

High School With Special Needs? Yes, You Can!
TOS Interviews Sharon Hensley, MA

Christine Field

When we begin homeschooling, the Lord puts us on a learning curve. We must learn how to teach phonics, math, and more. When we discover that we have a special needs child, we are on an accelerated learning curve. Now we must learn how to deal with our child's unique needs. As we persevere, we develop the needed CAN-DO attitude.

But what about high school? As these years approach, many parents wonder if they can continue to home educate. The answer is, "Absolutely!" We need some specific advice and encouragement, and our guest this month, Sharon Hensley, MA, can fill our encouragement wells. She is the author of *Home Schooling Children with Special Needs* and proprietor of the Almaden Valley Christian School.

TOS: We are so pleased to welcome you back to TOS! Thank you for taking time from your busy schedule. Homeschooling for high school is intimidating, but when your child has a special need, it becomes even more daunting. What would you say to the parent of a special needs child who is considering high school?

MRS. HENSLEY: First of all, I think we need to change our perception of "high school" when we have a child with a learning disability or a more severe disability. Our society has conditioned us to believe that every "successful" high school student is ready to step straight into a four-year college. However, this is not true. There are many ways to complete a high school program. High school—just like every other step of education for our special needs children—must be tailored to the unique needs and goals of each child. So basically, I tell all of my parents to RELAX, and then we help them create a realistic, appropriate program that fits their child's needs, interests, and level of ability.

TOS: I know you deal with children of all ages in the Almaden Valley Christian School. Tell us what steps you would go through to plan a high school program for one of your clients.

MRS. HENSLEY: We look at each student and what academic level he or she is capable of achieving and what goals and interests the student has, and we plan a program that is appropriate to each student. We offer four different ways of completing high school in our program.

The first is our "Certificate of Completion" program. This is for students who read below a fourth grade level and who probably will not be able to work and live independently, such as those students with mental retardation or low-functioning autism. For these students, we create goals in the areas of practical academics, vocational skills, independent living skills, and recreation/leisure skills. The overriding goal for these students is to give them the skills to have a meaningful life when their formal time of homeschool is finished. A good resource for planning programs for these students is a book by Debby Mills called *The IEP Planner*.

Our second program is our "Special Education Diploma." This program is for students who read and write at a fourth-grade level or slightly higher. The requirements are based on the minimum graduation requirements for California public schools. (Since we are based in California, we

have used the California requirements as our guide; but as a private school, we are not obligated to follow these requirements.) These students use a curriculum series that follows the basic high school scope and sequence and is written at a fourth-grade reading level. There are two main publishers of these materials, Globe Fearon and AGS . Both are excellent. The students in this program also are encouraged to be working on some type of work experience or job skill training in addition to the basic academics.

Next, we offer a “General Education” diploma. This program is designed for students who can work at or near high school level with modifications and who are not meeting all of the courses for a “college ready” diploma. For example, they may need to work more slowly through the materials or may need to have their textbooks on tape or to use some of the lower reading level textbooks for more difficult classes. These students often skip the foreign language requirement that would be necessary to go straight to a 4-year college. Work experience is also an emphasis in this program, although the majority of these students will go to junior college or to a technical school. Some of these students do take the GED.

Finally, we have students completing high school programs which meet the California State University entrance requirements. These students use high school level material but may also use technological assistance, such as books on tape, or more elaborate systems, such as the Kurzweil system which can “read” a text to a student on the computer and then allow the student to answer questions or write essays with voice-activated software! Because we are a non-accredited school, we also require these students to take the California High School Proficiency Test in order to graduate. Some states do not have proficiency exams, and these students could take the GED instead.

TOS: How about vocational or apprenticeship training? This might be appropriate for our special needs children. How do we learn more about these opportunities?

MS. HENSLEY: Although we encourage this in most of our programs, I will admit that finding job programs and apprentice programs for homeschooled students can be a challenge, and it takes some legwork and creativity—but it can be done! Here are some of the things that various students in our program have done: Some of our students have been able to attend the vocational centers run by the public schools—check with your county office of education to see what is available. Some of our families have been fortunate enough to have their own business that they then use to provide training for their special needs student. Others look for friends with businesses who are willing to hire students. Another good opportunity for job training skills is community volunteer work. One student in our program was able to learn basic gardening skills by volunteering at a local historic home as a gardening assistant. Others use church programs as volunteer opportunities. Some high-functioning students have been able to start small businesses of their own.

TOS: How do we find out about colleges with programs for students with learning disabilities?

MS. HENSLEY: Almost all community colleges have some assistance for students with learning disabilities, such as study skill classes, untimed tests, or tutors. Some even have programs for students with mild mental retardation. Check [with] your local junior college to see what is available. For other colleges, a great resource is the *Peterson’s Guide to Colleges with Programs for Learning Disabled Students*.

TOS: I am concerned about life after school. What should parents of special needs children be thinking about?

MS. HENSLEY: Certainly, parents who have kids with severe disabilities (autism, mental retardation) are going to have to think about guardianships. The best thing to do is to consult an attorney familiar with conservatorships. Disability income has to be applied for through the Social Security Administration. There is information about this on their website.

TOS: What advice would you have for the parent who is uncertain whether they can handle this assignment?

MS. HENSLEY: God has promised to supply ALL of our needs—which includes everything we need to homeschool our children, whether they are 5 or 15. I think the best advice I can give any parent is to turn your focus from the expectations and comparisons of the world and look to God for His guidance. Each of our children has a unique blend of strengths and weaknesses. We don't need to produce "cookie cutter" kids— we have the opportunity in homeschooling to create a program for each student that will help them fulfill God's purpose for them. And if we ask God to show us what each of our kids needs, He will. I have seen it countless times in our program and with my own daughters as well. My older girls are now 19 and 17. We just went through the process to get conservatorship of Alison (19), and Laura (17) took the Proficiency Exam last summer and graduated and is now working teaching horseback riding with special needs students. Both are doing what suits their own abilities and passions, and that is a successful program!

TOS: Thank you so much for your practical advice and encouragement. For those of you interested in contacting Ms. Hensley to have her help you set up a program, you can email her at sharon@avcsbooks.com; call or fax her at 408- 776-6691; or visit her website at www.avcsbooks.com.

Biographical Information

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