DEFENDING AND PARENTING CHILDREN WHO LEARN DIFFERENTLY: Lessons from Edison’s Mother

Scott Teel

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Defending and parenting children who learn differently: lessons from Edison's mother / Scott Teel ; foreword by Vincent Monastra.

p. cm. – (The praeger series on contemporary health and living, ISSN 1932–8079)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
1. Special education. 2. Exceptional children—Family relationships. 3. Edison, Thomas A. (Thomas Alva), 1847–1931—Childhood and youth. 4. Teel, Scott. 5. Dyslexics—Education. I. Title.
LC3965.T44 2007
371.9–dc22 2007006585

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data is available.

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Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 2007006585
ISSN: 1932–8079

First published in 2007

Praeger Publishers, 88 Post Road West, Westport, CT 06881
An imprint of Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc.
www.praeger.com

Printed in the United States of America


10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

This book is for general information only. No book can ever substitute for the judgment of a medical professional. If you have worries or concerns, contact your doctor.

Some of the names and details of individual discussed in this book have been changed to protect the patients' identities. Some of the stories may be composites of patient interactions created for illustrative purposes.
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Great nations prosper through a willingness to recognize and benefit from the diversity of abilities in people. Societies are enriched by the contributions of the plumber, as well as the poet and preacher; by the talents of the mason and machinist, as well as the mathematician; by the contributions of the carpenter and cattleman, as well as the chemist; by the gifts of the baker, as well as the banker; by the toils of the laborer, as well as the lawyer; and by the efforts of the artist, as well as the architect. Throughout our early history as a nation, the value of such contributions was recognized. Our nation grew and our people thrived.

During the past century, as our population grew, a shift occurred in the process of educating our children. We transitioned from a society in which children learned job skills primarily from their parents and neighbors to a context in which education became the domain of governmental agencies. With this transition came a subtle but significant shift in the valuation of skills. The three R’s (readin’, ritin’, and ‘rithmetic) became the central theme of education, and other skills (e.g., culinary arts, cosmetology, fine arts, music, farming, and the construction trades) were largely devalued and removed from mainstream education. Over the years, the emphasis on language arts and mathematics has dominated educational centers, culminating in the present federal policy (No Child Left Behind), in which children must demonstrate mastery of English, science, social studies, and mathematics in order to attain a high school diploma.

The impact of such policy on children, whose gift lies not so much in putting ideas on paper but in translating ideas into the creation of the physical world in which we live, is well documented. We now live in a society in which children whose attention is not drawn to the world of books are diagnosed with an attention deficit disorder. Children whose brains were built to invent and design are labeled as disabled in the areas of reading, writing, and mathematics, rather than identified as gifted for their creativity and innovation. Without the support and collaboration of educators and parent-advocates, these children
are at increased risk to “drop out of school,” engage in criminal activities, become addicted to drugs and alcohol, engage in a variety of high-risk activities, and live with a sense of inadequacy and incompetence, because they struggled to learn how to read, write, and learn advanced mathematics.

In *Defending and Parenting Children Who Learn Differently: Lessons from Edison’s Mother*, Scott Teel provides a guide for parents who are seeking ways to protect their children from the daily attacks on self-esteem generated by an educational system that devalues the talents of these children. Although our society holds in high esteem the contributions of the Albert Einstein’s and Thomas Edison’s of our nation, we seem to do little to promote their development or encourage them in the process of making the discoveries that enhance our lives. Instead, the Einsteins and Edisons of our nation thrive because of a parent or other caretaker who recognized their child’s special gifts, and created a nurturing environment that encouraged learning and self-expression.

