



# First Person: HELEN

## Good Things Come in Small Packages

Like any expectant first-time mom, I was thrilled at the thought of becoming a parent. My joy, however, quickly turned to fear when I went into premature labor. My concerns were multiplied when I developed pulmonary edema and could barely breathe. The only thing that kept me sane was the constant, rhythmic heartbeat of my baby girl coming through loud and clear on the fetal monitor. My family knew how serious my condition was, but I was in a total fog—completely unaware that the doctor had addressed the possibility of my husband having to choose between my life and that of our unborn child. Six days after entering the hospital, and four days after our life-threatening ordeal, our daughter Helen was born.

Five weeks premature and weighing only 4 pounds, 12 ounces, she made a feisty entrance into the world. My husband and I were able to take her home just two days later. With the exception of developing jaundice, she had no health problems whatsoever. Developmental milestones such as rolling over, sitting alone, and pulling up were reached well within normal limits. She even took her first step on her first birthday. Although she was tiny, we had no concerns for her physical development.

Helen's intellectual and emotional growth initially appeared right on track as well; sometimes she was even ahead of the norm. She talked at a very young age. She used simple but complete sentences by the time she was 18 months old and could carry on a decent conversation by age 2.

When the time came for her to start kindergarten, we had some reservations about her beginning school; but at the time, her starting public school was the best option for our family. Helen was one of the youngest children in her class and was definitely the smallest. Our first hint of trouble came during this year. She struggled with reading and math, but her teacher had no worries about her moving on to first grade. She saw no problem that a little maturity couldn't fix.

Helen made great strides in first grade but still struggled. Approximately one month before the year was over, the light seemed to turn on—she got it! Her teacher lamented the fact that she could not keep her another six weeks. Much as in kindergarten, my husband and I discussed the possibility of either having her tested for a learning disability or repeating the grade, but her teacher believed she would be fine.

Second grade was a repeat of first. No problems at the beginning of the school year, then increasing

struggles as the year progressed, and of course the “eureka” moment near the end of the year. As in both kindergarten and first grade, Helen's teacher strongly recommended against holding her back, citing the social stigma of repeating while crediting many of her problems to her immaturity. Yet again, a referral for special education was discouraged.

It was not until third grade that we had a major turning point. The work was becoming more difficult, and her frustration was growing. The final straw came one evening when, after a long and confusing homework session, Helen put her head down on the table and began to cry. When I asked her what was wrong, she began to sob uncontrollably, then threw herself into my arms and pleaded with me, “Mommy, why can't I learn like everybody else?” I honestly don't remember what I told her. All I could really think of was getting to school the next day to talk with her teacher. Thus began the long saga of figuring out exactly where the problems were and how we would address them.

After multiple tests to determine her eligibility for special education, all the assessments indicated “normal” results. But thank goodness the principal, the counselor, and her teacher saw past the scores and into the eyes and heart of a little girl who was quickly losing any belief in herself. We hired a tutor, we made modifications in the classroom, and Helen took more diagnostic tests—still nothing that would qualify her for services under special education. About two thirds of the way through the school year, Helen's pediatrician diagnosed her with ADHD; thus, she was eligible to receive a special education under the label *other health impairments*. She began taking Ritalin, and we saw a gradual improvement in her schoolwork.

The improvement we saw did not come without a price. Helen was very angry with her father and me when she realized why she was taking medication every day. She was truly terrified of not having any friends if they found out she had ADHD.

About halfway through fourth grade, we decided to try the extended release form of her medication. We did this in hopes that she would not feel as though she was being “watched” by her classmates when she had to go take medicine in the middle of the day, and also to help with her homework in the late afternoon and early evening. Unfortunately, coming