



Is It Time to Homeschool Your Chronically Ill Child?

By Jessica Leigh Johnson

IT'S RARE TO turn on the TV these days without hearing about pandemic bird flu or a brand-new virus sickening the nation in “unprecedented” proportions. One month, enterovirus is causing widespread panic among parents; the next, it's Ebola or measles. As a mother with three children who suffer from a primary immunodeficiency (PI) disease and are vulnerable to infection, headlines like these frazzle my nerves and keep me awake at night. When my protective instincts kick in, I consider pulling my boys from the biggest germ factory of all — public school — and teaching them at home, where they'll be safe.

While removing a child from school every time a new superbug makes headlines is a bit of an overreaction, there are times when teaching a chronically ill child at home is preferable to sending him or her to school. But how do parents know when it makes more sense to educate their chronically ill child at home rather than in a traditional school setting?

While there's no magic checklist that will give parents a definitive answer, taking these factors into consideration may aid them in making this difficult decision.

Frequent absence. Surprisingly, most truancy specialists do not consider frequent absence reason enough to remove a child from a traditional school setting on a permanent basis. If parents are determined to keep their chronically absent child enrolled in public school, there are ways to work around the issue of multiple missed school days.

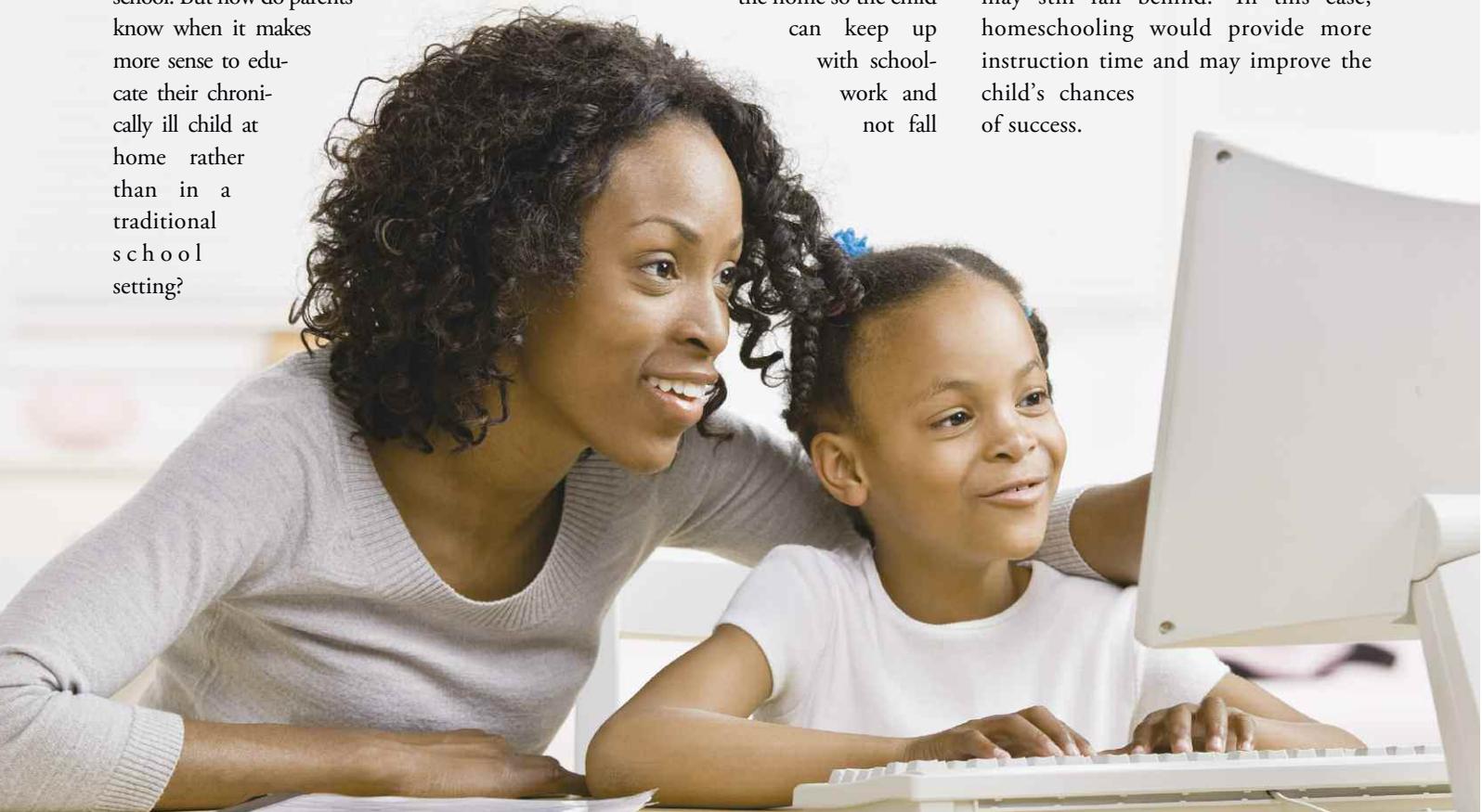
Chronic absence is defined as missing 10 percent or more of school days.¹ When a child is determined to be chronically ill, the parents can fill out a 504 plan specifying the modifications and accommodations needed for the student to perform at the same level as his or her peers.² This can

include a tutor who comes to the home so the child can keep up with schoolwork and not fall

behind the other students in class.

