

I always say that Aimee was our surprise baby, our fourth child. I remember looking into her brilliant blue eyes after she was born and vaguely hearing the paediatrician say "I'll see you tomorrow" as he left the room. But I was rapt with my beautiful baby and although I fleetingly wondered "Why did he say that?" my hesitation quickly passed.

The next morning the paediatrician came to my bed with a nurse who didn't look at me as she briskly pulled the curtain around my bed. He picked up my baby and stated "I think she has Down Syndrome. I'll order blood tests to confirm it."

My world fell around me at his words. How could this be? I have three other healthy 'normal' children. I took my precious baby home from hospital and later received the call confirming her diagnosis. I became hysterical. The other children asked "What's wrong with Mummy?" as my family and neighbours consoled me.

I was on automatic pilot, doing what I was told I needed to do. When I took my baby to her scheduled ECG she was only a few days old; and as I stood at the counter, the receptionist asked me what her name was. I stopped in my tracks. "My baby's name is Aimee. This is Aimee". From that moment onwards I was in overdrive. There was no time to feel sorry for myself. My whole existence became dedicated to helping Aimee walk and speak. At two years of age she began her intensive intervention program at a Special Needs Play Group. Aimee then attended a mainstream Preschool close to home, where she could learn from and interact with other children.

One day, the Librarian at the Catholic primary school the other children attended, asked me if they knew about Down Syndrome. Although I wasn't really ready to tell them, I sat the three of them down on the floor, put Aimee in the middle of our circle, and said "I need to talk to you about Aimee. She was born with a disability". I told them about Down Syndrome and its impact, and how she would do things at a slower pace. Her



big brother and sisters asked if we could make Aimee better but I said "No, she's perfect the way she is".

When Aimee was just four years of age, she absconded from her Early Intervention Unit during the lunch break. She was found on the busy main road by a student from the nearby High School. When I arrived to collect Aimee that afternoon I was informed about the incident, and the teacher added "It's your fault for not teaching her". My daughter had the right to attend school – and to be safe and happy – so I took her to the Catholic primary school my other children attended and said "I need to talk to you about Aimee". Soon after, she started school there with a Teacher's Assistant who remains a dear friend to this day.

Then the worst time of my life loomed as Year 6 was drawing to an end. I started visiting High Schools only to run up against barriers at each one. In the midst of my apprehension, one of the children's teachers suggested I attend the Mater Dei School information day. I thought "This might be the right place," but as our home was quite a distance away, I didn't dare get my hopes up. One night when I was cooking dinner, I received the

phone call from Mater Dei saying "We would like to offer Aimee a placement" and I started to cry.

Over the years, Rhonda has mentioned the Living Skills Program several times, but each time I've said "Go away, I don't want to talk to you, maybe next year!" Eventually, however, the family decision was made, and Aimee commenced her weekly placement in Year 11. The Living Skills Program has been a blessing. Aimee just loves being involved and comes home to tell us everything she's been doing. It's her opportunity to be independent and away from her family. We absolutely adore Aimee and miss her, but we also want to have her own time with her own friends.

The National Disability Insurance Scheme is now on the horizon and we believe that Aimee's funding package will be of great benefit as she progresses from Year 12 to her Transition to Work Program.

Who would have thought that my beautiful little baby would surprise and amaze me every day? My dream is for Aimee to be safe, happy and successful in whatever she chooses to be and to do in life. God bless you, Aimee.

Tanya Youssef