

Change a Child's World

By: Heidi VanderSlikke

LIAM IS A HEALTHY FOUR-YEAR-OLD BOY WITH ROSY CHEEKS, SPARKLING EYES AND A DELIGHTFUL SMILE. AT THE AGE OF TWO HE WAS DIAGNOSED WITH AUTISM.



The experts predicted he would never talk. With the help of an innovative program, committed parents and dedicated volunteers, Liam is proving the experts wrong. Today his vocabulary is growing steadily, and he is able to make

sentences out of the words he knows. He no longer lives in "his own little world," now making significant eye contact and interacting with others. However, in order for Liam's remarkable progress to continue, more volunteers are needed.

Autism is an increasingly common and extraordinarily complex disorder. Its symptoms vary from one child to another, and no single cause has been identified. Effective treatment must therefore be as multi-faceted as the problem. Jonathan Alderson, a Toronto based "autism treatment specialist" with a Masters from Harvard University, has developed such a program—Intensive Multi-Treatment Intervention. IMTI uses a wide variety of techniques to customize treatment programs, drawing from three main areas of research—biological treatment (including diet); behavioural and cognitive education; family and therapist attitudinal training. Since IMTI is primarily a home-based program

preparing children for successful transition to school, children like Liam are able to receive its benefits twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.

Liam's preschool years provide the optimal window of opportunity in his fight against autism. Ideally, he would spend between forty and sixty hours of his week with volunteer therapists in the play room. The volunteer therapist's role is to use an attitude of love, acceptance and playfulness along with specific techniques to build a strong rapport with Liam. Then, highly structured teaching segments are used to introduce an in-depth curriculum.

Another important element of the program, in preparation for school, uses peer aged "play dates." Children between the ages of four and six-years-old come into the home and spend supervised playtime with Liam.

Liam's mom, Nancy, firmly believes volunteer therapists have grown

personally through their time with Liam. "People who are normally very quiet and shy are trained in a program based on acceptance — they don't feel judged," says Nancy. "Liam is most attracted to the 'fun child' in someone. The program brings out the real you."

"Family life right now is centered on Liam's special needs, so that one day we'll be able to have a normal family life together," says Nancy. For Liam's parents the goal is to lose the autistic diagnosis for their son. They know of other families who have accomplished exactly that through the IMTI program. In order to succeed they need the help of enthusiastic, energetic, creative and caring volunteers.

Could your child be a playmate for Liam? Do you have a couple of hours per week to invest in the life of a special needs child? For more information on this wonderful opportunity, please contact Nancy at 725-8255, or e-mail nancy-bruce@rogers.com.