

# CHILDREN AT RISK NEWSLETTER

235 Donald Street, Ottawa, ON K1K 1N1

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(613) 741-8255 (Tel)

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(613) 741-5530 (Fax)

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## Happy Holidays to All!!!

### **PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE**

Submitted by David Allingham

Season's Greetings! Well, another year has come and gone. The new Board Members are full of ideas on how we can make Children at Risk, Ottawa better and the internal processes are slowly coming together. We have added a lot of new furniture and other hardware to our Donald St. facilities that give the place a whole new feel, not to mention an improved utility. There are still some minor changes to come, but they are mostly to improve some storage efficiency issues.

Our finances are improving and as of January we will be out of the Bingo! For all of you who remember volunteering in the smoke-filled hall several years ago, I am sure you will share my sentiments at its passing (though the non-smoking policy is not part of the downfall!). On the other hand, the Bingos did provide a good revenue stream for CAR for many years, so we say good-bye with some feelings of gratitude, as well.

Most of you are aware that we had a wonderful person engaged in the office for phones and administration for the last few months. Unfortunately she had a fall recently that has caused severe personal injury, so things may be a bit slower for the time being. I am sure I speak for all of us when I say to Carol that we hope you have a speedy and full recovery very soon!

On the Programs front, we are trying to locate new facilitators for some groups and will keep you posted with announcements when all is in place. Though we are currently still running less groups than in previous years, the length of the groups is longer to facilitate more in-depth skill development with the children and their peers. It also allows us to continue the Board's efforts to stabilize our funding and expenses. Speaking of funding, we are also looking for some dedicated volunteers to make a more concerted effort in our application for grants or allowances, as we foresee this as a better use of time and effort in procuring financing than working Bingos!

While we still have yet to say "See ya 2005", I would like to remind each of you that the next 4 months has our

50/50 sales for the Ottawa 67's games (February) and "Rockin' for Risk" (April 1<sup>st</sup>). Please take time to note the dates on your new calendars and mark out some time to volunteer for these events!

Finally...it is winter! Drive slower, keep some emergency supplies in your car (food, blankets, candles, matches, salt, sand and shovel), plus wear your coat, mitts and hat! Don't forget to shed a tear for the final season of The Red Green Show...oh well, at least there is still Corner Gas! Keep your stick on the ice and the snow outta your face!!

### **POSITIONS AVAILABLE** **SIBLINGS SUPPORT GROUP FACILITATORS**

Children at Risk is presently looking for two facilitators to run a siblings support group in the Ottawa region. He/she will be responsible for developing and delivering a seven to ten week program that allows siblings to meet, talk and learn about autism and Asperger's syndrome in a relaxed and fun setting.

The candidates should have in-depth knowledge of Autism Spectrum Disorders and experience working with families. Facilitators should also have good recreation programming skills and excellent communication skills. A good sense of humour and knowledge of group dynamics are highly desirable. Ability to work as a team player is essential.

Resumes should be sent by December 15<sup>th</sup>, 2005 to:  
Children at Risk  
235 Donald Street, Suite 212, Ottawa K1N 1N1  
Email: [carsup@magma.ca](mailto:carsup@magma.ca)  
Phone: (613) 741-8255  
Fax: (613) 741-5530

### **BINGO CANCELLATION**

As of December 31<sup>st</sup>, 2005, Children at Risk will cease to run a charity Bingo at the Side Door Bingo Hall. Running for over 18 years, the Bingo started in 1987, operating originally to supplement government funding for children in Thursday's Child Nursery School. However, with declining Bingo revenues since the non-smoking policy, combined with high volunteer requirements each week, a bittersweet decision had to be made. The Board of Directors has determined that, as a registered charity, Children at Risk has available funding through other venues of application. We want to thank all the parents and volunteers who spent many hours selling cards, calling winners and also net-working with each other at the Hall!

