

PSA Honors Program

Briana Rueter

*Understanding Keegan:
Facilitating Peer Acceptance of Autistic Children*

Education

29 April 2014

Briana Rueter

Facilitating Peer Acceptance of Autistic Children: An Introduction

Autism is one of the most prevalent disabilities in society today, yet it is also one of the most overlooked issues in the American education system. According to autismspeaks.org, this disability now affects 1 in every 88 children and is the fastest growing developmental disability in the United States. Because of this, one would believe that researchers would be doing whatever they can to help the individuals that suffer from Autism. However, autism research receives less than 5% of the research funding of many less common diseases in children (Autism Speaks, 2013). One way that is suggested to help autistic students perform well in the classroom is through the implementation of peer relationships within the classroom (Sherdian, 2013). But how does one employ this relationship? What roles do teachers play? How can society do something to help these children in need? The decisions have to be made fast in order to ensure the best possible experience and education for those that suffer from Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).

With the little money this research holds, investigators still do what they can to look into and fix this problem. Generally, as stated previously, Autistic students tend to perform better in school when they feel they are socially accepted by their peers and by school staff (Diehl, Millea, & Shea, 2013). Additionally, most studies pose the statement that there is not enough being done and more programs/interventions need to be implemented in the school setting (Jacobs, Kasari, Kertzmann, Locke, & Rotheram-Fuller (2013). Scholars have studied many ways in which students can be integrated more into

the social spectrum. Some examples include interventions, buddy programs, using structured and unstructured social opportunities, cooperative games, plays/dramas, and reading literature that addresses the issue. Teachers need to be educated in this field to help their students succeed.

This project is one example of a tool that can be used within the classroom to facilitate peer acceptance. It will be a great tool for educators and parents of autistic children. The mission of my thesis is to create a children's book that addresses questions students may have about autism. In turn, the students will understand more about the disorder. Because of this, children will hopefully feel more comfortable with creating peer relationships with students who suffer from autism. The more tools to address autism that can be implemented with-in the elementary classroom setting, the better.

Reference List

- Autism Speaks. (2013). Facts About Autism. Retrieved from <http://www.autismspeaks.org/what-autism/facts-about-autism>
- Diehl, J.J., Millea, M.A., & Shea, N.M. (2013). Perceived Autonomy Support in Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder. *Autism*. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4172/2165-7890.S3-001>
- Jacobs, J., Kasari, C., Kertzmann, M., Locke, J., & Rotheram-Fuller, E. (2013) Social Network Changes Over the School Year Among Elementary School-Aged Children With and Without an Autism Spectrum Disorder. *School Mental Health*, 5, 38-47. doi: 10.1007/s12310-012-9092-y
- Sherdian, M. (2013). The Effects of Incorporating Peer Buddy Programs to Help Facilitate Social Interactions in Elementary Schools. <http://hdl.handle.net/10211.8/411>

Briana Rueter

Literature Review

1. Sherdian, M. (2013). The Effects of Incorporating Peer Buddy Programs to Help Facilitate Social Interactions in Elementary Schools. <http://hdl.handle.net/10211.8/411>

This study explored types of inclusive programs that can be incorporated in school for students with special needs. It examines a buddy program called the Sharing Our Acceptance and Respect (SOAR) program. The study compared a control group to a treatment group that was given the means of the SOAR program to analyze its effects in the classroom. It measured the effect SOAR had on the student's perceptions of their social acceptance. The researcher found that the data collected in this study was not conclusive enough to determine a difference in the student's perceptions between the treatment and control groups. Therefore, this would be a topic that I can look into and explore further to try to create results.

2. Jacobs, J., Kasari, C., Kertzmann, M., Locke, J., & Rotheram-Fuller, E. (2013) Social Network Changes Over the School Year Among Elementary School-Aged Children With and Without an Autism Spectrum Disorder. *School Mental Health*, 5, 38-47. doi: 10.1007/s12310-012-9092-y

This study examined the stability of children's social networks and friendship features throughout one academic school year. It looked into the differences between typically developing children, children with ASD, and children with a non-ASD

disability. Overall, social network salience increased for all students across the school year. Children in upper grades had higher social network salience than those in younger grades. Children with ASD, however, had significantly lower social network salience and received significantly fewer friendship nominations and more non-preferred nominations throughout the school year. Therefore, the article suggests that school-based interventions that foster social development and peer engagement are still needed for children with ASD.

3. Diehl, J.J., Millea, M.A., & Shea, N.M. (2013). Perceived Autonomy Support in Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder. *Autism*. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4172/2165-7890.S3-001>

This study looked into the effects of autonomy support in relation to Autism Spectrum Disorder students. It looked into the relationship between autonomy support, self-determination, scholastic competence, and social acceptance. This was done in a study of 26 participants with high-functioning ASD in which they completed self-report measures that evaluated autonomy support, friendship, and academics. This study found that greater teacher autonomy support was related to higher self-determination in school, which was then closely related to scholastics achievement. Also, self-determination in friendship correlated with and social acceptance. Therefore, in both studies the importance of fostering self-determination was critical. According to this article, future studies should look into the best practices for incorporating autonomy support into classrooms and classroom interventions.

4. Rogers, S.J. (2000). Interventions That Facilitate Socialization in Children with Autism. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 30, 399-409. doi: 10.1023/A:1005543321840

This paper reviews some of the social interventions, with support of these interventions, which have been described in other peer reviewed journals that were previously published. This paper points out the additional research needs and future directions that should be explored. This paper is mostly based on single-subject designed research and is organized by both age group and by type of intervention used. It explores several types of interventions and their effects on each and every age group.

