why the parents would not have told her if there were special needs. She felt she could have understood and helped the children more. She didn't understand why the parent would just send their child and not tell her the issues. I had personal experience in this area and felt that I know some of the reasons why don't parents communicate.

Often times parents are embarrassed, especially with their firstborn. It's tough to hear that your child CAN'T, or WONT. We feel that it is a poor reflection of us as parents. And, we are at a loss. In fact we question this ourselves. We've beat ourselves up trying to parent better and to not loose patience with the very same issues that the teacher's are addressing.

Parents feel that you wont' understand, and you'll think it's all behavioral or bad parenting. Who wants to be judged?

You may have presumptions or ideas (ADD isn't real). It's confusing when a pastor or other mentor shares that they don't believe that kids really have ADD. But you know that research has shown ADD on brain scans. Kid's brains "turn off" when they try to think. But, you know that not everyone has seen the data, and you can't educate or change the world. It sometimes seems like a waste of time when you tell someone what is going on and they diminish the significance of it. They may say, "Oh, that's normal." While some of the behaviors are normal, the degree to which they are happening isn't.

Many times parent hope this semester will be different and somehow better - and that perhaps their child will do better in a certain type of class, or that

they've matured over the summer. They hope it was just the teacher's fault, or it was that they were immature last semester. They themselves deny the significance of their child's struggles. After all it is painful to see your child struggle. Parents are grieving or in denial at this stage. They have high hopes for their little guy - to be a star athlete, or to be a scientist, and those hopes are being dashed daily. The parent is coming to grips with these disappointments right before your eyes.

Many don't trust teachers because of their past negative experiences. They've been judged and misunderstood. Teachers may have harshly corrected their child or threatened them. Maybe their child has been bullied by other children or made fun of by both children and teachers. Seth was called names by his gymnastics teacher. Sadly, he was there to help him with his poor coordination. His teacher laughed at him and said he looked like a turkey. When my second son came to me in tears at how the children and teacher were laughing at him, I knew I had to speak up. Of course the teacher denied it and refused to apologize. That left a scar on my boys. They began to lose hope in teachers. Some don't want you to stigmatize their child - they don't want your expectations to change. They may have come to grips with their children's struggles and want their child to have to overcome some weaknesses. After all, they have to survive in the real world. This can be a form of denial, or it can be a healthy perspective. There have been times that I just waited to see how Seth would do. I wanted to see what the dynamics would be to see how much was really necessary to share. If the situation didn't require it, why would I want someone else to know.

Their child may ask them not to tell the teacher. Seth felt many times that teacher's would baby him, or look at him with pity. He pointed out that other kids noticed that he might not get into trouble when other kids did. He wanted compassion, but not to be a freak. He'd ask me if I had mentioned it. This put me in a difficult position. He needed modifications, and I certainly wanted teachers to understand Seth, but I didn't want him to feel like something was wrong with him. Also, here at High Country, some of the teacher's kids know my son. They might overhear their mom talking to me about it. It's always a concern: it's hard to be vulnerable when you've experienced a lot of bullying. And, the fact is: Parents have been burned! I remember the orientation day when I whispered to the teacher that Seth had ADD. (She was going to be out of town until the first day of classes, so I had to tell her then.) She didn't notice that I was whispering, or didn't think it through, and yelled out where the whole line of Seth's classmates could hear, "Oh, that's fine, I have ADD too." I melted in embarrassment for Seth. I knew the kids wouldn't understand and that

they would treat him differently. That's difficult for a guy who was already facing social challenges. (Do you think I told the next teacher?)

Along with the parent's advice that you might receive, I gave this teacher some practical ideas for dealing with difficult kids. You know the proverb, "A wise woman builds her house, but a foolish one tears it down." I felt that it might be a good idea to challenge some of her thinking, so that her attitudes would reflect Christ and not judgment. A simple shift in our attitudes can make such a difference. :

Remember you are the adult in the classroom: model kindness, tolerance and acceptance but uphold the standards. You are an ambassador of Christ - he never used condemnation. He corrected in love. Withhold judgment. One teacher pointed out so astutely his frustration with Seth by saying, "Seth you're in your own world." He was right, since he struggles on the Autism Spectrum. Love: doing something for the good of the other person - it's not about you. One teacher said "If you blurt out one more time, Seth, you can't come back tomorrow. (Sadly, this camp was a Christmas gift, and Seth really wanted to be there. He begged me to pray for him. He said, "Mom, I am putting so much work into not blurting out that I can't pay attention. Then the teacher calls on me and I don't know the answer." "Then, I make an excuse. Finally they teacher asked for a volunteer to write down every time I made an excuse. This is so hard, Mom."

