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CPD LEGACY STORY: ANDREW CROOKSTON

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This legacy story was written by Ashley Crookston, mother of 5-year old Andrew. Andrew attends the ASSERT classroom located at the CPD. ASSERT, the Autism Support Services: Education, Research, and Training program, is a state-of-the-art preschool program that uses research-based techniques to address the individual needs of autistic children.

Written by Ashley Crookston

Andrew was diagnosed with ASD just after his second birthday. Thankfully, we were referred to the Up-to-3 Early Intervention program who helped us through the most helpless feeling time. But as Drew’s 3rd birthday approached, my husband, Nate, and I realized that Drew was not where he could be.

We had heard of the ASSERT program, but despaired of getting accepted into it (due to a long waiting list). At that time, there were only 8 students in the program. However, we put Drew on the waiting list anyway, and were pleasantly surprised when we got a call from Dr. Higbee shortly after Drew’s 3rd birthday, inviting us to be interviewed and evaluated for the program. We were accepted, and Drew started at ASSERT in August of 2009.

The timing could not have been better. Drew was, at that time, in a period of impressive verbal growth, and ASSERT was able to take that natural emergence and turn it into true language. When he entered the program, we would estimate he had between 20-30 regularly used words. Now, almost two years later he has a full vocabulary. And, although verbal communication will never be his “first language,” he is “fluent” and is able to communicate almost all of his wants and needs in a calm and easily understandable way. Not just to us, who know him well, but to strangers, also.

ASSERT has also been wonderful in helping us as parents and as a family through many difficult learning moments. They have, at home and in the classroom, worked with us and Drew on important things such as: learning to stop when we say “stop”, toilet training, proper behavior in public settings, and eating. All of these are ongoing, of course. Every day at school and at home Drew is coached, reminded, and helped in all of these things.

Eating is a particularly good example of the efforts put into Drew’s education. Drew struggles with most textures and tastes, and has an extremely limited diet. When we alerted ASSERT of our desire to expand his diet, they came up with an eating program for us and them to follow to help Drew. It was not easy to do. However, Drew’s case manager was there whenever we needed her to help us and give us suggestions. The program was mainly implemented in the home, but at school they were doing parallel programs to help the eating program succeed. When Nate and I felt that we had gotten as far as we could with that eating program, Drew’s current case manager immediately evaluated the situation and came up with a new program for us to use. Again, he showed us how to implement the program, and has continued to help us with it. And still they work at school on similar things to encourage what Drew is doing at home.

One of the greatest things about ASSERT is the emphasis they put on the home. Dr. Higbee, before accepting us to the program, made sure we understood that what Drew learns at school is not any use if it is not taken into the home and becomes part of the routine there. It is no good to anyone if Drew can do amazing things at school, but comes home and closes down. Because of this, Drew’s entire life has changed. Not only is he learning to be a good student, he is learning how to be a good person; to interact correctly with others and to follow social rules that are instinctual or easily learned for neuro-typical children.

The ASSERT program cannot cover every aspect of Drew’s education, though, and they realize that. Their main focus is on more “academic” matters. However, where they are not as strong in their teaching, they are able to find ways to supplement.

ASSERT is not the ideal classroom for social skills. So, they have encouraged, basically required us, to enroll Drew in the local public preschool, where he will get more large group and peer interaction time. Also, as Drew has learned and become ready for it, they have helped us to enroll Drew in The Children’s House, a preschool on campus for “normal” kids. Drew attends The Children's house for 2 hours
every week. He has an ASSERT teacher with him to help him the whole time. There he gets to interact in situations that will come up after he leaves the ASSERT program. The ASSERT teacher can guide and help him to learn to correctly behave in those situations. Not only is Drew’s time at The Children’s House invaluable for his life skills, but he loves it.

That is one of the best parts of ASSERT, Drew loves it; it is fun.

We have been very blessed that Drew was able to be accepted into ASSERT when he was 3, and we have had two years in this wonderful program. I cannot say enough about it. I have been able to watch my son completely change and blossom during that time. I cannot even guess what he would be like today without it.