

# The Friendship Kit

*Creating a successful buddy program and lasting friendships for autistic children*



# How did one mom make it happen?



**W**hen it comes to parenting a child on the autism spectrum, don't you wish that there was a book with all the answers? A roadmap to helping them grow and thrive? Each autistic child is unique and there are no "one size fits all" solutions to making sure we're meeting our children's needs. We may not know what to do at any given time, but we must trust that we have the strength within us to figure it out...to find and, sometimes, fight for their therapies, services, schools and programs. And if the right 'thing' doesn't exist? We must find the courage to create the solutions ourselves because our children our worth fighting for!

For many children on the autism spectrum, developing friendships can be a challenge. In this e-book, you'll discover the steps one mom, Lisa Smith, took to create a buddy program for her son, Tate. Through education, coaching and teamwork, Tate's peers consider him a valued member of their class and treat him as an equal. Lisa has given us permission to share how she did it. I know that you'll be inspired and take away some strategies you can try.

Lisa Smith is a parent we can all model ourselves after. She proactively works to build a strong support team and welcoming community for her autistic son, Tate. What's important to note is that Lisa is an introvert at heart but she'll do whatever she has to do to keep her children safe and happy.

Be resourceful! You have the power within to make it happen.

Jodi Murphy  
Mother, Wife and Founder  
Geek Club Books  
[www.geekclubbooks.com](http://www.geekclubbooks.com)  
Autism storytelling for positive change

# Checklist for Building Friendships

People are so amazed that my son with autism has friends and I get that. I marvel at it myself. The very description of autism is about as far from the word “friend” as a person can get. Words like: aloof, detached, and indifferent, are descriptive of autism, right? So how can a kid with autism have a friend or be a friend? Below are the components that were used to create the friendships Tate has. This may not work for everyone with autism but these are the things we did.

## Inclusion

Tate was in the classroom with typically developing peers for most of his day in grade school. His peers became very familiar with his behaviors and his needs. In Junior High Tate spends a lot more of his day in an individualized education setting because he works at a much lower grade level than his peers. However, the relationships developed in grade school are still being nurtured often in various settings.

## Education

This one is HUGE. We never hid Tate’s diagnosis from his peers or their parents. When Tate did things that seemed odd the kids could ask questions and they were given age appropriate information. I asked Tate’s teachers to read books about children with autism with their class. When people are given correct information and edu-

cated they are not left to come up with their own version of the truth. Tate was never thought of as “weird” because his classmates and their parents were educated about autism.

## Social Skills Coaching

Tate had full support at school. An adult was constantly giving Tate instruction in social skills. On occasion, members of Tate’s IEP team would suggest Tate did not need support on the playground but instead needed free time (which would have been used by Tate to pace alone and stim). I insisted the playground was a crucial time for him to receive coaching. This playground coaching played a large part in developing friendships. Tate was pushed to play with peers and peers were encouraged to include him in games and to give him support themselves. The Paraprofessional was able to stand back and watch as the other children engaged Tate in play sometimes.

## Lunch Buddies and Other Social Skills Programs

We had organized social skills programs for Tate. The speech teacher came into Tate’s classroom twice a week in the early grades and organized board games and other activities for Tate and a few peers to engage in together. She coached the peers on how best to interact with Tate while she was coaching Tate on how to behave appropriate-

**Where can you follow Lisa and her family’s autism journey?**

Quirks and Chaos Blog  
<http://quirks-and-chaos.blogspot.com/>

Quirks and Chaos Facebook Page  
<https://www.facebook.com/QuirksAndChaos/>

Lisa on The Mighty  
<http://themighty.com/author/lisa-smith/>

ly. We started a lunch buddy program in second grade and it was invaluable. Today, social skills are still a part of Tate's daily education.

