

Learning independence: Newton boy with autism, nonprofit work together

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NEWTON-TAB

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Not long after Sarah Faulkner moved her family from Washington to Massachusetts to access better services for her son who has autism, the COVID pandemic hit.

According to the Centers for Disease Control, autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a developmental disability that can cause significant social, communication and behavioral challenges. according to the Centers for Disease Control.

COVID and education:Newton, other schools to remain shuttered due to coronavirus

“We lost all services at once,” Faulkner said. In fact, the Newton Public Schools did not offer in-person special education classes until the summer of 2020.

Her son, Zach Faulkner, an Oak Hill Middle School sixth-grader, “had a really hard time doing [virtual] schoolwork,” she said. Instead, the 12-year-old spent a lot of time playing “Minecraft,” a video game series, while students had to remain home.



Oak Hill students:Students at Oak Hill in Newton tackle UN’s Global Goals

“It was awful,” said Faulkner. “Zach needs support and I don’t have a special education degree.”

Importance of in-person work

Before Zach finally reunited in-person with his Oak Hill friends in the fall, staff from the nonprofit Edinburg Center started coming to his home in August to help him develop social skills and learn strategies for becoming more independent.\

“So much is needing to physically be there,” said Sarah Faulkner about the importance of face-to-face communication.

Return to middle school:Photos: Newton middle school students return to in-person learning

Trenton Hoyt, a board certified behavior analyst (BCBA) and a licensed applied behavioral analyst (LABA) with the Edinburg Center has been working with Zach since the summer of 2020.

“They don’t benefit unless we’re present,” said Carol Gillis, director of Autism Services and DESE/DDS Family Navigator at the Edinburg Center.

Learning how to be independent “is the core of what we do,” she said.

Because Gillis knows it is essential to work in person with those being served, she said she reduced the number of workers going into each home to decrease the number of potential exposures to COVID.

When she asked her employees if any felt uncomfortable going into people’s homes during the pandemic, staff not only rose to the occasion, they volunteered to do more work, she said.

Working together, making plans

During his time with Zach, Hoyt said they go over life skills and “anything to promote independence.”

They will sometimes take a walk, talk and review situations that happened at school and discuss ways to make certain classes more enjoyable for him.

“It’s very hard to teach ... you have to role play it,” said Hoyt, reiterating why it was essential, even during COVID, to be with Zach in person.

As part of their work together, they looked at the ways Zach could address bullying or other challenging situations at school.

“I get a lot of input,” said Zach.

Learning through doing

Zach, his mom and Hoyt have taken concrete steps to improve his personal safety, compromising skills, compassion and flexible thinking.

When Zach said he wanted to ride his bike to school, Hoyt practiced with him and they made rules together. For example, Zach agreed he would not bicycle to Oak Hill if there was a wind advisory, rain, or if the temperature was below 32 degrees.

“I like to know beforehand,” said Zach.

He also starts each week with \$5 from his mom. Each time he forgets to do certain task – like cleaning up after himself - he loses 25 cents.

“I think it’s a good idea because I want to spend money with my friends and not always be the guy who can’t buy anything,” said Zach.

When he was paid to water plants around the neighborhood, he used those funds, plus his birthday, holiday, and chore money to buy a laptop.

“I felt really pleased for myself,” said Zach.

To learn more about the Edinburg Center, visit <https://www.edinburgcenter.org/>

To learn more about Autism Spectrum Disorder, visit <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/facts.html>