

## **Adam's Story**

### *The Incomparable Gift of Understanding*

Adam is a thirteen year-old boy currently living with a Specialized Foster Family—and thriving under this family's care and guidance. However, it's been a long and challenging road for him; a road that became appreciably smoother when his needs were finally understood.

Adam first entered foster care in what's called a 'Kinship Placement'—the courts ordered his temporary removal from his mother's care out of a concern for his safety, and he lived with his grandmother and maternal aunt. Several months later, after his mother's condition stabilized, he returned home.

One year after his first removal from his mother's care, Adam entered foster care again—this time his grandmother and maternal aunt were unable to provide the degree of specialized parenting that Adam needed. He would see the inside of eight different homes—from family foster homes to residential treatment centers over the next three years.

Adam was described as 'extremely oppositional and defiant'. He was prone to episodes of angry outbursts that included yelling, cussing and verbal threats, refusal to take his medication, and attempts to run away (though he always stopped at the end of the block).

Residential staff approached Adam's behavior with the assumption that he was deliberately acting out against the rules and imposed structure. After two years, Adam was given a psychological evaluation wherein it was discovered he had a splintered cognitive profile—his skills were inconsistently developed, and he had difficulty using and understanding language. While his expressive and receptive language skills were severely compromised (verbal comprehension in the 8<sup>th</sup> percentile; perceptual reasoning skills in the 25<sup>th</sup> percentile, processing speed in the 16<sup>th</sup> percentile) his auditory working memory was well above average—in the 75<sup>th</sup> percentile.

Adam's cognitive needs were hidden behind his memory—his ability to 'parrot back' instructions from parents and professionals obscured his difficulty in understanding the meaning behind the words. Caregivers believed that Adam understood their directives and when he did not meet their expectations, he was seen as oppositional. Consequences were generally punitive and severe, which resulted in frustration and anger for caregivers and Adam, alike. Adam often felt misunderstood, lonely, and unjustly punished when he couldn't meet the unrealistic expectations that his caregivers inadvertently put on him. This lack of understanding created a negative reactive cycle—discovered, at last, through his psychological evaluation.

With a better of understanding of Adam's cognition, the residential staff began to understand Adam's needs, and they adjusted how they worked with him. Adam began to grow. His social skills improved, he was able to respond to directives more readily and there was a significant decrease in anger and verbal aggression. Most importantly, Adam began to feel better about himself.

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Adam's current caseworker first met him several years into his case when he was in a residential treatment facility. As his new worker, she met with Adam and his therapist. Adam turned away from his new caseworker, faced the wall, bent over with his head in his hands. His body language was clear: he had no room to let in this new woman.

Unresponsive to several verbal prompts, his therapist said, "Adam, you aren't being very polite." Still, there was no response. His caseworker said, "I know it's hard to change workers; we don't have to talk today, I'll be back and we'll get to know each other."

She told Adam that she would like to take him out for lunch the next time she came to visit, adding, "I'd like to come every two weeks so we can get to know each other better." The next time she met with Adam, he sat at the table with her.

While he sat at the table with his worker, Adam kept his focus on a spider he had rescued from the corner of the building. He had the spider in a styrofoam cup. He explained to his new caseworker how he could teach the spider tricks, and turned the cup upside down, the spider spinning a web into his hand. Then he gently put the spider back into the cup and let him do it again. His new caseworker sensed that the spider helped Adam to be more comfortable talking with her.

Adam shared his love for bugs, science and snakes. He said he really wanted a pet but all he could have in the residential setting was a spider. Soon Adam asked his caseworker what she did. She explained that she looks for homes for the children on her caseload.

Adam said, "How soon can you find me one, I hate this place."

"It takes time," she said, "because we want to make sure that we find you just the right place."

"Will you have a family for me the next time you come?"

"I don't think so, Adam; it takes time to find the right match," she told him.

At this, Adam became very angry. He bent over, put his head in his hands and began to make grunting noises as he rocked back and forth.

She said softly, "I know it's hard to wait but it's really important to find just the right family, you don't want it to be like it was when you first came into foster care... remember how hard it was for you?"

Adam said loudly, "I don't care! Anything would be better than here!"

His caseworker explained that she would do her best to find the right family, asking what he'd like in a family.

Adam said, "A mom and a dad, a dog, no little kids and no girls. I don't care if it's a foster family or adoptive; I just want out of here."

This scene marks such amazing progress that resulted largely from his caregivers' understanding of his needs. Adam was able to work through his frustration over the unsatisfying news his caseworker had

regarding a family for him. He engaged with his caseworker, he had been able to develop the language skills to talk with her, rather than acting out his anger. Adam was beginning to develop self-regulating skills that will help him for the rest of his life.

In February of 2010, Adam moved from the residential treatment center to live with a Specialized Foster Family. This family has demonstrated a talent for parenting kids who express behaviors associated with Autism spectrum disorders. The growth Adam saw following his psychological evaluation has not only continued, but accelerated.

Two weeks after moving in with his Specialized Foster Family, Adam asked if he could stay there forever. His caseworker explained that the family is a foster family and she couldn't answer that question right now.

As she was leaving his room Adam came to the door and said, "You want a hug?"

She turned and said, "Sure." He gave her a huge bear hug and said, "Thank you... it was worth the wait."

Adam is not alone. Many children who enter foster care have unique emotional, behavioral, developmental, or medical needs.

These children need families like Adam's Specialized Foster Family.

These children need families that are:

- familiar with their needs (*IEPs, unique social skills, medications, therapies*),
- skilled in parenting to them (*hold realistic expectations, structured yet flexible*), and
- willing to work closely in partnership with a treatment team (*caseworkers, therapists*)

These children need families to turn dissociative frustration into bear hugs.

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*The success of children in Boulder County depends on the willingness of adults to take action.*