

## TODDLERS AND PRESCHOOLERS WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

Although often overlooked or even denied, babies, toddlers and preschoolers can experience specific special educational needs. This can be physical, mental or the partial or complete loss of one of their senses. Once diagnosed, the parents feel lost, overwhelmed and emotional by all the new information. They are not alone; there are other parents who experience the same emotions, fears and questions.

### **Humble, uncertain, worn with care and afraid to speak...**

*A married couple and their **3 year old** child sit huddled together on an oversized leather couch in an acutely unfamiliar atmosphere. They await the admission panel of a school for learners with special educational needs called "New Hope," and are self-consciously aware of their own unfamiliarity with these new surroundings. Two passages lead off into the rest of the school, and around them are four therapy centres. Into and out of these centres a bustle of teachers, therapists, and children move regularly and purposefully, smiling at them as they pass. Some of these children amble along briskly, others walk using crutches, and some even scoot past in wheelchairs. Almost all the children are moving unassisted, or when a chair is pushed by a friend they are engaged in openly cheerful conversation. But the minds of these parents were entirely consumed by the pain of uncertainty and the weight of concern for their child. They could not yet fully understand the enormous relevance the scene around them would have in their lives, and the influence it would have on their, and their child's future...*

*They are here today because they wish to enroll their three year old boy in this school; a child who was born with a lifelong condition called Cerebral Palsy.*

*Every parent of every child who has ever been a learner at this school has had to sit on this same couch when their journey here began. The painful uncertainty that afflicts the parent of a child with a disability stems from one overpowering question: What do we do?*

*Three years ago, a few months after their son was born, they started suspecting that something might be wrong. They noticed that their child's development was somehow "different," that he could not control some of his limbs and muscles comfortably, that he struggled to co-ordinate his feeding and swallowing; that he was straining to control his body and move around.*

*He did not seem to be in pain, but a state of quiet fear and panic took over the parents when they first suspected something being wrong with their boy. Any parent can identify with the frightening emotion one experiences when one thinks or feels that harm might come to one's child. One always envisions the worst scenario automatically.*

*Unfortunately, their fears were indeed validated by a specialist who was able to identify the telling signs of a very specific condition almost immediately: Their child had Cerebral Palsy. There were quite a few unknowns when they first received their child's diagnosis, as the impairing effects of Cerebral Palsy only starts manifesting fully as the brain matures during the*

*first few years of infancy. They did not know what to expect and they were unsure about the treatment options available to them and how they would afford them.*

*As their child grew and his brain developed and matured, the effects of his Cerebral Palsy became more pronounced... He suffered from the gross and fine motor impairments and muscular control issues typical of CP, and was slower to achieve certain milestones in his physical development - as could be expected from a physical impairment - but he also seemed to be learning at a slower pace. However, these learning "impairments" were not necessarily a direct result of the same brain injury that caused his physical disability, they form part of what could be called the "secondary effects" of the condition, and this distinction is important...*

## **Barriers to learning**

This gap between what is achieved and what is achievable, in essence, becomes a practical definition for Barriers to Learning. Disabilities, when described and perceived as "Barriers to learning," introduce a division of far greater importance than just its semantic distinction. This distinction fundamentally changes the way we can approach and frame the situation: A barrier can be overcome... and now suddenly we perceive a way to potentially bridge this gap.

A barrier to learning now becomes anything which prevents a learner from reaching his or her maximum potential, the potential they would otherwise have been able to reach without the hindrance of that specific barrier.

It remains important that this child must still have the potential to develop, as learning will always be a self-directed activity. In some circumstances (such as with severe mental disability), the disability itself becomes a barrier that cannot be overcome by any intervention.

## **REALISING POTENTIAL**

So above all, we now look for potential in a child with a disability, and if this child shows even the smallest hint of potential for improvement, should we not fight to give these children a chance to be in an environment where they can develop to their maximum potential? Should we not fight to give children with disabilities a chance of developing a life on the other side of their barriers?

We come back to this family on the couch today, and we have to ask the following question: Does this child have the potential to develop in this school with his unique set of constraints? In other words: Will this school be able to cater for his specific disability, will this child be able to find a fit here as he grows older, and can this boy be happy here?

In this case, the answer is an emphatic YES! The multidisciplinary team acting as admission panel for this school believes this child has enormous potential to develop to his maximum ability in this environment.

New Hope School is ideally suited for the development of children with Cerebral Palsy, Physical Disabilities, and Specific Learning Disabilities; and the team believes **his parents brought him to the school at a young enough age for him to still be receptive to the treatment and intervention methods applied at this school.**

The competence and success of the support services at New Hope stems from the fact that they work closely together as a coherent team. Educators, psychologists, counselors, physio-, occupational- and speech therapists, classroom facilitators and general assistants all form part of the team to help each learner to overcome their specific learning barriers. The school also has a full time nursing sister and social worker.

Why is it so important that a child should be able to be happy in a school? The reason is entirely foundational: **When children are happy, they start to show interest, and where children have interest, education happens...**

New Hope school is situated in Ashley Gardens, Pretoria.

There is space available in the nursery school for 2017 for young learners with special educational needs. Invitations to an evaluation session is available at a fee of R300 proceeding a successful screening process.

For more information contact New Hope School:

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012 346 2127/8

[www.newhopeschool.co.za](http://www.newhopeschool.co.za)

[www.nuwehoopskool.co.za](http://www.nuwehoopskool.co.za)

*Information from the New Hope School Prospectus:*

<http://www.nuwehoopskool.co.za/blog/category/new-hope-school/>