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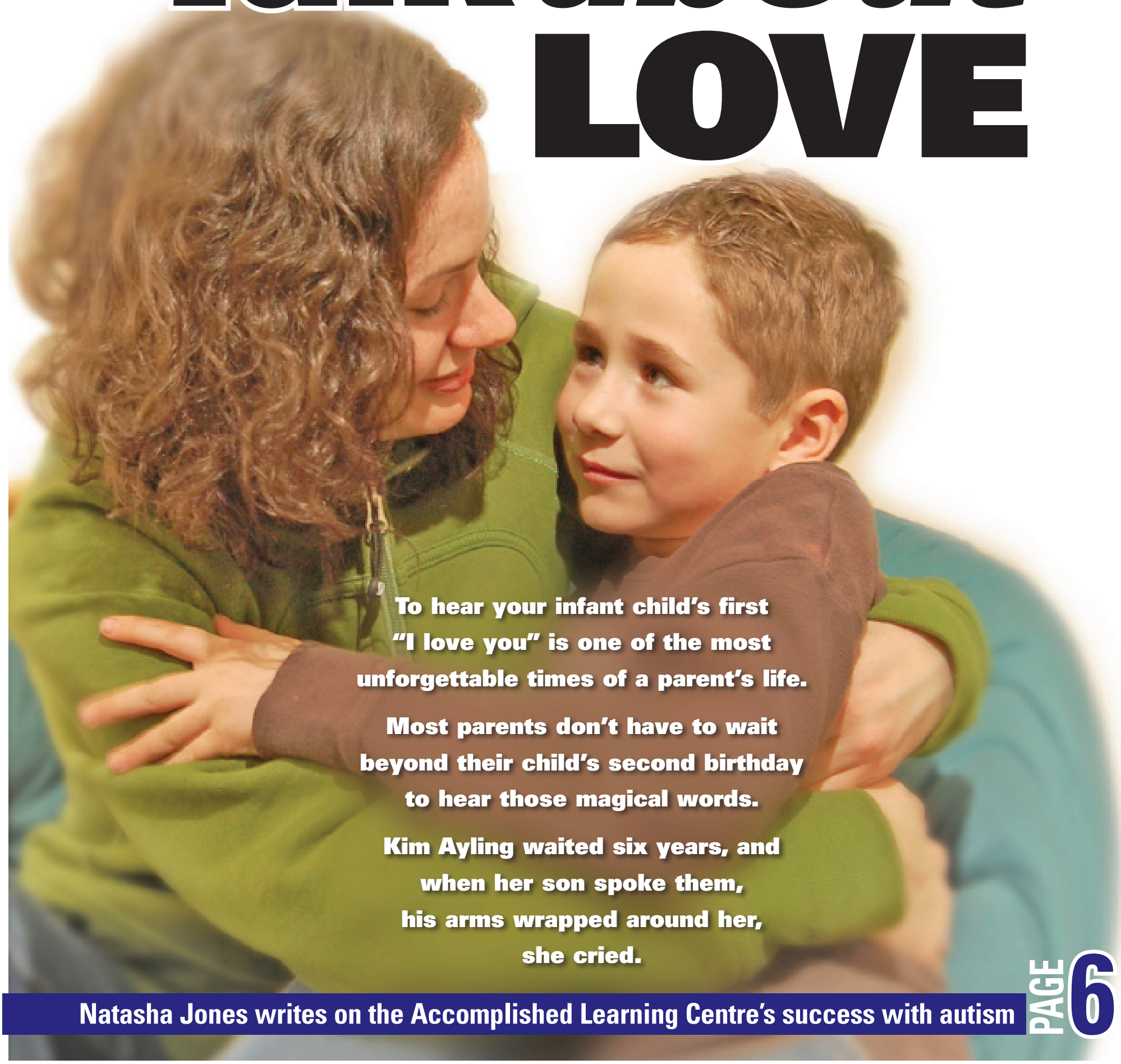
Talk about LOVE



To hear your infant child's first "I love you" is one of the most unforgettable times of a parent's life.

Most parents don't have to wait beyond their child's second birthday to hear those magical words.

Kim Ayling waited six years, and when her son spoke them, his arms wrapped around her, she cried.

Natasha Jones writes on the Accomplished Learning Centre's success with autism PAGE 6

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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.

NATASHA JONES
Times Reporter

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 brrrm-brrrm 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 Muensch.

"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.

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Consistency is the key to progress for ALC students

NATASHA JONES
Times Reporter

The woman's strokes are tentative at first, but as she finds her water legs, the arms grow stronger and the legs kick just enough to not displace too much water. Finally, after hours and hours of practice, she's getting the rhythm.

For the swimmer, that's one heck of an achievement.

Lisa Pearson would agree. The swimmer is her 72-year-old mother who recently moved into a housing complex that has an indoor pool. Too bad she couldn't swim.

