Mountbatten Brailler to conquer the world!


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I am Sarah, Mum to a little boy called Lucas who is four and a half, and completely blind. We found out about his blindness when he was around six months old, and right from the start all the tests showed that Lucas could see absolutely nothing at all. We had a pretty tough time from when Lucas (our only child) was born. He has a congenital heart defect, optic nerve hypoplasia, septo optic dysplasia, DIS, mild autism; believe me, this list can go on and on so I will stop here, as the labels can give people the wrong idea about Lucas.

I myself am a bit of an academic - and an avid reader, as is Lucas' Dad. We were finding it challenging to remain positive, so looked for ways in which we could take control of the situation and actually help our son.

For us, the idea of Braille became a focus. Whilst we were grieving for all that was happening, braille became our tool of empowerment. We were lucky to be assigned an excellent Qualified Teacher of the Visually Impaired, who expressed slight amusement that we would like to begin learning Braille when our son was not yet six months, but she contacted the RNIB and managed to get us a Perkins brailler to borrow. She handed us the terribly dry Braille Primer, and told us to shout if we needed any help.... and shout we did!

Our first reaction on meeting the Perkins was that it was a joke! We looked at our sons tiny fingers, and my not-so-big ones, and couldn't believe that this was to be the tool through which our son could conquer the world.

To those of you who haven't seen a Perkins Brailler - imagine the oldest typewriter you can, with six basic keys, turn knobs to put in the paper, and heavier than a sack of potatoes. They come in a few colours - which actually do the job of making the Perkins look less, rather than more enticing. Like putting make up on a goat.

We are into gadgets in our household - computers spreadeagled, PDA's, iPods, Nintendo D.S', SatNavs, cables and adapters strewn. We couldn't believe that nobody had come up with a better, more efficient way for children to learn Braille. The fact is that there are relatively few blind people in the world, and a huge proportion of these are unemployed – not the people in power. Brailling the Perkins way is definitely not sexy!

So, we have persevered, gained tendonitis and become frustrated along the way. Lucas, whilst being bright and able, is unable to use the Perkins for more than making noises. He has small hands with not much strength though not abnormally so, but even when he presses on each button with his whole weight, he can barely make a mark in the paper. His brailling skills were going nowhere entirely due to the fact that the Perkins is wholly unsuitable for a small child to learn to write.

Then, about eight months ago a friend of ours read about the Mountbatten Pro Braillers. The website promised great things – an electronic Brailler which children could press easily, which then led to excellent hand positions and the correct fingers on the keys. It also has a speech programme, so that a child can hear back what they have just brailled instantly. My friend and I fell in love, and as quickly into dejection when we noticed the price tag of £2,750. We are a family on a pretty tight income – certainly not people with that kind of cash hanging around. Then I remembered that my brilliant and awe-inspiring Dad was off to climb Mount Kilimanjaro in a couple of months or so, and pitched to him the idea of raising sponsorship to help Lucas and his friend get their hands on the Mountbatten's. He agreed, so we set to. We hassled everyone we could think of – and everyone was generous and supportive.

The time came, my Dad disappeared on a very big plane, and an even bigger journey. I received a text from him a few days later saying “We did it. Little slower than we had hoped perhaps, but in less than 12 hours! Bloody hot and knackered, but pleased”. I was so in awe of him – of course I thought of the Mountbattens, but I was also just very very proud!

So, my Dad came home unscathed and itching for the next challenge. Then, silence from the supplying company. Then, a week before Christmas, we got a call saying the Mountbatten's were in the country and they wanted to deliver them. I started to prepare Lucas, who often finds change a problem. The machine arrived, shiny from it's box looking more like a cool toy in blue and yellow than the 50's office aura of the Perkins. Before the man had fully unpacked it Lucas was demanding that we “make it talk”. We haven't looked back!

When the Mountbatten is turned on, it says in an Australian accent “G'day” - both boys now chirrup happily in antipodean accents for hours. Lucas has now had his brailler for about six weeks and is already brailling short words! This is even more impressive as we have not taught him some of the letters that he is using; he learnt them himself whilst using the Mountbatten. He has also learned how to change programmes to change the voice from recorded to synthetic. He asks to braille for many hours a day, and as a Mum it feels very strange to be telling my son to STOP studying, and play with some toys.

Lucas has also become more interested in reading Braille – and whilst our progress there is slower, I am sure that he would be nowhere as advanced as he is now without the Mountbatten.

As I am typing this, he is sat to my right brailling – I will get the occasional “how do I do 'O' ?” comment, but other than that he is completely absorbed.

I am aware whilst reading this article back that I sound like an advertisement for Mountbatten, which is not my intention, nor is it in my nature to be so entirely enthusiastic about anything really, but I honestly believe that every child who is learning Braille (and I believe this should be every child with minimal vision) should be given a better solution to brailling than the Perkins.

We live in a society where children are exposed to technology every day; this is as it should be, yet for kids like Lucas, they are refused the same chances to access the curriculum and work on their literacy simply because of a lack of resources and because of money.

There is no charity that fights for the rights of blind children to access all that is available to them – and there should be! If it weren't for athletic Grandfathers, and pushy parents, and generous friends, Lucas and his friend would still be failing to reach anything like their potential because children like them don't have a voice. It is time to raise that voice for them!