

"Although some may describe Being Special as a story of disabilities, I was inspired by the authors' abilities. Barbara and David tell a story of knowing when to hold on and when to let go. You'll be inspired to see how life has a way of working out when you have faith."

— MIKE MONAHAN —

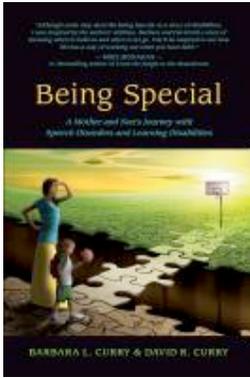
#1 Bestselling Author of *From the Jungle to the Boardroom*

Being Special

*A Mother and Son's Journey with
Speech Disorders and Learning Disabilities*



BARBARA L. CURRY & DAVID R. CURRY



Being Special: A Mother and Son's Journey with Speech Disorders and Learning Disabilities is an uplifting memoir of a family's experience with a special-needs child. The mother-and-son authors detail the emotional journey with speech disorders and learning disabilities from the toddler years until early adulthood. The authors, who wrote this book to help the parents of special-needs children, openly share their struggles with acceptance, the challenges they overcame, and their journey to embracing the blessings.

Being Special

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Disorders and Learning Disabilities***

Barbara Curry and David Curry

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Prologue: Graduation Day, 2003

Today is the big day. I never thought, even in my wildest dreams, this day would come. My youngest son, David, is graduating from high school.

We are putting the final touches on the party to follow the graduation ceremony. It is amazing how a high school graduation party motivates parents to tackle that “to-do” list of home improvements. Our spirits are high as my husband, Roger, and I walk into the backyard, admiring the results of all our work in preparation for this huge event in our lives. We had done a lot of work when our oldest son, Adam, graduated from high school, and this time we added new flowerbeds and what seemed like another ton of mulch. We had approached it as a fun family project. I got to play the role of supervisor and chief encourager, while Roger and the boys did all of the physical labor, which was fine by me.

As we arrive at the ceremony I am surprised by the butterflies in my stomach. It has always been a challenge for me to recognize my feelings; mostly it seems easier just to shove them down and put a lid on them. This time, though, I try to figure them out. Am I just nervous? No, that’s not it. I am frightened.

I am afraid of what will become of David after graduation. As an educator in the same school district the boys attended, it’s been easy to keep track of what was going on with David in school. David was fortunate in that he was always surrounded by educators who cared about him; at times, many of them went beyond the call of duty to help him be successful. But now he will no longer have the safety of school, and I won’t have the safety of having him in my school district under my watchful eye.

What am I going to do? David’s safety net is evaporating, and it will be harder for me to be his protector, his advocate in the world. I know high school graduation marks a time of transition, a time to loosen the apron strings. But I don’t want to let him go. I can’t do it. I have been

with David every step along the way of his journey. I am terrified. My son is growing up in a world that can be cruel. Is he ready for life after high school? Did we prepare him to face his future challenges without me being in the shadows...watching him...helping him? God, I need to feel your love and strength. I am scared for my son.

It is a beautiful evening; the light blue sky frames a breathtaking sunset. Having an outside graduation is always a little iffy, but tonight will create a wonderful memory for the graduates and their families. As an administrator of the school system, I am sitting behind the seniors on the football field. I have a perfect view of David and his close friends. Roger sits in the stands with the rest of our family. Life doesn't get much better than this.

I remember being their principal when they were in elementary school like it was yesterday. Where did the time go? I know when others look at David they see the athlete who succeeded on the basketball court. I am sure they think this kid has it made with his good looks and a family that supports him. What they don't know is how many nights his mama had to read his textbooks to him just to get him through school. They have no idea of the journey that my son has traveled.

My eyes tear up when they announce David's name and he walks across the stage to receive his diploma. I feel the weight of years of helping him through school, and at the same time I am absolutely euphoric. I whisper, *"Thank you, God,"* as David walks off the stage, his face beaming with pride. It has been a long haul for us, getting to this event. I am so proud of him.

We hurry home after the ceremony to greet our guests for David's party. The moon is bright and stars light up the sky. In the background, crickets chirp softly. The caterer had brought the food to our house during the ceremony. I learned many years ago that it is easier for me to hire someone to prepare the food; it is one less stressor in my life. My talents do not extend into the kitchen. The caterer prepared a repeat of the same menu we used for my older son Adam's graduation

party three years earlier. My two sisters had volunteered to stay behind at our house to arrange the food. The backyard quickly fills with David's family and friends. And teachers.... I see teachers from his elementary, middle and high school years who made such a positive difference in his life. It is humbling to see so many people coming to celebrate this special event with my son. Roger and I are touched by the many kind words people say about him. In spite of the obstacles David has overcome, he is a terrific young man. We are truly blessed.