### **Children at Risk 2005 Report on Services:**

#### Social Skill Therapy (Friendship) Groups

(Based on sessions of 8 & 10 weeks, 1½ hours/wk)

Ages 4-6 years 22 children

Ages 7-9 years 20 children

Ages 9+ years 43 children

Asperger Teens 18 children

(8 week session, 2 hrs/wk)

**TOTAL: 103 children serviced**

#### Sibling Support Groups

(1 session - winter, 2 groups per session, 7 weeks each session, 1 ½ - 2 hours/wk.)

Ages 5-9 years 8 children

Ages 9-12 years 12 children

**TOTAL: 20 children serviced**

**GRAND TOTAL OF NUMBER OF CHILDREN  
RECEIVING DIRECT SERVICES FROM  
CHILDREN AT RISK: 123**

### **POST-DATED CHEQUES**

Effective immediately, Children at Risk respectfully requests that any cheques payable to the charity NOT be postdated. Our small operation is not set up administratively to properly track items like this. Keep in mind that memberships paid in advance of renewal dates are renewed as of the due date, so that a full year is credited! (Adversely, to be fair, overdue memberships are backdated to the renewal date.) Thank-you for your understanding and consideration in this matter!

### **CHARITY COORDINATOR'S MESSAGE**

Submitted by Brenda Reisch

As we prepare to close the books on 2005, I reflect on the last 3 ½ years that I have been administratively managing Children at Risk. 3 ½ years ago our Board of Directors was not even sure the charity would continue to exist, now having to survive solely on fundraising dollars and donations! In fact, the need not to exist was interpreted to mean that all the services required by families in the Autism community would have been provided by the publicly funded bodies. So it is with mixed feelings that I announce we are still going strong! Our existence once again underlines the need for services and supports that are NOT currently provided by government agencies. It also makes clear that families are still not receiving direction, information and guidance, turning to Children at Risk and the Autism Society to help them understand the maze of services that exist through many organizations in the Ottawa region. Children at Risk has always understood that raising a child with Autism is a family affair and our mandate specifies not only support of that child, but the entire family. It is with this in mind that we look forward to 2006 to provide group supports, workshops, seminars and outreach through educational institutions and entertainment venues.

I want to wish all our families, group facilitators, volunteers, patrons and donors a terrific Holiday Season and a very happy New Year!

### **Interesting Internet Address**

Submitted by Hazel Smith

While I was doing some research on the Internet I came across a fabulous website:

Type in <http://pcsearch.babycenter.com/search> this will take you to a generic page where you need to type in Learning Styles in the box for Search Articles. There are 100 matches in the search results.

### **DONOR'S CORNER**

- Business Number Group at CRA - \$90
- German Embassy Employees - \$200
- I.O.D.E. Margaret Brand Chapter - \$500
- Microsoft Autism Golf Tourney - \$3,500

## **GROUPS UPDATE**

### **Friendship Social Skill Groups**

The Board of Directors has approved the financing of 6 Social Skill Therapy groups again for the next quarter, to commence later in January/February. Currently the applications of the children who have been referred by parents/professionals are being reviewed. Children who have not received recent groups or who are new referrals will be given a priority so ages and days for each group are still being worked out.

A new group that is being planned is Life Skills for Asperger/High-Functioning ASD Children. One year ago Children at Risk held a group for children with higher needs based on a life-skills approach. Unexpectedly, we received feedback from families that they would like to see this group approach for their higher-functioning ASD children. Many children with higher needs are in special Autism Units, where Life Skills is part of their curriculum. However, children that are integrated in regular classrooms do not have access to this skill development and we heard from families that it was often difficult due to time constraints/other family commitments for parents to set aside time to work on this area.

**IF DEMAND IS SUFFICIENT** we can plan a group specifically addressing Life Skill Development. This group would be held at our Donald St. offices, with sessions lasting 8 weeks, 2 hours each meeting. It would also need, at times, to start earlier in the day to allow for skill development like meal preparation. The age range we are looking at is 10-13 years old. **PLEASE EMAIL OR CALL Children at Risk to indicate your interest in this group, your child's name and age ([carsup@magma.ca](mailto:carsup@magma.ca) or 741-8255).** **If interest in a group like this is not sufficient, this group will not proceed.**

### **Sibling Support Groups**

Presently, The Board of Directors has been updating a job description for the Sibling Group Facilitators. We have several candidates lined up for interviews, with the goal to start the Sibling Support Groups at the end of January or early February 2006. We appreciate the feedback from families telling us how important these groups have been, recognizing the challenges of being a sibling in a household raising a child with Autism. Once our Facilitators are in place, we will notify families by email announcements of the start dates and times of the groups!

