

Dr. Raun Melmed looked at David Weigel's parents and asked, "What's your worst fear?"

"That David is autistic," his mother replied. "And I know he's autistic."

She had done her research after observing changes in David. At about 22 months of age, David was no longer using words. He had lost his eye contact. He wasn't eating. He was banging his head against the wall.

At 24 months, David was diagnosed with severe autism. His parents, Cliff Weigel and Laura Breslow, asked Dr. Melmed and others for best-case scenarios. What should they do? Where should they go?

"Dr. Melmed told us it's all about early intervention," Laura recalls. "He told us about SARRC and the school he helped start there. So, I called SARRC and told them I had a 24-month-old with autism named David."

That night Rachel McIntosh, MA, BCBA, Clinical Manager and Community School Director at SARRC, returned Laura's call. At 9 a.m. the next day, Cliff and Laura toured the school. It was the last day of the school year.

"We were amazed by the program," Laura says.

"What was really amazing was watching all the graduating children," Cliff adds.

It gave them hope that one day, David might also graduate from preschool — along with other children with autism and typically developing peers.

Digging In

The Community School was on summer break, but there was no delay in providing David with services.

"When we get children who are identified at

that early of an age, our goal is to start treatment as quickly and intensively as possible," McIntosh says.

David began working one-on-one with a clinician three times a week in July of 2013. Cliff and Laura also participated in parent-training sessions on a weekly basis. And by August, David was attending the Community School 20 hours a week.

"When we first met David, he was a very anxious little guy. He had a very difficult time separating from mom or dad or his nanny," McIntosh explains. "It was very difficult to get him to engage in any way ... He didn't use any functional communication. His form of expressing himself was crying."

The primary goal of his treatment, she explains, was communication.

"Let's get David talking — and pair that with engagement," she says. "Let's get him engaging with us, engaging with his peers and engaging with the materials in his environment like toys or bikes."

What a Difference

Eighteen months later, David has blossomed, his parents and teachers say.

One question Laura asked David's doctors at the time of diagnosis was: "Will my son talk?" No one could tell her for sure.

"That broke my heart," she says.

But now, at 3 years old, he's one of the most social little boys she knows.

"I talk a lot. And he talks more than I do!" Laura says. "He's funny and witty and has a wonderful sense of humor."

And he continues to grow.

"At this point, I can see changes almost right in front of my eyes," Cliff says. "You can watch him pick

Next Step KINDERGAR

Early intervention can help prepare children for their first day of school

BY STEPHANIE CONNER

up more structured language skills and new ways to communicate. It's truly amazing."

McIntosh adds that David's social engagement is heartwarming.

"All of the kids in the classroom look forward to him arriving," she says. "He knows everyone in his classroom. He knows all of their names, and he greets them by name. He's a conversational, happy, engaged little boy. It really is a tremendous difference."

And it's a difference that can give hope to others, she says. But it's more than just the work of SARRC.

"David's family is a tremendous part of his great outcomes. They have 100 percent committed to SARRC and the intervention model we embrace," McIntosh says. "They've gone at it with a level of intensity and commitment that drives exceptional outcomes."

David's next step is to continue on a path that would allow him to enter kindergarten with typical children in two years. As a result of his first 18 months with SARRC, his parents have hope.

"We appreciate it," Laura says. "And we're grateful." ▶

David Weigel has made tremendous progress and now is one of the most social students in the Community School.



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About SARRC's Community School

The Community School at SARRC is a preschool program that provides intensive, ABA-based programming for children with ASD as well as high-quality early childhood education for typically developing children. It's open to children ages 18 months to 5 years. Benefits include:

- ↗ 4:1 student-teacher ratio
- ↗ Small class size
- ↗ Individualized instruction
- ↗ Highly educated and trained staff
- ↗ Language enriched environment
- ↗ Play-based, developmentally appropriate curriculum aligned with state education standards

To learn more about taking the next step for your child and enrolling in the Community School, call SARRC at (602) 340-8717 or visit autismcenter.org.