

Not So Formulaic

# HANDLING THE "DIFFICULT" STUDENT AT YOUR HOMESCHOOL CO-OP

Change the circumstance, not the child



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# About The Author

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## Homeschooling mom, teacher, and writer

Ginny Kochis is the author of Not So Formulaic, a blog dedicated to breaking stereotypes about homeschooling, motherhood, faith, and family literacy. She founded The Writing Well Educational Services in 2007 after seven years in the formal classroom and has been teaching writing from home ever since. Ginny has a Master's Degree in Teaching Writing and Literature from George Mason University, has served as an adjunct professor of Developmental English at Northern Virginia Community College, and is a Teacher-Consultant for the Northern Virginia Writing Project. She is a contributing writer at CatholicMom, Gifted Homeschooler's Forum, FatBrain Toys, BookShark, and The Zelig Group and is a founding member of the Catholic Women Blogger Network monthly blog hop.

Ginny lives with her family in Northern Virginia.

# Handling the "Difficult" Student at Your Homeschool Co-op

*Are you struggling to handle the "difficult" student in your homeschool co-op?  
Change the circumstance, not the child.*

In my seventeen years of teaching, one student stands out.

His name was Tom.

His brain was brilliant.

And his behavior was really, really obnoxious.

I know - that's a strong word. And not how I should refer to any child.

But the behavior.

Oh, Mylanta, the behavior....

Tom didn't sit in his desk. He perched on top of it or wandered the classroom. He took multiple trips to the pencil sharpener, most of the time without his pencil. He talked out of turn. He tapped on his desk. He poked other kids with his fingers, elbows, writing implements, or whatever he had on hand.

Tom was the textbook example of a difficult student. In my eyes, he was not a learner who needed something more. Rather, he was the disruptor who took my time and attention. He was The One Who Kept Everyone Else From Learning.



What I didn't know then, but I do know now?

**There is no such thing as a difficult student. There are only difficult circumstances, and the kid gets the raw end of the deal.**

After Tom left my classroom for greener pastures, I tried to figure out what went wrong. His rare moments of participation were beautiful: he was charismatic, witty, and insightful. As I thought more closely about the times he would participate, I noticed something:

Tom responded when I wasn't lecturing. Hands-on activities grabbed his attention and let his talents shine.

# Reaching every child in a co-op setting

Tom had a mode in which he learned best. Everyone does - it's referred to as a learning style, adapted from Howard Gardner's theory of [multiple intelligences](#). Behavior problems in students like Tom occur when an educator's preferred learning style (most frequently auditory) and a student's intelligence (most frequently *not* auditory) crash and burn into a pile of frustration.

It's one of the reasons many families start homeschooling, right? If you've ever had your child in school, you know the extent of passive classroom learning. But the truth is, the same thing can happen to homeschoolers, especially in a co-op setting. Because class time is crunched, the curriculum is demanding, and the number of students is daunting, it's easy for mentors to fall back on lecture.

It's not easy for students to sit, listen, and absorb the content.

Here's where our expectations become a problem. Think about it - at home, our children explore learning in a comfortable environment. The co-op classroom is an abrupt change from that atmosphere: where at home a child might take frequent breaks, read standing up, or work in a small group with siblings, that same child might be expected to sit still for half an hour in a traditional co-op setting.

Subsequently, it's not just learning style awareness that is vital to co-op success. Attention spans matter, too:

**On average, most adults can sustain focus for 20 minutes at a time. Children can generally do ten.**

If your co-op class period is 40 minutes of lecture and discussion, that requires four times more concentration than a child can offer. Their interest begins to wane; their boredom gives way to "difficult" behavior.

So how do co-op mentors keep every student engaged? Through a technique called differential instruction: using activities that shift every ten minutes and appeal to a variety of learning styles.

# Benefits of differential instruction

Now stay with me here. I can see you, and I know you are rolling your eyes. I've been there, too. In fact, after one particularly awful inservice on differentiation, I remember asking a colleague if I was supposed to be teaching or running a dog and pony show.

But there are major benefits to changing things up. When classroom activities honor attention spans and engage multiple intelligences, children can construct their own knowledge of a subject. They are more likely to

- comprehend what they are learning
- develop stronger critical thinking skills
- foster a sense of ownership over their education
- invest more of their energy into authentic learning

And best of all, problem behaviors disintegrate. Suddenly, the "difficult" student is no longer difficult. She is engaged in her learning and too busy to be inattentive.