5. Humphrey, N. (2008). Including pupils with autistic spectrum disorders in mainstream schools. *Support for Learning*, 23, 41-47. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-9604.2007.00367.x

As more and more students are being diagnosed with autistic spectrum disorder, the concern for their education grows. Many of these students are subjected to bullying, loneliness, and are considered difficult to teach by educators. Because of this, the articles purpose was to outline evidence-based strategies of how to facilitate presence, participation, achievement, and acceptance of ASD students in the mainstream setting. The strategies presented include: challenge stereotypes and raise expectations, create order from chaos, promote peer understanding, develop social skills, adapt academic

subjects, and modify conversational language. These strategies should help teachers make ASD student's school experiences more enjoyable and worth while.

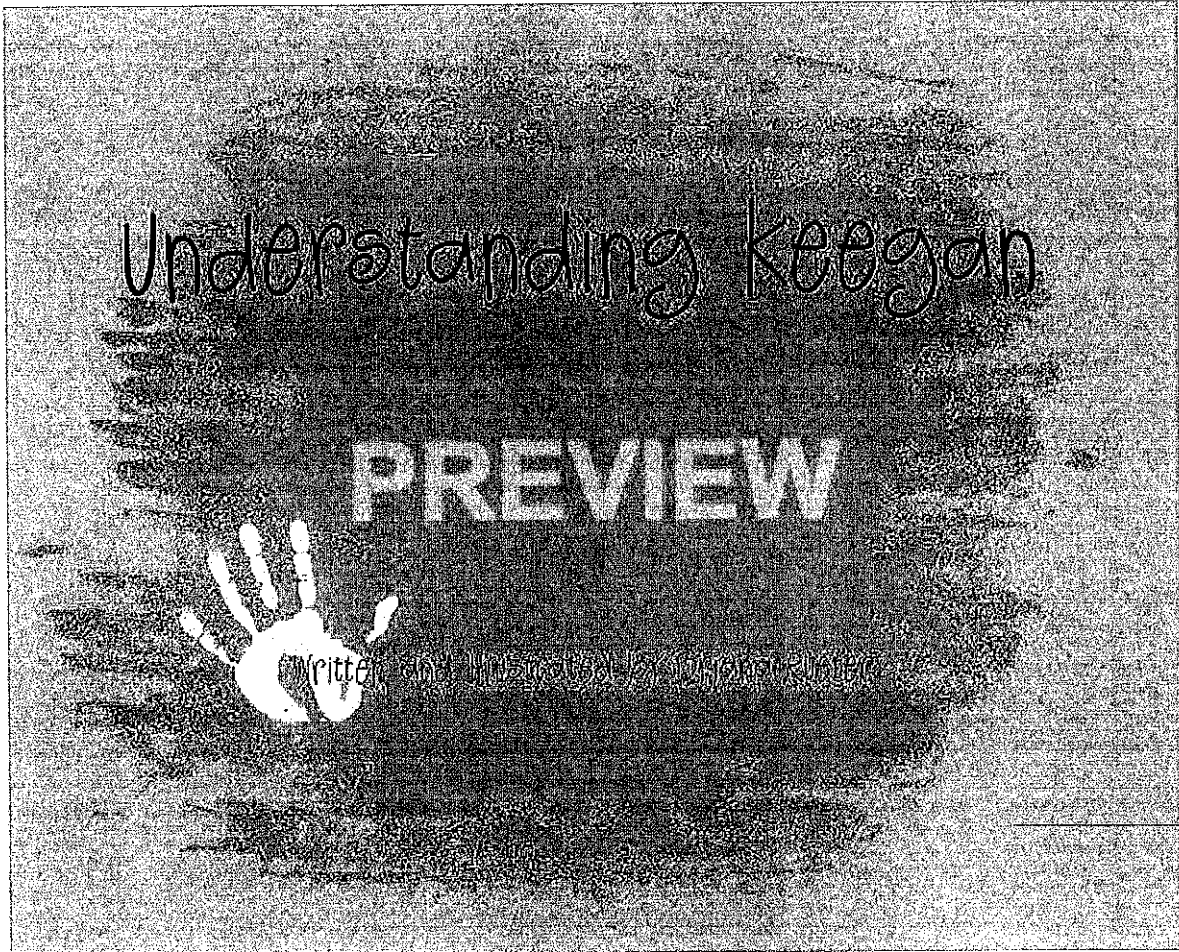
6. Belcher, E.C., & Maich, K. (2011). Using Picture Books to Create Peer Awareness About Autism Spectrum Disorders in the Inclusive Classroom. *Intervention in School and Clinic*, 47. doi:10.1177/1053451211424600

Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) tend to behave in a manner that can create tension amongst peer relationships. One way, the article suggests, to raise awareness of this behavior to peers within an elementary classroom is through the use of picture books during interventions. This can be effective within the classroom. The article provides criteria regarding the process of making the decision of what books to use and other related considerations to help teachers make the best decisions when dealing with autistic children and the acceptance of their peers.

