

Device helps autistics learn more



SNOQUALMIE, Wash. (AP) — With a single glance, Kevin Verity can memorize numerical bar codes from groceries, then recall them days later without error. He reads at lightning speed, even when the book he's looking at is upside down.

But when it comes to telling his mother how he feels or explaining the root of his disturbing emotional outbursts, the 17-year-old runs into frustrating obstacles thrown up by autism, a neurological disorder he has suffered from all his life.

Now, thanks to a community fund-raising effort, Kevin owns a tool his family hopes will unlock isolated parts of his mind and personality. The device, called a communicator, is a small, hand-held computer with a miniature printer in it that churns out a continuous, thin strip of paper. The Eastside Serotoma Club, a local service organization, raised money for the \$1,500 device in March. Kevin got the communicator a few weeks later.

"This is a godsend," said Kevin's mother, Janet Verity of Snoqualmie. "To me, it's my son's voice."

Kevin can talk, but he usually communicates by repeating slogans from television commercials or verbatim dialogue from his favorite movies. It's the autistic boy's way of speaking while still withdrawing into himself, said Marcy McCarthy, a special education instructor at a clinic on Vashon Island where Kevin first used a communicator last year.

Typing seems to be an easier way for him to focus on his thoughts than speaking.

Even on the communicator, Kevin often starts by typing a rapid-fire stream of product sales pitches.

But a few gems of Kevin's thoughts and feelings have emerged on the strips of paper spit out by the communicator, said his mother, who sits with Kevin and places one hand on his to give him confidence and assistance when he uses the device.

One day, for instance, Kevin came home from school extremely upset. In between typing commercials, Kevin suddenly pecked out "hard day" when his mother asked why he was so agitated.

Last year, when he first began to use a communicator, Kevin revealed he likes mystery books. He also said that the special music therapy he was receiving at the time made his ears feel "worn out." For his parents, who always have had to guess what Kevin felt, the communication was a miracle.

"I'm happy with that because these are the most words my son has ever said in his life," Janet Ver-

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— Janet Verity,
mother of autistic boy

ity said.

Autistic people like Kevin have a rare disorder that impairs their ability to adapt to their environment and relate to other people. Doctors think autism may be related to a chemical imbalance that affects the transmission of nerve impulses.

In a way, autistics are trapped in a state of information overload. They can be overwhelmed by background noises the rest of us ignore. Colors, smells, sounds and lights, the stimuli that surrounds us, fills their heads with an unbearable din. To cope with the overstimulation, some autistics focus for hours on an inanimate object and don't speak at all. Others withdraw into rigid patterns of repeated behaviors.

Particular sounds — like coffee percolating, the whisper hiss of other people breathing, fluorescent lights buzzing in a store — drive Kevin into a frenzy, his mother said. He wears earplugs almost all of the time to filter out the noise.

Any interruption in his daily routine can set off frightening fits in which Kevin screams, yells and strikes himself. He can't even eat unless every single item at his place setting is exactly where it belongs. Once, when she was running late, Janet Verity made Kevin deviate from his morning regimen and take a shower before he had breakfast.

"All hell broke loose," she said. "His whole day was shot."

Kevin was diagnosed with autism when he was three years old. A doctor told Janet Verity that the family should put Kevin in an institution because he'd never learn to care for himself.

"He said Kevin would never tie his shoes, never be potty-trained, Kevin would never, never, never," Verity said. "We went out of that office so fast. I never returned to that doctor."

Kevin did learn to take care of himself, but he can't be left alone. Despite his obvious intelligence and dexterity in math and reading, Kevin doesn't recognize dangers in everyday actions, like crossing the street.

"It's the simple little things he can't handle," his mother said.

Summer hits state with vengeance

PORTLAND (AP) — "Summer is here!" gushed a usually staid meteorologist Monday as hot weather and the prospect of more to come finally pierced the depressing gloom that has been gripping Oregon.

And there's no rain in sight, added George Miller, meteorologist in charge of the National Weather Service office.

The mercury reached 100

degrees in Medford by 3 p.m. Monday, after hitting a sweltering 103 the day before.

Farther north, in Salem and Portland, mid-afternoon temperatures soared into the 90s.

After the second-wettest July on record, summer hit Oregon with a vengeance.

The heat and the drying winds were doing wonders for the rain-damaged wheat and

grass seed crop in the Willamette Valley.

"Remember when they were talking about the million-dollar rains that saved the wheat harvest east of the Cascades during the drought? Well we've got the million-dollar no rain that is saving us from large grass seed losses," said Mark Mellbye, an Oregon State extension agent.

ET ALS

MISCELLANEOUS

Museum of Natural History is sponsoring an old-growth hike Wednesday from 3 to 7 p.m. that begins at the museum. For more information, call 346-3024.

Deadline for submitting Et Als to the Emerald front desk, Suite 300 EMU, is noon the day before publication. The news editor does not have a time machine. Et Als run the day of the event unless the event takes place before noon.

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