Don't point out every fault. Love covers. Seth once asked me to pray for him that he would not be the most annoying kid in his class.

Grace - love covers. Embarrassing a child never works the way you intend. The child just turns the hate on itself and the other children don't want to be uncovered by the teacher, so they join in with the teacher in ostracizing the child.

It's not over till it's over. Let's not forget about long-term growth. What is happening today is just a step along the journey. You can impact change if you handle it correctly.

Read up on the problem if you know what is going on. It could make a big difference if you you know why they child is failing. It would be obvious if the child had a broken arm, but issues like learning disabilities are more elusive.

Ask the Holy Spirit to show you how to work with this child. I know you are able to help a child feel accepted and loved, even if they are difficult.

One realization I had in talking to this teacher in her exit interview was that many of these kids had similar struggles, but with different diagnosis or none at all. In my quest to understand Seth's struggles, I learned a lot about being right brained. I think that most of the children that we see in our classes, who are having difficulties fall into this category. I'll focus on right brained.

Many famous leaders from the past are clearly right-brained. Some people think of right-brained as artistic and creative. Think of Christopher Columbus and other explorers, one friend told me. Surely it took a person who needed adventure to leave the safety of land in those days to sail across the ocean blue. We know that people like Thomas Edison and Einstein were divergent thinkers who learned to read late and didn't fit the common mold. Add genius to ADD and it can be interesting.

In the book, *More Charlotte Mason Education*, Catherine Levison quotes Winston Churchill: "I should've liked to be asked to say what I knew. They always tried to ask what I did not know. When I would have willingly displayed my knowledge, they sought to expose my ignorance. This sort of treatment had only one result. I did not do well in examinations."

These are right-brained kids who don't fit the mold, who don't test well and who are late bloomers.

If a child had a broken leg would you make him run?

I told LaJean that these are disabilities you can't see and that can be misjudged. Kids with lots of different problems have the same issues that overlap. Most are probably right-brained creative thinkers who find it difficult to sit still. They are often divergent thinkers who ask the questions instead of answer them and learn in a whole to part manner. Their heads are spinning with visuals to go with everything the teacher is saying. All that can be a problem. Commonly kids who are right-brained struggle with spelling, reading and details, not to mention sequencing.

How do you know if you are right-brained? Well, Jeffery Freed, in his book, [Right Brained Children in a Left Brained World](#), gives a simple test. Do you see movies in your head, or words? If you can close your eyes and visualize an ice cream cone you may be right-brained. He says the farther to the right you are on the continuum, you can see movies, in color, or multiple movies at the same time. That could be distracting, couldn't it?

Have you thought about the high school dropouts who were very gifted, but just didn't fit in at school? They may have been very creative. Some self-medicated their ADD symptoms with illegal drugs and alcohol. I say that what made it difficult for them in school may have simply been that they had a different learning style. Maybe simple idiosyncrasies affected their learning.

Bottom line: Are some of your students having problems? It takes an expert to differentiate these different problems. Do they have ADD, vision problems, are they gifted and bored, are they dealing with allergies or sensory issues. Maybe they need brain integration therapy or they have Asperger's. Because there are so many overlapping symptoms, it seems simple enough to me to think about what is common about these problems. Mostly, it is that they are right-brained. People

spend thousands of dollars paying experts to differentiate between these issues. I am proposing that as home school teachers that we not focus on labels, but try to do the simple things that will help the child and have compassion above all.

Most of the solutions are the same.

So, should we tell the parent if the child is failing, or struggling? Should we let the child ruin our class? How will the parent respond? These questions are easily answered when we have the child and his good in mind. I want to also give some simple ideas that might help, along with the parent's advice.

