

# Introducing . . .

## Ocelot

<photo here>

*Prepared by Ocelot's Mom*

*(Ocelot is not my daughter's real name. For privacy reasons, all references to name and location have been deleted. This document is intended to serve as an example for parents who wish to write similar documents. Please feel free to use this as a model.)*

*Note: the formatting of this is important to the effect. I wanted it to look light and easy to read, not like a therapist's report. My audience is Scout leaders, Sunday school teachers, and similar people who need help working with my special girl.)*

There are a few people in this world who can be described as a "force of Nature." Ocelot is one of those people. It is impossible to work with Ocelot for very long and not be changed by the experience.

The purpose of this document is to give adults a crash-course in understanding Ocelot. Of course reading isn't the same as working with a real human being, especially one as complex as Ocelot. Ocelot and I have been through a lot together, and we've learned things that work — and things that do not. I've included both here; I hope this document helps you.

Ocelot is a very bright girl. Her IQ is not able to be accurately measured, due to a learning disorder that drastically affects results on several subtests. Despite this, the scores on tests she has taken are in the Gifted to Highly Gifted range — and the test administrators think she would score much higher, if not for the learning disorder. Because her abilities show when she speaks, some people expect Ocelot to do superior work with little assistance, be a "self-starter" and to learn on her own. In Ocelot's case, this is not true. People in this IQ range have a much higher risk of depression and anxiety; Ocelot has suffered both. Her learning differences limit her production of superior work — yet she is a highly gifted girl, and thinks and learns in the same manner as other highly gifted students.

*"I'm not learning disabled, I'm learning different."*

## *Non-verbal Learning Disorder*

Ocelot has a condition called Non-verbal Learning Disorder, NLD for short. The name is a bit confusing; Ocelot has no problem with her verbal abilities — quite the opposite, as NLD indicates a disorder with non-verbal processing.

NLD is an interesting condition, in that affected individuals exhibit strengths as well as weaknesses due to the condition.

Ocelot has superb command of language, especially spoken language. Since she learned to talk, her vocabulary and usage have been that of a person many years older. This is often one of the first things people notice about Ocelot. Since Ocelot loves being in the spotlight, she loves to give oral presentations of material she has learned, and does very well at them.

Ocelot also has an excellent memory, especially for the spoken word. She easily memorizes lectures, songs, and theatrical dialog.

Of course NLD comes with handicaps, too. These fall into three main areas: organization skills, social pragmatics, and planning and process in school work. Ocelot also has problems relating to auditory sensitivity, personal care, and the mechanics of writing. [Some people with NLD have serious problems with sensory integration and gross motor skills. Ocelot has only minor problems in these areas.]

Ocelot's *organizational skills* are one of her biggest obstacles. She cannot reliably remember to bring home school books or papers. She does not remember to use her assignment book, and often forgets about things she wants to do until the last minute. Her room, locker, and desk are in constant disorder.

The best way to help Ocelot with organization is to give her clear, simple verbal requests. "Do your math homework tonight" works better than "What is due tomorrow?" If she needs to write something down, don't assume she will write it on her own. If the work is very important, an e-mail sent home will make sure we (Ocelot's parents) can keep Ocelot on track.

*Social pragmatics* covers a wide range of social skills, from reading body language, to making and keeping friends, to working in groups on school projects. Ocelot has great trouble in all of these areas. She often understands what is correct, but can't apply it to the situation at hand.

Please remember that with this, as well as everything else, Ocelot wants to do well. She *is* doing as well as she can. Telling her to try harder, or scolding her because "she can do better" will backfire, because she is already trying as hard as she can. Gentle reminders, even when you have given her hundreds of reminders already, will always produce better results than shaming or scolding.

Ocelot's school work issues fall mainly in subjects where complex *planning ability* is needed. For example, Ocelot loves to write, and has many wonderful ideas, but can't structure them into a coherent paper on her own. She learns new math concepts quickly, but has trouble using them to solve a complex word problem. Because of the nature of elementary school work, she has had few problems

*"Ocelot has a better vocabulary than I do!"*  
— camp counselor (high school senior), when Ocelot was 8

*"Ocelot did an outstanding job of presenting her project ... had difficulty with the writing, created a very interesting lesson..."*

— Ocelot's 5th grade teacher

with school so far, but we expect she will encounter more difficulties in middle and high school.

In addition to these major difficulties, Ocelot has some minor issues related to her NLD. These are:

- ❖ auditory sensitivity. There are a few unusual noises that affect Ocelot like fingernails on a chalkboard. Most of these are “plosives” - popping and clicking noises made with the mouth. We have been working with Ocelot to tone down her reaction to these noises, but she can still get quite upset when someone uses these noises as a way to tease her.
- ❖ personal care. Despite our best efforts at home, Ocelot’s personal care habits are poor. We are continually working with her on this, and see some improvement, though she still has many problems in this area.
- ❖ writing mechanics. Ocelot has an awkward pencil grip, and does not write fluently and easily. When she has unlimited time, and the motivation, she can produce neat work — but under time pressure her work is nearly illegible.

### *Ocelot’s Individual Education Plan*

Ocelot’s parents, and the Special Education staff of the <local> Public Schools, are currently working on an Individual Education Plan (IEP) for Ocelot in school. While final approval has not yet been given, we expect the following interventions and accommodations will be part of the plan. If you are at <local> Middle School, please ask for a copy of this plan, read and follow it.

