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PRESENTS

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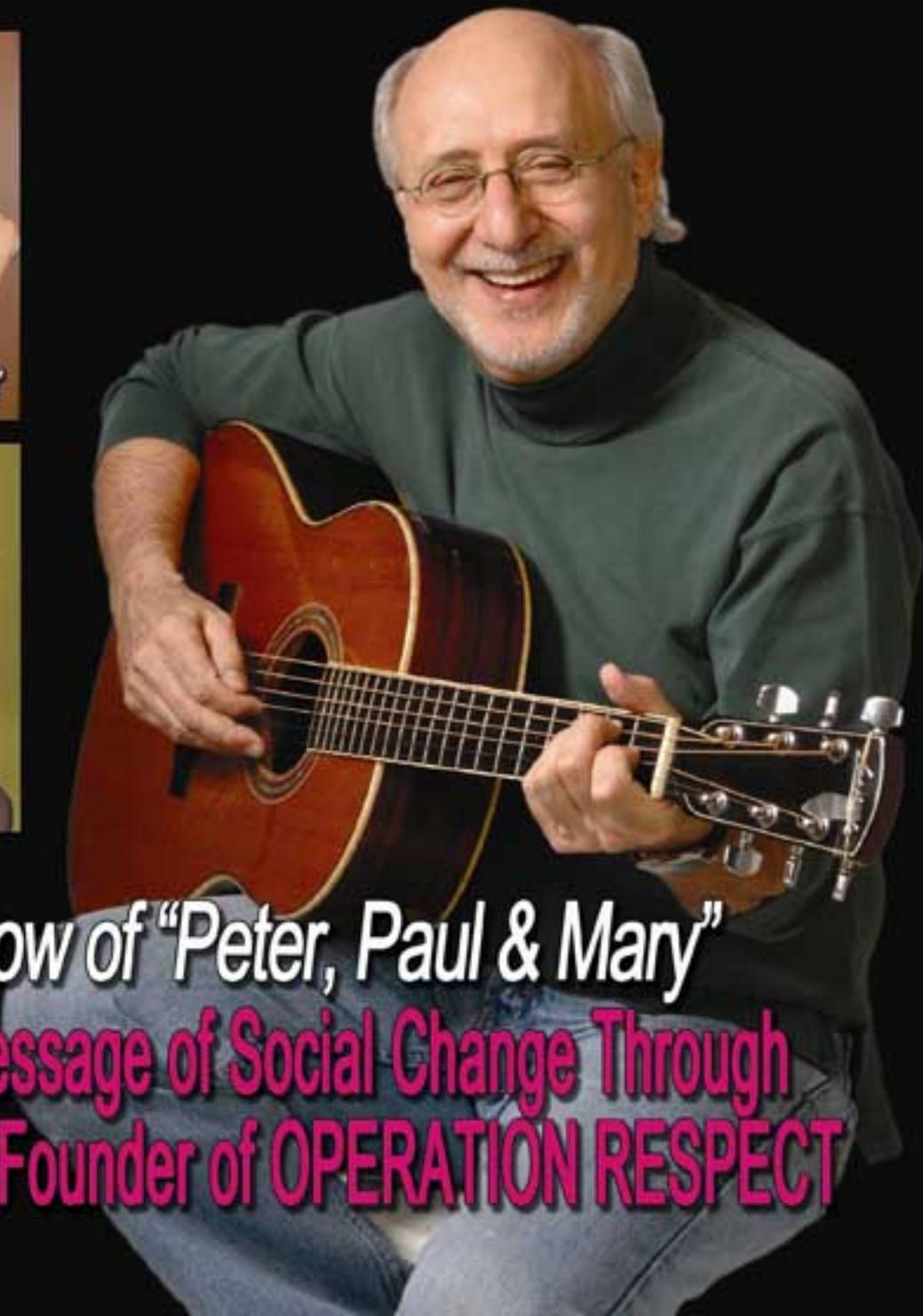
The **AUTISM** magazine
TAP INTO IT.
perspective



From Autism to All-Star



The Birthday Party



Peter Yarrow of "Peter, Paul & Mary"
Sings a New Message of Social Change Through
His Music as the Founder of OPERATION RESPECT

Language Via Literacy:

By Arlene Maidman

Who Would Have Believed It?