While all high school graduations are celebrations today we are celebrating the improbable, the unthinkable. Even now I remember the day David, at age 3, was diagnosed with apraxia, a severe speech disorder. I also think about when he was later identified as learning disabled in reading and written composition.

It was hard to accept that my little boy had a severe speech disorder. A connection, a link, was missing between David's oral motor muscles and his brain. I don't know if his brain was unable to send messages to the muscles to do what was needed or if the muscles themselves could not respond to the messages. The bottom line was my son had a severe obstacle to overcome if he was to learn to speak clearly, meaning he would need intensive speech therapy throughout his childhood.

When I held David in my arms as a newborn, I didn't realize that I had joined a club: I was the parent of a special education child. The club's membership isn't really voluntary, and parents and their children join simultaneously. From David's perspective, membership meant that school would be a struggle. For me, it meant my heart would frequently break. I would go on to witness firsthand the many wounds David survived as he battled his way through school. My challenge would be to find the inner strength, time and time again, to motivate David as he faced setbacks in his attempts to be successful. Although David endured many bumps and bruises, he made it. It was painful for David, and it was excruciating to witness. But David wouldn't be the fine young man he is today without those experiences. He is a winner; I

admire him for taking the hand he was dealt and making the most out of it.

On this special night, my heart is singing for my son. In spite of the challenges, we are grateful for so many blessings. We have learned to appreciate successes that many people take for granted. We have also been blessed with many great people helping us. We will always appreciate the educators in the two school systems where David was a student. Tonight is a victory for all of us.

David's Reflections

I did it! I graduated from high school.

I walked with my classmates....

I am one of them....

I am not different.

I beat the odds; several of my special education classmates did not graduate.

My parents invited a lot of my teachers to my graduation party. I owe so much to these people; they believed in me. The teachers are so happy for me, giving me lots of hugs and high-fives. They know it was no easy road for me. One of them even had tears in her eyes.

I am happy, yet scared. What will tomorrow bring?

Chapter 2: The Challenge Begins

After teaching sixth grade for one year at the Catholic school, I made my career dreams come true and became a sixth grade teacher at Pleasant View Junior High in the Richmond Community School district where my dad was still teaching. Although I had not wanted to coach because of the time away from my family, to help me secure the job I agreed to take on junior high girls' basketball and track and serve as the high school assistant softball coach.

I believe God places special people in our lives, and I was blessed at this time with a real life-changer. The assistant principal, Judy, became my mentor and motivated me to get my principal's license and go on for my doctorate. She saw something special in me, although we never talked about it, and encouraged me to change the course of my career path from teaching to administration. Because of my deep respect for her, I trusted her completely and took her recommendations to heart. I made it my goal to complete my master's program, obtain my principal's license and earn my doctorate.

After two years at the junior high, I transferred to an elementary school in the same district. With a full time teaching position and two children under the age of 5, I finished the coursework for my master's degree in elementary education. I was thrilled to reach my first goal and now my free time could be spent being a mother.

It was hard to believe that David was already almost two years old. His infancy had been wonderful but uneventful, other than nursing, which inevitably led to his spitting up like a projectile missile. If there were an Olympic event for babies spitting up, David would have won the gold medal with record-setting distances. When we visited my parents, they actually spread a bed sheet on the furniture and floor when it was time for me to breast-feed him. I had to do something different. When the doctor suggested switching to formula, David was able, thankfully, to digest it better. What a relief to know that he was getting the nourishment he needed.

David was a beautiful toddler and a healthy eater, but when he was about 18 months old, I became concerned that he wasn't talking. David made sounds when he wanted or needed something. When he did attempt to talk, he sounded like a little alien. We were careful not to "talk" for him. For example, when he pointed to a cup, we didn't automatically ask him, "Do you want more?" We encouraged him to talk, and he clearly wanted to communicate, but he just couldn't. As hard as we tried, Roger and I couldn't understand what he was trying to say. It became a guessing game for us to decipher what he was trying to say.

Fortunately, I had taken several college classes on child development. I knew something wasn't right. I felt it in my soul. I felt it in my bones. It was hard for David to make sounds, let alone transition them to words. Although I knew toddlers develop language at various rates, David should have been able to connect words such as "Go bye-bye" at his age, but he couldn't even say "Mama" or "Mommy." I was really worried, and I felt inadequate as a young mom. My son wasn't speaking, and I didn't know what to do to help him.