Scott Teel draws from the story of Thomas Edison and his mother, incorporates findings from leading researchers in psychology, medicine, and education, and creates a book with dozens of practical ideas for creating an environment in which children who are differently abled can thrive. In addition, he provides an extensive resource list to direct parents to specialists who can support them in their efforts to lead their children through the troubled and confusing years from kindergarten through high school. I often tell parents that students who struggle to attend to instruction and master reading, writing, and mathematics need to find a way through high school, with their self-confidence intact. Once they make it through those difficult years, they can choose to follow an educational and career path that matches their abilities. Until such a time as our educational systems begin to value skills other than reading, writing, arithmetic, and the retention of scientific and historical facts, parents would do well to learn from the lessons of Edison’s mother, and help their children cherish the unique gifts they inherited.

Vincent Monastra, M.D.
Over the past hundred years, there have been incredible medical breakthroughs that have prevented or cured illness in billions of people and helped many more improve their health while living with chronic conditions. A few of the most important twentieth-century discoveries include antibiotics, organ transplants, and vaccines. The twenty-first century has already heralded important new treatments including such things as a vaccine to prevent human papillomavirus from infecting and potentially leading to cervical cancer in women. Polio is on the verge of being eradicated worldwide, making it only the second infectious disease behind smallpox to ever be erased as a human health threat.

In this series, experts from many disciplines share with readers important and updated medical knowledge. All aspects of health are considered including subjects that are disease-specific and preventive medical care. Disseminating this information will help individuals to improve their health as well as researchers to determine where there are gaps in our current knowledge and policymakers to assess the most pressing needs in health care.

Series Editor Julie Silver, M.D.
Assistant Professor
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INTRODUCTION

Every child who learns differently needs an advocate, someone who believes in him or her and his or her ability to learn. In a perfect world, every child with a learning difference would have an entire support system of advocates—teachers, professionals, and family members who understand the child and help him or her fulfill his or her potential. Sadly, this is often not the case. Many talented and well-intentioned teachers have so many tasks to accomplish with so many students that they cannot give each child the individual attention he or she needs. As a recent Presidential Commission on Excellence in Special Education observed, the “system is driven by complex regulations, excessive paperwork and ever-increasing demands at all levels.”1 Other professionals and support persons are often underutilized or, all too frequently, never even consulted. Parents, guardians, and other family members are usually the child’s last line of defense, and it is therefore imperative that at least one family member accept responsibility as the primary advocate for the child, defending and parenting him or her throughout his or her school years.

I know firsthand how it feels to be a child with a learning difference. I was a late talker, rarely speaking before I was 4 or 5 years old. Most people could barely understand my speech until I was in the third grade. I attended speech therapy classes with the other slow kids in elementary school. (Actually, several of my cohorts in speech therapy turned out to be very intelligent. Yet, we sounded stupid and were therefore labeled as such in elementary school.)

I was easily distracted and bored in school, causing me to suspect now that I had some measure of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. I often spaced out through entire lessons. Of course, I did not understand the ensuing homework assignment, and therefore decided most nights to skip homework by telling my parents that I did all my work at school. My grades predictably suffered, although I always scored at the top of my class during the annual school tests.

I attended elementary school in the 1960s, before many learning differences began to be identified or widely acknowledged. My learning difficulties
therefore made me somewhat of an enigma to most of my teachers. They suspected that I was smarter than my schoolwork demonstrated, yet they could not understand why I did so poorly in many subjects.

Fortunately, one educator stepped in and acted as my advocate in school. My fourth-grade teacher, Mary Lou Holmes, rekindled my love for learning (a trait that had been nearly extinguished by my first three years in school). She saw through my learning difficulties and realized that I would and could concentrate when material was presented to me in a compelling fashion. She steered me toward performing hands-on science experiments. She allowed me to put some of my excess energies into extracurricular projects, such as starting a weekly school newspaper and producing plays and musical performances. In short, she realized that a standard “sit at your desk and listen” education would not work on me, and she altered her teaching enough to make an impact on my life. I will always be in her debt.

