

Brenda McDonnell Brian's Story

My son, Brian, who has Down syndrome and Pervasive Developmental Disorder (PDD), recently turned 5 years old and is an inspiration to many folks who know him, especially my husband, Jim, and me. He is also adorable, precocious, extremely strong-willed and melts my heart with his little kisses. While we may not have necessarily "signed up" to have a child with special needs, the reality is Brian has enriched our lives beyond measure and has given us incredible blessings.

I had heard many sentiments from well-intended family members and friends when Brian was first born and wanted to scream out loud at that time. The journey to accepting Brian for who he was took a while for me. We were especially blindsided when Brian received the PDD diagnosis when he was 2.5 years old. Just when we had started to become comfortable and hopeful about raising a child with Down syndrome the unimaginable had happened. At times, I didn't think I could handle all that would be required. I recall asking God on a number of occasions "why us?" and eventually the response I received was "why not?- you will see".

Brian received speech, occupational and physical therapy and eventually Applied Behavioral Analysis (ABA) therapy through New Jersey's early intervention program, starting at 6 weeks old. Like most families who we would eventually come to know, our experiences were a mixed bag of good and not so good experiences. It was during this time that I had met a young mom whose son was attending the early intervention program at the Stepping Stones School. She couldn't speak highly enough of how the center-based program was improving her sons skills. At the time, I thought that Brian was receiving enough therapy through the state and the 40 minute ride to the school was not particularly appealing. However, a change of heart followed shortly, and Brian started his program at Stepping Stones at 18 months old. Little did we know that we were about to embark upon a most valuable and incredible journey.

From the moment Brian and I entered the school building, we were treated with genuine care and respect. I observed Brian for several weeks working with the various therapists before getting to know other parents through a support group that was available on the premises. I was so happy to come to know other families in similar situations to ours who could share their experiences and expectations. It was obvious that the Stepping Stones staff had a lot of collective experience and insights regarding children with Down syndrome, much more so than the therapists who would come to our home. Finally, it was because of Brian's participation in Stepping Stones early intervention program that I was able to see how he was on a different developmental track in comparison to his little peers. These observations ultimately led to evaluations by developmental pediatricians and the PDD diagnosis.

We ended up moving in order to be closer to Stepping Stones which was a wise decision for Brian and for us. Brian transitioned from the early intervention program to the preschool class (for 2 years) and has just started in one of the primary classes this past September. Brian has made consistent progress each year, thanks to the experience and dedication of the Stepping Stones staff. They have also worked closely with our local school district (Brian's one-on-one aide is a district employee who administers his ABA programs) to ensure a seamless learning experience for our son. We have also received many recommendations and guidance as to how to help Brian at home. The home and school collaboration has truly been invaluable. And to think it all started with the first early intervention class when Brian was just months old.....

The road that Brian travels on is filled with many challenges and requires a lot of understanding, patience and encouragement. Brian is able to rise to the occasion each time because of those who believe in him. Thank you, Stepping Stones, for being a beacon of light and hope for us and our son.

-Brenda McDonnell