- ❖ careful monitoring of the volume of written work; minimization of copying; use of a keyboard.
- ❖ training in organization of assignments and papers; extra feedback regarding homework assignments; information conveyed to Ocelot’s parents.
- ❖ Special education classes in social pragmatics; monitoring by school staff; a “safe spot” where Ocelot can go during a melt-down; close monitoring during lunch and physical education.

### *How to Work With Ocelot*

Ocelot expects to be treated with respect, and will not respect those who do not treat her the same way. She will not work well for an authority figure unless she respects him as well.

Ocelot also does best in situations where the rules are clear and unambiguous. She needs structure and routine in her day. Unstructured times, such as lunch, recess and some gym classes, are where she is most likely to lose control of herself.

When talking to Ocelot, it is important to give her information in a clear, unambiguous way. You can use advanced vocabulary — Ocelot enjoys it. She also enjoys word play, if it is clear that it is word play. [She often can’t tell sarcasm and irony, though, unless

she is explicitly told about it.] If there is something important she must know/do, it is best to avoid word play and inference.

Do not assume Ocelot will remember standing instructions from day to day. An example of this is when a teacher tells the class, "Look at the board every day for your homework assignment." Ocelot will look the first day, and maybe write the assignment down, but will not look on the next day, unless it is called to her attention again.

When Ocelot feels patronized or belittled, she will often verbally lash out in anger. This is not a sign of defiance, it is her poor understanding of socially appropriate reactions. The best response is to say something like: "Ocelot, that is not an acceptable way to talk to me. Please say that in a calm way."

Sometimes, Ocelot will forget her personal care training and do inappropriate things in class. Given the reactions of other kids her age, it is better not to call attention to these lapses. A better response would be either verbal: "Ocelot, do you need to go to the bathroom?" or tactile — a tap on the shoulder. Unfortunately, Ocelot does not notice visual non-verbal signals.

### *Meltdowns, and How to Deal With Them*

Probably the most worrisome thing about Ocelot is her occasional meltdowns. These are screaming fits, where she loses control of herself and verbally lashes out, saying some very cruel things. If you are not prepared for a meltdown, watching one can be very frightening. Ocelot almost never gets physical during these episodes, and is never intentionally violent or abusive.

Fortunately, as Ocelot gets older, she is having fewer meltdowns. I believe maturity is helping, though we are also using several anger management techniques to help Ocelot learn control.

Ocelot never has a meltdown for no reason. Usually, it is the end product of a series of frustrations. Occasionally, though, if Ocelot has been having an "off" day, she can melt down over a single incident.

Things that may frustrate Ocelot:

- feeling excluded from peer activity
- personal discussions of religion (she's fine with impersonal talk)
- feeling like her thoughts are trivialized
- being asked to do something without a reason
- not being allowed to make amends for something she feels she did that was wrong
- being told how she should feel/react: "Ocelot, I know you don't really mean that"

When Ocelot is beginning to show signs of increasing frustration, it is best to have her do something different for about 10 minutes. For example, she can be sent on an errand, or asked to do a task in a different location from the source of the frustration. She will

*"The girls kept trying to calm Ocelot down, but she wasn't hearing them ... she kept being mean"*  
— Ocelot's Girl Scout Leader

calm down, come back on her own, and be ready to participate again.

If the situation has passed into a full meltdown, the only helpful solution is to isolate Ocelot. At home, we send her to her room; at Elementary School, she was sent to the Principal's or Counselor's office. This was not punishment, but served as a quiet place to work through the meltdown. Other than the simplest of suggestions ("sit over here"), it is best not to talk to Ocelot during this time. After a period of time ranging from 10 minutes to over an hour (especially if someone tries to work with her before she's ready), someone should talk to her to see if she has calmed down: "Ocelot, are you ready to talk now?" If she is ready, someone can talk to her about her actions, or just let things go.

In very rare situations, Ocelot will not calm down at all. [This happened only once during all of 5th grade.] If this happens, the best thing to do is contact us (Ocelot's parents) and have us remove her.

If you are worried about the possibility of a meltdown during a special activity, please contact me (Ocelot's mom) before the activity. I can often arrange to come along — I have learned how to handle the meltdowns even when isolation is not possible.

### *Other Facts About Ocelot*

Here are some other interesting facts about Ocelot:

- ❖ Ocelot loves to sing, and has real talent in this area.
- ❖ Ocelot likes costume and fashion, and is very inventive in designing new things to wear. She is learning to sew, and I expect she will design her own clothing some day.
- ❖ Ocelot loves to read. Her favorite books are fantasies about strong young women overcoming social obstacles. Her current favorite author is Tamora Pierce. She also enjoys watching (carefully chosen) anime films.
- ❖ Ocelot has been involved in Girl Scouts since 3rd grade. She loves all aspects of Scouting, especially the camping.
- ❖ Although Ocelot would deny this, she has no close friends. She has several acquaintances at school, and two friends who live 45 minutes and 9 hours away, respectively. She is very social, and enjoys being with other girls her age, but lacks the social understanding to truly participate in pre-teen friendships.

### *Contact Information (omitted for privacy)*

Home Phone:

Mom's Cell Phone:

Household E-mail:

Ocelot's Mom:

Ocelot's Dad: