

BEACH CENTER STORIES

From Meltdowns to Dreams of Disney: Koty's Story

Koty didn't interact with the other kids. He had outbursts and even his teachers were afraid of him. Several different practitioners and numerous tests and probes later, Koty was diagnosed with Asperger's Disorder. By the sixth grade, Koty had his eyes set on being the next Walt Disney, thanks to the effective partnership between his mother and teachers.

Beach Center on Disability

Making a Sustainable Difference in Quality of Life



Koty's Story

From Meltdowns to Dreams of Disney

This story was written by Keely Ervin 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. Keely was Koty's sixth grade teacher.

"We went through five daycares in one year."

These are the words of Koty's mom, Jenna, who recalls the first signs of difficulty when Koty was just three years old. As far as she knew, Koty was as normal as any other toddler. Sure, the daycares complained that Koty was not potty trained yet and that he showed combative behavior towards others. But Jenna never got a clear answer as to what the problems were all about until she enrolled Koty in a Headstart program.

Once he was at Headstart, teachers said Koty didn't interact with the other kids, that he had "outbursts," as they put it. One teacher said she was afraid of Koty. That's when the school called a meeting to discuss Koty's differences. Jenna took her sister along to be there to listen when things just got too overwhelming for her. "Frightening," is how Jenna remembers the intimidating group that sat before her that day. Several different practitioners and numerous tests and probes later, Koty was diagnosed with Asperger's Disorder.

Differences Become Obvious

When Koty started school, the differences between Koty and his peers became more noticeable to Jenna. "It was hard to notice the changes when he was younger. You naturally adjust and don't know anything different." While at school, Koty continued to show impulse-control problems. He had a hard time making friends and would pace the playground all by himself. Content to be isolated, he shied away from engaging with others around him.

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Anger was also a problem. Angela, one of the paraprofessionals who worked with Koty for many years, said he has always been easily frustrated. She remembers an incident several years ago when she asked Koty to correct a math problem. He became so angry he "jumped up, knocking the chair back on the floor, and grabbed my arm." Koty also had a difficult time with change and adjusting to a new grade each year always posed a challenge.

Working Together

At the time this story was written, Koty was in the sixth grade and looking ahead to middle school the next year. Since he'd been in the same school since Kindergarten, transitioning to a new school presented challenges for Koty. I started out interviewing Jenna, Koty's teachers, and Koty himself. From the interviews, I gained insight to Koty's past, the progress he'd made since then and what we hoped to accomplish for the future.

I focused on his highest needs, which were anxiety with change, changes in academic work, and higher expectations. I started incorporating some middle-school work and expectations into class time by introducing math concepts that Koty would see at the beginning of seventh grade.

Koty became more efficient with his planner and using sticky notes as reminders for studying specific topics such as spelling. To help make middle school a little more comfortable, I took my group of sixth graders to tour the middle school. There they had a chance to meet their new resource teacher, see the classrooms, and ask many questions. Koty said “middle school was going to be fun.”

I also created a summer packet filled with worksheets for home from the seventh grade math book, a reading log with questions from the middle school English teacher, and a calendar/planner for the summer months. It was important for Koty to continue to work on his reading and math skills over the summer. Keeping up the planner would take some practice but was essential for him staying on top in middle school.

Positive Changes

Koty has grown so much since those first few years after he was diagnosed. By the fourth grade, Koty was finally able to interact with his peers more and to make friends. Jenna said, “This year (sixth grade) Koty hasn’t had to call home as much.” Angela said the biggest change she’s seen in him is his confidence in himself and the ability to accept help from others. “He’s gone from pulling his hair, pounding on his head with his fist, and calling himself stupid to an occasional whine when he’s faced with having to learn something new. He has more control over his emotions.”

When Koty was asked how he thinks he’s changed, he replies, “I’ve learned to calm down and I don’t throw tantrums anymore. I’m doing better in math, reading, and social studies.”

A Glimmer of Excitement

At this writing, Koty faces the challenge of moving on to middle school next year. Jenna worries about Koty being mixed into the crowd of other kids and moving from one room to another, teacher to teacher.

Koty has many worries of his own. “I’m worried about classes and homework being too hard.” He thinks about what he’ll do there and whether the teachers will be nice. He worries about bullies and whether or not he’ll make friends. He worries he will forget locker combination and about gym because “I’m not good at gym.”

Getting past the worries, a glimmer of excitement sneaks through as Koty explains his eagerness to be in drama club and reading class. Koty is matter-of-fact about his future. “I want to be a cartoonist and movie maker.” In short, he wants to be the next Walt Disney.

Go With What Is Right

“You can’t care what people think,” Jenna advises. “You’re going to have the meltdowns. You know your kid better than anybody and you have to go with what is right for you.” She encourages parents to “go out and do things. You have to build a tough hide and can’t care about the comments others make.” Jenna’s hopes for Koty are that he be able to go to college, find a creative job, and just be happy.

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