She couldn't have found a better teacher in Pearson, and her husband, Ross.

"She was timid in the water," Lisa Pearson said. "At first, she was scared to let go. We needed to go with her every day for a couple of weeks to swim with her. That's what it takes for her to be a fearless swimmer."

The Pearsons apply the same approach to the students who enroll in the Accomplished Learning Centre where they have helped hundreds of children overcome the learning handicaps that hinder their lives, not only at school but at home, and which can cripple them in adulthood.

The key is consistency and a commitment to the programs which typically last three months and require one hour of practice a day, six days a week.

The centre, which the Pearsons own and operate from their Langley Mall school, offers intense, three-month courses in programs such as Samonas, PACE, Master The Code, Interactive Metronome and Fast Forword. [See fact box below]. Testing will determine which is the most suitable.

To say that the results are remarkable is an understatement.

"The average gain is more than three years in three months," Lisa Pearson said. "So that means that a 12-year-old in Grade 5 who reads at a Grade 3 level will be reading at or beyond her grade level in six months," she said.

A child who has difficulties that do not include reading will improve by three years or more in three months.

This child may be a student with a learning disability, suffer an attention deficit disorder and face difficulties in school. He likely fails to finish work in class and so has hours of homework every day, triggering conflict with his parents. From this, inevitably, emerges low self esteem and behaviour problems.

"Every student who leaves our centre after completing the course tailored to him or her is significantly improved. And this improvement is measured with pre- and post-testing," Lisa Pearson said.

"We take this kid who can't learn to read well, despite extra help in class and tutoring, and resolve the problem completely in six months. Guaranteed."

And, Pearson adds, "for most of our autistic clients this is the best therapy they have ever done."

While the school has structured learning there's plenty of play involved. Jenga, a game in which players remove blocks from a tower and pile them on top, teaches reasoning and logic so that the removal of a block will not demolishes the tower. The game strengthens sequencing and fine motor skills.

The Accomplished Learning Centre distributes to parents a list of games such as Uno that encourage one-on-one interaction.

"We don't get enough of that these days," Ross Pearson says.

"There are so many games that help."

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The Pearsons are sitting in the waiting area of their school. Kim Ayling is there, and the trio are watching a relaxed and smiling Mackenzie at play. Kim talks about the incredible changes in her son, and someone remarks that the Pearsons must see little miracles every day at their school.

"Some of these miracles are not so little," Lisa says, nodding towards Mackenzie who has just finished building a giant robot station from Lego blocks.

Ross agrees: "We have the best job in the world."

How to retrain the brain

Extensive training and research has led Ross and Lisa Pearson to a number of approaches which, in essence, retrain the brain. Here are five used extensively at the Accomplished Learning Centre:

- **Samonas:** Auditory training using specially recorded and engineered music with high quality headphones. It directly stimulates the middle ear, cochlea, auditory nerve, and cerebral cortex; and indirectly stimulates the entire central nervous system.
  Purpose: to develop auditory skills for listening, attention, language processing, phonological processing, and emotional well being.
- **Interactive Metronome:** Using a computer and special equipment, students clap their hands or tap their feet in time to the steady beat of a cowbell heard through headphones. The duration starts at half a minute and builds eventually to 37 minutes. It is fun and takes only 15 one-hour sessions. Golfer Vijay Singh used this technique prior to winning the Masters, and is its also used by the Miami Dolphins.
  Purpose: to train auditory and visual attention, concentration, language processing, fine and gross motor skills, balance, and to calm aggressive and impulsive behaviour.
- **Processing and Cognitive Enhancement (PACE):** This one-on-one program involves more than 100 game-like activities to develop a broad range of cognitive and processing abilities including: auditory and visual memory, auditory and visual processing speed, visual processing, auditory processing, phonemic awareness, logic and reasoning, and attention (selective, divided, sustained),
  Purpose: to improve learning, thinking, listening and attention skills in struggling learners.
- **Master the Code:** A "sound to code" reading and spelling program that enables struggling readers to overcome their reading challenges. This is an aggressive program that develops phonological processing abilities, eliminates incorrectly learned methodology, and teaches reading by re-establishing foundations.
  Purpose: to completely retrain reading skills in failed literacy learners and dyslexics.
- **Fast ForWord:** A reading and language computer program that develops and strengthens memory, attention, processing speed, and sequencing.
  Purpose: to strengthen these skills to improve critical language and reading skills such as phonological awareness, phonemic awareness, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension, decoding, working memory, syntax, grammar, and other skills necessary to learning how to read or to become a better reader.

The Accomplished Learning Centre is in Langley Mall, 5501 204 St, Langley. Phone: 604 539-1386, or e-mail lisa@accomplished.ca.

— Natasha Jones