OK, I know there is a tension between making excuses for the child and helping them to succeed. I personally am a strong believer in having standards and helping the child rise to the standard, but with the understanding that children arrive in different ways and in different times. In the meantime here are some ideas to help them succeed:

- Teach the child to make a movie for comprehension

- Tell them to read faster so that they don't get hung up on the mechanics

- Show them they can visualize ice cream, then the multiplication tables

- Get eye contact - don't assume they are or are not listening

- Check for understanding often by asking questions

- Have them keep their finger on their notes or the page

- Allow them to stand up or walk around or fidget with something (Seth likes Silly Putty - it's quiet and small)

- Talk faster or slower according to the child's needs. (ADD kids need you to speed up - they spend their lives waiting for others to catch up. They tune out in the mean time.)

- Use a scribe if they struggle with writing.

- Warn them about changes in the routine

- Be consistent

- Allow spell check and calculators where appropriate as long as they know the concept

- Write it, say it, do it. This repetition ensures that the kids with different learning styles catch on

- Minimize physical distractions - face the chairs away from doors and windows

- Point to the spot on the page as you walk around. (Don't embarrass a child who is lost. Just point to everyone's page as you walk by. It will look like you need to find the place.)

- Give prompts to get them on track when they are distracted (Let's start reading at the top of page 4 class with the word Businesses.)

- Promote grace - don't point out their weaknesses

- Point out that everyone has strengths (Kids need to be reminded that we all have them, and we all have weaknesses. Like the Body of Christ.)

You are resourceful, you are gracious, and you are an adult. We all have weaknesses, do we know how it feels to fail all the time. Our Doctor told us that there are a plethora of medical articles written on the psychological affects on kids with ADD who mess up all the time. They feel the pressure of causing mess-ups all the time. They know they let people down. They realize you are annoyed. They know they have cost people time and money by their mistakes. They KNOW...that's why many of them have a red spot on their foreheads. They hit themselves in the head all the time.

One other consideration about home-schooled kids: I explained to the teachers that people put their kids in their weakest classes ex: reading help for 6-8's. Don't be surprised if they are horrible at reading. The parent needs your help. The fact that they signed up for your class demonstrates that they have a weakness there. If you offer a class for reluctant spellers, don't be surprised if that's what you get. P.E. class might attract kids who have coordination issues. Public speaking, writing, reading classes are the same. It is NOT a reflection that all home-schoolers can't read or write. I encouraged the teachers to rediscover why they are teaching. Isn't our goal to help - co-labor -to love on them and encourage them so they can blossom? When I communicate with Seth's teacher's I always let them know that they are making a difference in his life.

I think my response as a section leader was influenced greatly by my situation. I might have just disagreed with her, thought she was judgmental and unfair, or just plain wrong, but I knew that much of what she said was based on truth. I just think that it was for a different reason than she suspected. I think that what she saw in her class was a product of the struggles her children were facing. She offered a class to help students who needed extra help in a area and she got kids who needed help. Why she was surprised that they were really bad at organization and discipline is a reflection on her misunderstanding of the situation. I think we can look at kids differently if we try: page. 83 in Right Brained Children in a Left Brained World puts weakness into perspective. I love how Jeffery Freed helps us to see things as they are. He helped me to see that my son is special and gifted, just not the same as other children.. He quotes Dr. Thomas Armstrong, The Myth of the ADD Child:

Instead of thinking of your child as...Think of him as...

Hyperactive energetic

Impulsive spontaneous

Distractible creative

A daydreamer imaginative

Inattentive global thinker with a wide focus

Unpredictable flexible

Argumentative independent

Stubborn committed

Irritable sensitive

Aggressive assertive

Attention deficit disordered unique

When I taught school I had a quote posted on my bulletin board. I'm not sure where it came from, but I love it. If you recognize this could you let me know the source?

Good Teacher:

The education of a college president

The executive ability of a financier

The humility of a deacon

The adaptation of a lizard

The hope of optimist

The courage of a hero

The wisdom a serpent

The gentleness of a dove

The patience of Job

The grace of God

The persistence of the devil

May god bless you and help you as you minister to the least of these.