Of course, the most important contribution came from my mother. She steadfastly believed in my ability to learn, and she fought for my educational rights long before significant legislation existed that guaranteed an equal education to children with learning differences. She talked my father into purchasing encyclopedias, chemistry sets, microscopes, and musical instruments for me. She talked the family physician into taking me to the hospital laboratory to use their microscopes and talk to the laboratory technicians. She bought a seemingly endless list of supplies for my science projects (petri dishes, test tubes, agar, alcohol lamps, etc.), and complained only when some of my experiments got truly out of hand (such as when I caught my laboratory on fire or brought a live brown bat into the house).

Even the great inventor Thomas Edison needed an advocate during his childhood to help him through his learning difficulties and problems in school. His mother, Nancy Elliot Edison, turned out to be a wonderful advocate. She was a strong, independent, and capable woman who never stopped believing in her son.

While many of Edison’s exploits are well known (perhaps even to the point of being American folklore), many people do not realize the important role his mother played in developing his genius. Without her support, Young Thomas Edison (or Al, as they called him) could have turned into a dismal failure instead of a huge success. In fact, he was such a poor student that many considered him incapable of learning. Al was so careless that he endangered not only his own life several times but also inadvertently threatened the lives of many others through his recklessness. In addition, he was a sickly child who suffered health problems all through his youth.

With all these handicaps, it is easy to imagine why so many people, including his father, might have felt that young Al had no future in life.

Despite the negative expectations of everyone else, his mother continued to be an unwavering beacon of hope for Al throughout her life. She steadfastly refused to give up on her youngest child, constantly believing that
he could overcome all of life’s many obstacles and difficulties to become a great man.

This book will tell you the wonderful story of Al and Nancy Edison, and explain how parents of children who learn differently can emulate her today—defending, encouraging, teaching, and parenting their children as she did more than 150 years ago.
1

Nancy Edison’s Miracle

My mother cast over me an influence that has lasted all my life. I was always a careless boy, and with a mother of different mental caliber I should have turned out badly. But her firmness, her sweetness, her goodness; they were potent powers to keep me on the right path. She was the making of me. She was so true, so sure of me. I felt I had someone to live for, someone I must not disappoint.

—Thomas Alva Edison

Thomas Edison always spoke of his mother Nancy Elliott Edison in quiet, reverent tones. He was fully aware that so many of his great achievements might not have been possible if not for the love, determination, and skill she displayed in raising and educating him.

Although Edison is remembered today as the quintessential American inventor and businessman, he seemed destined to a life of failure in his youth. His schoolteachers had given up on him as unteachable. His father suspected that he was mentally retarded. The family physician feared that he suffered brain damage at birth. The only person in his life who seemed to have an unwavering faith in his abilities was his mother, Nancy Elliott Edison.

Although we do not know what specific learning disability caused Thomas Edison’s troubles in school, Al, as his family called him, had a number of health problems as a child. His general ill health and weakness often caused his mother to fear that he would not survive his youth. His hearing gradually decreased until he was completely deaf in one ear and 80 percent deaf in the other ear by age 12. He did not begin speaking until 4 years of age, furthering his father’s belief that Al suffered from mild mental retardation.

Edison described himself as “a careless child,” and this recklessness nearly resulted in his own death several times. He once fell into a commercial grain elevator while exploring and almost suffocated in the mountain of wheat. He was also notoriously impulsive and often acted on his ideas with little forethought, even losing the tip of a finger after holding a skate strap down
and instructing a friend to shorten the strap with an axe. He started two major fires as a boy, one at age 6 (which promptly burnt the family barn to the ground) and another at age 12 in a railroad baggage car where he had stored some hazardous chemicals.

In 1854, at the age of 7, Edison began his brief period of classroom schooling at the Family School for Boys and Girls in Port Huron, Michigan. The school founder, Reverend George Engel, ran a firm and disciplined classroom where the children were expected to pay attention and sit quietly at their desks while the teachers lectured. Lessons were taught primarily by repetition and rote memorization.