Why can't David talk? Is it something that I did? Is this related to his challenges of drinking my milk? Did the hematoma on his head cause it? I played basketball and racquetball when I was carrying David...did that cause his speech issues? Is this my fault? He was planned...he was no accident. Why is this happening to my boy?

After fretting about David's lack of communication for six months, I called our family doctor about my concerns. Based on my experience as an educator and parent, I knew my son was speech-delayed, and I requested a speech assessment for David. I wanted professional help. Although he was only two years old, our doctor referred us to a speech therapist at the local hospital.

While I had requested the evaluation, by the day of the appointment I was scared and not thinking very clearly. I didn't even think about needing to entertain David in the waiting room or bring toys to occupy him. The waiting room was not really equipped for a toddler, and David was unquestionably an active 2 year old. He ran

around the waiting room as I attempted to get his attention and entertain him with nursery rhymes. My heart was pounding through my chest. I felt so alone, and I wished that Roger could have been with us. When David's name was called, I wondered if he sensed my anxiety.

In the speech therapist's office, David had a tough time sitting in his little chair. The therapist, Carole, asked David to repeat specific sounds, but he just couldn't comply with her requests. She demonstrated a great deal of patience as she continued to redirect David's attention to the tasks at hand. She showed him pictures of items that David actually saw on a daily basis and was familiar with. For example, David loved playing basketball with his Little Tikes basketball goal. When he saw a picture of a ball, his eyes brightened and his smile lit up the room. But he couldn't tell her that the object in the picture was a ball.

The next series of tasks called for David to look at four cards and point to the picture she named. His attention span was pretty good with this activity, and he was more successful than he had been with "speaking" tasks. I breathed a sigh of relief that he was able to complete some of these basic skills.

Throughout the evaluation, I observed David's communication skills, or lack of them, and I worked hard to hold back tears. My fear that my son would not be able to speak came out, in spite of my efforts to ignore it my head throbbed and my facial muscles tightened into knots.

With a smile, the speech therapist first confirmed that David had a lot of energy. When she also confirmed that David had a severe speech disorder and qualified for speech therapy, I just went numb. My breathing seemed to stop. So did my heart. It is one thing to think there may be something wrong; it's a *totally* different thing when a specialist confirms it. Later, I thought of a thousand questions that I should have asked her, but I didn't.

It's my fault. David has my "speech genes." I was in speech therapy from kindergarten through fifth grade. I even went to "speech summer school" when I was going into the fifth grade. Roger never had speech therapy.... I don't want David to ever feel ridiculed.

As a child, I had issues with articulation, auditory discrimination and stammering. It was a challenge for me to hear some sounds of the alphabet. To this day, I still have a problem hearing the difference between the short “i” and short “e” sounds.

I remember especially how hard it was for me to say the “r” sound. It didn’t help having two r’s in my first name. My “r” sounds came out more like “w” sounds, so my name came out “Bawbwa.” I got tired of forcing my tongue up to the roof of my mouth, pretending to get the peanut butter “stuck” there, so I could make the “r” sound. Thank goodness I mastered it; I shudder at the thought that I could be introducing myself today as “Bawbwa Cuwwy.”

I had joined the speech club in junior high, and I remember one speech competition when I had to give an extemporaneous speech in front of a judge. After I picked my question out of three options, I had 30 minutes to use magazines and journals to research and speak informatively about the current event I selected. At the conclusion of my seven-minute speech, the judge criticized my pronunciation of the word “picture.” He requested several times that I say the word. I consistently mispronounced it as “pitcher.” I honestly could not hear the difference between “picture” and “pitcher,” and I walked away from the brief encounter with the judge feeling very discouraged and embarrassed.

I was overwhelmed with sadness and guilt as I tried to grasp what I had witnessed during David’s speech assessment. I knew how hard I had to work to overcome my minor speech challenges, which were nothing compared with his. My son’s issues were severe enough that he needed therapy twice a week. My mind raced a mile a minute. There was so much I didn’t understand. Communication is a skill we take for granted until a loved one struggles with what seems almost effortless for the rest of us.

Why can’t he speak? How long will he need speech therapy? Will he be able to speak as well as us? What will happen if David can’t speak? Are there other children like David? What can I do to help him? What

am I going to do? What should I do? Will somebody help me? My son must not fight this battle alone.

I silently vowed I would do everything I could to help David; it became my first priority.

