

Inclusion Challenge: The Story of Peter

BY LIV FONNEBO

Nine-year-old Peter* controlled the classroom by being completely out of control. At the beginning of the school year, his teachers tried all the usual strategies: talking, explaining, ignoring, and encouraging. They challenged both his heart and his reason. Nothing worked.

When the school contacted Peter's parents, they discovered that there were reasons for his behavior. His parents were on the verge of divorce. Pain and anger caused him to do the only thing he had the power to do: break all the rules for acceptable behavior in order to get the attention and help that he so desperately needed. What action could the school take in a situation where words were useless? What would convince him that the staff loved him and cared for him even when they had to discipline him for the chaos that he caused?

After some consideration, an individualized program was designed, built on a few basic principles: love, caring, firmness, and consistency.

Kenneth had been a substitute teacher at the school. He was acquainted with Peter and his problems. He was as calm and friendly as he was athletic and strong. Kenneth took Peter swimming in the pool and taught him to use the climbing wall in the physical education wing. The two of them spent time together in the woodworking shop and on field trips. At recess, they played soccer and other games.

To put it simply, Peter's school program was designed to allow him to do most of his favorite activities with the full attention and care of the teacher. There was, however, one thing Peter was not allowed to do—be with his classmates. He started school at a different

**Names have been changed to protect individuals' privacy.*

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time in the morning and ended school at a different time in the afternoon. He had no instruction or recesses with his classmates.

At the end of each day, Kenneth, Peter, and Peter's classroom teacher debriefed. During the first week, Peter beamed with satisfaction. There had been no confrontations, no hitting, kicking, or profane or obscene language. He seemed to enjoy the program so much that his teacher worried whether the program designers had miscalculated the

other effect they had aimed for—to make him understand that in order to be in class, he could not take out his personal frustrations on his classmates and teachers. The staff waited nervously for the desired effect. They didn't have long to wait.

After a week and a half, the question came, "When can I go back to my class?" *The teachable moment had come!* Peter was again socially interested and missed his classmates! His teacher told him that she would love to see him back in class—as soon as he thought he could fulfill the conditions for being there. It was left up to him to decide when he was ready.

When Peter indicated that he was ready to rejoin his classmates, he was allowed to do so for one class period. If everything went well, he could gradually expand the time with his class. By letting him prove that he could be trusted—and by giving him responsibility for his behavior—the school was able to reunite Peter with his classmates.

Peter still has days when he challenges his teacher's skills and patience, but the intervention program clearly was a turning point for him. The separation experience helped him to discover some fundamental truths: *He* needed relationships with fellow students and teachers, and *he* had the power to do something about his own behavior.

His teacher talked with Peter every Friday for the rest of the school year to help him process his concerns about home and school and so that he would have a stable, caring adult to relate to during this turbulent period of his life.

Last July, Peter attended camp meeting. When he spotted his teacher, he waved and shouted: "When does school start?" There was an unmistakable look of eager anticipation in his eyes. ✍

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