

From the Beginning

By Alexandra Berube
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When working with a student with such a rare condition as Agenesis of the Corpus Callosum, It's hard to know what to expect in terms of their learning abilities and how each skill will develop over time. When Max* joined my classroom in the fall of 2008, his mother handed me a packet of materials on ACC and asked me to read them.

It was my second year as a Kindergarten classroom teacher and I had worked with students with learning disabilities before, as well as behavioral problems, but this was definitely a new frontier. I read through the packet, which outlined the deficits that children with this condition may expect to experience. Basically, the student could develop anywhere between completely normally and profoundly mentally retarded. The paperwork literally said it could be anywhere between those two extremes.

I have to admit, I was a little scared. This student would be under my care for the year in which he was expected to learn to read and write, socialize, develop fine motor skills and pencil grip, and a host of other core curriculum subjects. I had a lot of responsibility for the growth of this child, and I did not have an aide or support system to guide me through this process.

And so I started at the beginning. Max quickly began receiving services for OT [Occupational Therapy], which was a remarkable help, as this therapist was able to give me some guidelines on how to instruct Max on handwriting skills while his fine motor skills started to develop. The first month of kindergarten, Max could not make any representational symbols. He could not draw a line, he could not draw a circle, and he certainly could not draw a letter. The OT gave him a lot of great tools, like a special pencil grip that strongly corrected finger placement for writing.

In math, Max began to develop numeracy skills, starting with one-to-one counting relationships (you have to count each object only once, without recounting any objects--this requires strategy and memory). We worked on finding tangible ways for Max to keep track of what he had counted, including drawing dots each time we counted an object--count, draw a dot, count, draw a dot. Of course, the dots became huge inky pools on the page, and he would get distracted as he drew them, but I soon learned that the only way for him to keep track of his math reasoning was to use tangible objects at all times.

With all students, we use these strategies, including manipulatives as well. But Max was not maturing past this level in his ability to retain the skills without physical representation. Other students would begin to visually group objects, maybe counting two at a time, or gain the ability to count without drawing dots to keep track (which is really a scaffolding activity that they should grow out of relatively early in kindergarten). Max needed to double-check his

counting every single time, and this became very frustrating for him. He would lose focus, and his behavior would quickly decline.

Max's behavior while doing tasks that challenged him added another element to the difficulty of instruction. As soon as he got bored, which was very quickly, he would slide off his chair, crawl on the ground, throw the pencil, anything to get out of sitting at a table. And so we would stand by the table, we would walk around the table--I would find any way I could to have him physically touch what we were working on in one finite area. I would break up the activities into shorter and shorter increments. But I never let him get away with not trying.

In later blog posts, I will further describe Max's math development, as well as his literacy development throughout the years. But I think more than anything at this time, it is important to discuss a teacher's role in handling behavior issues in students who are struggling academically, whether they have special needs or not.

You can never, NEVER, let the child think you are giving up on them. If they suspect you think they can't do something, they'll have no incentive to try. I always made sure I held Max accountable for his work, even if his work was completely different than what the other students were doing. He could take breaks, he could work standing up, but he was not an exemption to the basic rules of the classroom, and when he would act out, I made it clear that as soon as he was done he would be getting back to work. He could not distract me from the task at hand, even if that was his goal.

I look forward to continuing to share my experiences working with this extraordinary student, who is now in third grade, performing in all subject levels on grade level. He has made me proud in innumerable ways since I have known him, and I look forward to sharing our experiences with readers.

*Name has been changed.

About Alexandra Berube

Alexandra is the Managing Director of Boston Tutoring Services, a tutoring company that offers one-to-one in-home tutoring in Massachusetts. She is also a former Kindergarten teacher who also tutors students in grades K-8, in all subject areas, including test preparation.

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This article was originally published on November 6, 2012 in the "*Agenesis Corpus Callosum*" blog.
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