Life suddenly became a lot more complicated. We scheduled David's first official speech therapy session for the next week, taking the latest appointment time of the day. I knew that I would have an ongoing scheduling conflict. Although my students' school day wouldn't interfere, I would need to leave before the end of my contracted workday to take David to the hospital for his twice-weekly appointments for months, perhaps years. I did not have anyone else who could take him. Besides, I *wanted* to take him. I wanted to be there with him and for him. I wanted to learn how to help him. I wanted to do whatever I could to control the situation.

I met with my principal and explained the situation. It was hard to reach out for help; I viewed it as a sign of weakness, but I was at his mercy. I waited anxiously for my principal's response to my request to leave work 20 minutes early, twice a week. It felt like my son's future lay in this man's hands. When he granted my request, I gratefully agreed to the conditions: I would be charged one of my personal days for the entire year in exchange for leaving work early. What a relief! With his help, I had removed the first barrier to getting my beautiful little boy what he needed.

Learning that our health insurance would pay for the therapy got us past another barrier. Roger and I were still paying back my college loans. My beginning teacher's salary, along with Roger's salary at the local factory, barely covered our expenses. Like most young couples, we struggled financially.

Thankfully, David actually enjoyed going to speech therapy. Just as a teacher can make or break a child's school experience, the speech therapist was the key. I immediately liked her, and I trusted her. She was gentle, not only with David, but with me as well. She was very

perceptive, recognizing and understanding my fears. Our spirits seemed to connect and her calm manner was very comforting to me. Once again, I felt blessed and humbled that God helped me by bringing her into my life.

When I shared with her that David was starting to exhibit some behavior issues, the therapist reassured me that this was probably the result of the “terrible twos” exacerbated by David’s frustration with his inability to communicate.

Gradually, David began to make more sounds, and the therapist was pleased with his progress. Though his development was slower than I wanted, there was growth. I made myself focus on his improvements. Still, I worried; kindergarten was only three years away.

Although all parents teach their children, I took on the role more officially at night. Every evening after supper, I would work with him on his speech and fine motor skills, using the at-home speech exercises the speech therapist gave us. She was very creative, and David viewed the homework as play. My experience as a former preschool teacher was also helpful. I focused on making the array of different fine motor tasks fun for him. His beautiful smile was more than enough to motivate me. One of David’s favorite activities involved red Jell-O. I would open a package, and David would empty the powder mixture onto a small baking sheet, lining it with a thin film. I made simple shapes in the Jell-O for David to imitate and after he made each shape, he licked his finger. He enjoyed this game, and he was successful at it. We did this exercise so often his pointer finger had a red stain on it most of the time. I actually worried at one point that his finger would stay red permanently.

As with his older brother, we read books and nursery rhymes. His favorite story was *Five Little Monkeys Jumping on the Bed*. Although David wasn’t able to say the words of the nursery rhyme with me, he could do the hand movements that went with the story. To this day anytime someone asks me, “What did the doctor say?” I want to respond, with a twinkle in my eye, “The doctor said, no more monkeys jumping on the bed!”

I also gave Adam, who was in preschool and was considered advanced, as much of me as I could. Adam is analytical like Roger, and he liked doing problem-solving activities. I felt guilty that I didn't spend as much time with Adam as I did with David

After the boys went to bed, I graded papers and prepared lesson plans for my other students. I could never have juggled everything without Roger; I don't know what I would have done without him. He helped around the house, doing the necessary chores so I could devote time to helping David. I was exhausted most of the time, but I was a mom on a mission. I leaned on Roger for my emotional support, and when I looked into his eyes, I saw his complete faith in me. He trusted me to help our son, and that was a responsibility I did not take lightly. Roger was still another of my blessings.

Even with all my efforts, I was not in control of the outcome, and this frightened me. I needed God's help, but I struggled with the idea of turning my worries over to Him.

David's Reflections

I remember playing with the Jell-O. I never realized that it was to help me with my fine-motor skills; I thought I was just playing with my mom.

Thank God we had people in our lives to help us.

Chapter 3: The Report

I continued teaching at the elementary school, transporting David to speech therapy twice a week and helping him with his fine-motor skills. After two years, I decided I needed to find the time to finish my second master's degree and obtain my principal's license. Although I didn't have to earn a master's degree in educational leadership, I decided to take that route. I could have taken the "easy way," taking only the classes I needed to meet the requirements for the principal's license, but I believed I would benefit by taking the additional coursework, and I had always loved learning. I found myself following in the footsteps of my mentor Judy, attending the same university and following the same college program; I even had some of the same professors who had impacted her. Her seeds had taken root.

