

Center for Autism & Related Disorders



Center for Autism and Related Disorders
at Kennedy Krieger Institute

April 2021

A Note From Dr. Rebecca Landa

Happy spring, everyone! In honor of Autism Acceptance Month in April, we are hosting some special events and sharing inspiring experiences from youth with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and their families. Our main objective at Kennedy Krieger Institute's Center for Autism and Related Disorders is to provide innovative and evidence-based services that promote the success and well-being of individuals with ASD and their family members. To accomplish this objective, we integrate clinical care, research, outreach and training. Our clinicians learn from the experiences of children, youth and adults with ASD, and deliver exciting evidence-based interventions anchored in research to ensure effectiveness.

One such intervention is "Connecting Language Using Books" (CLUB). The youth with ASD featured in this newsletter were participants in one or more of our past CLUB groups. I am sure we will hear more from them in the future! In the meantime, stay tuned for our summer newsletter, in which we will update you on more of the exciting work being done by our gifted staff members.



Wishing you wellness and enjoyment of all that spring brings!

Rebecca Landa, Ph.D., CCC-SLP

Founder and Executive Director, Center for Autism and Related Disorders
Vice President, Kennedy Krieger Institute

ROAR for Kids 2021

Kennedy Krieger Institute's 17th annual ROAR for Kids will take place May 15–22. To keep our community safe during the COVID-19 pandemic, this year's ROAR for Kids will be a hybrid event, featuring a drive-through celebration, a virtual run and walk, and virtual experiences all week long.

To register for ROAR, go to the ROARforKids.org website. You are encouraged to join the Center for Autism and Related Disorders (CARD) Dream Team or create a team of your own with your friends and family members to support CARD.

This year, the funds raised during ROAR will help purchase intervention materials for CARD's Infant Development Public Health Initiative. This program seeks to help underserved communities access evidence-based intervention services that foster social and communication skills in infants and young toddlers ages 8–14 months.

Please contact Maraya Stolte at Stolte@KennedyKrieger.org if you have any questions, or if you would like to connect regarding additional fund-raising opportunities to support CARD.



Stay Connected With CARD This Spring!

ROAR for Kids Events

- **Saturday, May 15:** Drive-Through Celebration
- **Sunday, May 16 - Thursday, May 20:** Virtual Event Experiences
- **Friday, May 21:** Virtual Pep Rally
- **Saturday, May 22:** Virtual Walk/Run

Ask an Expert

On **April 21 at 7 p.m.**, join our **Ask an Autism Expert** panel discussion. Our panelists will discuss early intervention, anxiety and ASD, employment, and more! Speakers include Dr. Rebecca Landa, Dr. Peter Girolami, Melissa Subock, Dr. Tiffany Lin, Dr. Roma Vasa, Dr. Linda Myers and Stacey Herman. Participants will have the opportunity to ask questions. Click [here](#) to register.

Virtual Webinars

SPARK at CARD and Pathfinders for Autism have teamed up in 2021 for a **series of virtual webinars**. We hope you can join us for our first webinar on **April 22 at 10 a.m.** with Alyssa Blesson, CARD's genetic counselor. Click [here](#) to register.

Support CARD

At CARD we are changing lives. Won't you join us? Even a small contribution can have a huge impact. By making a **gift of just \$10** a month, you'll help CARD **deliver meaningful support** to individuals with ASD and their families. Click [here](#) to join our club of dedicated monthly givers now.



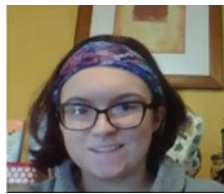
Conversations with CLUB: Insights Into Learning

Individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) experience learning and process language and social information differently than their neurotypical peers do. In celebration of Autism Acceptance Month, we interviewed five youth with ASD and their parents to share their insights and experiences. All five youth have been participants in an innovative and exciting intervention program at CARD called Connecting Language Using Books (CLUB), a program engineered and led by Sharon Conty, MS, CCC-SLP.

What is CLUB? CLUB is a 10-week social and language intervention group program offered several times a year for youth with ASD in kindergarten through 12th grade. Participants are grouped by grade and language ability levels. CLUB uses evidence-based strategies and speech-language therapy techniques to help participants build social and language skills, while at the same time building executive function skills, reading comprehension ability and self-confidence. With Sharon as the group's reader and guide, participants read and discuss exciting, fun and age-appropriate chapter books.

