

Bringing back Mac

Before he was diagnosed with high-functioning autism, Mackenzie's withdrawal from his family and classmates was a heartbreaking mystery. Thanks to Accomplished Learning Centre, today, Kim and Chris have their son back.

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Beneath his mop of thick, mousy hair, Mackenzie's boyish brows are squished into a frown. He wears a serious face for a seven-year-old, but it's probably because he doesn't know the stranger talking to his mother.

For a few minutes, he's perched high on a bar stool in a café opposite the Accomplished Learning Centre, drinking a can of pop. He climbs down, pops out of the café then comes back in, snuggling up to his mother in a way that says, "Let's go now."

Mackenzie has high-functioning autism. People with this complex disorder typically have an average or above-average IQ. Where they stumble is in their inability to express emotion verbally or physically, and they have difficulty interpreting non-verbal cues: They cannot recognize anger or disinterest, love or compassion in others.

Autism took Mackenzie "away" from his family, and the Langley-based Accomplished Learning Centre returned him.

The first sign that Mackenzie was not developing as others of his age came when his speech, still only at the baby talk stage, gradually drifted into silence. As he became more verbally incapacitated, he grew frustrated. The tantrums escalated in frequency.

When he began to talk again his troubles remained.

There were red flags in school.

He couldn't pay attention. Even stories that engrossed his classmates failed to capture Mackenzie's attention.

During a lesson on the life cycle of the butterfly, Mackenzie's teacher asked him a question. The little boy's response had nothing to do with butterflies.

When children he knew came up to him to say hello, Mackenzie wouldn't — or couldn't — respond, and teachers noticed that he wouldn't make eye contact. His ability to draw and write was lagging. He did not make the brrrrm-brrrrm sounds of a little boy fascinated by his toy cars. Instead, he pulled the tires off his toy truck, and spun them endlessly.

"He didn't know how to play with the cars," said his mom, Kim Ayling.

Not surprisingly, as the gap between Mackenzie and his peers widened, he regressed. He failed to reach many anticipated milestones of childhood in a timely way.

If he was hurting inside, he didn't show it.

But his family was stung by the withdrawal.

"When I went to pick him up he would want to be put down again," she said.

"When I came home from work he wouldn't react. He knew (that I was home) but he couldn't show it."

There were times when she felt she didn't know her son.

"He was in a world of his own," said Kim.

"I felt he was gone from me."

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By chance, Kim heard about the Accomplished Learning Centre where Lisa and Ross Pearson started Mackenzie on an auditory training program called Samonas.

It was invented by Ingo Steinbach, a German

scientist whose expertise in music, physics and electrical/sound engineering led him to devise a "spectral activation" process. This intensifies classical music and nature's most dynamic sounds so that they "massage" the middle ear to stimulate the area of the ear associated with physical and mental well-being.

Samonas unlocked the mystery behind Mackenzie's separation from his family, his playmates, and reality.

And it accomplished this incredibly quickly.

"Two weeks after he started Samonas, something happened," said Kim.

"He started to build forts. I was in the kitchen and he was in the living room building a fort. Suddenly it hit me: he never builds forts. And it struck me that this is what little boys do."

The longed-for moment that Kim will forever treasure came soon after he began at the Accomplished Learning Centre.

"Out of the blue, he walked up to me and put his arms around me and said, 'I love you, Mom.'"

In that moment of tenderness, the tears began to fall, and she knew that every penny invested in their son and the program was worth it.

"At that moment the program paid for itself," she said.

It did not take long before evidence emerged that the change in her son was not fleeting.

"After a week or two, Mackenzie would come to me and hug me and want to be held. It meant so much to me because I was robbed of that for years," Kim said.

"He started to understand the use of language more, not taking things so literally, as well as being able to communicate more of his thoughts and feelings without getting so frustrated and upset."

There was more. "He started skipping on the sidewalk on the way to the Learning Centre. He had never skipped before."

Diagnosed with autism only last summer, Mackenzie was at first reluctant to listen to the CDs that form part of the Samonas intervention. But before long, he was tugging at his mother's sleeve to get her attention, inviting her to listen, too.

If Kim and her husband, Chris, had any doubts about the program, they were erased by the end of the three-month program.

In that space of time, Mackenzie went from having no friends at school, failing simple spelling tests, lacking social skills, and not communicating verbally or physically with the people who loved him the most — his parents Kim and Chris, and younger sister Kaitlynn — to a confident student who excels at spelling and faces childhood challenges and disappointments as other children might.

An example was when he accidentally stepped on Kaitlynn's sandcastle, demolishing a corner of it. Where once he would stay nothing, he apologized. There was no parental prompting.

His improvement at school has been nothing short of remarkable.

"He has gained years," Kim said. "His logic and reasoning went up four years."

He loves to read and, book in hand, will urge her to read to him. His favourite author is Robert Munsch.

"He is still autistic," Kim said, "but it's so much easier than it used to be."



Natasha JONES/Langley Times

A reason to be proud: Mackenzie's confidence has grown so much that it has improved his skills at building objects, including this space station made from Lego blocks.