Champion dancer thrives with the right supports and community connections

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With a passion and talent for dance and a smile that lights up the room, Dakota Burke is one determined young woman.

With the support from an occupational therapist, a psychologist, and a speech therapist, all funded through the NDIS, Dakota, 9, who has autism, can now read at a level more in line with her age.

‘Last year I couldn’t read and this year I can properly read a book. And I got a “c” on my maths test. I was very proud of myself,’ Dakota said.

Dakota’s mum, Steph, has praised the NDIS for giving Dakota the opportunity to achieve her goals. She says the family would never have been able to afford the therapies Dakota needed without NDIS support.

‘It’s going to give Dakota the skills to be such a beautiful member of society later on down the track and give so much back to the community because she has these skills,’ Steph said.

After discovering the joy of reading, Dakota is once again rekindling her passion for dance after a short break, using it to balance the mental and physical aspects of her condition and help make her ‘feel happy’.

Dakota has danced ballroom for 5 years and, with her dance partner, holds the Australian title across New Vogue, Standard and Latin American styles for her age group.

‘It was through those community connections, a dance social for people who live with disabilities, that Dakota and her dance partner found each other and went on to become the best of friends,’ Steph said.

When Dakota was diagnosed with level 3 autism at the age of 8, it was an eye-opener for Steph, who says she felt helpless watching her daughter struggle at school and social settings.
‘Dakota found making friends difficult and it made her time in school hard and had an impact on her personally,’ Steph said.

Facing difficulties with everyday routines and dealing with frequent school suspensions, Dakota saw a paediatrician who diagnosed Dakota with autism and suggested applying for the NDIS.

‘Our local area coordinator at Carers Queensland supported us in that they listened to what we had to say which meant we got the best out of our plan,’ Steph said.

‘Being heard with clear goals and the right supporting evidence meant that we were able to focus on

the supports that we needed and everything almost to the “t”.’

Steph feels it’s important for families to identify what the end goals look like when plan setting so, they’re getting the right supports.

‘Thanks to free community supports and funded NDIS supports Dakota has been able to hit her goals and is now expanding and adding more goals,’ Steph said.

Supports such as the local council’s Active and Healthy Living Guide (an accessible active and lifestyle program offering free and low-cost activities), have been a stepping stone to find other interests Dakota has outside of school and dance.

‘We’ve tried a few different activities and found that yoga calmed Dakota down before going to bed. So, it was worth going to that 5pm session for the hour,’ Steph said.

Without the support within her local community, Steph says she doesn’t know where her family would be.

‘The connections within the community that we have made, ranging from free community supports to NDIS-funded therapies, have played a significant role in helping Dakota reach her goals,’ Steph said.

‘We have met with some autism groups on Facebook that have given Dakota the chance to make friends with like-minded people.’

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