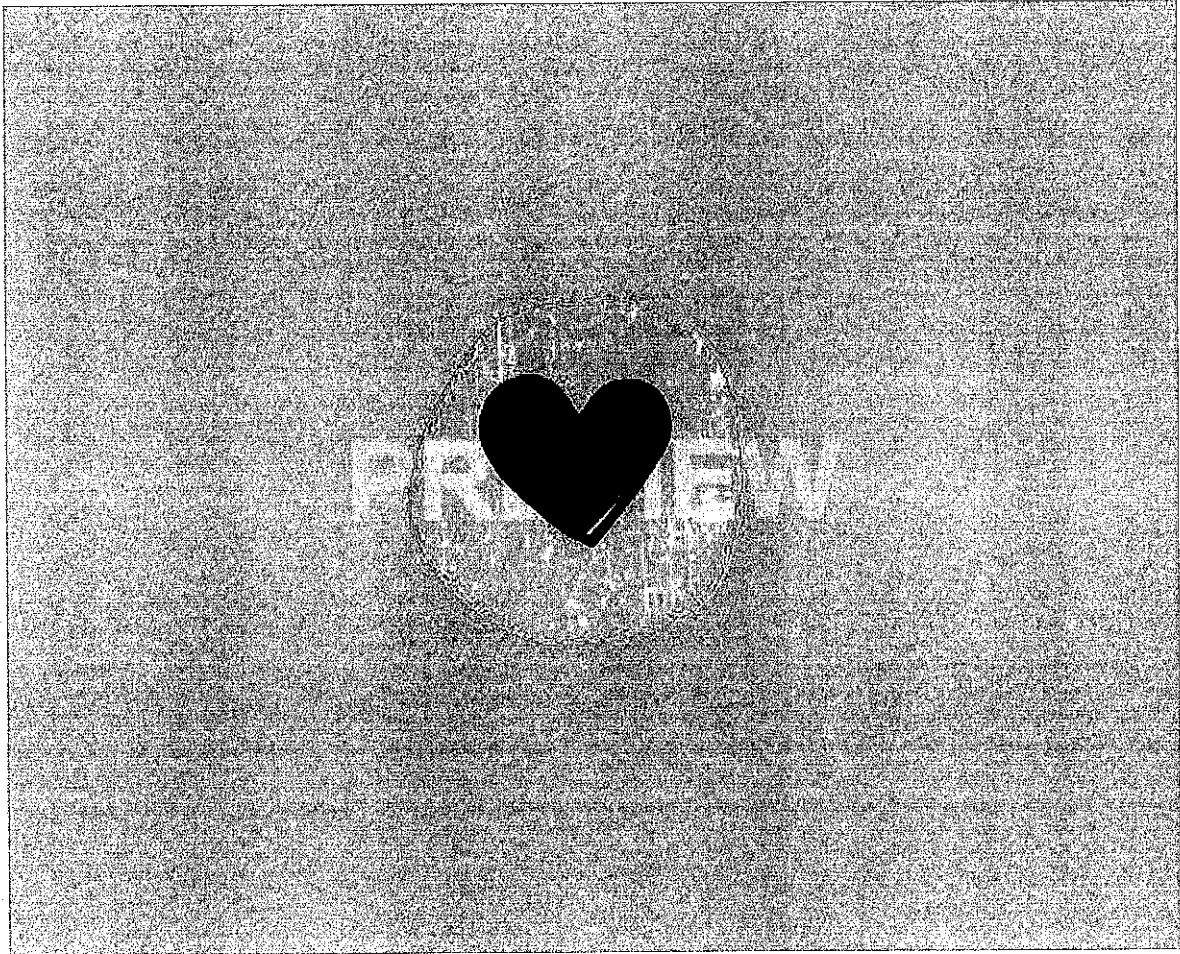
7. Gilles, R.M. (2013). Loneliness and Its Effects on Students with Diverse Learning and Adjustment Needs. *International Journal of Disability, Development and Education*, 60, 71-73. Doi:10.1080/1034912X.2013.786536

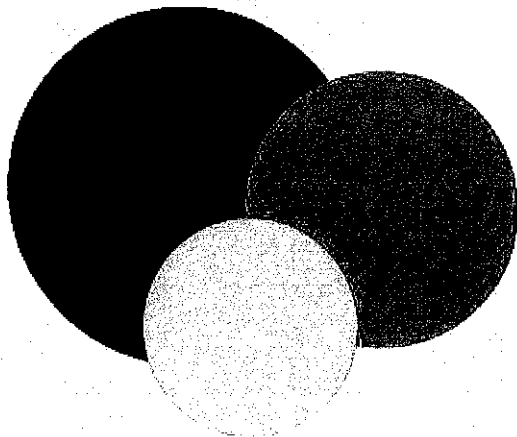
A study conducted in 2001 found that students in special schools expressed more intense feelings of depression and loneliness than similar students in self-contained classes in mainstream school. The hypothesis behind this finding suggests that, because students in mainstream classes have more opportunities to interact with peers both inside

and outside their classroom, special needs students do not have as much of a buffer when it comes to feelings of depression. The authors discovered that, even though many students with learning disabilities felt they were part of the social network, many reported school related loneliness. Several of these students stated that that was because they did not have intimate relationships with other children in their social network. Another study in 2012 revealed that students with Autism seem to show the same trends in feelings of loneliness.