## **His Own Personal Advocate**

Many of the programs and supports Tate needed to develop friendships would not have been put in place had we not hired an advocate. She occasionally observed Tate at school, made recommendations, and always came to our IEP meetings. Our advocate was more knowledgeable about autism and the law than many of our IEP team members. She could often provide data to support her reasoning and she requested and received things for Tate that I had never thought to ask for. An advocate is very expensive but ours was worth every penny. Note: If you cannot afford an advocate my advice would be to get a Wright's Law Book and study.

## **Willing Peers**

Without kind, willing peers Tate could not have friends. We had willing peers with compassionate parents who allowed their children to be pulled from other activities occasionally to be peer models for Tate.

## **Teachers Who Were Vested**

We have had some rock star teachers involved over the years. Not every teacher was willing to work hard or believed in what we were doing but most did. The speech teachers have usually been the ones to drive the lunch buddy program for us but others have helped too. Tate's Paraprofessionals had to shoulder the majority of the responsibility much of the time as they are the ones who spend the most time with Tate. They reinforced all the social skills lessons into all aspects of Tate's day. Without all these hard-working adults we would not have gotten far.

## **Parents Willing To Work**

No one's involvement is more important than the parent. We badgered administrators and teachers for programs we thought really mattered and we were not afraid to ask for things they had never done before. We paid for an advocate. We provided books about autism and social skills to teachers. I dropped donuts off at the school occasionally for the students participating in the lunch buddy program. I volunteered at the school and tried to keep an eye on Tate and his progress from the sidelines. I had to invest time in getting to know other parents. Other parents were not going to be willing to allow their children to have play dates with mine if they barely knew me. I had to "borrow" their kids after school occasionally and go to the park or get ice cream. And during those times I was the social skills coach. Early on Tate was not thrilled when I arranged play dates but I did it anyway.

## **Patience**

It did not happen overnight. Tate was in class with some of these kids for four years before he could tell them apart or remember their names. It took ages for Tate to develop reciprocal relationships with these kids and it took a lot of hard work. Tate had to be taught really basic social skills and those had to be reinforced for years. His peers had to be educated about autism and the adults in Tate's life had to utilize every opportunity they could find to work on social skills. At the beginning a lot of Tate's relationships were very one-sided. The peers were nice to him but he was not interested in them. We did not give up. I can honestly say that Tate has friends his own age now. He is able to actively participate in friendship. I did not know if we would ever get here but we have.



*Tate in between two of his buddies, Jordan and Ethan (photo courtesy of Quirks and Chaos with parent permission)*

## **Lisa on the Value of Teachers**

*"I am not sure educators always understand their significance or the difference they make in the lives of the children they teach. I have raised (or am raising) five typically developing children. Their teachers have made a difference! However, it is my experience, when a child has a disability or cannot communicate well, the differences a teacher can make seem to be even bigger. When a teacher takes her responsibility (the job she or he signed up for) seriously she can move mountains. When a teacher bullies, is uncooperative or lazy, the student cannot make progress and a lot of time is lost that can never be regained. A teacher has the ability to make our lives so much easier or to make our lives much more difficult. Small things that would only take minutes can sometimes save our son (and his parents) hours of anxiety. Thankfully, we have had dozens and dozens of people who did take their jobs seriously for every one that did not. I can only remember a very few who would have made better "burger flippers" than teachers."*



**Breaking It Down:  
Tate's Lunch  
Buddy Program**

The following describes Tate's lunch buddy program. Part of the beauty of a lunch buddy program is that it can be "tailored to fit" and changed as needed.

## Pre-Buddy Program Preparation

I first heard of lunch buddies when I was at an autism conference before Tate ever began school. As soon as I heard the program described I was "sold" on the idea. I began asking for a program for Tate when he started first grade. After we discussed the lunch buddy program at a meeting and considered it for first grade, it was agreed that we would wait and begin it in second grade. There were several reasons involved. We already had several social skills programs in place that first year of all-day public school and they were very time-consuming for the staff. The speech teacher had launched a social skills group for Tate, pulling peers from his class two or three times a week to play games and encourage Tate to interact with his peers. We had an adult coach with Tate at recess prompting him to play with peers so he would not wander aimlessly, isolated or lost in repetitive behaviors. Tate was struggling to learn the names of his classmates so photographs of all his classmates were obtained and he practiced naming them and matching children to their names as part of his day. The school staff was working hard on so many things that the lunch buddy program was put off until the following school year.

