



Life Long Parenting

By Susan Guernsey

I can still remember my first ACLD (LDA's predecessor) conference. I attended the *I Have a Kid Who...* session and could swear someone had been reading my diary. Perhaps you will feel the same as you read this. I hope so, because just hearing those other parents' comments has helped me tremendously through the years.

I am the oldest of nine children. By the time I got married I felt I had already helped raise some of my siblings. Each of them had his or her own strengths and weaknesses. And some were much harder to deal with than others. Yet even with my experience you can never know what it is like to be a parent until you are one.

When I had my first child 35 years ago, *learning disabilities* were just starting to be talked about. I worried during my pregnancy about the baby's physical health, not some *neurological pathway* problem. My path was easier than my parents because while my kids struggled with their education, none were labeled disruptive, lazy or retarded, and schools were beginning to recognize and tend to their special needs.

Still with my experience and special help at school I held some faulty notions. I figured once they were through with school they didn't have to worry about not *getting math* or struggling in P.E. or having problems on the playground. But now I see that finances, keeping in shape, and getting along at work are problematic. Those learning disabilities hang around and sometimes cause even greater difficulty in adulthood. A preschool teacher who taught my youngest in early childhood and then went on to teach him in high school made the comment to me that her students were the same in high school as they were in pre-school; they were just bigger.

Now that they are adults, they want to be on their own, live independently, and have significant others. We could help them with math, but now there are bigger issues. Because they think differently, there are holes in their understanding of things that so many of us seemingly learned by osmosis. Writing checks, the concept of credit cards, the draw of the

internet (and all that that involves), relationship issues, etc. are all so scary because they are so vulnerable. It's so hard for them to see their siblings and peers succeed in their own apartments and in their jobs. They feel isolated and frustrated. It is a helpless feeling for a parent too, because as hard as you worked during all the years of their youth to keep up their self esteem, your talk and encouragement now can fall on deaf ears. Just as when they got to higher math you needed to get them a tutor, now outsiders are the ones they will listen to more



readily. Sometimes this can be a good thing; many times a bad one.

Luckily for us, my son who has the most difficulties is able to work for my husband. He can not drive, but is able to have his own apartment within walking distance of the office and transportation. He knows the city better than any of the rest of us and can tell you what mode of transportation you need to get anywhere. He has gained experience and self-confidence by living on his own. We have some fail-safes, of course. He sees his dad every work day and his brother and sisters include him in many of their activities.

Recently he joined a social club and that has provided him with many opportunities for activities. My hope is that he will find some close friends, maybe even a girl (however scary is that!). But, as much as I have worried and will always worry about him, he has the best

sense of humor especially about himself, and I'm sure that will serve him well.

Selfishly, I am glad not to have too much information. I'm sure he gets lost, says inappropriate things in conversation and doesn't always look well groomed. But ignorance is bliss as long as everything comes out safely in the end!

For a long time, there were no programs for the adults with learning disabilities. I suspect that was because the immediate focus was helping children get through school, and that was a big enough challenge given that the range of learning problems is so profuse. Now though there are many adults who were the first to be diagnosed and helped as students 30 years ago. Even more who never knew what the problem was, but knew deep down that there was one. Even more who recognized their problems in their children.

Now LDA has really taken up the cause of the adult with learning disabilities. There are many programs geared to them at the conferences. More groups are forming to give them worldly education and social outlets. That's what is really needed, outsiders who care and can put them on the right path, listen to their issues, talk over decisions that must be made or provide a social outlet so they have things to do in their free time. We all know our children have ability. They just need help in the right direction. Although difficult to list because of the need for screening and accreditation, things that could be very helpful for those seeking help for themselves or their loved ones would be a list of life coaches, mentors, psychologists, cooperative living situations and social groups throughout the states. We are very fortunate that in the Chicago area, *Step Out, Inc.* is filling the much needed social outlet for our adult children.

My youngest sister is about to give birth to twins. Having children has been her dream for 25 years. Everyone is overjoyed for her and her husband. But they have no idea how their lives are going to change for ever more. Sometimes it's better that way.

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