

Time for Natalia
By Linda LaRoux

My granddaughter, Natalia, came to live with me at the age of four . I never knew how serious a learning disability could be until then. Her mother had been ill since before her birth. Her father had been abusive, compelling her to sit and watch television all day. She wasn't allowed the luxury of play nor did she watch anything age-appropriate. There was no communication with her mother who was so medicated that she was in deep slumber most of the day. Communication with her father consisted of constant disapproval and scolding. I spoke Spanish to her or I'd have noticed her English was distorted beyond recognition.

It broke my heart when I realized that she had no communication skills in English, couldn't write her name, didn't recognize a single letter or sound, could not recognize numbers, didn't know how to play with toys, was incredibly fearful of the playground, and extremely frightened by the outside world in general. Walking in the grass was so threatening to her that it brought about tears and trembling.

A test at the school revealed that she was two and a half years behind her age level. I wanted to cry. How could I not have known? Grandma had her over to go out to eat or to play a bit. Failure to notice made my heart sink. Now how could I help this little girl?

The first thing I noticed was that she was emotionally distraught. For a small kid, she had a lot on her mind, things a little girl shouldn't have to worry about. Every child knows something about what happens in the household. They're paying attention even when it seems that they're not. Natalia seemed to carry the adult burdens of the household as well as all the anguish that she had been experiencing during her young life. Then there was the missing of her mommy and the missing of her own bedroom. My house was scary for her. Change frightened for her. At night I played soft, relaxing music for her. In this way she might keep the melody in her head rather than thinking of all of the things that upset her. This served to keep her peaceful and thoughtless for the night. Her bad dreams stopped almost immediately.

Who would have thought that she had to be taught to play? I didn't realize that giving a baby a rattle was one of the first acts of teaching play. We built a Barbie house of shelves and dividers. My granddaughter and I decorated the rooms using wall paper, floor tiles, mirrors, picture frames for windows, and dressed it up with Barbie furniture and accessories. It was awesome for playing. It was every little girl's dream! Sadly, Natalia portrayed her dolls as sick and needing to go to the doctor or hospital. When playing with a girl and a boy, her dolls spoke mean and struck each other repeatedly.

I corrected this by becoming her playmate. Our dolls had slumber parties, went shopping, visited a veterinary hospital, horse farms, princesses, ice cream parlors, swimming pools. Everything was fun and purposely chosen to teach her about the positives in life.

The bedroom floor was matted in the alphabet. I created a game called "The Jumping Game" in which I would call out a letter and incorporate the sound of the letter.

She would have to jump across the floor to that letter. She loved this and we were quite silly about the jumping because her balance wasn't great. We'd giggle as she jumped because she was like a little clown and I used this to have fun with her and I'd tickle her. She learned her letters and sounds quickly.

I created another game for her in which she was to learn her numbers one through seventeen called, "The Hand Game." I had some yellow plastic hands with suction cups on the palms. There were two sets of cards. One was scattered about the floor while the other was used as a turning deck. We'd lick our suction cups and acting very excited we'd await the anticipation of the card on deck. We'd look at each other with the, "I'm going to beat you to that card!" expression. Then with a flip of the card from the deck and a shout of the number revealed, we waved our suction cup hands anxiously over the scattered cards till one of us would find the card that matched the one we just flipped over. As she would try to get the card that matched I would hit her hand with mine and the fight was on. Of course she was better at the fight than I was. Whoever had the most cards would win which gave us good counting practice. I couldn't understand how she won so many times compared to me!

We also played a rather large-scale game of hopscotch using ten rectangles. She would write the numbers counting by tens onto the bluestone blocks with different color chalk. We played the same as we would regular hopscotch only we would have to call out our numbers as we jumped, "10, 20, 30, 40," etc. We'd sing a little song in English and Spanish,

"Ten, twenty, thirty
Fourty, fifty, sixty
Seventy, eighty, ninety
One hundred

Diez, veinte, treinta
Cuarenta, cincuenta, sesenta
Setenta, ochenta, noventa,
Cien"

By the time she was in first grade I realized that a lot was being done through stories. She didn't have the desire to read. It seemed that she spent so much time on sounding things and not recognizing everything that I decided to use story telling as part of our learning plan to get her confidence up. I wrote a story for her called, "Gusano", about a little worm that was not happy with whom he was. The story was chosen because she was a little different than the other children and sometimes she questioned herself. She was also deathly afraid of worms. In the story, the little worm tries to change who he is. This did not work very well. He became unhappy. In the end he finds that he is very special just by being himself. The book also explained characteristics of a worm and its importance in the garden.

Natalia helped me with the drawings and I explained to her why we use

quotations, question marks, periods, etc. She was extremely proud of the book and wanted to share it in the school. The teachers said that it was rare to find a child that struggled with reading, yet could write so well.

For us, it was constant play all day long. It was wonderful that she didn't realize she was progressing and learning exponentially. We had more fun and created the most affectionate bond. Her knowledge expanded rapidly. The problem was that the other kids were learning so much in school that it was hard for Natalia to catch up. In Kindergarten it wasn't too bad. By first grade it became more difficult, by third grade it was near impossible, and in fourth grade I, too, felt overwhelmed.

In parent-teacher meetings I remember the tears trickling down my face as they told me she was not there yet. How can she not be there? It was getting to the point that by second and third grade she was going to bed at ten and eleven o'clock trying to get her homework done and to understand it. Our playtime was trickling down because I couldn't figure out how to get this homework into play. It became more like constant drilling because it was all memorization.

School seemed so much more advanced than I remember. In my day we were doing verbs, adjectives, and nouns in fourth grade. She was doing them in second. We did multiplication and division in sixth grade. She was doing it in third. Children are sponges and absorb incredible amounts of data. I would see her learning these things and thought, *Wow! She's so intelligent in comparison to me at this age!* Then came the big let down. She was still a year and a half behind?

The staff always reminds me that she would never be where she is at if I hadn't come up with all of those ideas. They're happy that I write books for Natalia. They even use them during some of their classes and this makes Natalia ecstatic. Some of the teachers have asked that I write a book about helping children learn quickly because there are so many children like Natalia. This is a work in progress. We still have miles to go...

Author Bio: Linda LeRoux lives in the tranquil village of Williamstown, Massachusetts. She was a Medical Assistant for 23 years, caring for those with life-long disabilities. A love for others dwells within her soul as she reaches out to aid those in need through volunteer efforts. As a Licensed Foster Care Provider she has taken on the important call for a parent, roll model, social worker, and someone to nurture the hurt in a child to overcome unbearable obstacles. When her granddaughter came to live with her she exchanged her demanding medical career for a part-time work as a lifeguard and aquatics instructor.

In the midst of it all this, she feels strongly about helping children with learning disabilities. One must break through the barrier, that painful place, and enable them to focus and progress. She intends to be one of those people who can make the difference. You may contact her at: linleroux143@hotmail.com