



## HEALTH & MEDICINE

# Program helps autistic kids forge friendships

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BOWLING GREEN, KY. — When Amy Hardin's son was diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder at age 4, he struggled to have a conversation and make friends.

Now 7 years old, J.W. Hardin has a village of friends and his mother said he's testing at or above grade level in reading and math at his mainstream public school.

His mother credits the staff at the Kelly Autism Program at Western Kentucky University as her son's secret to success.

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"He's able to regulate his emotions and actually tell us what's going on instead of having a fit," she said. "It's huge for us because that's what a person who can live independently in the future needs to recognize."

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For J.W., the struggle was never academic but learning how to get along with others.

That started to change for J.W. when Hardin and her husband, Mike, enrolled him in the Renshaw Early Childhood Center, which is also known as The Big Red School.

Back then, Hardin said J.W. didn't participate in activities he didn't like. But after the staff starting working with him in both individual and group settings, he made friends and joined in non-preferred activities.

J.W. continued progressing when the time came to transition to the Kelly Autism Program.

Hardin said her son used to kick or knock things over because it was the only way he knew to express frustration. But now, Hardin can actually see a tantrum coming and then watch J.W. calm himself down. He's learned how to say when someone's making him angry or to ask for a break, she said.

Michelle Elkins, director of the Kelly Autism Program, said that's the goal for every child in the program.

"Everything we do is based on social language," she said, adding that means children learn how to make friends. "With some children it's their first friendship ever."

Although the needs of children with autism can vary widely, many will have communication difficulties, such as not knowing how to respond or read social cues.

To help with that, the program focuses on different topics every week such as learning to share or how to win and lose a game.

Elkins stressed that children with autism are not incapable of communicating, they just need to be taught how through concrete strategies and skills.

The program offers support to parents, too.

For Hardin, it was one of the first places she didn't feel like she had to apologize to other moms for her son's behavior.

"What has helped me the most is connecting with other parents," she said.

Hardin saw just how far her son had come when he sang and danced on stage at The Public Theatre of Kentucky on Friday with other children with autism. The show was the final performance put on by a spring break camp for children on the spectrum.

For Hardin, who describes her son and other kids with autism as peacocks, a stage is right where J.W. belongs.

"If you really get to take a look at them, you'll see that they're the most beautiful things you've ever seen," she said.

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