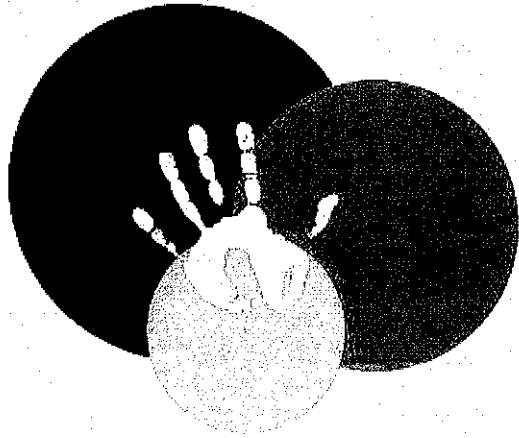






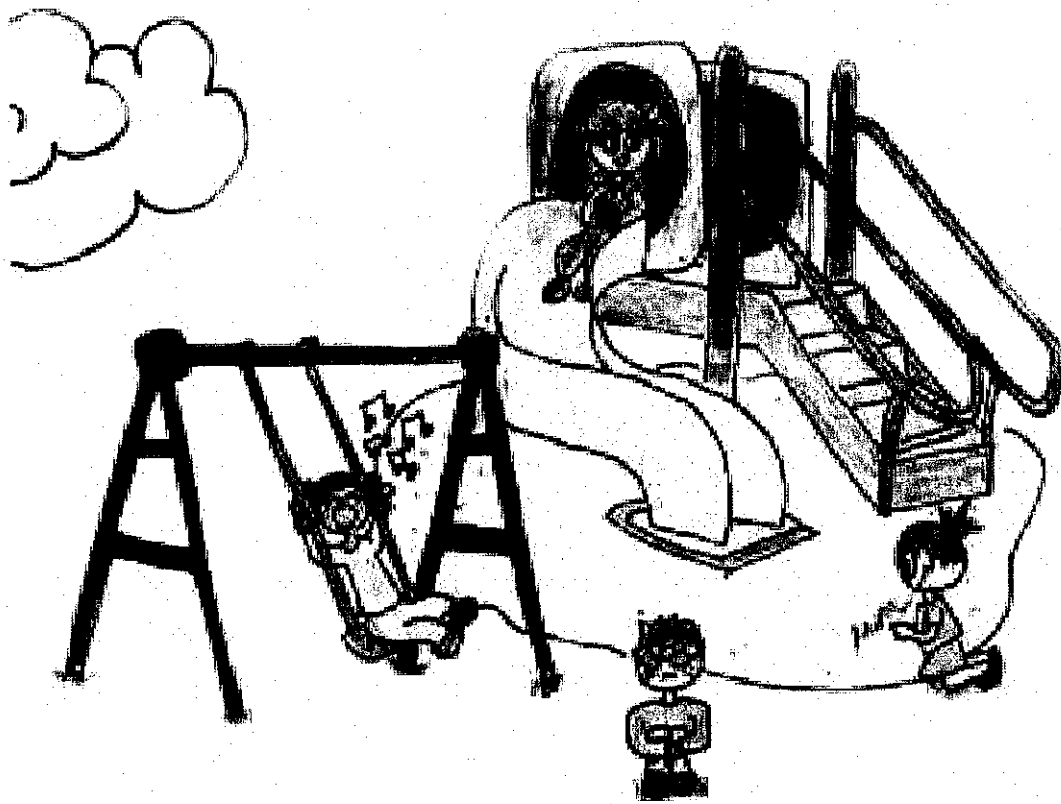


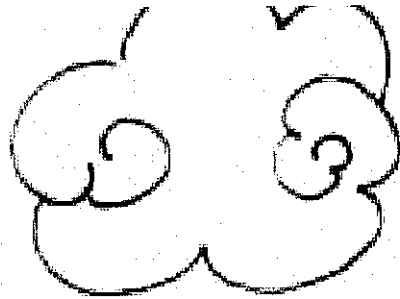
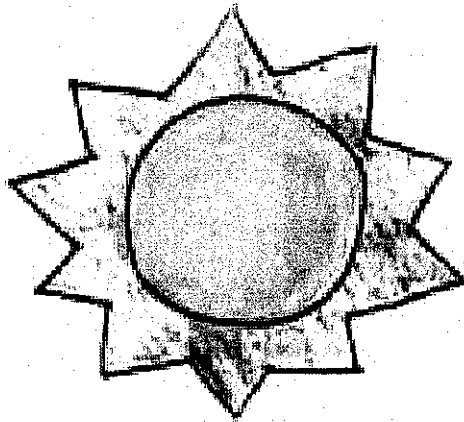
*Understanding Keegan (c) 2014 Briana Rueter
All Rights Reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,
stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or in any means
- by electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise -
without prior written permission.
Printed in the United States of America by Shutterfly Inc.*



Understanding Keegan

Written and Illustrated by Briana Rueter

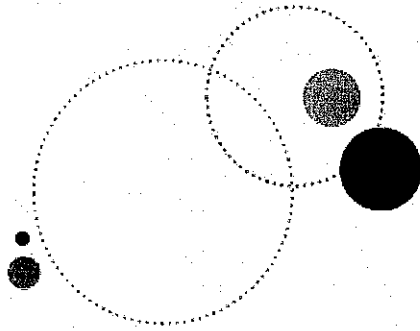




As Aubrey was playing at recess on that beautiful autumn day she noticed something. Everyone in her class was unique. Danny was really great at sports, Monica spent all her time drawing, Josie was a great singer, and then there was Keegan.

