

Breaking barriers

A mum couldn't use speech to communicate with her disabled little girl — so she came up with a way that she could, writes Michael Gleeson



Chelsea's Challenge — Wendy Haag and her daughter, Chelsea.

Picture: LAWRENCE PINDER N4304905

Rising to the challenge

IT WAS a language born of love — and desperation.

A Ferntree Gully mum couldn't communicate with her intellectually disabled little girl.

So she developed a system of cue cards to break through the isolation — a system which is being adopted Victoria-wide.

Wendy Haag has met the challenges life has given her.

The oldest of her three daughters, Chelsea, 8, has mild autism and an intellectual disability.

Her second child, Montana, 5, has been diagnosed with high-function attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

Her youngest daughter, Indiana, 2, is healthy.

But in an inspiring example of turning adversity into triumph, Mrs Haag has developed a communication system that has not only improved the quality of her family's life, but that of numerous other households as well.

Aptly named "Chelsea's Challenges", it is a system where parents use visual cues to educate children who have autism or intellectual disabilities.

Mrs Haag collates information on the child, often by meeting face-to-face with all the family members in their home, and constructs visual maps that walk them through their daily responsibilities such as school, homework and chores.

"It takes a maximum of three or four days, by the time I design it, print it, cut

it up up, laminate it and get it all ready," Mrs Haag explained.

"Quite often when parents first ring me I'll be on the phone for an hour or more because they're telling me their story, and they know I'll understand it.

"Well I live it, so I know exactly what to expect."

She said the improvement Chelsea had shown, since first being exposed to the visual system, was remarkable.

"Probably in the last couple of years her vocabulary has really taken off. "She's now really good at requesting and telling you what she wants."

■ If you want to know more about Chelsea's Challenges phone Mrs Haag on 9758 2473 or 0419 922 747.



The cue cards that help Chelsea to communicate.