## Applying differentiation

In this e-book, I'll profile a typical "difficult" student. I'll identify the "problem" behaviors, connect them with particular learning styles, and provide activities and lesson ideas designed to draw in every student. Here's what we'll cover:

- [The Daydreamer](#) (intrapersonal and spatial intelligence)
- [The Wiggler](#) (kinesthetic intelligence; sensory seekers)
- [The Talker and the Challenger](#) (interpersonal, linguistic, and logical intelligence)
- [The Exceptional Family](#) (dealing with special needs)

The series will provide practical, actionable advice that will not only save your sanity as a mentor, but keep your students excited about learning as well. I'll give you the knowledge I wish I had had when I was working with Tom. It would have saved both us, I think, preserving me from the stress of a "difficult" student, and protecting him from the wrath of an irritated teacher.

Every child deserves a chance at true, authentic learning. Here's to reaching every child.

# How to Reach a Daydreamer: Handling the "Difficult" Student at your Homeschool Co-op

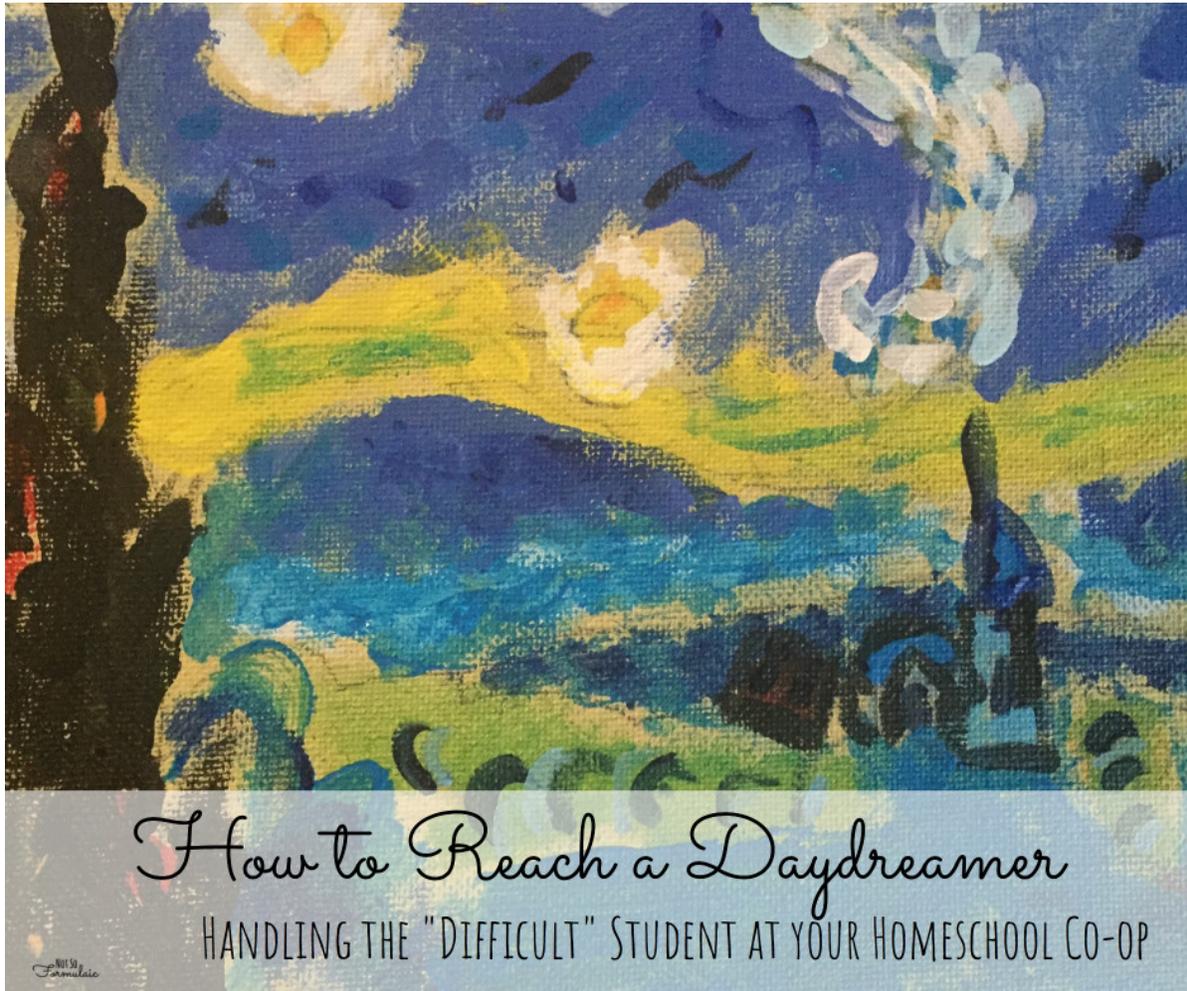
*Do you have a daydreamer who doodles everywhere or stares into space during class? She's actually an intrapersonal learner, and you can reach her insightful mind through creative classroom activities.*

