

BEACH CENTER STORIES

When Difference is a Blessing: Emma's Story

Emma is 14 years old and in the seventh grade. She enjoys dressing hair, and loves pizza and brownies. Emma has moderate hearing loss, a severe speech disorder, and developmental delay, but that didn't stop her parents and teachers from having a positive outlook about her potential.

Beach Center on Disability

Making a Sustainable Difference in Quality of Life



This story was written by Joo Young Hong for a Spring 2007 graduate course, Family and Inter-Professional Collaboration in Special Education, taught by Ann Turnbull, Ed.D., at the University of Kansas. Joo Young Hong provided at-home services for the subject of this story.

"I'm sorry but I don't understand what you are saying." The mom's teary face broke my heart. Emma's vague speech was even worse than usual on that day when the adolescent girl's emotional difficulties came up. Emma is 14 years old and in the seventh grade. She enjoys dressing hair, and loves pizza and brownies. Listening to music brings happiness to her life. Sweet Emma has moderate hearing loss, a severe speech disorder, and developmental delay, which is like Cornelia de Lange Syndrome. I have taken care of Emma three afternoons a week since February 2007.

Strong Faith

Emma's mom's strong religious faith comforts her when it comes to her daughter's safety. "I believe that God protects Emma with an angel to be with her all the time." Both of Emma's parents, her older brother, and her grandparents all love and care for

Emma. One of the blessings in their lives was their partnership with Mrs. Bobb, Emma's special education teacher in elementary school. She discussed the family's expectations and encouraged them to have a positive outlook for Emma. Even though no one expected that Emma could read a book, Mrs. Bobb worked very hard and to everyone's surprise, Emma learned to read short stories.

The positive experience of Emma's reading shows that Emma has the ability to improve in academic and life skills. The family hopes Emma will have enough opportunities for one-on-one education so she lives up to her best ability. Emma herself is a big blessing to the family; however, due to Emma's differences, they sometimes do not know what to do for her. The family earnestly needs emotional support as well as educational advice.

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Building a Trusting Partnership

The first step to building a trusting partnership with the family was to become close to Emma. I gave Emma a special album to record our time together. Through all the pictures that we took together, Emma came to understand our special relationship and grow close to me. Whenever Emma shows even very little improvement, I praise, thank, and hug her. Since Emma got along with me very well, Emma's mother began to trust me. Communication is a huge part of building a trusting partnership with the family. I spend at least 10 minutes speaking with the family every afternoon when I am with Emma. I share what wonderful things Emma has done that day and praise her in front of her mom.

Not only is Emma's mom happy to see her daughter's improvement, but Emma is proud of herself. We share our long-term and short-term goals for Emma. I especially encouraged the family to set high expectations for their long-term goals, so that we all keep devoting ourselves like one ship to rescue Emma from an island and bring her back to the mainland. When Emma's mother talks about her emotional and educational difficulties, I empathically listen to her and actively respond with encouragement. Through our sincere and open communication, we realize that when we share happiness, our happiness grows, and if we share sadness, our sadness decreases.

Music Therapy

Our time together is for education as well as for fun. Under the short-term goals, I included some fun activities. My goals are Emma's improvement in musical sensitivity, motor skills, and oral speech. Instead of just listening to me playing the piano, Emma also keeps time with her hands or with a tambourine. This helps Emma with motor skills as well as musical sensitivity. She also learns the difference between 4/4 time and 6/8 time and enjoys music very actively. We do stretching and count numbers from one to twenty. She can practice motor skills, math, and oral speech, all from this one activity.

Since Emma loves brownies, we often bake together. She learns to follow directions and measures the water, sugar, and oil. Stirring the mix is also good practice for Emma's motor skills. We always talk about our classes, lunch, and friends. We go to the public library once a week where Emma chooses what she wants to read and then she reads the book aloud. She has more opportunities to speak orally through such activities. We have a lot of fun, and our day is full of joy and improvement.

Dreams for Emma

I have dreams for Emma. First, I would like Emma to be able to order her favorite pizza at a restaurant for herself. I would also like her to be able to explain what she wants to eat and know how much money she uses to pay for the meal. Emma should be able to read the newspaper, learn what is happening around us, and express her own ideas after reading. Finally, I would like Emma to learn to be independent. She may discover ways to live for herself and get along well with other members of society. I believe that throughout the process, I will keep communicating empathically and building "unconditional trust" with the family. We all cheer Emma on to her success through our partnership.

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