

Children's Outreach Project A True Blessing

by Norman Beecher

Shaun Garcia is 4 years old. He has rich brown eyes, an impish grin and sensory processing disorder. When Shaun enrolled in Children's Outreach Project, Shaun's mother, LoriAnn Garcia breathed a sigh of relief. "I didn't have to worry about him getting kicked out of school anymore."

Modest as such a blessing may sound, parents of children with developmental disabilities often have trouble finding a stable learning environment for their children. C.O.P., however, is a place of security and acceptance, Garcia says.

Like autistic children, children with sensory processing disorder — a neurological diagnosis recognized by the Interdisciplinary Council on Developmental and Learning Disorders — show difficulties with high-level tasks involving the integration of different brain areas. These include complex sensory functions and also emotional regulation, although most children with SPD are not autistic because they do not experience breakdowns in the connections that control social affiliation and emotional empathy. SPD children are generally of normal or above normal intelligence.

In Shaun's case, SPD manifests most tangibly as hypersensitivity to touch. Shaun experiences a persistent, intensified need for sensory input. He craves physical contact and seeks out textures and objects that provide strong tactile feedback. Walking between rooms, he may feel impelled to trail his hands along the wall. Other times, he may be unaware of bumping into people or things. The slightly different way an SPD child's brain is wired can lead to behavioral problems such as excessive touching, insensitivity to injury and the inability to sit still and concentrate.

When Shaun first arrived at C.O.P., staff immediately began working to help him adapt to the new environment. They encouraged the Garcias to stay in the classroom as long as they wished. Garcia credits C.O.P. Special Needs Director Ali Potts, whom she calls a miracle worker, for identifying how best to handle Shaun's special sensitivities. "Shaun has a very hard time with transitions." When Shaun was due to transfer to a higher-level classroom recently, C.O.P. staff arranged a transition over a period of three weeks, adjusting Shaun's academic schedule to accommodate his personal comfort level.

Focus on each child's individual issues is standard at C.O.P. According to Garcia, small classroom sizes guarantee Shaun personalized attention, and therapeutic services are offered free as part of C.O.P.'s integrated program design. In typical classroom work, for example, teachers may deploy weighted vests and blankets, which have been shown to

provide a sense of security to children with developmental disorders like Shaun's. Similarly, "C.O.P. does a lot of occupational therapy. They use large rubber balls with handles to develop balance. They had Shaun doing foam painting," which was not only a chance for expression but a learning therapy tailored to helping him channel his tactile urges appropriately. The Garcias are just as enthusiastic about C.O.P.'s once-a-week gymnastics program, run by an outside instructor. "She's so special. She brings in bars and bean bags. She teaches tumbling and that sort of thing. The kids have a terrific time." The resulting improvement in Shaun's balance, coordination and motor skills has been striking.

Garcia particularly approves of C.O.P.'s emphasis on involving families. "They just had a Thanksgiving luncheon. They have family picnics all the time." The Garcias participated this year in a continuing seminar at C.O.P. on love and logic parenting, while C.O.P. employees babysat the children. C.O.P. regularly hosts Kids Connect, an award-winning collaboration between the Junior League of Denver and local libraries that helps parents and children build a life-long foundation of learning together through reading, art and music. C.O.P. parents are required to participate in at least two activities a year. "So many things are oriented for the whole family," Garcia notes.

Many children at C.O.P. receive financial assistance. The Garcias did not need that kind of support, but because LoriAnn and her husband both work full-time, they had to have confidence that Shaun would be fully nurtured academically and socially; and that is what Garcia feels they receive at C.O.P. "You know they're looking out for your child," says Garcia, whose second son, Alexander, raised in the C.O.P. family, now attends C.O.P. also. "They are so supportive."

Soon-to-turn 3, Alexander has no developmental disabilities, but he is every bit as enthusiastic as Shaun about going to school each morning. He has the same teachers Shaun had, "Miss Lisa" Brooks, "Miss Robin" Sotelo, and "Miss Amanda" Johnson, all "excellent." Like Shaun, Alex is thriving. In fact, the strong groundwork at C.O.P. facilitates all aspects of child-raising, Garcia believes. "They teach the kids the difference between good choices and bad choices, and it becomes very easy to apply that terminology at home."

Garcia is not shy about sharing her delight with C.O.P. She is an unabashedly vocal advocate: "Everybody is fabulous. Everybody there is terrific. I could gush about C.O.P. for days." ■

C.O.P. is the nonprofit organization that will be the beneficiary of the DBA Community Action Network "Snow Carnival" on Feb. 7, 2008. For more information, contact Heather Clark at hclark@cobar.org or (303) 824-5350.