I've mentioned before that [my daughter is an artist](#). Art is the way in which she communicates ideas to the world. Like her first - and my favorite - interpretation of the Spanish Renaissance.

On the co-op mentor's classroom handout, [El Greco](#) became [El Gecko](#). [Goya](#) became, well, [Goya](#). And over the course of the entire class period, G filled that sheet with cans of beans, bottles of snake powder, painting lizards, and a shark balancing potted plants on its head.

This was four years ago, when G was in first grade. Over time her habit has expanded to include dragons, unifaxes (like [unikitty](#), only a fox), and anthropomorphized versions of Julius Caesar, Justinian, and Leif Erikson.

Given the amount of art adorning her workbook and handout pages, you might think she's not listening at all. But it's actually the opposite: G uses artwork as a means to evaluate ideas, combine them with her own, and express her thoughts on paper.



She's drawing, but she's not *really* drawing. She's thinking and prewriting instead.

At the heart of it, G is a daydreamer. Her preferred learning style is intrapersonal: she is solitary, independent, and **metacognitive**. G surrenders to her thoughts, focusing on what she wants to explore regardless of what's going on around her. This can be extremely frustrating in a classroom setting. Her elaborate artwork distracts other students, and it can make her appear as though she isn't attending.

## Intrapersonal learners are an asset to the classroom, though.

Their **out of the box thinking** has been responsible for some of the most **influential theories** in modern history. Put that kind of creative power in a classroom, and you've got the potential for some seriously fantastic insight.

It's hard for mentors and educators to wrap their heads around intrapersonal

daydreamers. They're quiet and don't cause much of a stir, but they shouldn't be drawing or doodling or staring off into space when they're supposed to be learning something, right? Many mentors find that reining in a dreamer is like trying to hold water in a sieve. It's not only an exercise in futility - it also causes a giant mess.

## Rather than forcing your dreamer to pay attention, try channeling that creativity into classroom activities.

Take five to 10 minutes to introduce or review a topic, then pose a question or focus item. Have students create one of the following activities on their own, in pairs, or in small groups to explore your chosen topic.

### Concept shields

Knights carried coats of arms. Why not have scholars do something similar? With a concept shield, children pull significant elements from a discussion or study topic and use symbols to illustrate them on a paper shield. I use this most often for literature, as we can divide a shield into quadrants for setting, plot, theme, and character. A central symbol unifies the four quadrants and helps communicate how each element fits within the whole.

### Storyboards

A series of four to eight comic panels, [storyboards](#) allow students to trace the chronological or ideological shifts in a concept. They can create an up close look at a particular scene literature, or they can detail the events that occurred at one point in history. Scientific discoveries can be broken down and brought to life; even mathematical concepts can be illustrated and explored.

### Mindmaps

Also called a concept map, mindmaps are graphics that organize information according to relationship. The [traditional mindmap](#) uses words and phrases, but I like to use pictures, as well. You can find [graphic organizer](#) and mindmap templates online, but I encourage mentors to let students create their own. You can see what sort of connections they have made and determine whether or not you need to revisit a specific concept.

### Murals

Who doesn't love scribbling all over giant sheets of paper? Murals are a great way to involve an entire group in one creative activity: you are only limited by the size of the medium you lay on the floor. Create a representation of an ancient Greek city. Explore the mindset of the framers of the Constitution. Illustrate the setting of a [Midsummer Night's Dream](#). Hand out crayons, markers, and pencils and let them run wild, or take a few minutes to organize and plan. Either way, all of your students will be actively engaged in creating ideas, and your daydreamer will be in heaven.

