

Autism: Unlocking the door

“Every child can reach their full potential”

Recently, the Centers for Disease Control rocked the nation with the results of the largest U.S study of autism, which, found the condition is more prevalent than previously documented. In fact, the report concludes that about one in 150 American children is diagnosed with Autism.

The news prompted speculation as to what is driving the numbers upward, but an equally important question for parents and policymakers is what are we going to do for this large and growing population of children with extraordinarily challenging needs?

We at Camelot Schools firmly believe there is a success story waiting to be told for every child diagnosed with autism – a disorder that usually is not diagnosed in children until after they turn three. Children with the disorder often have difficulty expressing their needs and engaging in social contact with others.

It's important for parents to know that progress is possible, and they don't have to go it alone. So many parents struggle to meet their children's needs almost single-handedly, until they reach a point where it becomes clear they need help.

Camelot Schools' residential program, located in DesPlaines, Ill., on the outskirts of Chicago and its therapeutic day schools in Elgin and Dekalb, Ill., provide parents from around the country with options to help their children. We believe in intensive early intervention, yet we know that, with the right supports, children of all ages have the opportunity to reach their full potential and achieve semi-independence.

Our intensive program targets children with severe autism who usually require the nearly constant attention of a highly skilled person – an impossibility for many parents who are raising other children, working outside the home, or simply managing the daily responsibilities of a family and daily life.

One of the greatest challenges in treating autism is the great degree to which it varies from individual to individual. From a child who needs constant sound stimulation to one who can't tolerate any noise. Rather than imposing a one-size-fits-all approach to treatment, instructors must assess each child's strengths and learning styles to develop a strategy to match the child's specific needs.

Below we offer you a glimpse of the challenges children with autism face and some of the successes we have seen at Camelot's programs. We believe communication is key; there is hope for every child, and parents are important partners in their child's success.

Communication is crucial

Imagine not being able to express your most basic wants and needs. For many autistic children this is a reality which often fuels aggressive behavior. At Camelot, our approach is simple: We

make it an early priority to give each child a method to communicate, whether through sign language, a picture card system or other means. We find a great improvement in behavior when a child is able to tell his or her story.

Take 12-year old-Kim, who is non-verbal and has lower functioning autism. When she first arrived at Camelot, she knew a little bit of sign language, but was incredibly aggressive towards staff and other students. Since then, Kim has been using a picture exchange communication system and has also learned an entire book of signs to help her communicate her wants and needs. Although she still has some obsessions, Kim's aggressive behavior continues to decrease as she learns to divert her anger through communication.

Children participating in the autism program at Camelot's day schools take part in a specialized curriculum that focuses on maximizing independent functioning in home, school, vocational and community settings. The program takes advantage of a range of treatments, including music therapy, intensive occupational therapy with sensory breaks throughout the day, intensive speech/language therapy, social skills training via the social worker and classroom staff, prevocational and vocational instruction, and a functional academic curriculum.

Ten-year-old Larry is a perfect example. Diagnosed with Aspergers and ADHD, Larry constantly paces back and forth imitating a walkie-talkie calling police cars and fire trucks to different scenes. Because of his behavior, Larry is often unable to focus or participate in class. However, there is one treatment that calms Larry and enables him to focus: Yoga. It only takes asking Larry whether or not he'll be in Yoga class for him to calm down. As soon as he's in the Yoga class, Larry transforms into a different person, able to follow direction, hold poses, and focus on the rest of his assignments that day.

To help students thrive, Camelot's residential treatment centers emphasize capabilities that are essential to independent living, such as communication and relationship building. By utilizing a range of tactics, Camelot's caring instructors help students unlock their potential and acquire life-changing skills.

Hope for every child

Although early intervention is ideal, it is never too late to help a child reach full potential. At Camelot, we've achieved remarkable progress with children in their late teens by giving them the communication tools and social skills they need to lead more independent lives.

For 17-year-old Ferman, severe physical aggression was a way of life. Hitting, pushing and choking family members were his ways of communicating. When he arrived at Camelot, Ferman was under the care of two large male staff members who worked with him on a daily basis. His first improvement may seem small, but it was a life-changing breakthrough when Ferman learned to sit in a chair calmly without getting up and attacking others. His most inspiring moment was when he came out of his world of isolation and walked across the room to greet one of his therapists. Although Ferman communicates non-verbally through facial expressions, he is now able to re-direct his anger and interact successfully with people.

Parents are partners

For parents of autistic children, there is nothing more painful than leaving a child to the care of strangers and driving home alone. But it is this brave step that gives parents the chance to discover the child they always dreamed was there. Our ultimate goal is to bring parents and children back together and strengthen families. With our intensive therapies and treatments, children are able to learn the communication and social skills they need to live successfully with their families, semi-independently, or in a group home.

One of our most moving family stories is that of Sabrina and her 18-year-old son Faris. Having dealt with Faris' self-injuring behaviors for years, Sabrina could no longer manage her son at home. She took a bold step and left Faris in our care at the residential program.

Faris' face remains permanently injured with calluses and bruises from a lifetime of self-injury, but therapy has helped Faris decrease these incidents. Now, he and his family have begun to heal. His mother visits frequently, and she and Faris have created a positive, loving, appropriate relationship. Sabrina also works with staff to learn the different therapies that are used to manage Faris' tendency to injure himself. She also provides insightful knowledge of ways she and her family controlled Faris' behavior. This ongoing, two-way communication brings families and staff together as partners in helping children achieve significant progress.

It is incredibly powerful to see a child's evolution from angry and withdrawn to expressive and connected. Given a means to communicate, the skills to cope with every day stress, and help in learning how to interact positively with others, children with autism can gain the world – and their parents can and should be partners in the process.

For more information about Camelot Schools please visit www.camelotforkids.com.

Wally Hamlin
Executive Director, Camelot Residential Program