### **Groups for Higher Needs Children**

It is still the goal of Children at Risk to offer groups for ASD children with higher needs. Currently we do not have Facilitators to conduct these groups, so efforts will be made this next quarter to recruit qualified, experienced individuals. Recognition has been made that the structure of these groups would be different, with lower group enrollment numbers and also with ratios of 1:1 to address the children's higher needs/give more individual attention and direction. We hope to be able to offer a group in April or May.

### **WEDNESDAY'S FRIENDSHIP GROUP**

Submitted by Liz Schissler

Another Wednesday night Friendship Group is drawing to a close. Since October, Liz Schissler and Yassemin Cohanim have been facilitating a social skills group for six children aged 8 to 11 years. The children have participated in a wide variety of social and fun activities including board games, crafts, round table discussions, cooperative games, cooperative tasks, snacks, and a creative group mural!! All of the children have really enjoyed the new air hockey table and have tried out many of the other new games and activities that were purchased- THANKS to all involved!

Within a variety of tasks, different themes or areas have been targeted including feelings, friends, communication, and problem solving. Watching short video clips of these activities have been a highlight with many of the children.

Halfway through this session, the group enjoyed an outing to Cosmic Adventures where the tunnels, slides, and ball pits provided endless fun and many opportunities for social interaction. Two teen-aged helpers volunteered their time and energy to follow children through the mazes of tunnels.

Each week during this session, the children have been earning tokens for turn-taking, initiating games, and other social skills. We are looking forward to our final outing to Midway on December 7th to spend these hard-earned tokens!

## **PARENT'S & CHILD'S TESTIMONIAL**

By Erin Monahan

*We love the Friendship Groups run by Children at Risk! My son Nick thoroughly enjoys going to the Barrhaven location. He makes friends and works on social skills while he has fun participating in all sorts of games and activities - all within a safe and supportive environment. Nick always comes home in a great mood!*

By Nicholas Monahan

*I like Friendship group because I get to bring my toys and my stuffed animals. I also like to play games and pick out snacks and meet new friends! A+*

(Nicholas wrote this note himself!)

By Janet Kooiman

*I have to say a HUGE thank you to Sheila Bell and Nancy Good for the fabulous time Zack has had at the Asperger Teen Group held on Thursday nights. What an awesome group for the teen kids with ASD! Zack has learned so much from the peer shadowing and has enjoyed all the outings. There should be more groups like this.*

## **FUNDRAISING UPDATE:**

Submitted by Brenda Reisch  
Fundraising Chairperson

## **UPCOMING EVENTS SINCE SEPTEMBER/2005...**

### **2006 ENTERTAINMENT COUPON BOOKS**

Children at Risk will continue to sell the 2006 Entertainment Coupon Books to the first of January. They make an excellent gift for those "hard to buy for" friends and relative and are a bargain at only \$35! With 50% discounts on dining out, fast foods, services, activities and merchandise, you cannot lose with buying this terrific book. You save money and support charity at the same time! To own this valuable coupon book, just email [carsup@magma.ca](mailto:carsup@magma.ca) or call 741-8255.

We also have 18 local Quickie Convenience Stores in the area that are selling the books for Children at Risk.

(store names and locations are posted on our web-site)

## **MACMILLAN'S FROZEN FOODS FALL CAMPAIGN**

We had another excellent Fall MacMillan's campaign, selling over \$3,800 of products for a profit of \$1,000. Many thanks to parents Susan Holder, Roxanne Bronsard, Patricia Flanagan and Linda Teed for gathering multiple orders from friends and co-workers! Our next campaign will be in the spring, around April/May, so look for the flyers in the March 2006 Newsletter!

