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## Alex's Story

Assisting with event planning and management for local community events, technical assistant for local youth music nights, Cub scout leader in training, DJ business entrepreneur, photographic artist with two professional exhibitions under his belt, responsible community member participating in many fundraising events such as Relay for Life, Worlds Greatest Shave, Red Shield Appeal and volunteering at local animal shelters and sanctuaries. These are just a few of the things our son is currently participating in and gaining greater courage and strength in his abilities. Unfortunately, this was not the case over 10 years ago, nor the future we saw our son being able to achieve. We knew he could and we wanted him to but we felt our hands were tied. We needed to break free of the restrictions and limitations being placed on our son and so we made the brave decision to remove our son from school and apply to home school him.

Our son is a young man with a passion for the theatre, sound and lighting and photography. He loves spending time with his family and socialising with his friends. He almost always has a smile on his face and happy greeting for faces he knows. He is also a young man with multiple disabilities. Our son is DEAF, Autistic, has a moderate – severe intellectual delay and has significant sensory processing difficulties with severe motor dyspraxia.

Our school journey for our son began when he enrolled in an early intervention class at the age of 3. At this time, he had a diagnosis of severe-profound sensorineural hearing loss and Global Developmental delay. He attended two half days a week at the local primary school. He was placed in a small class of 6 with mixed disabilities and a teacher and teachers aid. While he enjoyed his time in this class as a regular routine with many sensory and learning aids in place he did not make firm friendships nor develop the skills to transition him into school. As a deaf child, he was offered a place at the age of 4yrs in a total communication class in a local support unit for hearing impaired children. Initially he began part time attending just two and half days a week

and slowly over the first 12 months he increased to attending five days a week. This was our first battle with the school system. Although he was starting a full year before his hearing peers, I had to provide medical evidence to state that our son could not attend school five days a week from term 1. It seemed ludicrous to us that our friends hearing children would not even be considered for school during this year but the suggestion that our son slowly build up his attendance was considered truancy.

The first few years of our sons schooling were ok. He developed some friendships, enjoyed the routine of the day and genuinely tried his best. He loved maps and calendars and could tell you everything that was going to happen according to a calendar or how to get just about anywhere. As time went on though, it became evident that our son had more than just global developmental delay and so we undertook further assessment. At the age of 6 our son was diagnosed with autism, sensory processing differences and a severe intellectual delay in addition to his hearing impairment. As his peers were progressing, our sons learning appeared to be at a standstill. He could not write, he could remember very little sight words, he did not understand numbers, he was becoming fixated on routines, and distressed by change. Although he had the ability to speak he had become selective non-verbal.

As each day, week and month went by we were slowly watching our son withdraw more and more into himself. Lengthy discussions with the school lead to further assessment and advice from Northcott, ASPECT, social workers, psychologists, speech therapist and Occupational therapists. It was acknowledged that the best way for Alex to learn was in a hands-on practical manner (kinaesthetic), with a total communication approach. The need for one on one assistances was identified and for school based therapy intervention. It should be noted at this time Alex was attending weekly speech, OT and psychologist appointments outside school hours as the school frowned upon him being taken out of class for regular appointments. It was also recommended that Alex complete his work on the computer and several software programs that meet state curriculum outcomes were recommended. Unfortunately, very little of this was implemented. A funding application was submitted to the Department of Education but

as he was already receiving Tier 1 funding as an ESL student (yes that's the category for hearing impaired students), there was very little that could be added. We were successful in securing funding for an additional half an hour twice a week as tied grant funding and one term of in school speech therapy. He was also offered a place in the school councillor's social skills group but as she had not signing ability nor was their funding to provide an interpreter, our son would not be able to communicate in the group. No one to one support, no ongoing multi-disciplinary therapy, no computer based programs.

One of the most prominent reasons offered to us as to why many of the recommendations had not been put into place was that they did not want to isolate our son from his class peers. This was ridiculous. By this time, our son was in a class with only three other children, a teacher and a teacher aid on the class full time. By not being able to learn adequately he was being isolated.