## Be Clear on the Purpose

When Tate began second grade, at my insistence the lunch buddies program was added. The purpose of the lunch buddy program was for Tate to learn social skills that he could then generalize into other settings. Our hope was to teach Tate skills by coaching him and eventually fading the prompts. Let me be clear: a lunch buddy program by itself is not going to teach your child all the social skills they need to learn. It is one of many things we have done to help Tate learn social skills. The skills he has learned from the lunch buddy program have been reinforced

over and over throughout his day since we began the program. Mastering skills was not something accomplished in one year. Tate has had a lunch buddy program for five years and it has taken a very long time to see a lot of results.

The lunch buddy program has been successful, in that Tate can sit amongst friends in a lunch setting and be fairly comfortable. Tate has learned skills and the coach has been faded much of the time. Tate still has autism but he is able to handle himself and respond appropriately in so many situations now due to all this coaching. As it turns out I often hear from the parents of the typically developing children who have participated that their children have learned so much from Tate. They are thankful that their children have learned about autism and have become very comfortable around my child with special needs. Among the things these children have learned are compassion, understanding, patience and perseverance. They also have a pretty good idea about what autism is and could probably generalize what they have learned to interact with other people with special needs.

## Step One: Telling His Classmates WHY

I am a firm believer that the children who participated should be told about my child's disability. I do not believe the lunch buddy program would have been successful for us without the full-disclosure that I insisted upon. Explaining WHY Tate is different than they are and WHY Tate NEEDS so much more instruction than they do was key. Children who are educated about autism are far less likely to bully a child with autism in my opinion. I do not have statistics on this. I did what made sense to me. I insisted from first grade on that Tate's classmates be told that Tate has autism and then given an age appropriate definition of autism. I wrote a personalized definition with illustrations in a picture book format for the kids. It started out very simply in first grade and got a little more detailed with each passing year. When Tate was in first grade I wrote a note to parents that went home in the first graders' backpacks, explaining autism and letting them know their child had a classmate with autism. I wanted to

take the mystery out of the reasons that Tate was followed around by a Para-Professional throughout his day. I wanted parents to be ready with an answer if--and when--their child came home and asked questions about Tate.

## The Evolution of the Lunch Buddy Program

The lunch buddy program has evolved a lot over the years. We learned what worked and what did not and tweaked it as we went.

### **\*Grade School: Permission slips and Prompts**

Parent permission slips had to be signed so the students could participate. Tate's whole class wanted to be involved and got those permission slips back quickly. The kids LOVED teaching Tate. When we began, in second grade it started with one teacher or Para-Professional sitting with Tate amongst several of his peers. His peers were coached before lunch on how to try to involve Tate in their conversations. It was very hard for Tate to engage back then. He would talk to adults but not easily to children.

The kids would ask him questions they had rehearsed with a teacher in a short meeting. A peer might ask Tate, "Do you have pets?" Tate would answer, "Yes". The adult would maybe have to whisper to Tate and tell him what to say next. So Tate might be coached to say, "I have a dog and two cats."

The peer would respond appropriately and ask the names of the pets. The adult coach would push Tate to answer questions and then reciprocate to the child who had done the asking. So Tate would be told to ask, "Do YOU have any pets?" It was amazing to see the difference in the typically developing children and Tate. The peers just knew how to respond and keep a conversation going, whereas Tate had to be told. The peers knew they should reciprocate with another question and keep the "ball bouncing" while Tate did not. Heavy prompts had to be used for Tate.

After trying these very scripted types of things and Tate not making a whole lot of progress, it was determined that the lunchroom setting was pretty overwhelming for Tate. So, instead of the noisy lunchroom, they moved to a classroom or the library where it was quiet and Tate would be more comfortable. Tate never eats a school lunch and has taken the same lunch from home for seven long years (peanut butter sandwich-no jelly, chips and a couple of cookies.)

