

Swiss Families and their Experience with ABA

Family 2

Die Erfolge mit Jennifer

Jennifer was born in 2000 and developed normally until her second birthday. We are a bilingual family and she could count to five and knew her colors in both German and Spanish. At the age of three she became withdrawn, her movements were more stereotypical, and she ran around in a confused state. She began to take objects into her mouth and stopped speaking. Most of her time was spent in bed or the shower. Our suspicion that Jennifer might have autism came from us and not from the doctor. We forced our pediatrician to get an evaluation by Dr. Gundelfinger at the KJPD at the University of Zurich. In March 2004 we received the autism diagnosis.

Now we had our confirmation – but how could we get started to help her? Via the internet we began to inform ourselves and were thankful for our language abilities because most of the information was not available in German. Among other possibilities we had contact with the ABA provider Knospe in Germany. Jennifer's mother attended their workshop. It was then clear that ABA was worth trying. We also did a rather expensive biomedical evaluation through Dr. van Limburg in Kilchberg ZH that showed that Jennifer had multiple food allergies and digestion issues. As a result we began in 2004 a gluten-casein free diet. The success of the diet came relatively fast and was confirmed whenever Jennifer ate something she shouldn't, as she would act delirious. Cordilia Derungs, a recommended therapist, had too many cases and couldn't take us. Also the KJPD ZH was overloaded and also couldn't help (they have expanded since then). Finally we found Silvia Senn from Uetikon am See/ZH, a competent ABA supervisor. We put together a team of four (including Jennifer's mother) and held a three-day workshop led by Silvia Senn. At the end of August 2004 we began 16 hours of ABA therapy per week and have since then expanded it to 20-20 hours per week. To increase the effectiveness of the therapy it would have been good to further increase the amount of hours but the costs (we paid ourselves) were too high for us.

Jennifer participated well in the therapy and we also soon learned that she possessed good fine motor skills as well. One of the problems we faced was finding really effective reinforcers. These are important for keeping motivation to learn high. Jennifer would lose her enthusiasm to repeat exercises that she had already learned.

As we look back on the first year of ABA we see the great progress Jennifer has made. While she previously was unable to follow simple directions or to draw even a line on paper – now she manages these tasks well. She still has problems getting used to new situations or places she is not familiar with or in crowds. She reacts confused and/or becomes hyperactive. The biggest problem is still speech (she can say 'mama, papa, nose etc' on demand) and we are now working with 'PECs'. We hope Jennifer's speech continues to improve, but we want her to at least have the possibility to communicate in any case.

At the end of August 2004 Jennifer went 2 days a week to the Special Ed (HP) Kindergarten in Sursee LU. We were lucky that the kindergarten teacher had experience with autism and was willing to come to a PECs workshop along with Jennifer's speech therapist. In addition to kindergarten we still provide Jennifer with 25 hours of ABA per week.

In addition to ABA and the gluten-casein free diet, we also work on biomedical treatments. Jennifer has high mercury and aluminium values on tests. We began therefore a program of chelation for heavy metals as well further treatment with probiotics to improve the digestive tract. We also supplement vitamins and minerals. The information on biomedical issues is gathered from the bio-med parent group as well as consultations with a specialist in Colombia!

To our experience with Colombia we would like to add: We were surprised that this country appears to be more advanced in biomedical approaches to autism than Germany or Switzerland. This is remarkable that this third-world country offers much more than what we find locally here (little or no support or expertise).

Not to be discouraged, we look forward – our goal is to successfully integrate Jennifer in the regular school system.

We want to thank all those that have helped and continue to help provide the best life possible for Jennifer – especially her mother.

Sept. 2, 2005, Walter Kellenberger