Edison’s inquisitive nature and creativity were unwelcome in this chilly academic setting. Al would often burst spontaneously into a series of questions when a subject intrigued him, disrupting the class and preventing the teachers from following their rigid lesson plans. On the other hand, Al quickly lost interest whenever the class seemed to move too slowly or the subject was boring. The teacher’s monotonous drone would gradually fade away from Al’s consciousness, and he would find himself doodling in his notepad or staring out of the window at the ferry crossing the St. Claire River.

Al’s teachers would frequently ridicule him in front of the class or make him sit in the corner as punishment for not paying attention. “I was always,” he recalled, “at the foot of the class, and had come almost to regard myself as a dunce. Even my father entertained vague anxieties as to my stupidity.”

Today, we understand that some children, such as young Thomas Edison, do not respond well to traditional teaching methods and require special attention to succeed in a classroom environment. Unfortunately, most educators in the mid-1800s believed that poor performance in school was due to either a lack of discipline or a fundamental inability to learn. Academic failure was nearly always presumed to be the fault of the child.

Predictably, Al’s teachers took no responsibility when a visiting school inspector asked why the young lad was performing so poorly. Mr. Crawford, Al’s teacher, explained that the boy’s brain was addled, a term used to describe an egg that had gone rotten, implying that Al was too weak-minded to ever do well in school.

Al was devastated by Mr. Crawford’s cruel remarks. He ran home crying and told his mother about the incident, which immediately stirred Nancy’s anger. She reassured Al that he was a bright child with his own unique abilities and strengths, and urged him to not take the teacher’s unkind words to heart.

Nancy marched Al back to the school and confronted the school staff. Although they explained their belief that Al was unable to learn, she countered with her knowledge that Al was smarter than any teacher in the school. Henceforth, she declared, she would teach Al at home.

Thus, after just 3 months of classroom instruction, Thomas Edison’s formal education ended. For most of the next 5 years, he would spend his days being homeschooled by his mother.
EDISON’S LEARNING DIFFICULTIES

Modern parents of intelligent children who underperform at school can easily relate to this story. The problems Al experienced, such as a difficulty focusing for long periods of time on one topic, are common in many intelligent children. Their problems in school may be due to a number of different causes, ranging from sheer boredom to dyslexia or some other learning disorder.

Many sources attribute Thomas Edison’s troubles in school to attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Edison did seem to share many common characteristics of children with ADHD, such as

- fidgeting or squirming frequently;
- drifting off into daydreams more than other children;
- having difficulty following instructions or finishing activities, such as homework;
- interrupting a speaker, such as the teacher;
- being easily distracted; and
- being impulsive.

Although ADHD is considered to be a health impairment that can adversely affect a child’s learning, a number of persons in the field of child behavior now feel that this is a misnomer. Rather than thinking of ADHD as an impairment, this school of thought prefers to believe that normal children and ADHD children are primarily different only in how they learn, not in their ability to learn. An ADHD child, for example, might learn well in a visually oriented activity or a hands-on experiment, whereas a normal child might learn well by listening to a teacher give a lecture or completing a worksheet. One analogy is to think of ADHD children as being similar to left-handed children; they are certainly different than most other kids, but that is not to say that they are wrong.

Traditional educational systems in America often teach children as if they are all linear thinkers, who think in clear lines that focus on one subject at a time. Linear thinkers learn well in a normal classroom environment through lectures and repetition. Thomas Edison, in contrast, was a tangential thinker. His mind would grasp one thought and use it as a springboard to form associations with other ideas. He had trouble focusing on one idea because tangential thoughts were always popping up and vying for his attention.

