



Emily Komro: Communication opens path to possibilities

Name: Emily Komro

Diagnosis: Autism

Age when connected with Courage Center: 15

Time receiving Courage Center services: From March 2007 to May 2008

Current residence: Ramsey, Minn.

Services received at Courage Center: Occupational therapy; speech therapy

Gains made in independence: Communication via computer; increased coping and social skills

When Tim and Kim Komro welcomed their beautiful daughter, Emily, into the world, they looked into her large blue eyes and knew she was special. But it took nearly four years to truly understand *how* special.

“Emily was born with not-quite-average muscle tone,” says her mom, Kim Komro. “We did a chromosome study, which ruled out Downs Syndrome but did not definitively identify her condition. However, by age 4, Emily clearly presented the symptoms of autism. That’s when we knew we had to find the appropriate tools and resources to help us empower Emily to achieve her full potential, whatever that potential may be.”

Seated next to her now-16-year-old daughter, Kim Komro brushes an errant strand of hair out of her daughter’s eyes. Emily reacts with typical teenage indifference, and her mom smiles.

By the time Emily was 15, Tim and Kim Komro had exhausted a long list of therapeutic options. Along the way, they had purchased a Prentke Romich Springboard communication device – a computer that offers Emily pictures to communicate her thoughts. “We learned that Courage Center knew how to teach the use of this device, so we contacted them for help,” said Kim. “Opening up an avenue of communication with Emily had always been our first goal.”

Once a week, Emily and her mom or dad visited Erica Mbamgamoh, speech language pathologist/AAC specialist, and LeeAnn Mateffy-Horn, pediatric therapy manager, at Courage Center Golden Valley.

Speech therapy focused on expanding Emily’s ability to communicate her needs. “In conjunction with OT, we added communication pages on her speech generating device,” explains Mbamgamoh. “Emily’s ability to communicate her needs significantly decreases maladaptive behaviors because she can tell others what she wants in a socially appropriate manner rather than acting out.” Mbamgamoh also helped Emily’s family learn to use the Springboard to communicate with Emily.

“Emily has made significant gains,” says her proud mom. “She has learned coping skills to help her deal with situations that previously might have overloaded her ability to cope.”

Those coping skills are the result of the specialized occupational therapy “sensory diet” Mateffy-Horn developed for Emily. It includes heavy, physical work, head movements, deep pressure touch, and speaking and listening activities. “Tim and Kim incorporate some of these activities into Emily’s schedule every day,” Mateffy-Horn says, “which helps Emily become calmer and less stressed. As a result, Emily presents fewer undesirable behaviors.”

Her parents also learned to help Emily regulate her “engine speed” by choosing specific sensory motor activities to meet the needs of her changing environment. This enables Emily to make eye contact, focus, pay attention, integrate information and follow directions more easily. When these stressors are decreased or avoided, Emily is able to participate in home, school and community activities without upset.

“We’ve also learned how to better understand Emily’s relation to her world,” says her mom. “For example, she needs a balance of physical movement and mental exercise to give her the best chance to succeed through her day. One without the other compromises her coping mechanisms. Just that simple understanding increases my patience.” Smiling, she adds, “And what mother doesn’t need a bit more patience with a teenage daughter?”

Emily is non-verbal, but, when so inclined, she deftly uses her computer to communicate her thoughts. And she’s achieved some comfort in social situations, especially enjoying horseback riding with the Victory Riders program in Rogers, Minn., for the past seven years.

Looking forward, the Komros’ future goals are “... to apply all the training and knowledge we received from the amazing therapists at Courage Center,” Kim Komro says. “It’s important that Emily have that piece in the puzzle of her day. It helps her cope.”

Advice to parents with autistic children? “Make sure that everyone who comes in contact with your child practices the same techniques that you’re learning so your child’s experiences with others are consistent,” says Kim Komro. “After all, we want for Emily what all parents want for their children: happiness and the chance to live life to their fullest potential. But no parent is perfect. So, if you have a child with autism, educate yourself. Talk to other parents with similar children. Contact the experts at Courage Center. The more solid information you have, the better your chances of reaching your goal.”

Turning to her daughter, Kim Komro asks, “We gotta run, Emily. Are you ready to go?” Emily smiles and slaps a “high-five” with her mom.

About Autism Spectrum Disorder

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a complex brain disorder without any biological markers for diagnosis. ASD impacts three major areas of development: language skills, social skills and behavior, interests and activities.

Courage Center offers many services for children and teens with ASD. These include traditional therapies, such as occupational therapy to help with sensory issues and activities of daily living; speech therapy to help with language and social skills; neuropsychological testing and diagnosis; consultation services with a psychiatrist (rehabilitation doctor); as well as counseling for individuals and families. Non-medical services include pre-driving and drivers training classes and assessment; Camp Discover, a day camp for children; the Clown Fish Swim Team and Adolescent Fitness Club.

“There *is* help for this condition,” says LeeAnn Mateffy-Horn, pediatric therapy manager at Courage Center Golden Valley. “For more information, contact me at 763.520.0431.”

###