Our son was provided with a teletext machine so that he could type his answers to a worksheet onto it instead of hand writing them. This was almost useless. He had limited reading ability nor could he spell. Typing answers into a machine that was not connected to the worksheet presented to him made no sense.

Our son was constantly getting into trouble for not turning in homework on a Friday – homework consisted of completing worksheets and writing out a spelling list. The class teacher insisted that we needed to allow our son to become more independent and that she would put strategies in place so this could occur. This included us, as parents, not being allowed to enter the classroom in the morning to help him unpack his bag or in the afternoon to pack his bag. We were also advised that they would no longer be assisting him with lunch boxes and drink bottles. Due to our son's motor dyspraxia, there was not a suitable lunch box or drink bottle at this time that he could open and close without assistance. We were also advised that his nutritional formula would be provided for him at the end of recess and lunch, upon the teacher's aids return from her break as she was no longer able to make it during her lunch break as this was considered work. He

was to drink it quickly outside the classroom while the rest of his class reassembled for their lesson. It was also suggested that we "upgrade" his back pack from a "Wiggles" backpack and that he was no longer allowed to bring his stuffed toys or baby dolls to school as he would soon be moving into the primary section of the school where that would make him a target for teasing from other students. Our son had no concept of age and what is deemed age appropriate. He liked his bag and his toys. They were a comfort to him and a way he could interact with the other children.

Our son was getting more and more frustrated. He was extremely emotional and unable to regulate himself. He no longer enjoyed going to school. The school advised us that he needed to be on behaviour modification medications or he could no longer attend school as his behaviours were upsetting the other students and taking the teachers' time away from the class. His body was suffering the consequences of extreme stress. In addition to our son's disabilities he also suffered from a hyposensitive immune system, severe allergies and chronic asthma. Consequentially he was often getting sick, many times requiring hospitalisation.

As parents, we were extremely concerned. We brought our concerns first to the class teacher, then to the deputy principal – head of the support unit, then the school principal and finally to the local area department of education disability co-ordinator. In one of many meetings we were advised that as we were obviously not happy with the school, as his parents we needed to pick his primary disability, and he could be placed in a school accordingly. We were torn. We had already spoken with the principal and councillor at the local ASPECT school who felt they could accommodate our son's learning needs but they would not be able to support his communication needs. At the age of 7 he had more AUSLAN skills than any of the staff at the ASPECT school and they felt without appropriate role models that they may be a skill that he would lose. We had worked hard to establish this communication and were not prepared to let it go. All things taken into consideration and based upon our son's assessment scores, we were offered a place for him at another local school entirely for children with disabilities. He would be placed in an IM class with mixed disabilities. We were distraught. We had

meet several children that attended this school. We knew our son had the potential to achieve more. We didn't feel our problems would be solved with a change of school. We wanted a place where our son could learn, and thrive not just academically but emotionally and socially. We wanted somewhere where his abilities were highlighted not his disabilities.

Then, by what some may say was misfortune, our decision was decided for us. Our son had become so unwell due to stress that his immune system was not coping and his lungs were suffering. He was placed in hospital for seven weeks straight, some of that time in the ICU. The school contacted us to offer our son well wishes and generously brought some school work in for him to complete so he wouldn't get bored or fall behind. School work was the furthest thing from our mind.

As the days and weeks went on and our son began to get well in hospital, we also noticed that he was opening-up again. We started to hear him speak, first our names – mum, dad, and then to ask for things. He would smile at the nurses and even say hi to the food lady. Confined to bed he listened to stories, tried colouring in and played with playdoh. He laughed.

Upon discharge we made the decision, with medical support, to keep our son at home for the remainder of the school term. We looked over the work that the school had provided and our son could work through and share in discussions about the topics. As the holidays drew to an end and the discussion around returning to school began, even only for short mornings, we immediately saw our sons distress. At first he returned for three mornings and was picked up at recess time. This increased till lunch time and so on until the end of term. As it was the final term of the year we assumed our son would be alright. He loved the end of year display. He loved everything Christmas so we assumed he would love the activities. He loved the end of year outings. Instead our worse fears were met. Our son stopped talking again. He became withdrawn. He became emotional and unregulated. He became sick.