Although many children with ADHD may be tangential thinkers, not all tangential thinkers necessarily have ADHD. Only an estimated 5–7 percent of the schoolchildren in America have clinical ADHD, meaning that the child is significantly impaired in social or academic functions by their ADHD symptoms. An untold number of tangential thinkers may display some ADHD behavior without having significant enough symptoms to warrant a diagnosis of ADHD. (Chapter 2 will go into more detail on this subject.)
THE POSSIBLE ADVANTAGES OF TANGENTIAL THINKING

A number of theories have been proposed in the last 20 years to explain the presence of ADHD children in our midst, ranging from excess television watching to modern food additives. The proponents of these theories suggest that something in our modern world is making these children go wrong. Otherwise, they ask, why is it that no one ever heard of an ADHD child 30 years ago, whereas now they seem to be abundant in every school system?

However, it is likely that ADHD is not exclusively caused by any one thing in our modern world that did not exist 100 years ago or even 1,000 years ago. For example, Thomas Edison did not have red food dye #5, monosodium glutamate, or potassium sorbate in his food. Neither was he subjected as a child to endless cartoons and reruns of “Gilligan’s Island” on television, yet he appears to have exhibited the classic symptoms of a person with ADHD.

This is not to say that environmental or social factors, such as food additives, television, and computer games, and the fast pace of modern society do not have some effect on the incidence of ADHD in children. However, the reason that ADHD seems so prevalent today, compared to 30 years ago, may be simply that ADHD is now a recognized condition that doctors and educators are familiar with and are comfortable diagnosing.

Recent research suggests that our ancestors may have found some advantage to having a certain number of tangential thinkers in every group, possibly increasing the population’s overall survival rate.\(^2\)

The apparent evolutionary advantage afforded by having a certain amount of diversity in thinking styles arises from the common traits associated with ADHD: hyperactivity, frequent daydreaming and inattention, the ability to hyperfocus, and impulsivity (unpredictability and novelty seeking). While these traits may cause problems for modern children in a traditional classroom environment, an ancient hunter-gatherer society may have realized an overall advantage by having a small subpopulation of persons with these traits.

The basis for this argument stems from an apparent association between ADHD and a dopamine receptor gene labeled *DRD4*. Several studies show that a particular variation of this gene increases the tendency toward novelty seeking and occurs in a high number of children with ADHD. This does not mean that the *DRD4* variation causes ADHD, but it does indicate that this variation of this gene, when combined with other genetic variations (and possibly, other social or environmental conditions), can result in a child having a higher probability for ADHD.

This genetic variation may have spontaneously occurred more than 10,000 years ago, but remained in the gene pool instead of dying out as most mutations do. The fact that the mutation survived and replicated into future generations indicates that it had some positive effect, since mutated genes that have negative effects cannot usually compete with robust normal genes and therefore eventually die out of the population.
Nancy Edison's Miracle

Having a genetic variation linked to ADHD helps to explain why ADHD seems to run in families. Thomas Edison's father, Samuel, was famously impulsive and grew bored easily. The National Institute of Mental Health reports that children who have ADHD usually have at least one close relative who also has ADHD. At least one-third of all fathers who had ADHD in their youth have children with ADHD, and when one twin of an identical twin pair has the disorder, the other is likely to have it too.

The Advantage of Novelty Seeking

If ADHD is perceived as such a problem today, why was it an apparent advantage for our prehistoric ancestors to have a number of ADHD persons in their groups? This question seems particularly difficult to answer when you consider two of the complicating factors commonly associated with ADHD:

- ADHD individuals (especially, children) are generally more careless and prone to injury than are ordinary individuals.
- ADHD often co-occurs with other problems, such as depressive and anxiety disorders, conduct disorder, drug abuse, or antisocial behavior.

However, consider that ADHD is a name that we have given to a specific set of symptoms only recently. By definition, we designate the top 5 percent to 7 percent of the most hyperactive, inattentive, and impulsive persons as having ADHD. That does not mean that in a group of 100 persons, we will find 5 hyperactive or impulsive individuals and 95 normal persons. Hyperactivity, inattentiveness, impulsivity, and novelty seeking are traits that we all exhibit to some degree. These characteristics are spread over the population in the same manner as intelligence, height, weight, and shades of hair color. Persons we designate as having ADHD are merely those who exhibit their particular traits most profoundly. Tangential thinkers, however, may represent the top 10–20 percent of these persons, not just the 5–7 percent that we identify as having ADHD.

