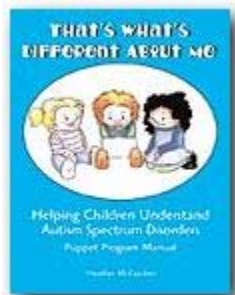


Innovative & Unique New Program Aims To Demystify Autism in Young Children

Written by Staff

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There is comfort in friendship, Peace in understanding. Puppets help establish roots for special understanding.

After witnessing firsthand the social isolation of her son because of his autism spectrum disorder, Heather McCracken recognized the absolute necessity for bridging the gap between neurotypical children and their peers with autism. After an exhaustive search McCracken realized "there was no program, no expert, no one to help support the one thing that my son desired above everything else - friends."

After years of research she developed the Friend 2 Friend puppet program, ultimately helping tens of thousands of children just like her young son. What started as a 10-line puppet play shown to local schools has developed into "*That's What's Different About Me!: Helping Children Understand Autism Spectrum Disorder*", an autism demystification program that confronts the basic lack of understanding within the classroom about autism and more importantly, about children with autism.

The program centres around the story of three friends - Crystal, Angela and Freddie and illustrates how they implement the "seven basic friendship tips" with the guidance of their teachers. Included in the program kit is:

- an interactive DVD of the puppet play with a "What Did Crystal Learn?" review
- an implementation manual
- five children's colouring/story books

Unlike anything else on the market "That's What's Different About Me!" is designed for use in classrooms and homes and is specifically targeted to children ages 3 -10. It provides children with information about autism in an age-appropriate and sensitive manner, creating a truly inclusive school environment while teaching a respect for diversity.

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Autism demystification is central to fostering mutual friendships between children with autism and their peers, siblings and classmates. As McCracken states, "All children, regardless of their unique challenges or gifts, have the intrinsic need to play and make friends. Children with autism are no different - they just express this need differently."

This full-packaged program for promoting autism awareness in young children not only cultivates successful social interactions, it gives families the confidence that their son or daughter with ASD can go to school, make friends and just play with other children.

Heather McCracken is a mother of three children. Her son Iain was finally diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder at 18 months after countless visits to doctors, spurred on by McCracken's maternal

intuition. Through her experiences with her son's ASD, she was motivated to create the Friend 2 Friend programs and became the founder and executive director of the Friend 2 Friend Social Learning Society - www.friend2friend.org - a non-profit organization dedicated to fostering friendships for children with ASD. She has received recognition for her work which has been featured on radio and television broadcasts, as well as in print media. McCracken who was born in New Brunswick, currently resides in British Columbia with her family.

Kathryn Robbins is McCracken's 14-year-old daughter. Kathryn is a wonderful big sister to her two younger siblings. She is a talented artist, writer and musician who has devoted many hours to illustrating the *That's What's Different About Me!* story and colouring book.

That's What's Different About Me!: Helping Children Understand Autism Spectrum Disorder is published by the Autism Asperger Publishing Company at www.asperger.net.

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