

WITH PATIENCE AND CARE: Using Charlotte Mason Education with Special Needs Children

By Jim and Sheila Carroll
Living Books Curriculum
Charlotte Mason Homeschooling

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Mary Jane hears a tapping sound coming from the direction of her son, David, who has spastic cystic fibrosis. He cannot roll, sit, walk or speak; yet he is enjoying reading. The tap is his signal for mom to turn the page. Chris' seventeen-year old son, Tim, has fetal alcohol syndrome He experiences difficulty focusing on tasks. Chris uses great literature and frequent lessons changes. Chris' other son, eleven-year old Steven, has dysgraphia yet does copywork quite well, if it is read aloud.

Cheri is at the bookstore buying great literature in hard back because the print is larger and works better for her son, who struggles with writing and reading. Megan watches the clock and changes lessons every five minutes for her ADHD child. Mary Ellen is overseeing her daughter, who has a brain disorder, draw and write in her nature journal.

What do all these mothers have in common? They are homeschooling their special needs child using Charlotte Mason's methods. Moreover, they will tell you that using CM methods transformed their homeschool.

What is a Charlotte Mason education?

Charlotte Mason (1842-1923) was a British reformer and pioneer in the field of education. Her concept of "living books and real life experiences" influenced many educators in Great Britain. Mason believed children's minds were no different from their bodies; both require a highly nutritious, varied diet. The proper diet of the mind, she taught, is ideas, the best and the greatest ideas from the finest literature. Hence, the concept of "living books," books of a high literary quality, by an author with a passion for the subject, who makes the information or story come alive.

Ms. Mason expressed her educational principles in the motto, "Education is an atmosphere, a discipline, a life". By this she meant that when the *atmosphere* in the teaching home is positive, realistic, and non-judgmental the child can learn. When the *discipline* of good habits, such as attention, concentration, truthfulness, self-control, and unselfishness are in place, they foster learning. Moreover, when *life* is embraced as an opportunity for learning, then education can encompass many things including living ideas found in great books, Scripture, and the lives of worthy people and life experiences.

Charlotte Mason was aware of the needs of children with learning disabilities. Then, as now, there were children who needed individual help to learn. She encouraged a stress-free atmosphere, simple hands-on materials, plenty of outdoors time and a gentle, loving

approach to instruction. Dr. Downes, a friend of Charlotte Mason, expressed it beautifully:

“Only let us have patience; let us make allowance for their difficulties; let us begin with concrete rather than abstract ideas; let us develop their bodies; and through their games and recreations let us try to find some portal to the slumbering intellect; above all, let us watch over their moral nature with even greater jealousy than we do in the case of ordinary children.” *The Parents' Review*, Volume VII, Nov. 4, 1897

How do homeschooling mothers today use Charlotte Mason’s methods with their special needs children? We decided to ask them. We went to an online parent support group to invite mothers to volunteer to be interviewed. Six mothers agreed. Each received seven questions. The overriding consensus was that Charlotte Mason’s methods are not only helpful but essential to success with their special needs child. We share with you the results of the interview:

What are your child’s special needs?

Each mother has at least one special needs child and some mothers have more than one. The disorders of their children are moderate to severe and included autism, Asperger Syndrome, quadriplegic cystic fibrosis, ADHD, delayed speech, CAPD—a central auditory processing disorder—and dysgraphia and dyslexia.

How did you learn about the educational philosophy of Charlotte Mason?

Most said they learned of CM through online discussion groups. Parents of special needs children often find there is no one in their community or circle of friends who can understand or help. They learn to be proactive by asking questions and researching where they can to get the help and information they need. Online discussion groups are one way to fill this critical need.

Has CM helped you to homeschool your special needs child?

The overwhelming response was “yes”. Megan explained that CM helped her to see her child as a whole person. Cheri said, “So many CM techniques are based on the way children learn...and they are especially effective with special needs kids.”

Mary Jane felt that CM reinforced what she already felt in her heart, “Yes. I believe the one thing her philosophy did for me was reinforce what I had already been led by the Lord to do with my very special, vulnerable child, and that is mostly a relaxed teaching and learning environment where we can use our own home and life experiences to educate him.”

What kind of adjustments is necessary for you to use a living books method?

Most mothers felt they needed to adapt or adjust their child’s work in order to meet a specific learning need. Cheri, mentioned earlier, says, “We never use a textbook. I knew from the start it would not work with my child.” Instead, she buys hardback books because the print is larger as an aid to her child who has visual discrimination difficulties.

Mary Jane, whose son David is quadriplegic, finds that tapping out a response using a device positioned on his head enables him to learn grammar and oral expression. “As he attempts to say something on his device, we get the idea, then go back and model the appropriate way of saying it.”

Another mom, Tammy, said concerning her autistic daughter, “Language delays hinder Pamela from saying all she knows. Glimpses of her inner life fortify my faith. For example, when we read the reunion of Miriam and Susanna in *Calico Captive*, Pamela squealed with delight. Her reaction gave me evidence of things not seen. She borrows phrases from books to use as part of her oral self-stimulation, which later blossoms into useful language.”