Tangential thinkers would have presented a number of advantages to a tribal hunter-gatherer group. For instance, their search for novelty may have made them more prone to explore or migrate, helping the group spread out and discover new environmental niches and sources of food. Tangential thinkers would also be less afraid to explore their own creativity, thus opening up new areas of art, social expression, and invention that the rest of the group could then exploit. They could also prove useful in testing and exposing false beliefs.

The Wonder of Nancy Edison's Accomplishment

While many successful methods for teaching tangential thinkers are known today, Nancy Edison could only follow her instincts when it came to deciding how to educate her son. It would have seemed a daunting task to even the most determined tutor of the mid-1800s, yet Nancy approached it with obvious
optimism. She believed in Al's abilities as well as her own. Her unwavering faith and self-esteem were reflected later in her son as he persevered through thousands of dead ends in his experiments with the light bulb and other inventions.

Edison's astounding achievements speak highly of the education he received from his mother. He executed the first of his 1,093 successful U.S. patent applications in October of 1868, at the age of 21. In 1882, perhaps his most productive year, he completed 106 successful patent applications.

WHO WAS NANCY EDISON?

Throughout the rest of this book, we will be exploring how Nancy Edison successfully taught Al at home. First, let's take a look at who this remarkable woman was.

Nancy Elliott was born on January 4, 1810, in Chenango County, New York, to a family of Scottish descent. Her father was Reverend John Elliott, a Baptist minister and the son of Ebenezer Matthews Elliott, a former captain in Washington's army.

Nancy moved to Vienna, Ontario, in her late teens to teach in the public high school. She met Samuel Edison there and married him on September 12, 1828. Nancy was just 18 years old, a bit stout and of medium height, with soft brown hair, large hazel eyes, and an easygoing, mild attitude toward life. Samuel was a 24-year-old tavern keeper who had moved with his family to Vienna 17 years earlier to establish a homestead. He was a restless and impulsive jack-of-all-trades, who had already tried his hand at being a tailor and carpenter before deciding to open a tavern. Contrary to Nancy's patriot heritage, Samuel's American grandfather had been loyal to the British Crown and had fled to Nova Scotia during the Revolutionary War.

Nancy and Samuel had four children together (Marion, William Pitt, Harriett Tannie Ann, and Carlile), and they appeared to live a quiet life over the course of their first 8 years together. Everything changed, however, in 1837, when Samuel became involved in a political struggle led by William Lyon McKenzie, the mayor of Toronto.

McKenzie was outraged by the British government's imposition of "taxation without representation" on Canadians. He hoped to enact a second American Revolution and establish a democracy in Canada. It is known that Samuel was said to have felt some guilt for his grandfather's refusal to take part in the American Revolution, although it is impossible to say whether or not this guilt helped to motivate him toward supporting McKenzie.

Despite the danger in which it placed his family, Samuel began secretly training volunteers in the woods outside of Vienna in anticipation of the rebellion's outbreak. In December of 1837, his group of rebels was called to action. They quietly began making their way toward a tavern north of Toronto to rendezvous with other rebels and receive further orders. Fortunately, word reached them before they had arrived at their destination that British troops
Nancy Edison's Miracle

knew of their plan. Many of their comrades had already been killed, and soldiers were reportedly heading toward Venice to track down Samuel’s band of men.

The rebels split up, each man trying to get to a safe destination before they could be apprehended. Nine members of Sam’s brigade were caught and hanged in London, Ontario, but Samuel eluded capture and made a desperate run for the United States border 80 miles away.

Samuel made the frigid journey on foot, hiding during the day and moving on deserted country roads at night. He eventually made it safely to the frozen St. Claire river and crossed over into Michigan. Cold, alone, homeless, and virtually penniless, Samuel realized that he would not be able to return to Nancy and his children in Canada. He therefore began wandering the American countryside, searching for a suitable place to settle and send for his family.