I had the distorted view that showing emotion was a sign of weakness. I had developed that perspective in high school, and it had seen me through my adulthood safely so far. After all, as a female athlete in the mid-1970s—before Title IX and equal opportunity for girls in school sports—I had a pretty decent sense of what discrimination felt like. I became driven, giving it all to prove myself, even if I was "just a girl." In high school, I played three varsity sports (basketball, volleyball and tennis), played in both the marching and concert bands, and worked hard on my academics; I *had* to learn to organize my time!

My parents' approval was also important to me, another internal push toward being an overachiever. I put a lot of pressure on myself to excel. As the middle child of three girls, I was determined that my parents would never have to worry about me. I rarely showed anger or sadness, and I never shared my feelings with anyone. I'm sure that I experienced an array of feelings; I just chose to not recognize them, name them or feel them. I kept them in check, learning to manage my emotions so they wouldn't get in the way.

I didn't know that my organizational skills and my ability to just "get it done" would be the attributes that would help me survive the ups and downs of being David's mom. I know that others, looking from the outside in, described me as Superwoman. I also know how very far from the truth that perception was. I constantly struggled as I juggled. I tried so hard not to drop any of the balls I had in the air at any given moment. I was exhausted most of the time, but I just kept plugging along. I could not have done it without Roger, my faith and my upbringing. I was not a quitter. I had my goals, and with Roger's help, I kept focused on them.

I did everything I could to help prepare David for kindergarten. I could never have foreseen how valuable my previous experience as a preschool teacher would be. I knew, based on what my former preschoolers could do, that David's capabilities were behind those of his peers. It was a challenge for David to string beads, copy and draw two lines that intersected like an "x," or dress or undress himself independently. When he colored, he moved his entire arm, not just his hand as most children did. We had our work cut out for us.

Although David made progress during the year, I was still worried about his speech and fine-motor abilities. In addition, he was still not potty trained at night and had to wear diapers, even though he was 3 years old. I wondered if his developmental delay was impacting his bladder control at night.

David became increasingly frustrated by his speech challenges. He was extremely attached to me, demanding that I do everything for him. I had witnessed children struggling in school, and I saw the pain they endured. I didn't want David to have to fight that battle.

One of our favorite soothing activities was to rock together every night. As I rocked him to sleep, he would rhythmically swirl his hair around his finger. My mom had been a rocker, and I remembered many hours in her lap; I always felt so safe with her arms around me. I enjoyed passing this on to the next generation. And I became more focused than ever on helping David.

What else can I be doing to help him? He has all these issues, and he isn't potty trained at night. He doesn't listen and he does what he wants, at such a high intensity. He is sucking all of my energy out of me, draining me. Why can't he get a break? God, I need your help. I know You won't give me more than I can handle, but I must be getting close.

The hospital had adapted the speech waiting room for toddlers. I was glad to see that they purchased shelving, toys and books for their younger clients to use. David could have fun playing while he waited for his turn for therapy. I thanked the hospital staff for the waiting-room renovation, and I secretly gave David the credit for the change.

David's speech therapist was excellent. She was a wonderful and creative teacher, incorporating body movement with sounds. David learned to say the "b" sound while he put his little hands into fists and punched the air like a world-class boxer. She also recommended a sensory-integration technique to help regulate sensory input, which helps some children with the learning process. She gave me a brush with soft bristles, like a soft surgical brush, and suggested that we brush his arms and legs with deep strokes for about three minutes a couple of times a day. I was willing to try anything. David was very compliant and actually enjoyed having Roger or I brush him, so we had another soothing strategy.

I still taught David at night, incorporating new fine-motor activities disguised as play time. I already had a nice supply of puzzles, play dough, pegs and art supplies that I had purchased for his big brother at the local teachers' supply store. David delighted in putting puzzles together that had four large pieces. He wasn't ready yet to sort the colorful large plastic pegs by colors or shape, but he liked putting them into the various spongy shapes. David enjoyed playing with play dough, using the plastic cookie cutters to make different shapes.

I felt blessed that I could actually help David develop the skills he would need in kindergarten. I was thankful every day that Roger helped me so much around the house; I couldn't imagine trying to do it all alone. It was hard enough with great support.

After each speech therapy session, the therapist would meet with me to debrief about their session. It was amazing how connected we became through those interactions in the hospital waiting room. I could share my concerns about David with her, and we slowly developed a friendship. It was rare for me to open up, but she had built a climate of trust with me. Her daughter-in-law was expecting a baby, so I gave her some of the boys' clothes from their infant days. During those rare times of having a free moment, we even went to a couple of movies together.