More than reading. As Sharon is the main reader for each CLUB group, children and teens of any reading level can join CLUB. Instead of emphasizing the reading decoding process, Sharon uses a multisystem approach to understanding stories. One goal of CLUB is to help participants understand the book characters' thought processes, motivations and actions. The group discusses the characters as if they were actual people, living out the fictional situations in real life. In this way, CLUB participants practice solving problems, making predictions and recalling events and details from the stories. These are essential skills for reading comprehension. For some, visualizing the situations presented in a book in this way deepens their connection to the story

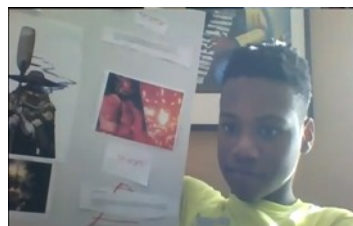
and helps them see a situation from multiple points of view (a skill that is very challenging for individuals with ASD). Kylie, a high school student who participated in several CLUB sessions, proudly admits that CLUB transformed her into a book-worm. Although Kylie says she doesn't talk much during CLUB, she's a great listener and uses her



imagination to envision every scene. **"I like the cool battle scenes [in the Percy Jackson novel],"** she says. **"In the story, they talk about the battles and what's happening. I always use my head and figure out what's happening."** Sharon provides multiple ways for participants to connect with the books and characters, which helps each one build reading comprehension and reasoning skills.

Building self-confidence. In addition to learning strategies that support academic growth, CLUB participants have opportunities to learn and practice social skills in a safe, supported place. Sharon

makes sure that each participant is embraced, and she creates an environment where it's OK to take risks and practice emerging skills. Jaiden is a middle school student who has participated in CLUB for two years. He finds connection in the group dynamic. **"I like being around**



kids I can relate to. I was comfortable with them," he says. He also notes that Sharon created a supportive environment for learning. **"Ms. Sharon was always positive. She made me feel at ease. She tells a lot of jokes."** Jack, another CLUB participant who is in middle school, has been in CLUB for four years. **"Being part of CLUB is actually pretty fun because sometimes we play games or have snacks, and we read a book and do an activity,"** he says. **"Last time we were in person, we had a party at the end."** Lorimae, a second-grader in CLUB, also lit up when discussing the party. She

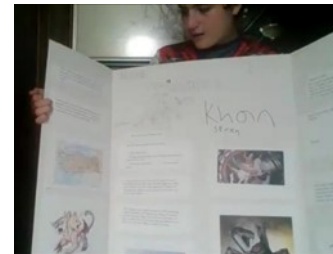
enjoyed the book-based games and liked sharing candy with some of her CLUB mates. Incorporating authentic opportunities for children and teens to connect and socialize is another element that makes CLUB so powerful. Such experiences happen all too infrequently for youth with ASD.



Setting the bar high. At the end of the 10-week program, the participants complete a final assignment and presentation related to the book. The project requires development of skills in organization, planning, and independent research, all of which are challenging for

most members of the group. Sharon sets the bar high and asks participants to expand on the concepts they learned in CLUB, and to present their project to the group. The project is definitely a challenge for many of the participants in CLUB, but Sharon motivates them to try even when the task feels really hard. Sharon supports participants through this process by providing resources and helping them organize their research findings. One of the CLUB participants, Khan, who is in middle school, says the final presentation in CLUB is difficult because it involves a lot of organization, but **"it is rewarding."** Khan says the presentation was a challenge, but he enjoyed it. **"I liked the challenge of being as good as you can. My presentation was good enough to be able to get [an award]."** In offering CLUB participants emotional support, Sharon helps them find motivation to complete a really challenging task. Success in this project is a huge milestone for the

participants in CLUB, and enables them to try, with reduced anxiety, projects assigned by their teachers at school.



Family insights. So many wonderful skills are taught and observed in CLUB. One of the most exciting parts of CLUB is that the

parents also notice meaningful social skill improvements and positive academic changes in their kids. The group is a space for growth, both socially and intellectually, and the parents can see the benefits. **"We have really seen Jaiden blossom socially over the year,"** Jaiden's mom says. **"I know it's because of his experience in CLUB."** The structure of CLUB and the support Sharon provides help participants practice critical academic skills without the distractions and pressures of their normal school classrooms. Khan's mom has been excited to see Khan's emerging academic skills. She describes Khan's progress as a jump forward. **"He wasn't even really reading before the first time he went to CLUB,"** she says. Now, Khan's participation in school has really started to flourish, and **"I've seen a huge change in him,"** she adds. **"He really participates [in school]."** And Khan adds, **"I even ask some odd questions."**

CLUB is an innovative program that supports youth with ASD through promoting meaningful thinking, focused work and social connections. The group is filled with empathy, encouragement, discovery and joy. During the pandemic, the biweekly virtual CLUB meetings have been an important avenue for participants to remain connected and practice their skills. And CLUB has become so well-loved that when it ends, participants miss the group, their friends and Sharon. **"It felt so weird how I wasn't going to CLUB anymore,"** Kahn says of how he felt after his session ended. **"Things didn't feel the same for like a week or two."**

The next CLUB group will meet over the summer, starting June 21. Email Sharon Conty at Conty@KennedyKrieger.org or Alyson Fagan at Fagan@KennedyKrieger.org to learn more.