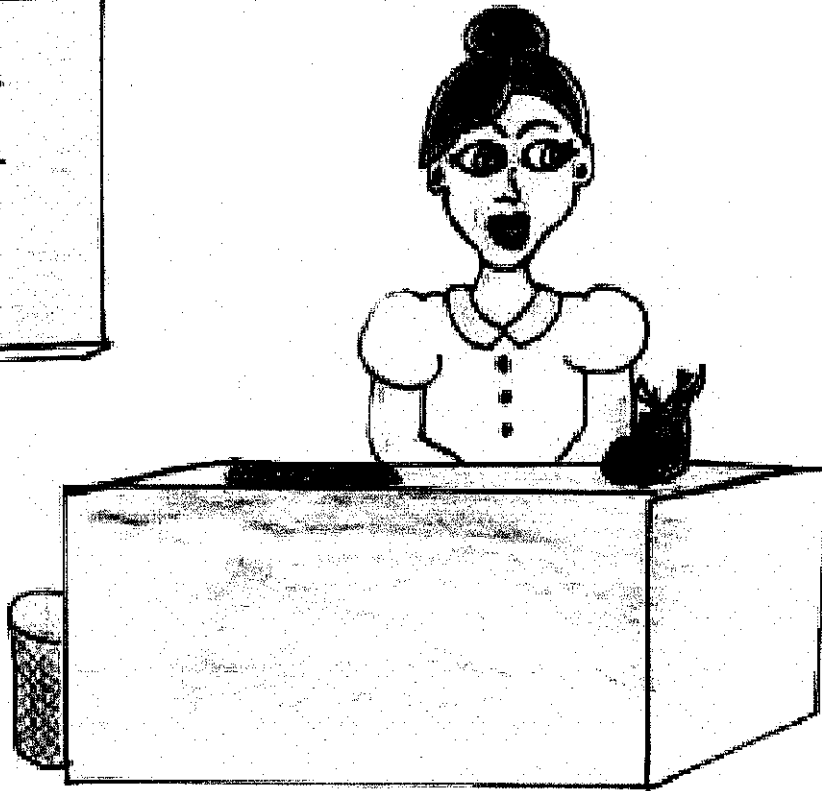
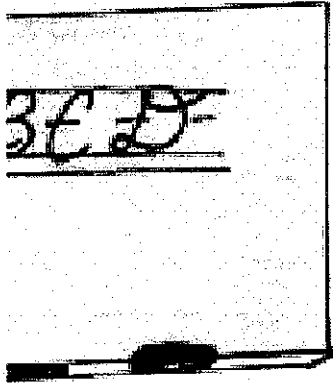
Now, Aubrey had known there was something a little different about Keegan that made him special. But she never understood what it was or why he acted the way he did.





You see, Keegan always acted differently than the other kids. He would shake his hands all over in the air and often other students never understood what he was saying. Keegan also had a special helper that would always sit with him when our teacher, Ms. Campbell, was teaching the rest of the class. "But, why?" she wondered. "I know he acts a little differently, but what makes him that way?" Avlorer decided it was time to do a little investigating to find out for herself!





Aubrey walked up to the door of Ms. Campbell, the 3rd grade teacher. Ms. C was always so kind and made every kid feel special. So, Aubrey knew she could ask her anything!

"Ms. Campbell, I have a question for you."

"Yes Dear?" Replied Ms. C

"It's about Keegan. Why does he act the way he does? I don't get it. I don't understand." Aubrey stated.

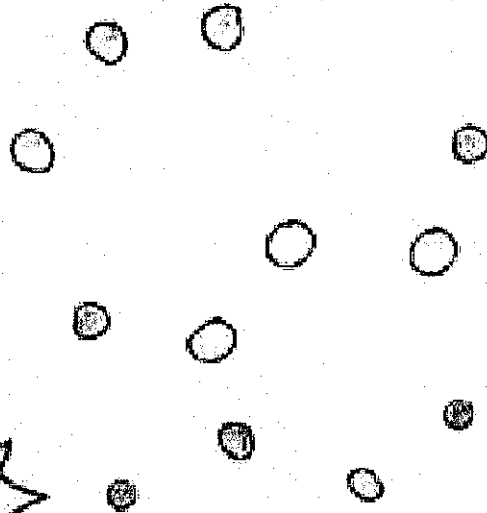
Ms. Campbell looked down at Aubrey with a bit of a grin and said, "I am glad you asked Aubrey."

"Keegan is a very special child," Ms. C began, "just like how you and all the other kids are special. But, there is something about Keegan that makes him unique. It is called Autism."

"Autism?" Aubrey remarked, "I have never heard of that before. What is it?"

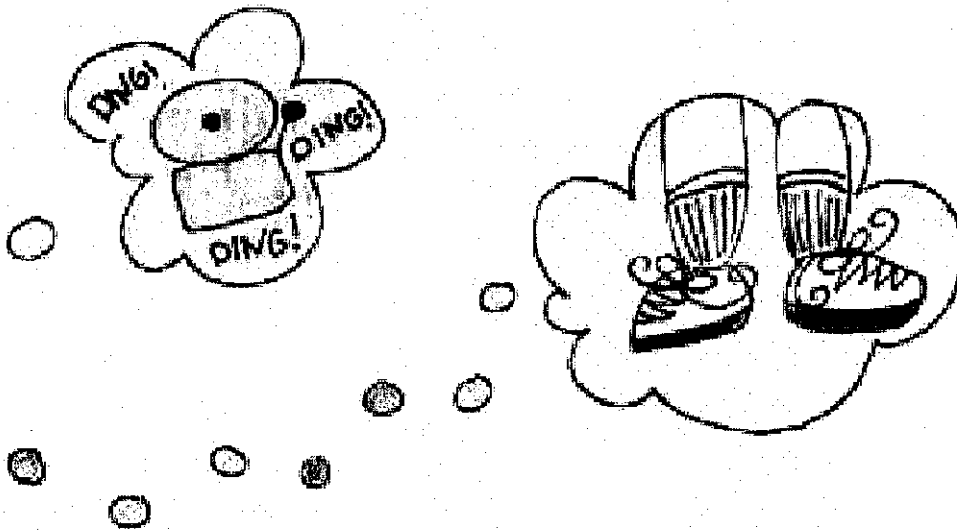


'Autism is a disorder, which is not contagious.' Aubrey looked confused. Ms. C smiled and said, 'That means you can't catch it, Aubrey. Autism makes the world a difficult place to live for Keegan. For instance, a simple sound, like a school bell ringing, sounds like screaming in Keegan's ears. A tag on his t-shirt feels like an itchy sweater to him. His senses are very sensitive because many things that he hears, sees, feels, touches, or smells are amplified, or stronger, than they are for most of us. I heard someone say once that Autism is like walking around with your nails cut too short and your shoes on the wrong feet every day.'