After about 20 minutes of creation time, bring the students back together for a five to ten minute wrap-up. Talk about what the class discovered, from big ideas to small details. Some students will be eager to share their work: let them, as it is a great way for children to see how other people approach the same topic.

By the end of the class, your students will have engaged in critical thinking and expression. They will grasp the concepts you've taught more readily, and they'll have had a chance to show you what they know. Best of all, your intrapersonal daydreamer will be engaged and involved in her learning environment, and you won't have had to spend any time redirecting her attention back to the task at hand. You've changed the circumstance, not the student, and that's a win for everybody.

# How to Reach A Wiggler: Handling the "Difficult" Student at your Homeschool Co-op

*Do you have a "difficult" wiggler in your homeschool co-op? Learn how to reach a wiggler and make learning come alive.*

*This post may contain affiliate links. See my [disclosure policy](#) for details.*

You know that list of things you never thought you'd say until you became a parent? My most memorable include:

*Don't throw snakes at me.*

*Your brother's diapers are not hats.*

*We do not climb the walls in this house.*

We have a built-in bookshelf in our living room. It looks like a bookshelf. It works like a bookshelf.

Almost everyone in the house treats it like a bookshelf.

Except for B, who's convinced it was installed for [parkour](#).

B is my physical kid. She was my shortest [labor](#), my earliest walker, and my only child who [quit diapers before two](#). She was [riding a bike](#) several months before her older sister and running 5Ks at the age of five. She's energy and light and constant movement.



She's also exhausting to teach, God bless her.

While in many ways B reminds me of my [former student Tom](#), I find myself connecting her behavior to the story of [Gillian Lynne](#). She's the visionary behind CATS and Phantom of the Opera, a Dame of the British Empire known worldwide for her skills as a dancer and choreographer.

Lynne struggled in school, so much so that when Lynne was eight years old, her mother had her evaluated:



Two things from this video stand out. First is Robinson's interpretation of the specialist's diagnosis: "Gillian isn't sick - she's a dancer."

The second is the stark, unflattering truth about the connection between our current education system and the pharmaceutical industry: "somebody else might have put her on medication and told her to calm down".

While Robinson doesn't label outright, he phrases it well: Gillian Lynne is one of those people who needs to move in order to think. Like my B, Lynne is a kinesthetic learner. They learn best through movement, physical sensation, and hands-on experiences with the world.

In my traditional and co-op classes, I refer to these kids as wigglers. They wander, drum their fingers, shuffle their feet, and tap their pencils. They tend to be more rough and physical in line or at play, and they might even have a hard time keeping their hands to themselves in class. We're quick to corral such behavior and slap on a diagnosis because the potential for distraction is high.

How can a child learn anything while being that busy?

How can her classmates learn anything with that much distraction?

The answer is simple: we channel it.

## Reaching the wiggler in your homeschool co-op

Because kinesthetic learners need to move frequently, they will benefit if we let them explore the world by touching, doing, experiencing. Listening to lectures and watching presentations is doable, but not for the entire class period. Limit that sort of instruction to five to ten minutes, then move to something hands-on and interactive:

## Construct

Kids love to build, whether they are kinesthetic learners or not. Get all of your students involved through the creation of models or maps in science and history. Try manipulatives for math classes, even if you're teaching a higher level course like Algebra or Calculus. I love [cubing](#) in my literature [classes](#): we just did one yesterday for [A Tale of Two Cities](#) (my students wrote their claim on one panel, then filled the others with supporting evidence from the text). These techniques gets hands moving and brains thinking, keeping kinesthetic learners engaged and distraction to a minimum.

## Act

Put on plays and historical reenactments. Try reader's theater for the work you're studying. Build human models of molecules or mathematical constructions. Put a literary character, historical figure, or philosophical idea on trial. The more involved you can make the learning process, the better. Students will move and make deeper, more insightful connections at the same time.

## Play

I love tossing bean bags during class discussions. Students still have to raise their hands, but they can only speak once they're holding the bean bag. If the weather is nice and you can get outside, relay races are great fun. Put a concept or theory at one end of the course and its details or components at the other end. The first team to sort all their details correctly wins. If you're stuck inside, try setting up discovery stations in the classroom. Dedicate specific desks to problem solving, discussion topics, and other group tasks. Set a timer to give students five minutes at each station.