## **10<sup>TH</sup> ANNUAL CELEBRITY PUMPKIN CONTEST**

Ten years later, one of Children at Risk's signature events is getting bigger and better! With the expansion to 4 malls – Merivale Mall, Carlingwood Shopping Centre, Place d'Orleans and now Lincoln Fields Shopping Centre, this fun and seasonal event raised a record amount of **\$5,044!!** We had 89 carvers this year, also a record, with many more celebrities donating valuable Prize Packages to sweeten the pot and increase funds raised! Accolades go to all 4 Shopping Centres for their hospitality, with a special acknowledgement **to Frank Fenn** at Carlingwood Shopping Centre for his Poster creation and **Tracy Mills** at Merivale Mall for sponsoring all the pumpkins and hosting the Reception again! Please also join me in thanking Mall Display managers **Alison Armstrong, Merle Hagerman, Andrea Allingham and Carol Laity**, as well as **Lisa & Christina Myatt, the Ryan family, Marlene Stepan, Anita & Kevin Northover, Mary McDonald** and all the many volunteers who made this phenomenal event possible by "pumpkin-sitting" at the displays!! Check out the "Top 13" Celebrity Carvers on our website, [www.childrenatrisk.ca](http://www.childrenatrisk.ca)

## **What is On Now/Coming:**

### **GIFTS, ETC...**

Currently we have several items for sale to support Children at Risk and the Autism Society:

- ASO Galerie au Chocolate Fine Belgian Chocolates, 200 g. decoratively-wrapped box - \$10
- ASO Note Cards, featuring art by Autistic children, 8 cards & envelopes - \$12
- Kiwanis Fruit Cakes, boxed 1250 g. light & tinned 900 g. dark - \$14
- Scarves by Shelley, boa-style light & stylish scarves, assorted colours, 3 sizes - \$15-\$25
- "Pippy's Wish" children's book by local author Selena Robins - \$5

All these items can be obtained through the Children at Risk office, 741-8255, 235 Donald St.

### **OTTAWA 67'S 50/50 TICKET SALES**

Once again, Children at Risk is being invited to sell the 50/50 tickets at the Ottawa 67's games for the month of February 2006. Sponsored by the Rideau and Kanata Kiwanis, we will need volunteers for the 5 home games on February 3, 5, 10, 12, 17 & 19. Each shift is approximately 2 ½ hours of volunteer time, starting one hour before the game and selling to the end of the second intermission. Volunteers can then stay and watch the game if desired! With Winterlude on, these games are usually sold out and we will need 8 – 10 volunteers each game. Please email to [carsup@magma.ca](mailto:carsup@magma.ca) if you think you can help out for a game or two, volunteers need to be 16 years of age or more!

### **5<sup>th</sup> ANNUAL "ROCKIN' FOR RISK" DANCE**

Saturday, April 1<sup>st</sup>, 2006 is the date for the annual Children at Risk 50s/60s/70s dance "Rockin' for Risk"! This wildly popular event will be held at the Nepean Sportsplex and features live music by local band "Intersection", a visit by Ottawa's premier Elvis Tribute Artist Shawn Barry, prizes, silent auction, raffle, dance and costume contests and more. Hosted by OLDIES 1310's Brother Bob Derro, it is a night of dancing, fun and fundraising – all for Autism! Tickets will go on sale in February, so either plan to attend or volunteer by emailing [carsup@magma.ca](mailto:carsup@magma.ca) Be there or be square!!

### **MORE TOYS!!!**

The main room in the Children at Risk office has gone through a major face lift this fall. Based on the recommendations of the facilitators, we purchased additional toys and equipment to better meet the needs of the children participating in the social groups.

Thanks to Elaine, Liz and Yassemin (some of our facilitators) who volunteered to sort out the toys that have now made it to toy heaven and to Janet Kooiman who travelled across the city to find the best deals in town. The feedback has been very positive especially the new air hockey table that has been provided to us with a great discount from the "Jacks are Wild" store.