Through other community activities we had meet other home educating families. At first we thought they were crazy. We didn't understand why they wouldn't send their children to school. Educating children is not easy. Especially if they have additional needs. The time to research and develop work is endless. Resources are expensive. It would consume your life not to mention affect the family income. But now we understood.

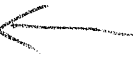
Over the Christmas break, we discussed and decided to trial home educating our son. We sort advise from veteran home educators, rapidly got together several resources and made our plan. We applied to register our son. Nervous and not too sure what to expect I sat through my first AP visit. He looked over our education plan for our son and stopped at the last page. This page listed a number of therapy programs our son would also be participating in that we suggested would supplement our son's education – as we had been led to believe was the only purpose in school. The AP turned to me and said "This is the most important part of your son's plan. This should be your focus and build everything from here". Wow. Someone who actually agreed with us.

That was February 2007 and I can honestly say we haven't looked back. It has not always been easy. There are no premade curriculums for children with additional needs that cover all possibly needs. Resources are expensive. Time and patience is needed in abundance. Financially it is a significant burden with no additional financial support. When I consider what resources and funding my son would have received in school as a child with additional needs I begin to wonder. Then I consider all that was available to him while he was at school and how much of a failure this was. I compare it to the limited resources and funding we had in our home environment and consider just how far he has come.

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for Life, Worlds Greatest Shave, Red Shield Appeal and volunteering at local animal shelters and sanctuaries. I truly believe none of this would have been conceived let alone possible if our son was not home schooled. So many opportunities, so many real-world experiences, allowing our son to live his life his way.

My daughter started kindergarten she was diagnosed legally blind 3 mths into kinder, the school only got her an aide for the playground after I refused to send her after she got trampled by other children. Her vision improved with intensive treatment but her self esteem was affected due to this incompetence and delay in supports. In yr 1 she was seriously bullied by a child 4 yrs older, she was stalked, physically grabbed by arms until she bled, from child's nails, I said to the principal please help support my child from this bully, response was Well what do you want us to do? I got support from a child psychologist who said to school can you support this child and let her have a safe place in library they said we can't guarantee her safety or that the bully won't go to the library too, the teacher decided that my daughter needed to be more resilient so took her to the bully and said there was nothing to be scared of and she was nice after further stalking and assaults, I picked up my child from school she was screaming I carried her home she ran out of my arms and onto the road where I quickly grabbed her the child psych said she was trying to escape the bullying and was and could no longer cope with being bullied.. Then she was so vulnerable she became a target, the kids in her class every lunch time held her hands behind her back took her lunch and money again the teacher did not protect her after being informed.. Then because I complained for the rights of my child a teacher said if you keep complaining Your child will be targeted and treated differently by teachers that happened too they refused to let her use the toilet but other kids were allowed she was picked on by teachers I was ostracised and targeted by the school, my daughter had initially been diagnosed with communication problems further diagnosed with a cognitive impairment, I thought my poor child was going to have a nervous breakdown I removed her from school she is thriving now but was let down by the school they treated us disgracefully, she had lost 3 family members every Yr until kindy, was also in deep grief along with her disabilities and I've never been so disgusted in my life. My credentials are child welfare and mental health.





## × Sarah's Story

Sarah was identified as gifted by her preschool teacher. She started kindergarten in an independent school at 4 years old. By third term she had noticed her differences and started to hide her abilities. The school accelerated her, she was 5 when she started year 2. Although she understood all the work, her little 5 yr old hands couldn't write as fast as others in her class. She would be kept in to finish handwriting and prevented from attending extension maths classes, all because her hand speed didn't match her mind. We had no real choice but to homeschool.

