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Friday, March 24*Last modified Thursday, March 23, 2006 10:*

Giving Autism A Name And Face

By TAMI K. PHILLIPS, Times Staff Writer

MORTON-If Hutch McGehee could talk about his autism, he'd tell people that's he j regular child who experiences things differently than most.

Hutch, 8, was diagnosed with autism at the age of two. Though it's been a long roa Hutch and his family, they have learned to deal with the diagnosis with patience ar faith.

Next month, the McGehee family, who live near the Reservoir, will help educate th on the disorder during Autism Awareness Month.

They'll participate in the Together Enhancing Autism Awareness in Mississippi (TEA Walk For Autism to be held April 22 at Winner's Circle Park in Flowood. The event v raise money for a variety of TEAAM programs including new parent resource kits, p awareness campaigns and Kamp Kaleidoscope, Mississippi's only summer camp for children with autism.

According to the Autism Society of America, autism is a complex developmental dis that is the result of a neurological disorder. Autism affects the normal functions of brain, often compromising social interaction and communication skills.

Children with autism are sometimes described as being "in their own world."

For Hutch, diagnoses and treatment of his autism have changed his life dramaticall

Hutch's parents, Mike and Lisa McCrory McGehee, said they realized something wa wrong with Hutch at an early age when his senses would become easily overloadec

Hutch could not go to a restaurant or any crowded, noisy place without screaming were in pain. For a child with autism, sensory perceptions are often disoriented anc ordinary sights, sounds, tastes, smells and touches can be downright painful.

"He wouldn't let anyone hold him or love him, only Mike," Lisa said. "When you we hugging him, it was just like a stab."

Mike and Lisa also noticed that Hutch's language and social skills were delayed. He insisted on everything being the same and avoided eye contact, all symptoms of autism.

At 18 months, Hutch was diagnosed with juvenile diabetes. His parents thought insulin treatment might solve Hutch's problems, but it didn't.

Hutch's pediatrician recommended additional testing at his two-year physical checkup.

There are no medical tests for diagnosing autism. An accurate diagnosis must be based on observation of the individual's communication, behavior and developmental level.

Two university tests diagnosed him as autistic and Hutch began receiving 40 hours of therapy per week. The different types of therapy, including speech and occupational therapy, trained Hutch how to act in normal settings.

The results were astounding, Mike and Lisa said.

"At that point he couldn't feed himself," Lisa said. "They had him eating with a spoon for two weeks."

As soon as Hutch was diagnosed, his family, including older brother, Seth, 19, began attending conferences and learning everything they could about autism.

Today Hutch attends Oakdale Elementary School where he is a third grader. He attends regular classes though he also attends resource classes. When the family relocated from Kentucky to Mississippi last year, Hutch adjusted to his new school with ease.

"Hutch does surprisingly well with change," Mike said. "Everywhere he's been, kids love him."

But Hutch deals with changes and unexpected events best when he is prepared for them.

For example, to ready him for this interview, Hutch's parents told him throughout the year that he would be going to see a new friend later.

When Hutch entered the room, he happily hugged his grandparents, Oliver and Fay McCrory, both Morton residents, before hugging this writer.

Hutch enjoys many of the same hobbies as any 8-year-old boy. He likes video games, NASCAR and funny movies. He looks forward to playing soccer this year.

He also loves playing with his grandfather's puppies and being outdoors.

"Typical boy stuff," Mike said.

Hutch is computer literate and visits Web sites he sees on television. He is also good at reading.

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When asked what he is required to do at school, Hutch replied, "do all of my work."

If he completes that task, Hutch said he gets to "play" when he arrives home each afternoon.

Hutch's younger brother, Harlen, 6, was diagnosed with autism by a school therapist though university studies dismissed the diagnosis. Mike and Lisa believe Harlen may have Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) or a learning disorder.

Some of his actions may come from simply mimicking Hutch, they said.

There is no known cause for autism and doctors say genetic disorders, childhood immunizations or environmental pollutants could bring on the disorder. Autism is five times more prevalent in boys than in girls.

As they continue to raise awareness about autism in the public, the McGehees said they will continue to love and care for their sons. They hope the public will realize that autism affects an estimated 1 in 166 births.

Though there is no cure for autism, the symptoms can be controlled through treatment,

As Mike said, "it's not the end of the world."

Lisa added, "we don't look at our children as being different."

And about the long road they've been on with Hutch, she said, "we always felt that we gave him to us for a reason."

For more information on autism or TEAAM events, visit www.teaam.org.