

# Your United Way Dollars At Work

## United Way Helps Families With Special Needs Children



Through United Way of Southeastern Pennsylvania, donors are able to fund agencies in the Philadelphia region. These donors are certainly aware that their dollars are helping the community in a variety of ways, but seldom do they hear of the personal stories of achievement that give a face to charitable organizations.

Last year, parents noticed that their two-year-old son was not developing normally. He could not talk or feed himself, and had no curiosity in toys, people, or environment. James' parents were desperate to find the reason for his uncommunicative and distant behavior, and he was soon afterwards diagnosed with Pervasive Developmental Disorder (PDD). PDD is an Autism Spectrum Disorder, and is particularly detrimental to child development. James was referred to a United Way agency, where he began to receive the most important gift of his life...the ability to communicate with, and understand the people who love him.

A Specialized Teacher and a Physical, Occupational, and Speech Therapist developed an individualized program focusing on James' eating and motor skills, sensory processing issues, and communication. According to Margaret Rybinski, Director of Children Services at the agency, the environment and the program are designed to accommodate the children's unique perception of the world. "People may walk in and think it's a pretty boring room, but it's important to have a calm environment specific to their learning needs," said Rybinski. The agency team has the expertise to focus on children's strengths to facilitate learning.

The agency also provides support for the entire family. For example, during programs, the children's parents attend a support group down the hall. "They are always having a great time," says Rybinski, "whether they are laughing or crying, they love the chance to get together and talk about their children." According to Rybinski, the group also gives the parents an opportunity to gradually adjust to a separation from their children. She says, "It's a nice precursor to preschool. They are still in the building, only a few doors down with the other parents, and they can see that their kids are okay and having fun."

Through the agency programs, James is able to communicate with pictures and is constantly adding words to his vocabulary. Rybinski says, “His mother takes pictures of everything from broccoli to furniture, so that he can make sentences with pictures, but we never give up on the word, and he does pick up words eventually.” The sensory program has also helped James learn to be calmer in stressful circumstances, and his developmental skills have improved so much that he and his family feel confident in his ability to attend preschool.

Like James, 5-year-old Joseph also has an Autism Spectrum Disorder, called Asperger’s Syndrome. According to Joseph’s mother, Helen, Joseph’s school was ill-equipped to deal with the special learning needs of her son. “I felt there was something missing in Joseph’s evaluation and placement,” said Helen. “The entire experience could have been so much easier if the right information was there. I feel like the first five years of education are foundational; all this time for Joseph should have been geared around a child with Autism, but it wasn’t. It wasn’t comforting to him.”

A United Way agency gave Helen the information that she desperately needed to understand and help her son. This information was not limited to the symptoms and treatment of Aspergers. Helen said, “Through [the agency], I learned a lot about special education laws, what rights I have, even the political parties in my community and how they work locally and statewide. If you’re dealing with children and special needs education, you really have to know the people who are supporting what your kids require.” Helen is not only an advocate for her son, but for all children and parents affected by Asperger’s Syndrome. She plans to spread her knowledge and help parents to identify early signs of Asperger’s.

Helen said, “[the agency] taught me how to listen to people, and to really stand up for what I believe in. It gave me the tools to listen to my kids, to hear their frustration, so you don’t let the tension spread through the family. Just letting people talk until they’re done is an unbelievable lesson to learn because of what they tell you-if you let them.”

United Way mobilizes the caring power of donors in order to bring about positive change in the lives of people like James, Joseph, and their families. United Way supports a variety of programs designed to improve health and human services and provide means for members of the community to reach their full potential.