After a few years of home education we had some difficult family circumstances which required an unexpected move from a remote rural area back to the central coast. We sought to enrol our three children into local schools. but the local high school would not enrol Sarah in year 7 because she was only 10 years old. "That will be a problem" they said. They wouldn't meet our daughter, they wouldn't look at her off the charts year 7 naplan results, they wouldn't speak to her teachers at nsw government distance education where she was doing well in year 7 but she was already deemed "a problem".

There is a selective high school just two suburbs away, but there was no discretion to consider enrolling Sarah. Because we didn't know 18 months in advance that she would want to be at school on the central coast there was no school to send her to. She was not welcome anywhere.

I even called the 'high performing students unit' in the education department. They expressed confusion - why was I calling, their job was just to process selective school applications and I was out of date. There was nothing else they could do for us. Sarah would have to wait and reapply. "But what if the local school has said they won't take her?" I asked. "Well I guess you'll just have to either repeat her or homeschool for a while" they answered.

I teach law at university level, but I still struggle with the volume of paperwork and procedure for distance education, AIC, home education under BOS/BOSTES/NESA, Medicare issues with an increasingly anxious preteen and then the Centrelink interaction with all this (necessary because now one of us needs to stay home).

My daughter was always a bubbly social girl, but being turned away from schools hit her hard. She was so good at school but still no one wanted her. She began to suffer from anxiety. She probably couldn't cope with the selective school now. There's a good chance she will never go back to 'school'. My husband and I will work to ensure she gets a good education, but it means that we can't both have paid employment and that has consequences for our whole family.

I've known a lot of families with gifted kids, my daughter is by no means an anomaly. Gifted students are a low priority for schools. It hurts the kids and it hurts society. We know for sure that very few kids fall within the average for which schools are designed. So many kids are outside that range in various ways. Those kids deserve attention, education, the ability to thrive and be encouraged not just tolerated. Better is possible.

## ✓ Ben's Story

We started homeschooling our 2nd child when he was in year 2. He had always struggled at school from day 1.

He was a delightful young boy who aimed to please, but was very aware that he could not seem to learn as quickly as the other children in his class.

He was assessed and assessed and assessed..... He is on the autism spectrum, has dyslexia, dyscalculia, dysgraphia, ADHD inattentive type not hyperactive, an anxiety disorder and a moderate high frequency hearing loss. We we told he had such severe dyslexia that it would be unlikely he would ever be able to read. During his time at the local State school he has wonderful teachers who tried their best, but with 20 in the class there wasn't much time really. The school councillor and his year 1 teacher both recommended we find alternative schooling for him because he wasn't coping. This is a child who never got into trouble at school, so caused no behaviour problems in the classroom and very easily overlooked. By the time he was in year 2 he was clinically depressed and was spending about 3 hours a day sobbing. The only thing he could do was watch TV, he had ceased playing like a normal child, was unable to interact with his siblings outside of school because he was so stressed. We attended another educational assessment and the education specialist suggested we homeschool him. Best decision we ever made. Within a month of being homeschooled we had our delightful little boy back who could play lego, rumble with his brother, and enjoy learning his way. He did eventually learn to read with one on one help and lots of games and therapy.

After homeschooling for primary school we made the decision to send our son to a specialist programme for high school, as I thought this programme would be able to help him more than I could. D.A.L.E (Dynamic, Alternative, Learning Environment) It wasn't Dynamic or alternative and I still question if it should have been called learning environment. Year 7 was ok, his teacher was ok but our son enjoyed being there, very

tall large male teacher with a good sense of humour and able to control a class of difficult students, year 8 was a complete waste of time. The problem is programmes such as this, have students in the class who have learning difficulties and anxiety disorders who are in the same class as students with behaviour disorders, recipe for disaster, add incompetent teacher and what a mess. We returned to homeschooling in year 9 and our son is now in year 10, studying at TAFE part time and loving it. TAFE has been amazing in its support for students with disabilities.

Over the years it would have been helpful to have been able to access advice and assistance to help educate a child with significant learning disabilities. To be able to find the best practice in certain situations. To know which programmes/ curriculums/ therapies are useful and which ones are a waste of time and money, parents are willing to help and support their children as best they can but a bit of help can go a long way.