With each of these options, be sure to allow five to 10 minutes at the end of class for wrap up and discussion. Students need the opportunity to unpack what they've

discovered, and you'll be able to assess what topics (if any) need additional attention.

Gillian Lynne. Charlie Chaplin. Misty Copeland. My little B. Brilliant minds; talented bodies. People who need to move to think. They are kinesthetic learners: individuals who learn best through movement and physical sensation. Let them be an active part of your co-op classroom. Instead of climbing the walls, your wiggler will be building cathedrals.

Everyone will benefit from the grace.

# How to Reach a Talker: Handling the "Difficult" Student in your Homeschool Co-op

*Does your homeschool co-op class have a talker? Have no fear - I've got three ways to reach and engage your talkative student.*

6:30 AM. I've just finished my [workout](#). The little guy's still sleeping, so I'm angling for a shower and some writing time before he wakes up. I set the monitor on the bathroom counter and pull back the shower curtain.

*MAMA!MAMA!MAMA!MAMA!MAMA!MAMA!MAMA!MAMA!MAMA!MAMA!MA  
MA!*

I sigh, flip the switch on the monitor, and brush the sweat from my brow.

*Mama!Mama!Mama!Mama!Mama!Mama!Mama!Mama!Mama!Mama!*

"Hi baby. Good morning, love."

*Hi mama. Hi baby. ABCs! ABCs! Find Blue Thomas. Thomas read ABCs. Read  
ABCs? Find Blue Thomas. Cup? Cup empty. Find Blue Thomas. Read ABCs. Cup.  
Cup. Cup!!!!*

That is my son's SOP.

He's two. We're not dealing with super complex sentences, but there are lots and lots (and lots) of words. Even my mother noticed:



## How to Reach a Talker

HANDLING THE "DIFFICULT" STUDENT IN YOUR HOMESCHOOL CO-OP

"Does he jabber like that all the time?"

\*incomprehensible toddler babble from the background, punctuated with exclamations of "Ball!" and "Banana!"

"Yeah, pretty much."

\*inaudible prayer for sanity in motherhood\*

**Where my two year old is the chatter, my six year old is the challenger:**

"B, please get your socks on. We're heading out."

*I don't need socks.*

"It's winter. Your feet will be cold. Please wear socks."

*Socks are unnecessary. I will not wear them. There. My shoes are on. Let's go.*

Gardner would have a field day with my younger kids. My son is both kinesthetic and linguistic, learning with his body and thinking in words. My daughter is kinesthetic, linguistic, logical, and interpersonal, a mass of motion, conversation, and logical (?) reasoning.

And the rest of us? My oldest daughter, husband, and I just sort of cower in the corner, waiting for the storm to pass.

I kid.

Or do I?

## If you aren't a linguistic, interpersonal, or logical learner, working with one can be harrowing.

The first two lean toward extroversion; the last one feeds on solving grand, sweeping questions. A simple, "because that's the way it is" is seldom satisfying, and the chatty Cathy sharing your classroom needs a constant stream of dialogue. If the class is supposed to quiet, you can bet these learners are decidedly not.

They're whispering.

Humming.

Talking to themselves and their neighbors.

Asking a billion questions for which you have no answer.

Generally, one's first inclination is to silence the distraction by moving it to a solitary space.

I tried that once. She only shouted across the classroom to where she sat before.

## What do you do with a talker or a challenger? How do you harness that need for conversation?

Group work, for one. But you can also try the following:

## Debate

Provide a topic, put students in pairs, and have them develop pros and cons for both sides. Give about ten minutes for discussion and preparation, then give each pair two minutes to present the issues.

## Discussion/Socratic Seminar

Either write a hypothetical situation or problem on the board or pose a question out loud to the group. Offer a few clues to the answer, then let the class discover the answer through conversation and dialogue.

## Collaborative Writing

While there are **several ways** to approach this, the goal is the same: students work together to develop one cohesive, written response. They must consider all options and discuss a topic thoroughly in order to develop a strong argument.

Linguistic, interpersonal, and logical learners are an asset to the classroom. They may try your patience at first, but their love of language, desire for interaction, and thirst for knowledge make working with them a joy. Give them opportunities to talk about the topic at hand. Your classroom will still be noisy, but at least the noise will be on topic.

# Dealing with Special Needs: How to Handle the "Difficult" Student in your Homeschool Co-op

*Sometimes, the challenge a child faces is more than just a learning style. Here's how to be flexible and sensitive to a child's special needs.*

From the start, I've made it clear that I don't believe in difficult students - only difficult circumstances.

