



MY JOURNEY WITH AUTISM

By Deanna Jaconetti-Tyrpak

While Autism has been the hot topic in the news across the country, Autism has been the main topic of my life, both professionally and as a mother. I was working as a speech language pathologist in a special education classroom for children with Autism in the early 90's and pregnant with my only child. That is where my journey with Autism began, taking my life on a new path.

My daughter Dominique was born and reached all developmental milestones until 7 to 12 months old, when I watched anxiously as she began to lose her skills. She stopped babbling and her happy expression changed to a face filled with worry and agitation. It became difficult to play with her toys and her ability to calm herself and deal with life's frustrations became almost impossible. My joyful baby was growing up into an agitated, little girl, trying to live in this new foreign body.

I began to research approaches available for Autism and came upon the work of Drs. Stanley Greenspan and Serena Wieder, who pioneered the DIR™ (Floortime) approach. It was different from other approaches available, that were behavioral in nature and accepted by the mainstream. DIR™ focused on the humanistic aspects of Autism, with all learning based on the building of interactions and relationships, the core foundation of our life as human beings. The emotional development of the child and the ability to relate and interact with others, being the critical foundation for all future learning. DIR™ gave me hope of finding a way to reach my daughter. I had to woo her into my world, by first learning how to join her in her world.

Floortime became our world as I joined her in the activities she loved, which meant I was lining up train engines and reciting her favorite videos. I followed her lead and joined her, while gently creating challenges that would encourage her to engage in interaction with me. I wanted to be her play partner even when she appeared to not want me to be. I wanted her to understand the natural back and forth patterns for communication, so challenging for children with autism, but an essential building block for learning.

Although she progressed, being Dominique was a constant challenge, as her body's inability to do what she wanted it to do, caused her frustration and anxiety. Her inability to show people that she was smart and capable, frustrated her and was demonstrated through daily aggression: kicking, biting, scratching and head banging. DIR™ taught me to investigate the reasons behind her aggressive behaviors and understand that her body processed information from her environment differently than mine. I learned how to acknowledge her deep feelings about her differences and brainstorm with her about strategies to cope with the intense feelings, she expressed through aggression.

Unfortunately, Dominique's success at home never transferred to a school classroom. Educators never understood what it was like to be Dominique. They only saw the unacceptable behaviors that needed to be extinguished. With low expectations, they never assumed that she was a bright girl inside a body that didn't always support her. Instead, she was expected to work on tedious, repetitive tasks, like matching colored pieces of paper, while they observed her to cry and murmur to herself, "Dominique so smart". She became more aggressive and her emotional well being disintegrated before my eyes.

When Dominique turned ten, I created an interactive, social and academic opportunity for her at home, using the DIR™ model, that would support her emotional development and learning. On the first day of home schooling, Dominique looked up from her first attempt at adding single digits numbers and said "Dominique so smart". This time it was with joy and pride in her eyes. She began to learn meaningful

information, while regulating her body and emotions. However, there was a missing piece. She could not understand why she was not in school with her friends, where she could bring her lunchbox and book bag.

I began to think about what seemed be the impossible. Two of my colleagues, speech language pathologists, Linda Cervenka and Michele Ricamato, and I, set out in 2004, to create a school dedicated to the DIR™ philosophy, the first one of its kind in the Midwest, that would serve students age 3 to 21, diagnosed with autism and related disorders. The dream of Soaring Eagle Academy began: creating a unique place where students defy current misconceptions of autism and learn to soar to higher levels of learning, by engaging in dynamic, meaningful learning through development of social interactions and relationships. A place where my 15 year old daughter, Dominique, can bring her lunch box and book bag, play and learn with friends and show her teachers that "she is so smart".

We have 30 families waiting for our doors to open this September 2007. Please join us in making this dream a reality for our students, by making a tax deductible donation at our website:

www.soaringeagleacademy.org



Deanna's daughter, Dominique, 15 years old, loves spending time outdoors.



The founders at an Autism event, from left to right: Michele Ricamato, Linda Cervenka, Deanna Jaconetti-Tyrpak



Matthew, 9 years old, son of Mario and Angel Fillippo, waiting for school to open.



Mikey, 11 years old, son of Michael and Judi Maggiore, looking forward to soon attend the Soaring Eagle Academy.

Where students SOAR to higher levels of learning