I still felt guilty and sad about David's situation. He was such a loving child and generally happy, except when he was trying to communicate and we couldn't understand him. I stayed driven to learn as much as possible so I could help him. A few months after David's third birthday, I contacted our doctor to request a referral for David to receive a complete battery of tests at the closest children's hospital. I was grateful for our doctor's support to do what I thought was needed and, thankfully, our insurance would pay for the assessments. The hospital had a strong reputation, and David deserved the best. I had to find out what more we could do.

The first available appointment was in early fall. Roger and I took a couple of days off and planned to drive to the children's hospital, more than two hours away. I am so "small town" that going to the "big city" was out of my comfort zone, and I was relieved that Roger was able to get off work to go with us. He was my pillar of strength; I didn't think I could do this on my own. I needed my husband by my side. I stumbled on a resource that a top-of-the-line motel gave a considerable financial discount for families going to this Midwestern hospital, and we made arrangements to stay overnight during the two days of testing. Roger's parents eagerly agreed to keep Adam while we were away. It was hard for us to leave him, but we knew Adam and his grandparents would enjoy their time together.

Roger and I were both nervous when we arrived at the hospital. Although we didn't talk about it, we could see it in each other's eyes.

As we made our way through the maze of corridors, we were overwhelmed at the number of severely ill children being cared for. It was humbling to see that our challenges were nothing compared with those experienced by other children and their families.

God, thank you for blessing us with healthy children. Please help heal these children at the hospital and give strength to their families.

During the first day of assessments, we met with a team of doctors and social workers. It was evident that they were experts in their fields. They interviewed Roger and me extensively for several hours, gathering David's history and our perspective on him, while David entertained himself with a basketful of toys. I was already emotionally exhausted shoving down the fear that permeated my body.

When the doctors were ready to interact with David, he was taken to a room filled with lots of activities used to diagnose his abilities. The room had a two-way mirror, so Roger and I were able to observe. David was not ready to cooperate, and he threw quite a tantrum. Roger held my hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze as we watched. After several futile attempts to get David to engage in the activities, the doctors requested that I come into the room. My presence, unfortunately, did not help. I was close to tears because of David's resistance to my attempts to get him to complete the tasks. Although I tried not to show it, I was frustrated; the doctors were waiting on me to get the situation under control and I couldn't. I finally asked if Roger could change places with me; perhaps he would have better luck in getting David to settle down.

I don't know if it was Roger's excellent parenting skills that got David to calm down or if David was simply getting exhausted, but I was grateful that the energy in the room shifted positively. The IQ tests and fine-motor tests were finally completed. I wondered how accurate these assessments would be, based on David's temperament.

I wish Roger could hold me, console me and tell me everything is going to be fine. I want to throw a temper tantrum. It's not fair that my son can't speak. There is NO reason David should have to go through

this! Why can't he speak? God, tell me your plan. Help me to understand.

We went from one specialist to another, and I knew this was taking a toll on David. Although the team of doctors debriefed us at the conclusion of their assessments for the day, I could not focus on what they said. We appreciated the team of experts taking their time with us, helping us to help our son, but I was overwhelmed and on overload with the day's events. I hoped that the next day would be less strenuous for David. We went out for supper, which meant Roger and I spent a lot of energy keeping David entertained while we waited for our meal. David was an active little boy who had a hard time containing his enthusiasm.

The next day, we arrived at the hospital refreshed. We were scared but determined to make it through another day of testing. The second day of events at the children's hospital included speech and gross-motor assessments. I hoped David would feel more comfortable and that he would cooperate. He was definitely in charge the first day, and it had not been a pretty sight.

First, David was given a ball to throw to the doctor at the end of the table. He threw it! Right on-target! We had just started to relax when David stumbled on the little balance beam. He tripped over his own feet while he walked. Roger and I looked at each other. Was this our little boy who shot basketballs and dunked the ball in his pint-size basketball goal? Who rode his Big Wheel throughout the house with the ease of a professional driver? I always thought his gross-motor skills were fine; now I didn't know what to think.

At the conclusion of their evaluation, the team of doctors shared that it was evident that we loved our little boy. Their acknowledgment of our efforts was appreciated, but it did nothing to ease the sick feeling I had in my gut. As they gave us a summary of the day, my mind began shutting down, afraid to hear what they had to say. I could not comprehend it, but they assured us that we would receive their report in the mail.

The ride home seemed like an eternity. The stress of the two days of assessments took its toll on me. I just couldn't push down my feelings any longer; the lid wouldn't stay on. I cried quietly all the way. I would get my composure back, and then the tears would start again. Roger didn't know what to say to help me or comfort me. Sometimes, there aren't any words.

