

Can an intellectually disabled mom raise a gifted daughter? It's working so far for Bonnie and Myra Brown

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Saturday morning is pancake time, and the head chef summons her assistant—"Munchkin!" Myra Brown, 12, skips into the kitchen and starts stirring the batter, while her mom, Bonnie, scrambles eggs. "What are we eating, concrete?" says Myra, giggling at the lumpy mix. "You need to add a little water," says Bonnie. When they're done, the pancakes are a bit undercooked and the eggs a bit hard.

It's another perfect breakfast for Bonnie and Myra.

They are a team, a loving family of two, typical in many ways but in others quite different. While Myra is an academically gifted sixth grader who dreams of becoming a marine biologist, her mom, Bonnie, has had great trouble with everyday tasks such as following directions and figuring out cooking measurements. She doesn't have a cell phone, driver's license or bank account. Her IQ, around 70, puts her at the high end of what's consid-



'Mommy Is Always



"I'm trying to be
the best parent
I can," says
Bonnie (at home
with Myra).

ays There for Me'



"She gets along with everyone," says one teacher of Myra (center, at school with friends).

ered intellectually disabled (ID). Yet Bonnie and Myra are happily sharing a life in their modest two-bedroom apartment in middle-class Lansdowne, Pa. Together they represent a different face of parenting—ID adults raising children on their own. "Parents come in all shapes and sizes," says Sandra Azar, a psychology professor and parenting expert at Penn State. "The truth is, adults with ID can parent."

But how does that work out for a whip-smart kid like Myra? Like other girls her age, Myra counts on her mom to cook meals, keep a clean apartment, buy groceries, hold down a job—all things Bonnie, who has worked as a french fry cook at a nearby Wendy's for 16 years, has learned to do.

When Bonnie takes Myra clothes shopping, "Sometimes she picks something I don't like—and I'll ask her if she likes something I picked," says Myra, a bubbly preteen who has pictures of Disney stars Selena Gomez and Demi Lovato taped to her bedroom wall. "I don't think, 'Oh, she has a disability,



"They're like any regular mom and preteen," says support staffer Charlene Jordan (grocery shopping with Bonnie and Myra).

how am I going to handle it?" I think of her as a normal mom."

But Myra knows her life isn't quite the same as that of her classmates. For one thing, four women—trained support staff—spend a total of 20 hours a week with her and Bonnie, doing

everything from helping Bonnie pay bills to planning for Myra's impending adolescence. "We're like a SWAT team—we just swoop in and take care of things," says Meg Nielson, Bonnie's service coordinator from Community Interactions (CI), a nonprofit which



"I like books—and I love to be creative," says Myra (at school with teacher Andrew Miller in April).



"She is taking responsibility for her own life," sister Anna Jones says of Bonnie (with a coworker at Wendy's).

“Myra doesn’t see me as someone with a disability. She sees me as her mom” —**BONNIE BROWN**

provides support to adults with ID. Every day after school Rosemary Northcraft, 61, a former CI staffer now working for another service group, picks Myra up and helps her with homework. Myra, who calls Rosemary “Mom Mom,” is grateful but occasionally wishes her house weren’t always so full of helpers. “Sometimes,” she says, “I just want to be alone.” Bonnie, 45, knows that wouldn’t work. “Without them,” she says in a soft, unhurried

voice, “I’d probably lose Myra.”

For 50 years, people with ID in the U.S. were put into institutions and involuntarily sterilized. That practice was all but phased out by the mid-1970s, and a 1999 law began a shift away from institutionalization, further paving the way for ID adults to raise children (see box). According to a 2005 U.S. census survey, 132,300 people with ID are caring for children in their homes—though experts believe

the real number is much higher. “The question is, if we take these kids away from their parents, are we giving them a better life in foster care?” asks Azar.