It was October 9th of 2003 when we started on a path that changed our lives and the life of our daughter, Julia. She was four years old—two years older than when we had first been given the diagnosis that she was autistic. The intensive intervention program that we had put in place had not taken us very far. So it was at the suggestion of our pediatrician that my husband, Julia and I found ourselves in the office of Dr. Marion Blank at Columbia University's Developmental Neuropsychiatry Program.



Dr. Blank advised us to try a program called A Light on Literacy that was wildly different from any that ever entered our minds. She said, "I can't promise you that Julia will speak, but from my experience with other nonverbal children, I feel confident that—with the correct teaching—you can teach her to read and write." She then added: "The program is not easy. It takes extraordinary diligence in carrying out the instructions and in using the materials you are given. But it can be amazingly effective."

Our heads were swirling. We did not know if we were being led down a garden path; we did not know if we were up to the challenge; we did not know if we were up to allowing ourselves the luxury of hope. Our home-based therapists who were talented professionals showed a skepticism that was even greater than ours: "Julia reading and writing? It's not possible." Still, we could not just drop the matter. Dr. Blank's credentials and knowledge were impressive. If she believed that our daughter might achieve anywhere near the results she indicated, we felt we had to give it a chance.

We may have doubted Dr. Blank at first, but the results proved us wrong. It is now October 2006 and Julia IS reading, writing, and even speaking. Her command of language has reached places we never would have imagined possible.

Just as Dr. Blank had said, her program is unbelievably methodical. Reading fundamentals take place in every activity—even when the activity seems to have no connection to the printed word. For example, we regularly had to carry out visual sequencing activities involving sets of different colors. Every single array had to go from left to right because, as Dr. Blank told us, we read from left to right. Sounds pretty simple, but too often these little things are overlooked. It is the attention to every last detail that makes the system work.

Dr. Blank always tried to get us to

understand the logic of her system, and she would raise aspects of language that were, for us, akin to a foreign language. I remember being bewildered when she first used the term "non-content words." These are the little words like the, is, but, not, are, that are often specifically excluded from language programs for children with autism. She would say: "Think of the difference in meaning between 'the girls are sitting' and 'the girls were sitting,' or 'the lady is sleeping' and 'the lady is not sleeping.' Those little words are central to real language. If we do not teach children how to master them, they will never have a real working language system."

We had no idea what had hit us. BUT within a few weeks, Julia began to read



and write. Before we started, I asked how we would know if Julia actually understood what she was reading. Dr. Blank said, "You'll know when she can do things like this." She then put three toys on the table—a truck, a doll, and a bed and wrote, "Give me the truck." That day, Julia did nothing—but three months later, without anyone saying a word, she read the card and did just what it "said." In addition, Julia was, and still is, completely enamored with the computer program Dr. Blank developed as part of her reading system. Reading has added a joy and interest to

her life that is beyond description.

In teaching a child how to write, Dr. Blank uses a unique technique of hand support. Often, those who watch think that the adult is writing for the child or directing the child's hand. It was not until I began to teach Julia myself that I saw how this technique simply helps control the child's fine motor problems and allows the production of legible, neat writing. From day one, it was Julia's hand leading mine. Now we are well beyond that. Julia—with total independence—can type faster than I can on the computer. (Her handwriting is also independent, but still somewhat "sloppy.")

Amazingly, about a year after Julia started to read and write, she started to speak. We don't know exactly why this has happened, but we have some clues. Visual language was far simpler for her to process. She could literally "see" how language could be useful and comprehensible. Once speech began, Dr. Blank created another program that was designed to extend Julia's spoken language by integrating with and building on her written language. For example, when we try to get Julia to say a relatively long sentence, (she can now produce sentences 8 to 10 words in length), we first write it out for her. She reads it. Then we take the paper away, and she can say it.

The change goes far beyond reading and writing. The world of print has a calming effect that enables Julia to handle situations that used to scare her to death and tear our hearts to shreds. When plans change, or if we need to communicate information such as who is coming over for dinner, or who is picking her up from school, we write it out for her. The words on the paper offer her the information she needs and her anxiety subsides.

She even enjoys going out to a restaurant now. Why not? She can read the menu and make a selection. Quite empowering. Quite a confidence-booster. Written language has enabled Julia to start becoming

a part of our world instead of being stuck in her own.

More importantly, the better Julia relates to us, the better we relate to her. It is truly amazing what an impact written language can have on the autistic population, but how little effort seems to be put into teaching these children to read. For years, these children have not been given the credit that they could read. Without reading, we are closing them into their own world instead of opening up our world to them.