The kids that wanted to participate in the lunch buddy program after that first year would bring a sack lunch and commit to being a lunch buddy for a week at a time. Usually there were two or three kids who would eat with Tate for a week. The kids' questions and conversation starters were scripted with note cards beside them or even written on a placemat. The kids got so good at doing this that a lot of times the "cheat sheets" were not used. The students became therapists themselves and the teacher would often sit back amazed at how well the kids were doing. Conversation skills are not the only thing that is worked on during lunch. Posture and body language is also constantly targeted. Keeping Tate from stimming with his hands and fingers and just looking odd in general has been a huge part of the lunch buddy program.

### **\*Recess: Engaging Tate in Play**

Recess came right after lunch so the buddy program was carried over into the noon recess. The lunch buddies were asked to try to engage Tate in play at recess too. Tate often declined or tried to decline but his adult coach was right there encouraging him to participate in the peer activities.

### **\*Junior High: More Independence**

For sixth grade Tate and his class moved to the junior high. The lunch buddy program continued. Tate and his lunch buddy group sat in the lunchroom that year, but at a table off to the side. It was still noisy and a bit overwhelming but doable. An adult was present every day but if the kids could keep the conversation going and Tate



interacting the teacher was able to sit back and watch.

In seventh grade, Tate sits at the long tables with his peers three days a week with a teacher observing from a distance. If he becomes distressed or looks overwhelmed they go in and “rescue” the situation but the kids are always friendly and willing to help Tate too if they can. Two days a week the lunch buddies are back at the small table off to the side with a peer or two and a teacher. They are working on reciprocity and the coach is prompting Tate when necessary to ask APPROPRIATE questions and not just repeat the same question that was asked of him. One day each week a Resource Room teacher is the adult at the table and one day a week the speech pathologist is the adult at the table.

## The Keys to Success

There are a lot of variables involved in a successful lunch buddy program. I have mentioned the education of the students so they understand the

child’s disability as one of these variables. Another is very obvious. You must have students willing to participate. We were lucky. The kids LIKED being Tate’s teachers. It made them feel important. The staff involved often praised these kids and let them know what a difference they were making.

When Tate was in grade school I occasionally took donuts to the kids who were participating in the program. Without the kids motivated to help there would have been no success. Another must, also an obvious one, is a staff that is excited about the program. If the staff had not jumped on board and made the lunch buddy program FUN and interesting then the peer models would NOT have been motivated to participate. Tate has been blessed with several rock-star teachers who love their jobs.

Lastly, I had to be vested in the idea. I pushed and pushed and pushed some more for social skills teaching in every IEP meeting we had and followed up to make sure things were happening. Let me insert here. I have had good relationships with almost all of Tate’s teachers and Para-Professionals. Had we been using our energy to argue instead of using it to help Tate then the lunch buddy program would have probably failed.

## Tate Still has Autism

Tate’s social skills are still very poor compared to his peers. He still is not really keeping up his half of a friendship with these kids at all. Tate has peers that are so good to him and so friendly but he does not have nearly as much interest in them. He is sometimes even rude to them. We have seen VAST improvement though because of the lunch buddy program. I remember reading when Tate was newly diagnosed that it would take hundreds of repetitive trials to teach him the things that other children were just absorbing from their environment. Tate has had over 900 of these lunches with his peer models and adult coaches at this point. I am confident that I would be living with a “different” Tate had he not had this program in place.

## **Note for Teachers Example:**

*This is the kind of list Lisa has handed her son's teachers in elementary school. Use it as a guideline for creating your own list specific to your child when you meet a teacher for the first time.*

### **What I'd Like You to Know About My Child with Autism**

#### **Autism is a huge spectrum.**

If you have taught children with autism before you may have a good general idea of what autism looks like. My son will still be different than the others. If you have questions about how autism affects him, ask me. Nothing will impress me more about you than your willingness to learn about my son's needs.