From the moment Myra was born on Oct. 1, 1997, Bonnie was determined never to find out. Married then—she and Myra’s father divorced when Myra was 2—Bonnie turned for help to her mother-in-law and Northcraft, who taught her the basics of baby care. By then Bonnie was also under the supervision of Community Interactions, which helped her with housing and enrolled her in parenting classes that she took for seven years. “Sometimes she would call me at 4 a.m. with questions about Myra,” says Northcraft, who checked on the nervous mom and her newborn every day. “I’d tell her, ‘You have to talk to the baby all the time so she can learn.’”

When Myra was young, Bonnie read to her every night, books like *The Cat in the Hat* and nursery rhymes such as “Mary Had a Little Lamb.” But when Myra hit first grade, Northcraft noticed Bonnie struggling to help with homework. “It just wasn’t getting done the right way,” says Northcraft, who took on the task with Bonnie’s blessing.

The teamwork paid off. At WB Evans School in Yeadon, Pa., Myra is a B student and attends a weekly session for academically talented students. When the class was reading C.S. Lewis’s *The Chronicles of Narnia* last year, Myra “understood the material better than others,” says her fifth-grade teacher Andrew Miller. “She likes to read. But she also likes to chat about boys. She fits in like any other girl.”

After school, Myra has a routine: “I clean my room, I make sure the dishes are done, I help Mom out if she doesn’t understand something,” she says. “Like once, we were making a gingerbread house, and you had to have a certain kind of flour. Mommy said, ‘But this flour is the same thing.’ I told her it wasn’t, and we bought the right stuff.”

She looks out for her mom in other ways too. Not long ago, Bonnie mistakenly showed up to church for choir practice on the wrong night, and a church staffer scolded her in



"A lot of my friends don't have a mom who is always there for them the way my mom is for me," Myra says. "So I'm lucky."

“My mommy is tall, pretty and friendly. She’s not afraid to ask for help, and that’s great” —MYRA BROWN

front of a crowd. Back home Bonnie cried, ashamed, and Myra put her arm around her. “Mommy, don’t worry about it,” she said simply. “It doesn’t matter what other people think.”

Myra has never been injured because of neglect, never been forgotten at a mall, never been endangered, if you don’t count undercooked pancakes. But Myra is growing up, and the challenges of parenting are getting more complex. As Myra approaches her teen years, Bonnie is being encouraged to take parenting classes again. “I will talk to her about how she wants to handle having the facts-of-life talk with Myra,” says Northcraft, who will sit in on that discussion and keep an eye on any new friends Myra makes. “I ask her if she has any boyfriends,” says Northcraft, who is Myra’s godmother. “She does have one little guy she likes,

but they just say hi in class.”

The counselors are also aware that Bonnie sometimes tries too hard to please Myra, and “will buy things for her she can’t afford,” says Nielson (Bonnie gets around \$1,300 a month from social security, food stamps and her Wendy’s wages). “Teenagers can push the guilt button, so we’ll have to see how Myra’s teen years go,” says Nielson. Then again, many parents have a tough time keeping teens in line. “I see

a lot of mothers out there who scream at their kids and never discipline them,” says Nielson. “Bonnie has morals. She is fiercely protective of Myra; she makes her feel loved and safe.”

One recent evening, while cooking Jamaican chicken for dinner, Bonnie called her daughter over. “Look, My-My, here’s your English test,” she said, beaming. Myra grabbed it and squealed, “Yay, look! I got a 98!” Tacked to the fridge was one of Myra’s old second-grade writing assignments, entitled, “Meet My Hero—My Mom.” “Nobody’s perfect,” Myra says. “A disability doesn’t make you who you are. My mommy is funny and smart and never rude to anyone. She takes care of me, and I love her.” ●

THE CHANCE TO PARENT

For decades the intellectually disabled were banished to institutions. But in 1999 the Olmstead Act allowed them to be cared for in their homes. That led to more focus on providing support to parents with ID. “We can never forsake the needs of the child,” says Mette Pedersen, a New Mexico-based disability expert, “but we are trying to support those who want what we all want—the right to parent their child.”