This is not to say that Julia does not have a very, very long way to go. I still get upset when I think where Julia is compared to the mainstream population. But I am fortunate that my friend, Samantha, is there to remind me that my mantra three years ago was "If only Julia could say Mommy." Then I realize how huge the progress has been.

Julia's ten-year-old brother, Harry, captured the situation in a school essay he wrote last spring on the theme of "turning points"



Julia and Arlene

"Everyone who seeks a more compassionate and wise life will benefit from this wonderful, insightful and beautiful book. It is a very short step from understanding autism and the God Connection to understanding you and the God Connection."

—GARY ZUKAV, AUTHOR OF *THE SEAT OF THE SOUL* AND *THE DANCING WU LI MASTERS*

Autism and the God Connection

Redefining the Autistic
Experience Through
Extraordinary Accounts
of Spiritual Giftedness

By William Stillman

in his life. He wrote: "The turning point for me was the day my sister went to see Dr. Blank. Now she can read, she can write, she can communicate. She can even do math. She can even play Candyland!"

A Final Note:

I have written this piece, in part, to express the enormous pride I feel for Julia and to offer other parents a message of hope that is based in reality. But I have another goal. For too long, the language intervention has been "guided" by the assumption that written language must follow spoken language. I know the view. I was there! I do not deny that this statement describes the sequence of development in "normal" children. That is not, however, sufficient reason for applying it to our children. Its primary effect is to deprive them of the opportunity to read and write. So I hope my story serves as a catalyst for opening a dialogue on options that have for too long been closed. **TAP**

Language Via Literacy:

By Marion Blank, Ph.D.

The Children Who Made This Journey Possible

My story begins four decades ago when I was just starting my career in language research. A colleague suggested that I might find it interesting to see a hyperlexic child. I didn't even know what the term meant, but I soon learned that it was a condition where development was sort of turned on its head—with skill in written language preceding and exceeding skill in spoken language.

So there he was, an appealing four-year-old Korean boy diagnosed as autistic. He seemed oblivious to everything but the New York Times, which he was avidly reading aloud. That day, a headline in the paper announced the development of “hexachlorophene” —a new antiseptic agent. Without skipping a beat, he pronounced the word as if it were no more difficult than “cat.” At the same time, when he was asked, “What are the letters of the alphabet?” he replied, “A-L-P-H-A-B-E-T.”

The experience was amazing, though I had no idea how to fit it into any theoretical framework. That changed about ten years later when I was developing programs to teach spoken language to children with diagnoses of autism and aphasia. One child was Paul, another four-year-old hyperlexic. My work with him led me to see not simply the different skill with which he handled written and spoken words. It also led me to see the phenomenally different motivation each elicited. The printed word offered a world of comfort and fascination; the spoken word, an unpleasant, confusing morass.

I began to wonder if he would find

spoken language more appealing if it were made to be the “same” as written language; in other words, to package the teaching so that spoken and written language were identical. The written material he loved most involved maps; words like Constantinople

I began to wonder if he would find spoken language more appealing if it were made to be the “same” as written language; in other words, to package the teaching so that spoken and written language were identical.

were like manna to him. Clearly this would not be basis of a useful spoken language system.

The only option was to design books so they mirrored the spoken language he was learning. At first, the idea seemed to boomerang. Within a few sentences in the very first book, Paul realized that the written page was now saying the same things as the

words he was speaking. He threw down the book and cried. It was as if his safe, private world had been breached.

But by then I was familiar with what parents learn early on. Change is difficult and likely to be resisted. So (admittedly a bit chastened) I decided to continue the effort “for a few weeks.” Lo and behold, within three weeks, Paul was willing to deal with both systems of language and just as I had dreamed, the written language clearly helped him master the spoken language I was trying to teach. His progress was wonderful and all of us (parents, myself and Paul)—albeit in different ways—were delighted at the improvement.

Empowered with success, I wanted to use this approach with other children. But hyperlexia is relatively rare. Not many children elect to become adept at reading. I wondered if autistic children who do not spontaneously develop reading might also benefit from learning how to read — along with learning how to speak.