With a recent capital grant, CAR has also been able to purchase a stove that complements well the pre-existing fridge. This set up will be conducive to potentially offering life skills development sessions in the future.

Just sending out this notice, as The Capital Chordettes have given on-going support to the Autism Community! We hope many of you can plan to attend, there are many lovely items for gifts and the auction has fabulous prizes. If anyone wants tickets, please let me know at Children at Risk, [carsup@magma.ca](mailto:carsup@magma.ca) or 741-8255. The bonus is a min-concert by The Capital Chordettes with some traditional seasonal tunes and favourite songs!

For more information on The Chordettes and their commitment to Autism through their parent organization, visit [www.capitalchordettes.org](http://www.capitalchordettes.org)  
Brenda Reisch

## **CAPITAL CHORDETTES, INC.**

Presents our

# **ANNUAL CHRISTMAS CRAFT AUCTION AND CONCERT**

**Featuring:**

Auctioneer Ken (The General)

Grant

and

**The Capital Chordettes**

On

**Friday, December 2, 2005**

**6:30 – 10:00 p.m.**

**Ron Kolbus Lakeside Gardens Centre  
Carling and Pinecrest, Britannia Park**

**Includes: Silent Auction, Bake Table, Craft Table,  
Children's Table, Glass Menagerie, Used Books and  
Videos**

**Refreshments will be served**

**Admission: \$6.00**

**Tickets available from Chorus members and at the door.**



## **TIPS TO A POSITIVE EXPERIENCE WITH DSW STUDENTS**

Submitted by Marlene Steppan – Vice President of CAR Board of Directors

Over the last 10 years, CAR has developed a partnership with Algonquin College to provide placements to students enrolled in the Developmental Services Worker (DSW) program. This fall, about 25 students completed 20 hours of work with families of children on the spectrum between the ages of 3 and 13. The goal of this program is to provide some respite to our members and expose them to potential candidates interested in working with their children.

In October, I was given the opportunity to meet with some second year students, to help them prepare for this placement. At that time, they completed a survey to give us feedback about their experience in working with families in the community.

In general, the feedback was quite positive and they felt appreciated by the parents.

- Parents made them feel welcomed, were supportive and shared valuable resources.
- The opportunity to learn new techniques, ideas and skills from parents and other professionals involved in the treatment team (e.g. SLP).
- The chance to see the way the children learn and to have an opportunity to tap into their world.

However, some students described situations that made their experience more difficult:

- When parents are constantly watching over their shoulder or continually interrupting the sessions.
- Lack of feedback from parents especially if a child has limited communication skills and behavioural issues.
- The presence of big pets interfering with the delivery of the program.
- Other service providers not receptive to the work of the DSW.

Based on these feedbacks, here are some tips to help you make this experience as positive as possible:

- Provide clear objectives to the student on a weekly basis.
- Allocate the last 5-10 minutes to review the session with the student in order to provide feedback and clarify expectations.
- Provide opportunity for the students to observe other professionals involved in the care of your child (e.g. SLP, behaviour therapists, OT).
- Promptly contact the placement co-ordinator regarding any issues of concern.

Children at Risk is committed to continue this valuable partnership. Over the next month, we would appreciate hearing from parents and professionals who have been involved in this program in order to get their perspectives. The result of this survey that will be distributed over the next month will be shared with the school and upcoming students.

In January 2006, another group of students will be looking for families with children or adults on the spectrum, to complete their placements before graduating this spring. Please contact our office at 741-8255 if interested in participating in this program.

### **SANTA PHOTOS**

Courtesy of Rio Can Property Services, our friends at Lincoln Fields Shopping Centre and Westgate Mall are designating net proceeds from Santa photos to Children at Risk! A 4 X 6 photo is only \$5, with additional packages of various sizes available. Special group photos can be accommodated, as well, during weekday hours with advance notice (828-3783). Below are Santa's hours for each location:

#### **WESTGATE**

Saturday, November 26 – SANTA ARRIVES!

