
Hope is Eternal: The Story of HANDLE®

A Story of Determination and Inspiration

by Peg Simon



Judith Bluestone, founder of The HANDLE Institute International, LLC – and an internationally acclaimed author, lecturer, consultant and originator of the award-winning HANDLE® (Holistic Approach to NeuroDevelopment and Learning Efficiency) approach to neurodevelopmental challenges – died unexpectedly on Feb. 18, 2009.

But she left an amazing mark on the world in the 15 years preceding her death. In that time, she trained more than 130 practitioners and screeners around the world to work with children and adults with a variety of neurodevelopmental challenges, including autism spectrum disorders, attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder, conduct disorders, dyslexia, general learning disabilities, brain injury and Tourette's. She authored two books, spoke at numerous conferences on autism and traumatic brain injury, helped thousands of people around the world, and above all, imparted her message that hope is eternal.

And she did it, having herself triumphed over the challenges autism.

Bluestone could not speak intelligibly until she was a teenager; she would “ride” her tricycle for hours each day by turning it upside down and watching the wheels spin round and round; she suffered from seizures and was the object of ridicule at school.

Through her own determination and brilliance, she overcame these challenges to become an eloquent presenter, caring therapist, gentle teacher, and an inspiration to all who knew her.

About HANDLE

A home-based HANDLE program of activities takes about 20 to 30 minutes per day. Individualized for each person, it is revised repeatedly in the course of the months of the program. HANDLE is holistic and non-judgmental, giving credit and credence to the client. Developmental in nature, it treats problems at their roots, rather than simply providing short-term solutions or compensatory techniques. Through Gentle Enhancement® of specific movement patterns and reflex integration, the body and the brain gently increase tolerance for stimuli, improve ability to regulate and self-organize, and release stress that can prevent learning and daily activity.

In reducing stress, it minimizes the “fright or flight” response that is so prevalent in many with autism spectrum disorders. Bluestone taught that “a stressed system cannot learn,” so parents and caregivers are taught to stop an activity at the first sign of stress.

Bluestone also emphasized the ‘H’ in HANDLE, noting that one can never treat just one part of a person — a human being is a holistic system; therefore, HANDLE is a systems approach.

“We are so hopeful that we will make a significant impact on those who think that autism is a disease that needs to be eradicated at all costs,” Bluestone said in an email last year. “And the cost of a HANDLE program, both monetary and time invested, is so little.”

Walking Away From Autism: One Mother’s Report

“My son was diagnosed in May of 2005. At that time, they told us if he ever achieved third grade proficiency, we should be happy, and not expect anything more,” says Darla Bonner.

HANDLE “respects my son as a person, not a person with autism. It enhances his abilities. It is not an approach that strives to eliminate negative behaviors. It gives him the tools to make his life better. By strengthening his ability to make better connections, it allows him to express his frustrations or fears without violent outbursts or self-injurious actions. And again, it tries to help my son — not my son’s vision or speech or coordination — his whole self, as a person.

“In myself, I have seen a shift from negative to positive,” continues Bonner. “I no longer view my son as a person who needs to be fixed, nor autism as something I need to fight. I view my son as a person whom I can assist in realizing his potential and his own goals. Autism is no different than a hangnail to me now. It is annoying sometimes, but not something that can’t be managed. My son is walking away from autism, and I’m the lucky mom that gets to go

along for the ride.”

Concluded the proud mother: “He started regular kindergarten on time this school year, and he’s thriving. HANDLE has changed our lives in positive, meaningful, lasting ways. I am so thankful it is available, and that we found it.”

HANDLE’s Beginnings: From Israel to Seattle

Bluestone’s journey of triumph through her own challenges with autism can be read in *The Fabric of Autism*, where she offers a glimpse into the formation of her approach. “Although my own personal experiences with several neurological and developmental disorders certainly provided me the background to understand and the ‘lab’ (myself) to work through various challenges, the formation of the approach now named HANDLE was inspired by my work in Israel primarily with the children of the Ethiopian immigrants,” wrote Bluestone in an email last year.

“Until then I was ‘doing my own thing,’ incorporating some of my own theories/ practices into what I had learned in college and graduate school, in private schools for children with learning disabilities and as a public school learning disabilities specialist.

“The tool I developed proved to be extremely successful and I was asked to use it in other applications as well. When I saw the results of this assessment tool and the therapeutic programs that I developed to remediate the deficits discovered, I knew I needed to develop this further. I began to teach my theories and practices to others.”

Bluestone’s work turned around an entire school district in less than 18 months, successfully mainstreaming the children in a crime-ridden area, and turning the parents’ lives around as well.

“I returned to the U.S., settling in Seattle, where four different groups utilized my services,” she continued. “It was clear to me

that other approaches available were not working for various reasons, primarily because they did not respect and incorporate into them basic principles of neurodevelopment.”

These include:

- » Neuroplasticity and synaptogenesis, which show that brain and nervous systems are in a constant state of adaptation to their environment.
- » The knowledge that nervous systems cannot sustain extreme stress without first shutting down and then breaking down, so that rehabilitation of this system needs to respect what Bluestone calls Gentle Enhancement®.
- » The importance of mental rehearsal in learning, reinforcing the need to have small increments of non-aversive neurodevelopmentally correct programs practiced daily in homes and schools.
- » And the growing understanding of the important role of nutrition (especially essential fatty acids and water) as well as the influence of food sensitivities and environmental toxicity.

HANDLE is founded on these principles, and its success comes from that profound understanding. Independent research by Dr. David Lewis at the University of Washington has validated Bluestone’s pioneering HANDLE paradigm, demonstrating changes in brain structure that correlated with functional improvements in adults with traumatic brain injury. In 2004 Bluestone received both the national Jefferson Award and the prestigious

Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis Award for public service and for extraordinary contributions to society.

“Get a HANDLE on the Autism Spectrum”

Bluestone’s goals for the next five years were large: getting HANDLE into schools and juvenile detention centers; finding research partners to produce formal studies of HANDLE efficacy in autism; providing new classes for parents and professionals; and much more. Although she won’t be here to fulfill those goals, the institute she founded and the HANDLE practitioners she trained will be the ones to march into the future, making real her visions.

One of those visions is already bearing fruit. In April, in honor of National Autism Month, the institute launched “Get a HANDLE on the Autism Spectrum,” a two-day class for parents, professionals, caregivers, educators, and all who work with those on the autistic spectrum. The classes are being offered in Bensalem, Penn., Tucson, Ariz., and Vancouver, B.C. A limited number of partial scholarships are open to parents in need.

For information on these classes and other trainings and clinical programs, go to www.handle.org.

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This article was first published in the Washington Diplomat. The Churkendoose Project supports holistic and innovative approaches for people with neurodevelopmental challenges. For more information, go to www.churkendoose.org.