

EVERYTHING REALLY CHANGED FOR DANIELLA



...AND OUR FAMILY

Our beautiful daughter arrived on May 27 2002. With big brown eyes, curly brown hair and skin so pure and clear, the nurses called her Snow White. As a new mum I accepted some feeding problems although this was settled when Daniella went on to the bottle.

But as a new mum, I knew in the first few days when we were still in hospital, that there was something not quite right with my baby. I could hear the other babies crying, wanting to be fed and changed and cuddled, but my daughter wasn't responding, wasn't looking at me when I spoke to her and told her how beautiful she was and how much I loved her. The nurses reassured me but I knew that something wasn't right with my baby girl.

At six months, Daniella was saying 'Mumma' and 'Dadda', she was eating and sleeping and just too good to be true. Then at two years of age, her progress stopped. Daniella became obsessed with 'Dora' (a cartoon character) and the only language we were hearing from her was an exact copy of what we were saying to her. She was 'echolalic', a condition where vocalisations are repeated, although we didn't know it at the time.

We were referred to one of the children's hospitals and my husband and I told the specialists that we had been researching our daughter's indicators and we believed that Daniella really fitted the diagnosis of Autism. Assessments followed and we were advised that Daniella was too social, too happy and that she didn't have Autism but Global Developmental Delay, or GDD, as we learned to call it.

It wasn't until Daniella was in her second early intervention program and I was chatting with other parents over a cup of coffee that I realised that their children who did have a diagnosis of Autism were struggling with similar issues. We returned to the hospital and asked for Daniella to be reassessed. We were eventually advised that our beautiful daughter had Classic Autism.

Our search for the best and most appropriate school began. Her primary education was going fine but soon high school loomed before us and we quite honestly became frantic to find the best high school for Daniella. We wanted a setting that would understand her diagnosis and offer the individual support she needed whilst focussing on the development of her social skills as well as her academic ones.

We found Mater Dei School and everything really changed for the better for Daniella AND our family.

We had heard about their Living Skills Program (LSP) too, but were very reluctant to transition Daniella into this as 'she had never slept away from home' and 'we weren't going to let our daughter be cared for by strangers'. But Daniella had other ideas!

Daniella was coming home begging to go to 'Residence' (or LSP) because her friends were going and she was missing out. We had meetings with Rhonda McNeilly (LSP Coordinator) and Pamela Templeton (Director of Services) and were encouraged to trial Daniella in the LSP for one night each week at the beginning of this year ...and we are so thankful we did!

To say that we are thrilled with Daniella's increased confidence is an understatement. We have Sunday family nights at our home and our family are saying 'Wow, Daniella is actually looking at me, she is having a conversation with me now, she's a different girl'.

It's not just a program that teaches Daniella living skills because we can do that at home. It is about Daniella gaining confidence, laughing, learning and having fun. It is about the girls and the Social Educators that she is socially interacting with at Richardson House. It is about her new friendships, community and a sense of belonging.

Sandra Violentis



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