11 AM – 1 PM, 2 PM – 5 PM

Thursdays, December 1, 8, & 15

11 AM – 1 PM, 2 PM – 4 PM, 5 PM – 7 PM

Fridays, December 2, 9, & 16

11 AM – 1 PM, 2 PM – 4 PM, 5 PM – 7 PM

Saturdays, December 3, 10, & 17

10 AM – Noon, 1 PM – 5 PM

Wednesday, December 14

11 AM – 1 PM, 2 PM – 4 PM, 5 PM – 7 PM

Sunday, December 18

11 AM – 4 PM

Tuesday, December 20

11 AM – 1 PM, 2 PM – 4 PM, 5 PM – 7 PM

Wednesday, Thursday & Friday, Dec 21-23

11 AM – 1 PM, 2 PM – 5 PM

#### **LINCOLN FIELDS**

Saturday, December 3 – BREAKFAST WITH SANTA

8 AM – 10 AM

Saturdays, December 3

11 AM – 1 PM, 2 PM – 4 PM

Thursdays, December 8, 15 & 22

5 PM – 8 PM

Fridays, December 9, 16, & 23

5 PM – 8 PM

Saturdays, December 10 & 17

10 AM – 1 PM, 2 PM – 4 PM

## **CAROL LAITY (Office Administrator) - BIO**

Ottawa is my hometown, but my job took me to Toronto and where I spent many wonderful years and made some long lasting friends. When my Mother became ill, I returned to Ottawa where I spent 2 precious years with her until she passed on. During her illness I reconnected with a good friend who had married and had a beautiful baby. As he developed it became apparent that all was not well. He was diagnosed with autism and with that, all the predictable emotions were expressed. Searching for help was a daunting task, but she was aggressive and finally found some help. I try to give this couple an evening out once a week.

I am also a volunteer for the Ottawa Humane Society and have a wonderful Maincoon cat that really runs my apt. I merely pay the rent and answer the phone. On occasion I have friends who call and leave him messages when I'm away. This can be damaging for the ego. I enjoy my new computer, reading, theatre and plan to improve my golf with some winter practice classes. Cooking is a pleasure even if it's just for myself. I am particularly pleased with the new part-time job I have. There are so many important things to be done and I have the good fortune to be working with someone who has endless patience and such a sense of commitment. That's all for now folks!!

## **Helping you Help your child !**

Submitted by Simy Illouze,  
Workshop Coordinator, ASO – Ottawa

This year, our two charities CAR and ASO- Ottawa, have come together for the purpose of hosting informative workshops helping parents and professionals alike, discover new programs, new strategies and new techniques to improve the quality of life of their loves ones on the spectrum.

Although our organizations do not endorse any one specific treatment approach, we go through great lengths to survey the type of information, which is mostly needed by the parents in our community.

In fact, this past summer, Ottawa's autism community identified Relationship Development Intervention (being the latest treatment in the options of treatments for autism), as the "most wanted presentation". Accordingly, on October 16, 2005, CAR and ASO – Ottawa, responded to this need, by bringing to Ottawa, Doug Smith, U.S. certified RDI consultant.

Approximately, one hundred parents and professionals attended the RDI workshop and for the most part, participants reported feeling that RDI is not a treatment of choice for "all" on the spectrum. Although, it was generally felt that the presentation provided a clear understanding of the "true core deficits" of autism spectrum disorders, the same was untrue of the clinical treatment applications in RDI's levels & targeted stages of remediation.

- Relationship Development
- Activity Framing
- Spotighting /Highlighting
- Use of Declarative Language
- Episodic Memory Enhancement
- Development of Flexible Thinking

Some felt that the presenter Doug Smith had not connected with his audience and had not done justice to the fundamentals of the RDI treatment. Others determined that the central problem lay in having to cover so much material in just a one-day presentation.

In hindsight, everyone got a good glimpse at a new method, which is still, for lack of a better term, "under construction". Overall, everyone reported being extremely pleased with the venue arrangements (day, time and location, scheduled breaks) and above all with the snacks and refreshments available.