My goals were to have the children’s language be as complete as possible. This meant they had to acquire both expressive

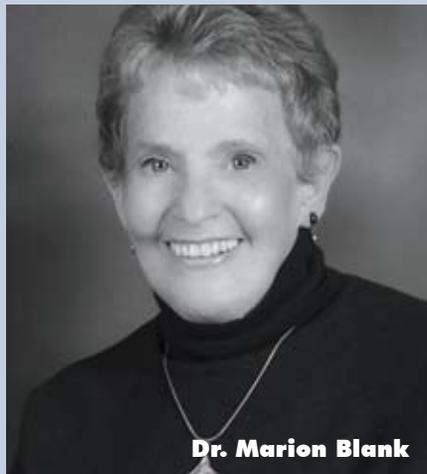
and receptive skills. In oral language this involved speaking and listening; in written language, writing and reading. With Paul, this had not been an issue. He had made it easy for me since he could write as easily as he could read. Not so with the “non-hyperlexic” children. Further, most of them had significant fine motor limitations – so independent writing was out of the question.

Fortunately, I had another tool in my armamentarium. I had consulted on helping deaf children with cerebral palsy master language skills. We had achieved some excellent results in teaching them sign language by supporting their hands as they executed the movements. I decided to apply similar principles in teaching the children with autism to write—both in writing by hand and in typing on the computer.

I was as amazed as the parents by the children’s skills. Although we supported their hands, we never had to make the movements for them. We started with the simplest single line letters (such as o, l, c, j) and moved steadily to those that were more complex. From day one, they were able to execute the correct movements and within four to six weeks, they learned the entire alphabet. The hand support seemed to release the attention they had to give to positioning the hand, enabling them to concentrate on producing the shapes they needed. Within about a year’s time, most of the children could type independently at the computer. Independence in handwriting was more difficult and some children never completely mastered it.

With the mechanics under control, I could focus on the content of the teaching. The results could not have been more heartening. The children’s love of written language was almost as great as that of the hyperlexic children; further, written language acquisition clearly supported their spoken language progress. For example, Adam, a boy six years of age, was stuck at three- to four-word utterances. I remembered show-

ing him a five-word sentence—The boys are not sitting. He easily read it—since reading requires dealing with only one word at a time. Then I removed the sentence from view and asked him to say it again. His eyes turned up, as if he was “reading” the words in his mind’s eye (which is almost certainly what he was doing). Then for the first time, he produced a five-word sentence. As often happens in development, that breakthrough presaged a host of significant gains.



Dr. Marion Blank

My next big move came via Barry. He was a six-year-old boy who was willing and able to do many complex visual-motor activities. But in the two years I had known him, he never uttered a speech-type sound. Refusing to accept the status quo, I said to the parents: “I don’t know how to get Barry to speak. But because of the way I’ve designed my written language system, everything is in place to teach him to read and write. I think we might be able to offer him language via this other route.”

The parents looked at me in exactly the way so many people since have looked at me. Their faces expressed total disbelief. But they trusted me and they knew no harm would come to their child. So we started.

Once again, I had the phenomenal gratification of being amazed by a child. Barry took to the program with a zeal and skill that I would not have believed possible. Within a couple of months, he was

writing sentences and within a month after that, answering questions. As I was to learn many times over, the non-speaking children often take to the program better than the ones who speak. It is as if they finally have a route into language they have been hungering for.

Julia is, happily, one of these children. She is also one of the several non-speaking children who use written language as a base for moving into spoken language.

Both as a researcher and a clinician, I yearn for the day when we will know how this happens. For now, I am thrilled to help make it happen.

In talking about the excitement, I don’t want to underplay the effort that is required. For the families, the daily work is, as Arlene has said, very demanding. Progress is accomplished only through major commitment and effort on the part of the parents. Just as with the children, they steadily amaze me. Their dedication is truly unbelievable and, more than I can say, I am grateful for the trust they have placed in me to help their children reach levels that astound us all. **TAP**

Dr. Marion Blank, Ph.D., is the Director of the A Light on Literacy program at Columbia University (ALight@childpsych.columbia.edu). Dr. Blank has spent over 40 years studying how children learn to read. She has lectured extensively around the world, served as a consultant to government bureaus abroad, authored the widely used Preschool Language Assessment Instrument, developed an award-winning computer program that teaches reading, and written over sixty articles and six books on language and literacy. Her alternative method has helped thousands of children learn to read, and her latest book, “The Reading Remedy,” and her new reading system, Phonics Plus Five, makes the ideas behind her comprehensive program available to every parent. More information is available at www.doctorblank.com.