

Autism at Home Series, November 2009

WHAT'S OLD, WHAT'S NEW: BOOKS AND FILMS WORTH KNOWING

Real Hope & Health & Help: On the Way or Now Here?

As the numbers continue to increase and more and more lives are being impacted by autism, desperate hope and pleas for help and change have become a reality as approaches and insights from many sources are being shared with increasing frequency.

Now parents of children with autism are less likely to be told and advised “to put them away in an institution and forget them” (SON RISE, Raun Kaufman), or “there is nothing that can be done,” or “your son will never have friends, will never be mainstreamed in school, will never hold a job” (Taylor Crowe or BACK IN MY ARMS, Tad Lesso), or even “anyone who says that nutrition has anything to do with autism is a fraud.”

The year began when a book arrived on the scene by one of the Autism at Home Series writers, Julie Matthews, whose title boldly proclaims **NOURISHING HOPE FOR AUTISM: NUTRITION INTERVENTION FOR HEALING OUR CHILDREN**. *Yes, hope and healing!* As she also points out in her excellent, fast paced and full CD interview in July, the range of advice from pediatricians is moving from “there is nothing that can be done” to “it will not help, but it also will not do harm either” to I have heard there have been some encouraging results” to finally “I’ve read some of the clinical research and there are several encouraging and appropriate approaches to try.” It seems that we have come a long way and the insights gained through clinical research are continuing to provide more and more answers.

The summer brought more encouraging news In August I attended a global nutrition conference in St. Louis. The previous year at the same conference I had hosted an informal networking session on “Autism and Nutrition” and over 100 people from some 25 states attended to share information and experience. This year I again announced that I would host another “informal” gathering. Much to my surprise and delight over 500 people came eager to share and learn. Many were grandparents. The meeting lasted for over three hours, and we all saw tears of frustration and even despair turn to tears of joy as so many people were able to share personal accounts of transformation and valuable research information. Who knows how many people will respond next year when the conference meets in Anaheim, California.

Also in August two new books and a film were released. One of the books is by another of the authors in the Autism at Home Series, William Stillman offers his inside view in **EMPOWERED AUTISM PARENTING**, a forceful invitation and clear call for parents and care givers to take back and lay claim to their right to be the experts and fierce advocates for their children with autism by first assuming intelligence and competence. His book is filled with resources which will certainly become a valuable reminder to parents of their crucial role in the development of their children’s special gifts. An equally important companion to the book is his August lead article in the Autism at Home Series and his CD interview “The Other Side of Autism.”

The title of a second book, also appearing in August, promises to provide parents with A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO AUTISM: WHAT EVERY PARENT, FAMILY MEMBER, AND TEACHER NEEDS TO KNOW by Fred R. Volkmar and Lisa Wiesner. The Foreword of this 624 page book is written by Gary B. Mesibov, Ph.D., Professor and Director of TEACCH, Treatment and Education of Autistic and Related Communication Handicapped Children, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He makes a strong case that this book provides a “very credible, practical, and relevant addition to our field to help the many advocates and family practitioners to better understand the exciting new developments and how they can be implemented in our day to day work.”

These two books, from different points of view, offer insights and resources to often bewildered parents who first receive the diagnosis of autism with fear and dread of what the future might hold for them and their child. More and more frequently diagnosis is seen as a “ladder,” to be used as a beginning point to move from, rather than a “lid” to a box or a label which will remain constant.

A significant new film whose title character is a brilliant young man with Asperger’s also had its premiere late in the summer. ADAM further defines and embodies through excellent acting, writing, directing and cinematography the complex human interactions of a person on the spectrum. Adam is not a savant; he is a highly intelligent individual who knows that he is different from NT’s (neuro-typicals) and struggles with exploring that difference. The supporting cast is also excellent, especially Harlan, a friend of Adam’s deceased father. The film may not be a box office hit (when I saw it for the first time there were only about 6 other people in the theatre), but it will certainly be added to my collection (I laughed and cried more than once during the film) and to my film course on extraordinary people. Please feel free to contact me at rbecker64@aol.com if you would like a copy of the film course with numerous resources included.

When films are referenced which provide evidence of moving beyond the devastation of diagnosis to hope, achievement and fulfillment A VIEW FROM HERE: MY LIFE WITH AUTISM certainly stands out. This is the story of Taylor Crowe, who narrates his story of normal development (complex speech, eye contact, outgoing personality) until between the age of two and three when life suddenly changed radically. The diagnosis of autism at age four shook his parents’ world. The psychiatrist pronounced that Taylor “would never have friends, would never be mainstreamed in school, would never hold a job.” Thus began a long journey, well documented by video clips and interviews and commentary to 2006. I first met Taylor when he was the keynote speaker (yes, the keynote speaker) at the Texas State Autism Conference in Dallas in 2006. At that time he was a senior in film animation at the California Institute of the Arts, having been admitted on the first submission of his folio. This institution is where most of the finest film animators receive their training. Taylor has since graduated, has a job, and speaks throughout the country telling his remarkable story. The film contains an impassioned statement by Taylor’s father, David, for parents not to accept the “death sentence” diagnosis, but to move forward up the ladder toward competence. He emphasizes the hard work on Taylor’s part that has resulted in his achieving his goals as a creative artist and as a human being. He also stresses that parents and children “need joy and happiness” in their lives and that autism must be seen as an adventure, not a sentence. (see also THE HORSE BOY) Taylor

concludes his film by saying “Autism is a part of my life; it’s not all of it.” (see www.taylorcrowe.com)

Certainly no discussion of Hope & Health & Help would be complete without honoring and giving thanks for the vision and persistent efforts of Dr. Bernard Rimland whose quest for understanding began in the early 1960’s to find the cause of autism (other than “refrigerator mothers”) and to move forward toward providing hope and help. When Dr. Rimland completed his journey here after having pioneered so many initiatives including the Autism Research Institute (ARI) and the DEFEAT AUTISM NOW” (DAN!) protocol and conferences, the leadership reins were ably assumed by Dr. Stephen Edelson. The work has not only continued at a steady pace, but has actually risen to new heights.

The recently completed DAN! Conference in Dallas continued to bring together top researchers and parents and educators. The proceedings of this and past conferences are online free of charge at www.autism.com. The newsletter is available at www.autismnewsletter.com as well. There is an autism resource toll-free call center for parents who need help from a real person. The number is 1-866-366-3361. Finally the Edgeware Gallery has been established at ARI where Mark Rimland, Dr. Rimland’s son, is the resident artist. See www.edgewaregallery.com. ARI continues to provide a comprehensive array of help: funding research, sharing information with national and international autism organizations, training clinicians, and holding conferences throughout the US.

2009 began with Nourishing Hope for Autism. We all await with great anticipation the next manifestation as we continue our quest for understanding on the journey to discover and experience, for ourselves and our children, new routes to health and wholeness.

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