As we continue to volunteer our time and efforts to benefit our local autism community, CAR and ASO – Ottawa, once again hosted another workshop "Prompts for Restructuring Oral Motor Phonetic Targets". This was a hands-on approach to speech production by Karen Luker, Speech Language Pathologist and Certified PROMPT Therapist on November 19, 2005. 36 parents and professionals attended this excellent presentation!

Look for more workshops in the New Year!!

## **FINDING THE PERFECT GIFT**

By Emily Levine

Every year as the holidays approach, I start making lists of gifts to buy for family and friends. For several years, my son Sam was hard to shop for - or maybe I should say easy to shop for, because it really didn't matter what I got for him. He liked unwrapping things, loved counting the presents, and would happily shred mounds of wrapping paper. But no matter what was inside, he ignored the gift.

As a toddler, Sam never played with toys in an appropriate way (as defined by my conventional thinking). He would turn his trucks over and spin the wheels, he would line things up, and anything that made a noise would be sounded over and over and over and over. I used to buy a lot of things hoping to pique his interest, hoping to hit on something that would engage him, that we could play with together, that would stimulate any kind of interaction. Nothing seemed to work.

I started to feel sorry for Sam and for everything he was missing out on. My sister's girls always do crafty things with her, bake cookies, and are in plays. Sam was even afraid of Santa. (He would stand grimly next to Santa and glower at the camera, and Santa would look slightly perplexed in the picture.) All my friends would complain about what greedy monsters their children were being, while my guy wanted practically nothing. He liked watching the same videos over and over, and reading the same books.

I enjoy finding the right gift for all my loved ones, and I put a lot of thought into it. Finding the perfect thing that will not break my paltry budget is quite a challenge! I wanted to find something that delighted Sam, other than chocolate, french fries, or ice cream.

The year Sam was six, he wrote his first letter to Santa. He wrote, 'Dear Santa, I would like the letter A. Have a good trip. From Sam Levine'. I obsessed over this, trying to figure out what he meant. Was this Wheel of Fortune echolalia? Did he want something that started with an A? What should I do? Finally, I went to a craft store and found some wooden letters about eight inches high and bought him the letter A. When the presents were opened, the relatives all rolled their eyes. However, Sam was delighted, carried his A everywhere and even brought it to bed.

This was the beginning of my understanding of autism. For years, I had been trying to make Sam fit in. It was for his sake, I told myself. It began to dawn on me that I was in a mourning process for the parent I wanted to be, and the feeling of missing out on normal experiences: the loss of my idea of what parents and kids do together. I was having a hard time coping with the changes in my own life expectations, and my own feelings of competence as a parent. When babies smile and gurgle and appreciate your every glance, you feel wonderfully rewarded. But if your child doesn't give you that kind of unmistakable feedback to reinforce your good parenting behavior, it's not so easy to keep going;

it's demoralizing. Gift giving is very similar. It encapsulates some of the frustrations and self-doubts that go along with parenting a special-needs child. I finally realized that this stuff bothered me, not Sam. He was happy counting pretty packages and shredding paper. I was the one who was disappointed and felt left out. I began to let go of unrealistic expectations, and to try to see the world through his eyes. It's actually been a big relief.

Sam is ten now and has made many strides. He's even gotten to be a materialistic monster like most kids (this is progress?). Some of his favorite gifts have been instructional videos and owner's manuals that came with gifts to his dad and me - the breadmaker video was a big hit, for example. If he's really good this year, maybe Santa will bring him a 90 minute video of Disney movie credits!!

#### LIKE A HURRICANE (OR "BABY RITA")

By Sean McRae, September 29, 2005, (11 years old)

I sit on my window ledge and look outside.

The wind is so strong.

Leaves are blowing away.

There goes a piece of paper going down the street.

The basketball net is shaking.

The tree across the street looks cool.

It looks kind of like a hurricane.

Our bench has already been blown over

I hope it doesn't fly away.

I hope the flags don't fly away.

I look for birds in the sky.

There aren't any.

It's really windy.

I hope the kids aren't outside.

No one wants to be outside in weather like this.

Boy, the winds sure are strong today.