Which of the following methods do you use regularly: living books, narration, nature study, habit training, picture study, copy work, dictation, and short lessons?

Living books

All those interviewed indicated that they use high-quality literature, often reading aloud for all lessons. Tammy emphasized, “They are the basis of all our schooling.”

Narration

Cheri adapted the use of “day-after narrations. When we first started, my child needed time to process the story, so I did what I call ‘day after’ narrations. This allowed my child time to think through the story and give a much more effective narration. Now, after a few years of practice, my child is able to give narrations as soon as the reading is finished.”

Tammy thought she was not effective in using narration, until she discovered “there are two big steps in narration: reading to know and telling what you know.” By breaking down the process into two parts, Tammy was able to help her daughter bridge the gap by first focusing on understanding, then on telling. Maryellen found narration helped her special needs child “to go over information in his mind and to organize and sequence information, which used to be a challenge area.”

Nature study

Frequent times in the out-of-doors and close study of some natural tree, plant or animal is a key experience in CM education. Many special needs children do well with this very hands-on activity. However, keeping a nature journal was often less successful because many special needs children have trouble with fine motor skills and attention to detail.

One mother used it as the basis for science study; another found that looking out the back window to see the nature there could be a form of nature study. All agreed it was challenging to get outside regularly because of other demands and commitments.

Habit Training

Habit training is especially important with special needs children. Cheri points out that they “crave” structure, since they tend to have poor organizational skills. Maryellen

found Charlotte Mason's teaching on habit training changed her life as it gave her the understanding how to train her children in helpful habits both in the family circle and in learning.

Staying on task and finishing work was one habit in particular that many found important. Cheri creates a lesson plan with a schedule organized around 15-30 minute segments for her middle school child. "Having him know what's coming next is a huge help and is a way of helping him achieve a level of responsibility for his own work."

Picture Study

Charlotte Mason recommended all children learn to enjoy great art. In the PNEU schools, students would live with a good reproduction of a well-know work or art for a week or so, taking in every detail. Then the picture would be covered and the children were to describe it from memory.

Not all mothers did picture study, but those that did found their homeschooling experience considerably enriched. A variation of picture study that Cheri uses is to "make art cards and allow the children to play games, like Old Maid and Concentration. It is amazing how the children will form their own relationships with the pictures just by playing games with them,"

Copywork and dictation

Charlotte Mason encouraged taking selections for copywork and dictation from the literature currently being studied. For Maryellen's daughter copywork is one of her strong areas. "It gives her a clear picture of what is expected. We sometimes use sand on a cookie sheet to do the copywork." However, Tammy's daughter Pamela does dictation or copywork as part of a specialized language instruction program to teach new language structure. Tammy hopes later to move into using living books.

Short Lessons

Charlotte Mason recommended lessons be no more than ten minutes in length for a child under the age of eight and twenty minutes for the elementary years. Each lesson should be as different as possible from the one before. When the lessons are short and varied, a child's interest is usually fresh and ready for what comes next.

Mary Jane found this was something that came naturally. "This we have always done. I have to look for opportune times to teach something, make the point, and work for a little bit of feedback." Tammy agrees. "Short lessons are critical for the special needs child. It helps keep their minds fresh for the task and limits the amount of frustration for challenging subjects and tasks. I split math into two short lessons, twice a day just so she would not feel bogged down by too long of a lesson but she needed more practice." Megan saw short lessons were a huge help. "I sometimes use 5-minute lessons. Breaking it down into small, learning chunks is essential."

Patience and care

For these mothers the best approach is a Charlotte Mason education. It encourages a relaxed atmosphere, literature to enjoy, developmentally appropriate learning tasks and teaching to their child's strengths. It was an honor to know these mothers and learn of their struggles and triumphs. We saw the strongest factor ensuring success was the mothers themselves. Their patience and care, their willingness to work tirelessly on behalf of their child was a moving testament to the power of love.

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If you would like to read more on how parents of Charlotte Mason's PNEU School viewed learning disabilities, see "Backward Children", The Parent's Review, Volume VIII, No. 4, 1987, pgs. 255-263 and "The History of a Backward Child", The Parents' Review, Volume III, No. 8; 1892-1893; page 600-609. Both of these articles are online at Ambleside Online, <http://www.amblesideonline.org/PR.shtm>

Bio

Jim and Sheila Carroll are homeschooling parents and founders of Living Books Curriculum, a literature rich curriculum inspired by the work of Charlotte Mason. LBC offers complete curriculum and individual study guides using Charlotte Mason's time-tested methods. Jim is a professor of Educational Psychology. Sheila is a writer and storyteller with degrees in Children's Literature and Educational Leadership.

The proceeds of their curriculum support bringing Charlotte Mason education to children in developing nations. To learn more: www.educationinabox.com .