

Prom Night for Charlotte

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It's hard to believe that my Charlotte is now 16 years old and here we are – it's time for the PROM!

It was such a happy occasion marking the end of formal education and the beginning of a new chapter in her life. The house was filled with excitement. The girls singing and giggling, are upstairs getting ready. Beautiful hair – curling and straightening tongs lay on the carpet like coiled snakes, their duty done. Polished nails with matching glossy toes. The music from her sister Emily's band – Cool Billy – had no boundaries, finding its way into my office TWO flights down. Proud Grannies, parents and friends filled the garden in an attempt to capture the mood on camera. Then the limousine arrived. The girls came out looking stunningly beautiful and waved to neighbours who had lined the streets to cheer. I was so proud I could burst! I smiled, as I saw my excited, bonny sixteen year old, confidently climb into the 'limo' with her friends. She waved and

just like Cinderella, she did go to the ball..... During the evening Charlotte rang me to say she was having a fantastic time. At 11.30 p.m. the limousine drew up outside my door, filled to capacity with local girls and boys glad to have had a lift back to Mere in style! Charlotte and her girl friends still had that excited glow when they went up the stairs to bed to continue, no doubt through the night, to recount all the magic of their special evening.....

Did I think we would ever get to this point?? If I think back to Charlotte's birth then my answer would have to be that I didn't. I didn't dare to imagine or believe that such things would be so... normal? Thinking about the beginning of our journey, I knew nothing about Down syndrome and so life back then was filled with uncertainties, heartache and unknowns. Like other parents, I learnt about her disability, have fought numerous battles and overcome many obstacles along the way in pursuing Charlotte's educational and developmental needs. My biggest fear (which began the day she was born) was concerning what the future might hold for my little girl? You see, I had very real ideas, 'seeing' endless possibilities and opportunities for Emily, then, my lively two year old daughter, but each time I tried to 'see' into the future for Charlotte – it was like doing a jigsaw puzzle where I couldn't make any of the pieces fit.



Of course looking back, I know that my thoughts were very much tainted by a casual comment made by a social worker who came to talk to us as we waited for the outcome of an operation Charlotte underwent a week after she was born. "As an adult she will have the mental age of a seven year old, and well... you would let a seven year old go to the shop on her own wouldn't you!" Upon hearing this I burst into floods of tears. (I am sure she meant well at the time). However, her words have never left me, and have been instrumental and strangely motivational in my efforts to teach Charlotte throughout the past sixteen years. I held on tenaciously to the idea that like every other child, she would make her own future in the present. My uncertainties were replaced by practicalities, the unknowns replaced with determination, and the heartache began to heal with each *tiny* progressive step Charlotte took. I found myself being more reassured by the happiness and joy that filled my busy

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daily life each time I looked at my two little girls (see top photo, opposite).

Early intervention played a vital part where many routines were established laying the foundation for all future learning. I was continuously searching for resources or making things that provided stimulation and were fun things to do. Behaviour was given a high priority. At school I fought for Charlotte to experience the same opportunities offered to her peers. Where she showed a need for some form of support, if I couldn't do it, 'I found a man who can'. One step at a time, building on *what she could do*, never losing sight of the long term goal – some form of independence in adulthood.

It was like stitching a patchwork quilt. Each square had to be worked on individually and in isolation before moving on to the next. The squares, side by side, displayed a disconnected array of shapes, and the size and scope of what was required seemed endless, all requiring hope, patience and love, but it was my thread that anchored it all with determination and expectation, not minding how long it would take (only Charlotte could steer that) but get there she would. I saw my role as providing repetition, reinforcement, and over-learning. I learned to be patient and provided oodles of love. How many of us have gone over things that seemed like we had done something a thousand times and thought she is never going to get there?? Then suddenly she does....

Memories of our first 'short-term goals' flood in.....

- There she was sitting on the school bus for her first day at the village school. Her beaming smile seemed to shout out "look mummy I'm here too!"

- The first school outing at aged 9 was an anxious time for me. After one whole week away without any contact, there she was descending the steps of the bus grinning confidently.....
- "What time is it Mum? What time is it?"... Designing materials to help Charlotte tell the time, requiring a bridge that transferred successfully to the basic clock face. (The Charlotte Clock www.mathsextra.com).
- The keyboard with the lighted keys arrived for Christmas three years ago. Initially used as a rather expensive CD player! Piano lessons followed which incorporated twice yearly concerts by students.... There I was sitting in the audience at the first concert watching Charlotte as she performed her first piece, Jingle Bells, in front of parents and friends.
- The onset of the teenage years – which began with the announcement "I'm a teenager and that means that I can do what I like!"
- GCSE year and study leave – sitting her exams like her peers, now completed, drawing this chapter to a close....

I have come to realise that for me, my journey so far, has taught me that having high expectations is crucial, behaviour and discipline is paramount. (It is easy to over compensate when a child has a disability). Exposure to as many opportunities and experiences are as important as they are for our other children. As a sub-skill, or skill is mastered I actively encourage my daughter to do it by herself, and create opportunities for her to practise, practise, practise, what ever is emerging or learnt. This continuously builds small measures of independence, confidence and self esteem. What ever we do I work TOWARDS age appropriate



behaviour to assist developing levels of maturity. The job never ends, the content changes, but the philosophy extends to every area of her life.

September opens the next chapter, as Charlotte moves on to Yeovil College where she is looking forward to participating in the Drama class. She will continue her core subjects – Maths, English, IT, and Life Skills developing more practical skills for adult life. She is looking forward to wearing cool clothes, making new friends, which, I am told, includes boy friends and, broadening her horizons. All in all, isn't life full of surprises...

Vikki has actively contributed to Charlotte's development, especially for numeracy. She is passionate about helping children develop maths skills which include learning to tell the time and handling money. Vikki currently advises and provides training using Stern's Structural Arithmetic. She can be contacted on: 01747 861 503 or at vikki.horner@mathsextra.com