

Inclusion Challenge: Joey in the Multi-Age Room

On a sunny morning in May, 7-year-old Joey* entered the psychiatrist's office. "School," he announced, "is a blowtorch and I am an ice cube." Kindergarten had been shaky. First grade had been difficult. Second grade had been a disaster. During the following July, Joey and his mom came to see me in my multi-grade classroom, a large room with deep windows overlooking several acres of trees. Snippets of conversation registered in my mind as I tried to listen to Joey's mom and watch him explore the room. "Very poor social skills." Joey rearranged the cushions in the reading corner. "Diagnosed with severe Attention Deficit Disorder." Joey pulled the tangrams out of the math center and began making designs on the floor. "Personality conflict with his teacher." He continued on around to the writing table, carefully examining the variety of pens, markers, stencils, stamps, and papers. "I know he's smart, but he won't do anything in school." Joey checked the programs on the computer screen's menu.

"He hates anything new," his mother concluded, "so I'm afraid he won't agree to come here. But I really feel he is not going to survive in his current situation."

Less than 30 minutes later, my telephone rang. "When is registration?" Joey got into the van and told me, "This is a place where I could go to school."

I was shocked, but also delighted.

Fall brought 14 students in grades one through eight, Joey among them. I placed his desk near mine. I wanted to be able to observe him carefully for awhile—to see what he could do, what was easy, what pushed him to the breaking point. His hands were extremely sensitive, partially from allergies. He needed to put lotion on them often, something that had irritated his former teacher. I put a large pump-bottle of hand lotion on the corner of my desk

**Names have been changed to protect individuals' privacy.*

BY JUDY ANDERSON

near Joey and told him to use it whenever he needed to.

Writing with a pencil was very stressful for him because he could feel the vibration of the graphite on the paper. I suggested fine-tip markers on smooth white paper. Joey's handwriting was almost unreadable, but his drawing ability was exceptional. For writing workshop, to solve the penmanship problem, I immediately introduced him to the computer. He was a very creative writer with a clever sense of humor—as long as he didn't have to write anything long-hand.

For social studies, Joey shared what he learned from each unit in the form of drawings, three-dimensional dioramas, and oral presentations. One of the older students read the quizzes to him so that he could answer the essay questions orally. He rarely missed a point.

For math—his biggest nightmare—I limited his assignments to 10 problems each. I gave him unlined white paper that I had divided into squares. He numbered each square from 1 through 10 and wrote one answer in each. I did not require that he write anything more than was necessary. If he missed an answer to a complicated problem, I asked him to go through it orally for me so that I could tell where the process had fallen apart. (I used the same process to teach math to all the students—carefully going through each step as I wrote it out, then going back over it to show where possible mistakes might occur.) For Joey, I rarely had to repeat the steps. Standardized tests administered that fall placed him around the 30th percentile. By the following fall, all his math scores were above the 90th percentile.

Life with Joey was not without hurdles. It took time for him to accept that it was all right for other children to come near his desk, that he could have things that were just for himself and other things that he must share, that he

was a valued member of our school family. He struggled to control himself when something upset him, rather than lashing out at whoever

was nearby. He gradually learned to work and play with other children.

Joey practiced his handwriting diligently to make it at least decipherable. Progress came in fits and starts; several steps forward, a few steps backward. But it came.

But so did seventh grade and the

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transfer of his father to a corporation in southern California. There were farewell suppers and final good-byes as the van pulled away.

Then came the cross-country phone calls: "I have a new computer." "I'm going to get a parrot." "School this year is a pain, but I'm doing pretty much OK."

Then pictures of eighth-grade graduation, followed by, "High school is great. There are lots of computers and I've already made them a new game. Algebra isn't so good, though."

And then, just a few weeks ago, a letter, a picture of a high school senior with longish dark hair and deep-set blue eyes—"I made it, Mrs. A. Thanks for everything!"

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