

## **Literacy and Communication Skills in Kindergarten (Back to the Beginning)**

*By Alexandra Berube*

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Max worked very hard in the first few months of Kindergarten to make strides in his ability to communicate verbally. As I mentioned previously, Max's ability to communicate his needs was an area in which we put in a great deal of work. At times, when he got overwhelmed, he would shut down and choose not to listen to teachers who are trying to help him. When upset, \*Max would become inconsolable, and have trouble recovering from setbacks. Especially in social situations, such as if someone broke a building of his, he retreated into self-consoling behaviors such as crying and rocking. He would growl or snarl at a peer if he or she upset Max in this way.

I think this is why some behaviors of Agenesis of the Corpus Callosum may be confused with Autism. It looks like the student can't express themselves, as they regress to either younger behaviors or more 'primitive' behaviors like snarling. But they can learn behaviors that will serve them better in social and academic situations, and it's often up to them to decide if they want to respond or not. As I wrote before, Max would act out, or refuse to communicate or do activities, but he could do them. They were not beyond his capacity. I certainly wouldn't want to put any blame on a child by saying they 'choose' not to respond, but by that I mean, they do have the capacity, it just takes time and a strong sense of trust and comfort level to make them want to do so (as well as emotional maturity, of course). I can only use my experience to state my opinions on this matter, of course--I would not want to generalize onto any students with more limited capacities. I just think that students need time to see what they can do, and it shouldn't be assumed that something is beyond their ability. This goes for all students.

Moving onto literacy, we practiced a great deal with rhymes, because Max had difficulty recognizing rhymes aurally and generating rhymes orally. He performed much better when asked to match pictures of rhyming objects, because the visual cue allowed him to better process the information. I had small phonics objects, and would use them to give him a visual clue (a cat and a hat, a ship and a clip, etc). This helped quite a bit, and when we did word family activities with pictures of objects (match everything in the 'at' family, match everything in the 'um' family), he was able to do much better than with just the aural clues. I wanted him to continue to improve in his ability to aurally recognize rhymes, as I had thought that this skill would help him in his reading. But it didn't work that way.

I had been taught in Graduate School that you needed phonological and phonemic awareness to be able to read. I was concerned his lack of rhyming ability would hold him back. But it didn't, at all. His reading improved much faster than his aural rhyming skills. Max came into Kindergarten knowing all of his letters and letter sounds, with a solid foundation of how to sound out and decode words. He knew that he had to break down a word and sound out each part in order to read the word. So his reading skills improved rapidly. In turn, the more he learned word families, the more he 'knew' what rhymed. His ability to aurally detect rhyme

only increased as he learned word families through visual clues and from reading words. He could rhyme once he could read.

In writing skills, with the work Max had been regularly doing with his OT [Occupational Therapist], along with much practice, Max gained the ability to express himself with words and pictures. In September, when asked to write any letter, Max said he could not do it, and did not try. I would have him trace my letters or make lines from one dot to the next in order to form letters. A large part of this was that it is physically challenging for him to use a writing tool, and therefore it is understandable that he would resist the work. By December of Kindergarten, Max was forming letters on his own in order to write words. Similarly, when we began Kindergarten I could not get him to draw any representational figures. He would draw squiggles and circles all over the page, saying he could not draw anything. By December he regularly created representational images on his work. This huge leap shows in some ways that he had the ability all along, and just needed a way to get it out of him. Once he got that from the OT, it was like breaking open a shell so that we could see what had been inside him all along.

\*Name has been changed.

### **About Alexandra Berube**

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This article was originally published on November 19, 2012 in the *Agenesis Corpus Callosum* blog.  
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