

From the CEO

Restoring a Smile

by E. Clarke Ross, D.P.A.

Last school year, one of the saddest periods of our lives, my son Andrew lost his smile.

he theme of this issue of Attention!®, the environment, played a significant role in Andrew's experiences-and will have a significant impact on his future. Despite the developmental and learning challenges Andrew has faced since birth, for his first 14 years he had a happy life. He had some good friends, participated in his church youth group, was confirmed when he was 14 and played basketball. He and I enjoyed professional baseball, and he became an authority on baseball statistics—an "island of competence," as psychologist and frequent CHADD conference speaker Robert Brooks, Ph.D., calls itthat generated tremendous positive feedback and increased self-esteem. Academically he did okay, and the other students in elementary and middle school were mostly kind and supportive. While he was a little different and while he struggled, he smiled when he was having fun.

School challenges

Last September, Andrew entered a public high school with 2,000 students. Despite a good individual education plan (IEP) on paper, his life quickly fell apart. He was not in classes with friends but was placed instead in self-contained special education classes where he did not know the other students. He was socially isolated from his former classmates and had difficulty making new friends. Predictably, his grades suffered. Assigned to a theater arts class, this child with high functioning autism refused to read in front of the class and so failed. Kids he did not know mostly ignored him, busy with their own social lives, and a few were nasty.

A typical teen, he wanted independence and autonomy. At home, he resisted all suggestions and assistance, frequently loudly. Techniques that once worked so well—check lists, reward points, positive reinforcement—failed. He became increasingly depressed, withdrawn, and defiant and hostile to us. We, his parents, did not know what to do.

There were some bright spots during the year: a baseball class was a positive experience; the school psychologist provided helpful individualized support; and the speech therapist worked closely with Andrew. But basically he

remained socially isolated and close to failing academically. In the late spring, the school offered a private school placement.

With the help of an educational consultant, we began researching boarding schools. Along with our health care professional team, we concluded that Andrew's best chance to earn his high school diploma and enjoy positive social experiences would be at a special boarding school for kids meeting his profile. To say Andrew initially opposed the idea is an understatement: he went ballistic. Still, he reluctantly accompanied us on school site visits and then attended trial stays at two schools. Not only was he well received and accepted for admission at both, but at the first school he reconnected with a friend he had met two years earlier at camp and at the second he met a girl he liked. Suddenly, boarding school didn't seem such a bad idea.

Baseball highlights

In the spring, Andrew's environment took another change for the better. School was over, and baseball was on. His deep involvement and interest in professional baseball spurred another positive change in his life and attitude. We attended an Orioles game and met Baltimore players Jeff Conine (*see page 16*) and Brian Roberts. Both Brian and Jeff spent time with Andrew during batting practice.

One weekend Scott Eyre of the Chicago Cubs, a pitcher with attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (AD/HD) who was featured in the December 2003 Attention!®, had lunch with us, introduced us to other Cubs players and hosted us at two Cubs-Nationals games. That weekend Andrew's smile re-emerged.

The environment of the boarding school Andrew selected will be a significant improvement over the situation he had last year, a year we have to acknowledge was wasted. But more rewarding, at the time I write this, is the fact that Andrew's smile has occasionally returned. It may not be as frequent or as natural as it was before, but there are times when we see a glimmer of his former smile. All we can do, as parents, is make the best out of each day.



Conference Notes

CHADD CEO E. Clarke Ross, D.P.A., will discuss *AD/HD, The Lived Experience*, and also *Avoiding Stigma* during two separate sessions at CHADD's annual conference in Chicago, III., Oct. 25–28, 2006. Visit *www.chadd.org* for more information.

