



Grace's Story

Grace is 3 1/2 years old and has been attending "Playgroup" at the Bethany Early Intervention Program for over 2 years. Her mum Rachel says that this Playgroup has taught Grace many social, physical, emotional, communication and group skills and the importance of some routines. "I am confident that Grace will integrate well into a school setting, thanks largely to the support, encouragement, and individual care of the staff at Bethany. As well as this, I have found the group to be a great support for myself, having time to chat and build relationships with the other parents who face similar challenges to me". We invited Rachel to share the story of her "Amazing" Grace.

The meaning of the word grace - unmerited favour - fits our beautiful little girl perfectly. Although we believe this wholeheartedly now, it has not always been the case. The day Grace was born was easily the most traumatic day of our lives. We were unaware that Grace had Down Syndrome until I first

laid eyes on her.

The minute I saw her I knew, and announced to the room full of professionals

what they already knew but had not yet gotten around to telling us. At this point Sean and I felt a strange mix of emotions. On the one hand, here was a beautiful little child, seemingly perfect in every way. She was like a little doll, perfectly formed and in proportion. She didn't cry, but just looked around knowingly. But we were being told our child wasn't perfect - far from it in fact. She had what every new parent dreads - a permanent and profound disability. The pain we felt was for what we thought we had lost by learning this. Grace would never be what we had imagined, and in that instant, we assumed that this was a bad thing.

For two days, I didn't stop crying. But on the third day the cloud lifted and I saw Grace for who she really is. From that moment on, her presence in our lives has impacted us more than anything else ever has, and perhaps ever will. The life lessons we have learnt from her three years have been profound and perhaps more powerful than those learnt by others in a lifetime. It is these lessons that we cherish and feel compelled to share, as undoubtedly we are all on a journey of discovery, learning the art of life from those who are marginalised through their difference.

The first lesson Grace taught us was to ponder what life was really about. Prior to her birth we had never really stopped to articulate this, but our actions suggested that popularity, academic ability and sporting prowess ranked highly. It's my guess that these values would also rank highly amongst the average Australian. Most of us might add family and friends to the list too, along with aspirations of wealth and prosperity.

With these ideals in mind, what then do you do with a child that will never be the smartest kid in the class, or excel at sports

and possibly not hold down a well paid job or get married? You reassess your ideals, seek out what is important in life and, most importantly, learn to value every human being as an equal. The things that Grace will achieve in her life are very different from what we had in mind before she was

born. However they are definitely of no lesser value than any other person in the world, disability or not.

The enthusiasm with which Grace approaches life is another lesson she is teaching us. She is genuinely excited about the little things and shows appreciation for the smallest gift given to her. It is a joy giving her special treats as we know she rarely takes things for granted. Instead her face lights up and her body literally shakes with excitement at the prospect of 'treats', like prunes after breakfast, or taking the dogs for a walk. If only we too could learn to show such appreciation for the endless blessings showered upon our lives, rather than always wanting for, and expecting, more.

Finally, Grace lives into her name by being truly generous, compassionate, considerate and forgiving. She rarely throws tantrums. She always says sorry. And she is forever fussing over her baby brother, whether it be wiping his nose or disciplining him for the tantrums! With such an outlook on life, Grace will travel relatively burden free. It is hard to ever think of her as being bitter or holding a grudge against this world for the hand she has been dealt. Rather, her attitude is to rise above her limitations and live into her possibilities, which, if expressed in the virtues described above, will certainly ensure her's will be a life well lived.

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Grace cuddling her younger brother Lachlan who is nearly 2 years old.