

# Shawn: Working on Goals Through Daily Activities



Shawn & Ally the Dental Alligator *Teresa Alley photo*

## Assessment

The diagnosis and care of each child referred for services at the Washington County Children's Program is a journey. For young Shawn and his parents, that journey began with Shawn's inability to speak at 18 months. An initial diagnosis of deafness led to a session with WCCP's Barbara Koch, who teaches sign language. But Barb also has long experience teaching children with autism, and to her the signs were immediately readable. "Shawn was locked in his own world," Barb says.

Shawn's mother Marie agrees. "I was in denial. Then I read a magazine story about autism called 'Little Boy Lost.' What I wanted to do was rule it (autism) out. I wanted to prove Barb wrong." But the initial deafness from ear infections was not the whole story of Shawn's inability to speak, to make eye contact, to play with other children, or to eat a variety of foods. Marie read that story and saw her son in it. After a pediatric evaluation at a developmental clinic, Shawn began developmental therapy at WCCP.

## Plan

Shawn's plan of care included Applied Behavioral Analysis (ABA) right from the beginning. ABA is a well known "best practice" for autism that involves breaking the simplest tasks into very small, achievable steps for each child. No two children's plans look alike. To keep the process on track, WCCP's therapists train with the child and parents in concentrated sessions with a certified behavioral specialist, in this case Alan Tomasello of Discovering Kids Consultation. These sessions can be very tough for everyone, as Marie recalls her sessions with Shawn, but they set the bar for what behaviors parents and therapists will require from each child.

A child's work is his play, so a typical day in a WCCP group looks a lot like that in a "regular" preschool. But whether riding a tricycle, sharing a snack, playing next to a buddy, or knocking on office doors at WCCP and saying hello, Shawn was always working hard with a therapist to meet his own goals and eventually to emerge from his private world and engage in social interaction with others. "Errorless learning" is one key, says one of Shawn's therapists, Ralph Hirtle. "If he wants something, you hold it up by your eyes so he has to make eye contact with you, and say, do you want the truck? . . . If he says 'fork fork fork,' you say 'Do you want a fork?' and hand it to him while saying 'I want a fork.' The "hand over" method is also part of errorless learning. The therapist puts her hands over the child's hands or arms and accomplishes the behavior along with the child, time and again, until the child is doing the task on his or her own. With encouragement from his therapists and parents, Shawn worked very hard on his goals until he was ready for kindergarten.

## Progress

Shawn has been in kindergarten in his hometown for four months now and is doing very well, says his mom. "Something I didn't know is that he can read!" says a thrilled Marie Johnson. "His communication is up one hundred percent from August, and he is going up to children now and asking them politely to play games."

Barb Koch noted that though Shawn still may not like eye contact, it's a learned behavior and he can do it. Much about autism is still unknown in the medical world. Barb says that "In my opinion we 'break up' autism through enforced social interaction. It is possible to change the appearance of the disorder from severe to mild." In other words, though autism may be called 'incurable,' children who formerly would have been placed in residential settings can now succeed in everyday life if given the proper start. For parents of children with autism, the question is basic: Will my child grow up to have a career, get married, and have children of his own? For Shawn, Sr., and Marie, a positive answer seems much closer than it did four years ago because of the progress Shawn, Jr., has made with their help and support and that of his teachers and therapists.