'Wow,' remarked Aubrey, 'That must be terrible.'

'Yes,' replied Ms. C. 'I would imagine so. Why don't I take you down to see Ms. Donahue? She is the Paraprofessional who works with Keegan. She knows a lot more about this subject and can help you understand what it's like inside Keegan's world.'



1-2-3-4-5

So Aubrey and Ms. C headed down to Ms. Donahue's office. Aubrey had seen Ms. D many times. She would come into the classroom several days a week and would often take Keegan out of class.

They walked down the long hallway filled with autumn leaves on the walls to the last door on the left where Ms. Donahue was sitting and eating lunch.

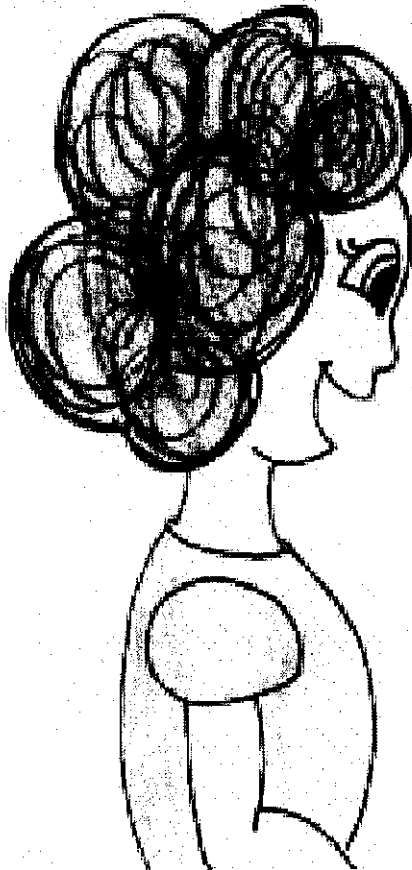
"May we speak with you Ms. D? Aubrey here has a few questions she would like to ask you about Keegan," Ms. Campbell stated.

"Come on in," Ms. D replied, "I would love to talk!"

Aubrey was a little shy at first, but she knew that Ms. D was a kind and understanding teacher.

-6-7-8-9-10

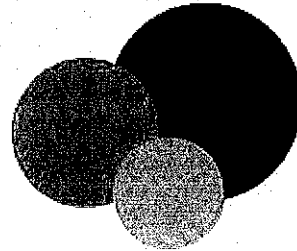




"Ms. Donahue, what makes Keegan the way he is? Why does he have Autism? I don't think it's fair that he has to live like that."

Ms. Donahue nodded her head in agreement. "It's true," she said, "Keegan's life is very difficult for him. However, we all have difficulties that we face in life. Keegan's are just a little different than yours and mine..."

"What makes life even more difficult for him is that many people don't understand Autism or take the time to try. That's why I am glad you came to my office today. Let me teach you a little more about Autism so you can make his day a little brighter."



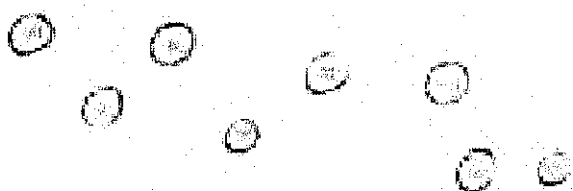


"What did Ms. Campbell all tell you about Autism, Aubrey?" The teacher asked.

"Well," Aubrey began, "she said something about how everything is a lot more difficult for Keegan to deal with because he feels and hears things differently than we do."

"Ms. Campbell is very right Aubrey. You see, people who are Autistic tend to have what's called overactive sensory issues. This can be a heightened sense of smell, hearing, touch, and even sight. Because of this, they tend to behave a little differently than you and I to make up for that fact."

"I don't get what you mean," Aubrey replied.

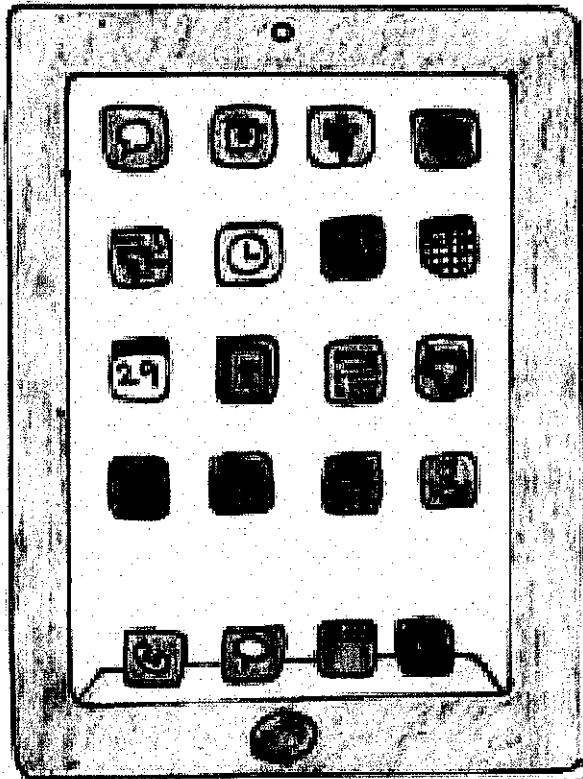


'For example,' began Mr. D. 'Have you ever seen Keegan waving his hands in front of his face?'

Avlery nodded.

'This is called stimming. They do this because it helps make their hearing normal for them. Sometimes, 'white noise,' like a fan, can also help relax people with Autism.'