British soldiers spent an entire day searching for Samuel in Venice, ransacking Nancy’s house and outbuildings in the course of their quest. Although the troops eventually departed, Nancy and her four young children were left alone to eke out a living as best they could while Samuel searched for a new home in America.

Samuel finally sent word for Nancy to join him in Milan, Ohio, after nearly a year and a half. She dutifully loaded a wagon and took her children on the arduous trek to reunite with her husband in June of 1839.

One of Samuel’s new friends, a Great Lake’s steamboat captain named Alva Bradley, helped Samuel set up a shingle mill and feed store in town to support the Edison family. A new canal that ran between Lake Huron and Lake Erie soon brought prosperity to Milan and success to Samuel’s businesses. Farmers from 100 miles around Milan would bring grain to ship on the canal, making it for a time the busiest grain port in America. Al would sometimes spend hours watching from his bedroom window as the wagons full of golden grain wound down the road to the boat docks.

Nancy was content for a while to raise the children in a small leased home, but she soon became pregnant with their fifth child and insisted on a larger house. Although Samuel balked at the idea of building a new home, Nancy took it upon herself to purchase a lot in her own name. Samuel eventually complied with her wishes and built a splendid three-story Greek Revival home of sandstone and brick, topped with cedar shingles from his mill.

Sadly, their new home would be the scene of a series of tragedies. Samuel Ogden Edison III, Nancy’s fifth child, was born on March 5, 1840, but would only survive to age 3 before succumbing to an unidentified illness. Six-year-old Carlile would die in February of 1842, barely a year before little Samuel passed away. Another daughter, Eliza, was born the following year but became ill and died a week before her third Christmas.

Nancy was emotionally devastated over the loss of three children within 5 years. She sought solace in the midst of all this tragedy by becoming pregnant one final time. It was a difficult pregnancy, complicated by her emotional duress
and prenatal diabetes. To calm her nerves, she would knit baby clothing for 3 hours every day.

Thomas Alva Edison, Nancy’s seventh and last child, was born on February 11, 1847. He was named for Samuel’s uncle Thomas and their friend Captain Alva Bradley. Doctor Leman Galpin, the family physician, lived nearby and was able to arrive in time to deliver Al himself. He hesitantly observed that the child’s head was **sorely misshapen** and feared that **brain fever** of some kind had caused damage to the newborn, setting the stage for Samuel’s doubts as to his son’s intelligence. Although the doctor’s fears were unfounded, Al did prove to be a sickly child and was always small for his age.

Nancy now had only her newborn baby and three teenagers remaining at home. Of the teenagers, only 14-year-old Tannie was destined to stay with her for more than a few months. William Pitt was 16 years old and already looking for a job in town, while 17-year-old Marion would soon marry a local farmer and move away.

Nancy felt a great sense of loss from the five mournful years leading up to Al’s birth and feared that she would lose him just as she had lost Carlile, Samuel, and Eliza. Nancy devoted herself to her youngest child, often praying for his health for long periods at a time. She managed to nurse him through his various illnesses until, at age 7, he was deemed well enough for the family to move to Port Huron, Michigan. Samuel felt the move was necessary, anticipating that the railroads in Port Huron would soon supplant the steamboat traffic on Milan’s canal.

It was in Port Huron that Al had his brief exposure to classroom education at the Family School for Boys and Girls. After three short months, Nancy pulled Al out of school and once again devoted her life to her youngest child by pledging to teach him at home. Despite anyone else’s opinion of Al and his abilities, she believed he was capable of learning.

Nancy’s experience as a teacher was certainly a great help, although a greater gift may have been her intuition as a mother. She knew Al intimately and understood how to grab and retain his attention. Al’s natural curiosity and her guidance would be more than enough to show the world that he was capable of great things.