According to children-with-special-needs expert Terri Mauro, “Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act specifies that no one with a disability can be excluded from participating in federally funded programs or activities, including elementary, secondary or postsecondary schooling.”² Disability in this context can refer to a physical impairment such as an illness or chronic condition.

Unfortunately, even if a tutor comes to the home, sometimes the amount of time the child spends with that tutor is not enough to keep up with classmates. Tutors cost money, and because of lack of funding, some schools may be able to afford only one hour of tutoring per day for a homebound child. Despite the school system's best efforts, the child may still fall behind.³ In this case, homeschooling would provide more instruction time and may improve the child's chances of success.





More individualized attention. With upwards of 25 students in a classroom, teachers can't possibly focus enough attention on a particular student in order to monitor rapid changes in his or her health. Many times, school nurses split their days between several schools and are not always available in a medical emergency. For peace of mind, some parents choose homeschooling so they can keep a closer eye on their child. The health status of a child with conditions like asthma, food allergies and diabetes can change quickly and unpredictably, and paying close attention to symptoms at their onset can be lifesaving.⁴

The need for flexibility. A chronically ill child often has numerous medical appointments and procedures. Homeschooling offers the flexibility to schedule these appointments without having to work around school hours.

A chronically ill child will also have days when he or she is just not feeling 100 percent and may need more down time than his or her peers. After a day-long infusion, that child can be tired and lethargic. It may take a day or two to recover from a particularly draining procedure. Homeschooling allows the child to tackle schoolwork in smaller amounts while taking frequent breaks to rest and then resume studies when ready.

Less exposure to germs. While many chronic conditions such as PI can be well managed with immune globulin therapy, a chronically ill child can be extremely vulnerable to even the most common cold germs. For a child with complex immune deficiencies involving more than one part of the immune system, or a child on chemotherapy or undergoing bone marrow transplant, exposure to a classroom full of children poses a dangerous threat to their health. It doesn't take a doctor to figure out that the fewer people a chronically ill child comes in contact with, the

better chance he or she will have to stay healthy. For parents of an ill child more vulnerable to infection, homeschooling may be the safest course of action.

Less stress for both child and parents. The life of a chronically ill child can be complicated enough without adding the hassle of dealing with school personnel who don't understand the child's disease, and often wonder why a child who "looks" healthy is sick so many days. Some parents choose homeschooling simply to eliminate this one area of constant stress.

Sometimes a child with a rare and misunderstood condition is made fun of or picked on due to adverse symptoms. With homeschooling, the child is taught in a safe and comfortable environment, free from negative stressors that can detract from his or her ability to learn and focus on schooling.

Along with the benefits of homeschooling come drawbacks that must be taken into consideration, a major one being the potential lack of socialization in a homeschool setting. Only part of school is actual book learning; the other half is social skill learning, which the child will need throughout the rest of his life.⁵ Making friends, dealing with or ignoring bullies and working with others are important social skills that cannot be taught but rather are learned through firsthand experience. Homeschooling parents can combat this issue by involving their child in sports, community organizations such as 4-H or local theater groups, and church youth programs, to name a few.

One last thing to consider when choosing homeschooling is the quality of the curriculum and the qualifications of the teacher. If parents don't feel qualified, they can look to their local public schools to see what types of homeschooling options are available. The options, governed by each district's local education agency, will differ

depending on the state and region. In addition, there are many online homeschool programs with licensed instructors. In order to choose a high-quality curriculum, parents must wade through a vast array of options before finding the right one. They can start by looking for one that parallels their worldview, uses their preferred learning approach and fits their budget.⁶ Many resources are available online for parents just starting out on the homeschool journey, including www.k12.com, howtohomeschoolforfree.com and homeschool.com.

No matter what others choose, parents have to follow their instincts and do what they feel is best for their family. Just as no two children are alike, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to educating a child, especially if he or she suffers from chronic illness (and frequent absences). A child who is able to maintain a high level of attendance can thrive in public school. But when circumstances make that difficult, parents do have the option to homeschool, and, hopefully, they'll find support for their decision. Parents, teachers and the school system can work together to find the solution that makes the most sense and leaves both child and parents feeling comfortable. ■

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