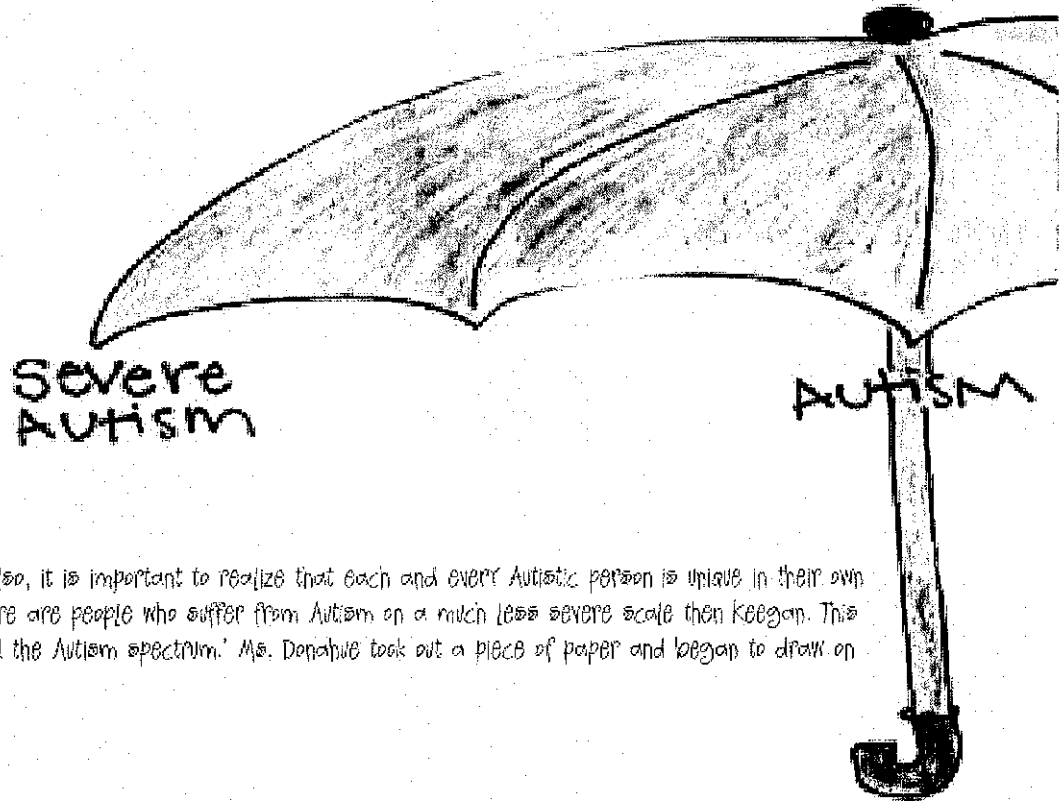




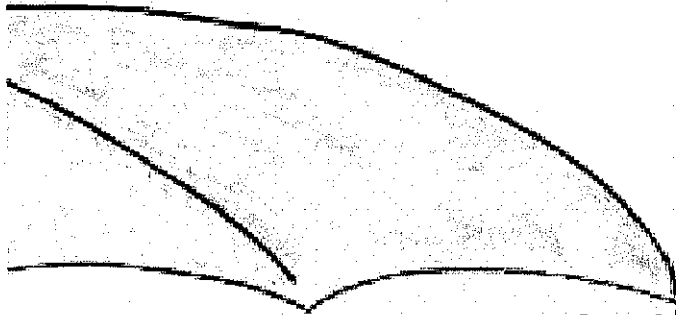
SOME CHILDREN WITH AUTISM USE TOOLS
LIKE THE IPAD TO COMMUNICATE WITH
OTHERS.

"I never knew any of that stuff!" Aubrey stated, "What else can you tell me about Autism?"

"Well, I am sure you have noticed that it can be difficult to understand what Keegan is saying at times. Many times, people with Autism have a difficult time communicating what they are thinking. But, it is important to understand that this doesn't mean they cannot understand what you say. Many people think that just because the person who suffers from Autism cannot communicate well, they cannot interpret, or understand, what you say either. This is very wrong. So always treat your friends with Autism the same way you would treat any of your other friends. And, talk to them, everyone wants to be involved."



'Also, it is important to realize that each and every Autistic person is unique in their own way. There are people who suffer from Autism on a much less severe scale than Keegan. This is called the Autism spectrum.' Ms. Donahue took out a piece of paper and began to draw on it.



High Functioning Autism - Aspergers Syndrome

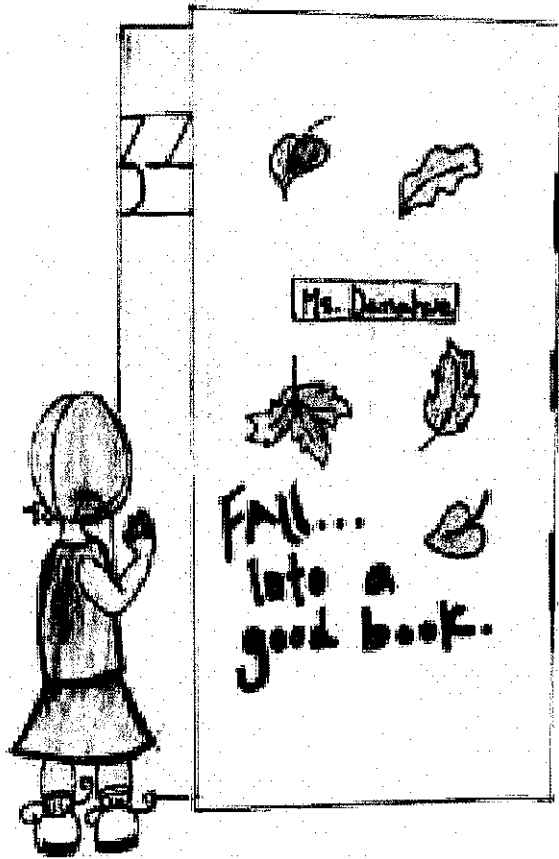
'on the spectrum' she continued, "there are high-functioning Autistic people and low-functioning Autistic people. our friend Keegan falls in the mid-to-low end of the spectrum. This means he needs help with many things, like communication, but also is not completely dependent on other people. When meeting someone with Autism, treat them as an individual just like you would anyone else.'