My daily routine continued with teaching, taking college classes, transporting David to speech therapy and helping him at night. I anxiously waited for the report from the hospital. I was optimistic that I would be given suggestions to help David overcome his challenges. These doctors were experts; I was excited to begin implementing their ideas.

Although it was only several weeks, it seemed like a lifetime before the doctors' report arrived in September. My hands shook as I tore open the envelope. My breathing was shallow. I took those results extremely seriously. I have the utmost respect for the medical profession. My mom is a lab technician; my older sister is a nurse practitioner specializing in obstetrics/gynecology, and my younger sister is a medical technologist. But as I read, I began dissecting the findings to avoid internalizing their meaning.

"David's eyes slant downward." Where is that coming from? Why did they mention it? Are they saying he has Down syndrome? What? He has speech apraxia? He has difficulty moving his tongue? Can that be overcome? They want us to teach him sign language? We should consider teaching David how to use a communication board? I know he is speech-delayed, but isn't this going to the extreme? They don't know where he started; he has come so far. Take him to a behavior therapist so we can get help dealing with him? Why? He is just an active little boy. He should qualify for a special education preschool? I didn't know they even existed. These IQ scores just can't be reflective of his ability. It's just because he wasn't cooperating during those sessions. He didn't show them what he knew. How can they say that David is a clumsy child? That simply isn't true.

Before getting “The Report” (as we began to think of it), I anticipated I might need to keep providing additional assistance to help David with his fine-motor skills, but I was not prepared for the doctors’ findings. The results seemed to question his abilities; The Report focused only on what he *couldn’t* do.

The Report knocked me off my feet; I felt helpless. I was a scared mother, wanting to do whatever it took to help my son. I tried to read it again, but I couldn’t; the words were a blur as the tears flowed. I just wanted to know what I could do to help my child. I was not prepared to hear a litany of things he couldn’t do. I felt sick to my stomach and incredibly sad.

What type of future was my little boy going to have?

After the boys went to bed, I shared The Report with Roger. He shook his head in disbelief. His voice was barely above a whisper as he asked, “What should we do?”

We went through the document line by line, strategizing our next move as if we were playing a game of chess. We highlighted each comment and recommendation and noted our thoughts about it:

1. Eyes slant downward: Talk to school nurse.
2. Speech apraxia: Check with speech therapist.
3. Sign language: Check with speech therapist.
4. Communication board: Check with speech therapist.
5. Behavior therapist: Make an appointment with a child behavior therapist with an excellent reputation.
6. Special education preschool: Schedule a visit.
7. IQ scores: Blatantly disregard. The scores were not reflective of David’s ability. His noncompliance during the assessment impacted the outcome. These scores would not become a self-fulfilling prophecy. If we accepted the scores at face value, they would be more likely to come true. We would not lower our goals or expectations, thus ensuring that our actions would not reinforce the scores.
8. Clumsy child: Enroll David in a gymnastics class.

Because of the hospital's excellent reputation, Roger and I decided not to get a second opinion, but we were selective on the recommendations that we chose to implement. We would consult with David's speech therapist about the diagnosis of apraxia and would follow her recommendations about using sign language and a communication board. We would follow the recommendation of the behavior therapist after she met with David. Fortunately, I was aware of many resources through my school system. We would rely on my experience, education and intuition to decide whether to enroll David in the special education preschool, after I scheduled a visit. We knew our family doctor had received a copy of The Report, but we decided not to follow up with him. We had our own plan of attack, and we felt at peace with it.

Although I knew Roger was upset by The Report, he tried hard to keep it in check. I think he did that for my benefit. He reassured me that The Report was not an exact science but an educated guess, based on the doctors' expertise. He gave me lots of hugs and held me especially close that evening. I blamed The Report for my son's problems when, in fact, I struggled to accept the findings. The IQ scores devastated me. I felt the weight of the world on my shoulders, and I was emotionally drained.

When I checked on David as he slept that night, I fought back more tears. I didn't understand why this was happening to him. Because of my background in education, I knew how hard it was for a square peg to fit into the round hole of the school system. Roger was putting 100 percent of his trust in me and relying heavily on my opinion. He was counting on me to solve these problems. I vowed to continue to work with David and prove that the hospital doctors were wrong.

My mentor suggested I take a break from my college classes for a brief period so I could focus on David's needs. She was very intuitive and knew I was overwhelmed. Once again, I would follow her advice. She was still, however, nurturing the seed that she had planted for my future success.