Over the course of this series, I've offered suggestions for changing the circumstances of your homeschool co-op classroom. We've talked about factoring in the average attention span of a child (10-15 minutes) and switching activities accordingly. We've talked about recognizing the multiple intelligences of your students and providing opportunities to use them. But there are two more things we haven't talked about, and I'd be negligent if I didn't bring them up. First,

**A fantastic teaching toolbox is worthless without flexibility.**

And second,

**Sometimes, the challenge a child faces is more than a learning style.**

## **The importance of flexibility**

Do you ever feel like the only constant in motherhood is change? It's the same in teaching; whether we are working with our children at home or with others in a co-op classroom, the environment is in a constant state of flux.



I admit I struggle with change. But I struggle even more with the alternative: a complete breakdown in learning relationships when it's my way or the highway.

Let's say you've decided to try some of the activities I've suggested over the past few days. You've given your instructions, provided the materials, and set the kids in motion. Everyone gets to work - except John.

He's sitting in the corner, scowling.

Why isn't John as excited as his classmates? Is he being recalcitrant? Is he a troublemaker?

Probably not. Chances are, John just doesn't learn or think in the way the activity requires. He's not enthusiastic because he doesn't know what to do, or he's concerned he might make a mistake.

As I said in the introduction to the series, sometimes addressing multiple intelligences can feel like a dog and pony show, especially when you realize not every child will like every activity. Fortunately, there *are* solutions:

- Incorporate several activities into one class. Offer opportunities for discussion, creation, and presentation.
- Offer choices to your students through classroom activity stations.
- Develop a rapport with students so they are comfortable trying new things.
- Be open to changing the lesson if it just isn't working.

You can't make everybody happy all the time. But if you maintain an attitude of flexibility, the students will respond in kind.

## The impact of special needs

In a diverse group setting, a teacher can expect to encounter students of all talents and backgrounds. This includes students with special needs, such as Autism and Autism Spectrum Disorders, anxiety disorders and chronic depression, giftedness and twice exceptionality, and dyslexia, ADD and ADHD.

A special needs student is any child whose pre-existing condition prevents her from fully accessing the curriculum.

**In layman's terms, they are creative, beautiful, wonderful children whose brains are wired differently.**

Even if you are providing a variety of activities to engage different learners, you still may find that children with special needs are difficult to engage. A need for routine, an attachment to objects or ideas, or an abreaction to noises, textures, or odors are just a few of the difficulties such children encounter. Some children face more than one difficulty: for example, both of my girls are twice exceptional - gifted, sensory kiddos with an added dose of anxiety.

What does this mean for the classroom? For the student, it's like climbing a hill with a bag of rocks around your neck. The feat is possible, but it's harder, takes longer, and wears you out a lot faster. Without flexibility and accommodations, this opens the door for elopement (leaving the classroom), defiance, outbursts, and meltdowns.

## Supporting the special needs child

If you know a child in your co-op has special needs, be sure to avail yourself of appropriate [accommodations](#). Work closely with the parents and other adult members of the co-op to provide for the child's needs as discretely as possible.

If you suspect a child has special needs but have no confirmation, approach the parents as allies:

- Begin the conversation with a positive comment about the child
  - *John is a joy to have in class. He knows so much about Greek history loves sharing that knowledge with us.*
  
- Explain what you've noticed in the classroom, but gently
  - *I've noticed that John gets frustrated easily when there is a lot of activity in our classroom.*
  
- Ask what you can do to help
  - *How can I help him be more comfortable when our discussions are lively?*

When you approach the conversation this way, the focus remains on your desire to help the child succeed. The parents can reveal information as they are able, and you'll preserve the family's right to confidentiality and safeguard their emotional needs.

Reaching every child may seem like a monumental task, requiring mountains of preparation and classroom ingenuity. Truthfully, though, it only takes a bit of planning at the start. When systems and activities are in place, the children take ownership and construct their own knowledge with you as their guide.

This is where we cultivate an interest in education for education's sake. Isn't that the reason why so many of us decided to homeschool in the first place? To light a fire to their curiosity and foster a love for the true, the good, and the beautiful? When we seek to reach every child through their individual intelligences, we open up a world of exploration and discovery that will serve them well, even into adulthood.

This is real learning - for every child.