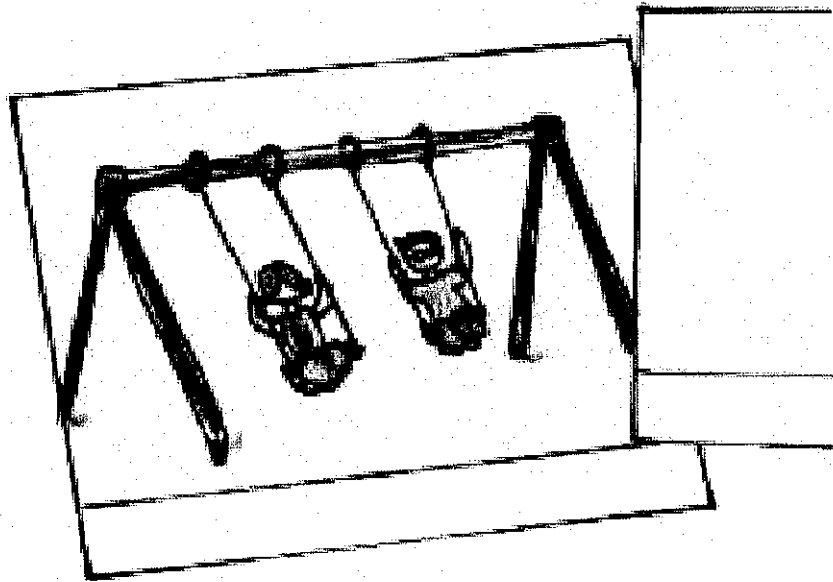


"Now Ms. Dopahue, I have learned so much today! Thank you! So I shouldn't be afraid to be friends with Keegan?"

"Not at all." Ms. Dopahue said with a smile. "He wants to have friends just like everyone else. Just always remember, the calmer you are around someone with Autism, the calmer they will be as well. Keep in mind to treat them like the individual they are and always be respectful. If Keegan ever does have an episode where there are too many distractions, too much noise, or he seems anxious, come find a teacher like Ms. Campbell or me. We will know how to help him." Ms. D continued, "I am so glad you came to talk with me today Aubrey. I really appreciate you caring about Keegan."

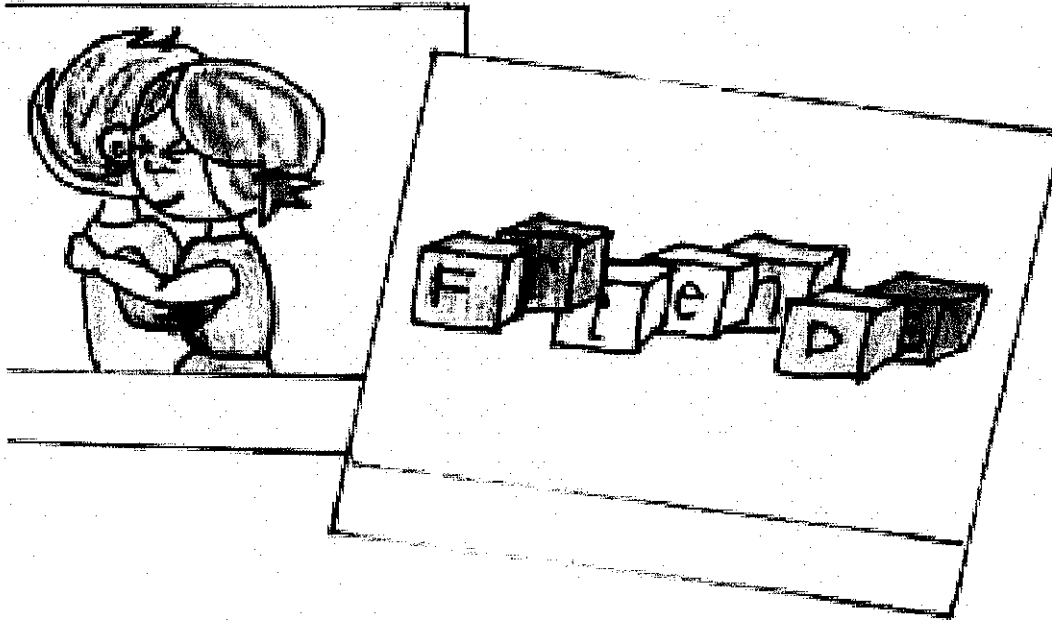
"Anytime Ms. D! Thanks for answering all my questions!" Aubrey said as she turned around and waved on her way out the door. She knew what she was going to do next.





Aubrey only had 10 minutes left of recess and she was on a mission. She sprinted out the doors to the swing where Keegan always sat. She walked right up to him and said, 'Hi Keegan! Can I swing with you?'

Keegan did not reply. Instead he just looked up and smiled. Aubrey knew he meant yes. So, she sat and they swung together the rest of recess.



Every day after that Aubrey and Keegan were inseparable. She would always help to calm him down when things were getting too loud in class and they would always spend the last 10 minutes of recess swinging together on those same swings. Aubrey was so glad she took the time to learn more about Keegan because she had made a friend that would last a lifetime.