The next day, I talked with the school nurse about the statement in The Report that David's eyes slanted down, which could be an indication of Down syndrome. She told me that children with Down syndrome have a line that goes across the palm. I wasn't sure if the line went across one palm or both, but that night after supper I called to David, "Come here for a minute; I want to look at your hands." My heart was pounding and I steadied my breathing so I wouldn't hyperventilate. I looked into my son's beautiful eyes, determined not to cry no matter what I saw. I turned his hands over to look at his palms and immediately thanked God that David did not have the line on either hand. I didn't think I was strong enough to put anything more on my plate. I was already at the breaking point.

I called the hospital the next morning to ask about the comment about David's eyes. The doctor explained that they noticed that Roger's eyes and my eyes did not slant, but David's eyes did, and that it was just an observation; it had no significance. If I could have reached through the phone line, I would have smacked that doctor. He would have been the recipient of all of my frustration and anger regarding David's situation.

When I made the appointment for David with a behavior therapist, I shared with her that David was extremely clingy to me. I described how he demanded that I do everything for him, such as give him his bath, dress him and sit with him and that he wouldn't let Roger do any of these tasks. I told her how energetic he was, and that he required my undivided attention. He didn't mind us very well; if he wanted to do something, he did it.

After just one session, the therapist concluded that David did not need her services and it really would be a waste of money. She informed me, however, that he perseverated; it was a challenge for David to transition from one activity to another. She did not seem concerned about it, or maybe I did not pick up on it. I was fixated on the statement that he didn't need a behavior therapist.

She also recommended that I read Dr. James Dobson's book *The Strong-Willed Child*, which I did. Although I did not use all of the

suggestions, I found it helpful. It provided tips and techniques for parents, and I appreciated the author's connection with spirituality. It was reassuring to know that I was not the only parent with a strong-willed child. I believe David's strong will reflected his frustration over not being able to communicate.

When I met with the speech therapist at the hospital to share The Report, she explained speech apraxia to me. David's brain had difficulty moving the parts of his mouth, like his tongue and lips, which are needed to speak. That made sense; I knew he had difficulty forming sounds and syllables. He had difficulty saying them because there was a missing link between his brain and his mouth. For example, she said, if I had ice cream on my lips, I could use my tongue to lick it off. David, however, couldn't make his tongue do that simple task. Because he couldn't control his tongue, he sounded like an alien when he talked.

The therapist concurred with the diagnosis of speech apraxia. She explained the use of a communication board, which children can use to replace or supplement talking when they want to communicate. For example, David could point to a cup on the communication board if he was thirsty or point to a book if he wanted me to read him a story. She emphasized the amount of progress that he had made so far, and because of that, she didn't want to teach him sign language or expose him to a communication board yet. She recommended that we stay the course, and I readily agreed. Although sign language and the communication board were wonderful tools, I was afraid that they would become a crutch for David.

Whenever I thought about The Report, I felt a prickly sensation throughout my body, like when you barely miss being in an accident. It was like having my guts ripped out of my body. I stayed in panic mode. The only thing I could do was keep forging ahead. The next thing for me to check off from The Report was to visit the special education preschool.

What will it be like? Will David fit in? Will he like it? I have all these questions and so few answers.

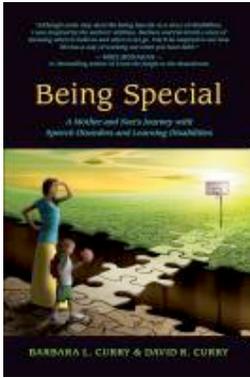
David's Reflections

I wish my parents had gotten a second opinion. Maybe another team of doctors would have had another opinion or better techniques to suggest. They only had me for 10 hours of testing; that wasn't sufficient time to determine what my strengths or weaknesses were. They didn't know me. It feels like those doctors thought I should give up, that there was no way for me to achieve.

Was I was that "off" from where I should have been for my age? It's hard for me to imagine that, at 3 and a half, I couldn't speak. My niece is that age and I can't begin to picture her not talking. It would be a very long road for her, a sickness without any cure.

I despise that the doctors stated that I was a clumsy child. They criticized my greatest attribute, which is my athletic ability.

I refuse to believe that I was ever clumsy.



Being Special: A Mother and Son's Journey with Speech Disorders and Learning Disabilities is an uplifting memoir of a family's experience with a special-needs child. The mother-and-son authors detail the emotional journey with speech disorders and learning disabilities from the toddler years until early adulthood. The authors, who wrote this book to help the parents of special-needs children, openly share their struggles with acceptance, the challenges they overcame, and their journey to embracing the blessings.

Being Special

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