

BEACH CENTER STORIES

The Busiest Kid I Know: Kevin's Story

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Beach Center on Disability

Making a Sustainable Difference in Quality of Life



Kevin's Story

The Busiest Kid I know

This story was written by Alison Gurwin 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. Alison is Kevin's sister.

My brother, Kevin, was born on June 29, 1990, with three moms: my mom, my sister, and me. My dad instantly adored his only little boy as did his overprotective "moms." Our family lived then and still lives in a suburb about fifteen minutes north of Chicago, a beautiful neighborhood that provided a wonderful upbringing. Summers were spent at the beach near by or running through the sprinkler in our yard; winters were spent watching our dad spray the homemade ice rink on our patio and layering ourselves with warm clothes on freezing cold days.

Kevin was busy from day one. As a little boy he became obsessed with trains, fire trucks, and cartoons. He then moved on to video games, playing outside, and riding bikes. Now he is a member of many groups, such as a Jewish youth group, and has a job at an after-school recreation program. In addition to Kevin's participation in extra curricular activities, last year he received his "keys" to independence by obtaining his driver's license. School has always been a task that simply got in the way.

During preschool, Kevin exhibited severe separation anxiety. He would throw tantrums and cry as my mom tearfully left him at school, wondering how she could help her little boy. Kevin then started kindergarten at the same school my sister and I had attended. Avoca West Elementary School was (and still remains) a small neighborhood school where class sizes were about 90 students, teachers knew almost every student by name, and opportunities were ample, thanks to a large budget.

A Diagnosis

In the beginning of kindergarten, Kevin was showing a lack of progress and a need for additional support for reading. He was evaluated and diagnosed with a learning disability. Kevin was provided with any and all accommodations and content enhancements, guided by strong teachers who were nurturing and effective. Kevin's educational team inspired security and confidence in the individualized support that he was receiving. My parents felt Kevin was provided with motivational support and a high-quality education when he was at school and they tried their best when he was at home.

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At home, Kevin was loved unconditionally and supported through guidance and empathy as we watched him struggle as a student. As his second mothers, my sister and I protected our brother from anything we were able to: teasing neighborhood kids, overtired, frustrated parents and, to the best of our ability, himself. We would try to ease his frustration by helping him with homework, coaxing him to even complete his homework with rewards, and helping to explain things to Kevin in ways that he would understand.

As Kevin progressed into fifth grade, grew self-conscious about his learning disability. He didn't want to go to the resource room; he didn't want to be different. Junior high school became the most difficult experience during Kevin's educational career.

A Rough Year

I left for college at the University of Kansas just as Kevin was about to start junior high. Because I am the oldest child, it was a difficult transition for everyone, but Kevin took it especially hard. I was his second mom, the one who constantly told him to wash his face, the one who was also always in his corner. It was a rough year for all of us.

Kevin would constantly avoid school work by escaping on his bike, being with friends, and finding ways to busy himself with anything other than schoolwork. My parents began to realize that Kevin's participation in extra-curricular activities increased his self determination, eased stress, and made him happy, but unfortunately for him, Kevin also had to go to school. Junior high was a struggle for my parents due to the lack of connection among Kevin's educational team. My parents felt that Kevin was thought of as a lazy student, just another test score to worry about. No teacher truly bonded with Kevin and cared about his success in school.

Kevin achieved his Bar Mitzvah during his seventh grade year when he was thirteen. In the Jewish religion, a Bar Mitzvah signifies a transition to adulthood and, after a special religious ceremony, the event is commemorated by a big celebration. For Kevin's Bar Mitzvah party theme, the phrase "Where's Kevin?" was tucked within each colorful centerpiece. That constant phrase showed just how active my brother was and continues to be as he has matured. Each table listed a different location—"The Beach," "At Alex's House," and "At Lifetime Fitness" – in addition to others. The special event in Kevin's life was a time to reflect on his success and progress.

The Next Challenge: High School

As a family, we were so proud of Kevin. All those around him felt his generosity, compassion, and warm heart. Junior high was a time of difficulty for Kevin. Still, he managed to skate by academically. Then my parents began to worry about what would happen to him as he entered the scary world of New Trier, a college preparatory school. My parents worried about the support that Kevin would be receiving. Kevin has always lacked academic motivation. Throughout junior high school, Kevin's motivation continued to decrease as he, along with my parents, struggled with his team of teachers.

As it turned out, high school was the best thing that ever happened to Kevin. Kevin was assigned a wonderful resource teacher who immediately bonded with my brother and "got him," both emotionally and academically. Kevin was comfortable with his support but still struggled to find motivation to accomplish school-related tasks. In working with Kevin's educational support team, several techniques were implemented to increase Kevin's motivation. The open and honest relationship that my parents formed with Kevin's resource teacher made specific steps possible to increase Kevin's motivation. Kevin also knew that he was not going to be in 4-level classes (classes are designated 2, 3, and 4, indicating the level of difficulty).

More Confidence

Kevin joined the volleyball team and took part in other extra-curricular activities such as volunteering in social service groups and participating in a Jewish youth group. Kevin made friends outside of New Trier and was, once again, busier than anyone else I know. As Kevin continued to join groups, travel the world, and make close friends, his confidence began to grow (and so did he!).

Through Kevin's newfound self esteem, his motivation increased in school. He began to get his homework done so that his afternoons were free to be packed with activities, friends, and his job at the park district. Kevin was well aware that his grades were a factor in his participation in extra curricular activities. He knows that if his grades slip, he will not be allowed by the school or my parents to participate. This is viewed by Kevin as motivation to succeed academically. Kevin has been happier and more secure and is becoming a responsible young adult, looking towards the future.

At New Trier, Kevin has realized that he cannot just slide through the ACT or earn the minimum grade point required for acceptance to college. Throughout the creation of my action plan, a timeline was created in coordination with ACT tutoring and Kevin's busy schedule. Kevin was able to concretely understand the necessary steps to support him as he prepares for such an important assessment. Kevin's educational team and my parents were comforted by the structure of the plan. They were able to better understand the arrangement for the summer and complete their tasks within the plan to achieve what was the best for Kevin. Working with Kevin to create the action plan for his ACT alleviated test anxiety and gave Kevin responsibility for participating in tutoring. He knows he needs to work hard to achieve his goals.

A Light at the End

As Kevin's sister and a member of the field of special education, I have been both frustrated and relieved by the academic support that Kevin has received throughout his educational experience. My parents' partnership with Kevin's educational team has been somewhat of a roller coaster. While junior high school was a constant worry for my parents, Kevin's high school team has provided light at the end of the tunnel. My parents have felt supported and reassured that Kevin is receiving the most support possible in order to succeed. In addition, Kevin's improved self esteem and confidence has allowed him to put forth his best effort and be an effective student moving in the right direction.

When I look at Kevin, I see that little curly headed boy with a small, tan body and a Thomas the Tank Engine toy in his hand. To view him as a young man who is taller than I, who has a low voice and is going to college soon, is almost inconceivable. I have my eyes on the stars for Kevin. Achieving great things is just part of Kevin's busy schedule.

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