#### **A routine and transition warnings are helpful for a child with autism.**

While we know that flexibility is an important life skill and one we need to work on, my child does not handle surprises or big changes in his routine well. Things like a substitute teacher, a fire drill, or a field trip are all going to cause anxiety. A warning and clear instructions will help reduce anxiety. A visual schedule is a helpful tool. Before transitioning to a new activity (especially when going from a preferred activity to a non-preferred activity) a five-minute warning, a two-minute warning, and patience will be needed.

#### **A child with autism needs extra time to process language.**

Use simple language and short sentences. Give no more than two-step instructions. Give my child at least three full seconds after you make a statement or ask a question to respond. If you choose to repeat, do not rephrase, as then he will have to start processing over again. Trying to hurry my child will only slow him down further.

#### **Receptive language and expressive language are two different things.**

My child may understand much more than you think he does. He may not be able to put into words all the things he wants to say. On the other hand he may be able to quote long complicated phrases or passages without understanding any of the meaning of the words. It is difficult to know exactly what my child really knows and what he still needs to learn sometimes.

#### **Children with autism are literal.**

Figurative language and abstract ideas are a mystery to a child with autism. So, when you say things like, "Pick up the pace" and your other students know you want them to walk faster, my son will be looking for something called "pace" that he should be lifting from the floor. These things happen all day long.

#### **A child with autism can get stuck on one subject.**

My child obsesses about things that probably won't matter to you. He might want to talk about Disney movie characters or Muppets for a long period of time and there will be little you can do to distract him. He gets stuck in a continuous loop. Occasionally these topics of interest can be incorporated into his learning but mostly they distract him from learning.

## **Note for Teachers Example (Page 2)**

### **A child with autism may need help with social interactions.**

My son will probably appear disinterested in his peers and he may actually be disinterested but he will never learn social skills unless we keep trying. You have him in a perfect setting for teaching social skills. It is an environment I cannot recreate at home. It would be so helpful if you would use every opportunity available there to teach and reteach social skills.

### **Sensory issues are a distraction for many children with autism.**

Sounds that are barely noticeable to you may distract my child and keep him from learning. Textures may cause my son to recoil in disgust. Smells may cause him to gag. Please be considerate of this. Over stimulation can sometimes overwhelm him and cause a meltdown. A meltdown looks similar to a temper tantrum but it is not the same at all.

### **Children with autism use stereotypic behaviors or repetitive behaviors when they are excited, bored, or stressed.**

My son will need redirection throughout the day. The behaviors will cause him to appear odd to his peers. Please consider giving the class an age appropriate definition of autism to help his peers understand.

### **Positive Reinforcement will be helpful but punishments will not.**

Punishments or threats of punishment will probably result in anxiety and impede progress. He will work toward a reward but will shut down if he fears a punishment.

### **People with autism tell the truth as they see it.**

My son may let you know you need to lose weight, you need a shave, or your breath smells bad. Do not take it personally. A sense of humor is a must when working with children with autism.

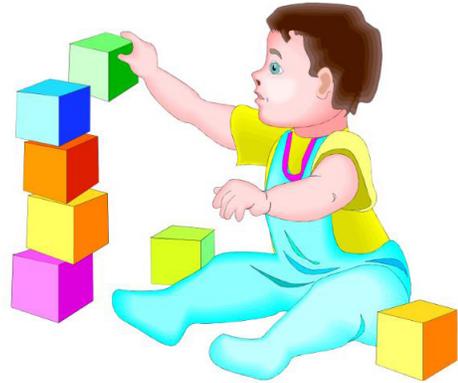
### **Kids with autism are not scary or unlovable.**

They are just different. Sometimes different is intimidating but educating yourself about autism and about my son will help. I can help with that! I will willingly answer any questions you have.

**BONUS TIP: NOTHING IS MORE IMPORTANT IN MY CHILD'S EDUCATION THAN COMMUNICATION BETWEEN HOME AND SCHOOL.**

# What is autism?

by Lisa Smith



Most of us have two eyes that see, two ears that hear and a mouth that can talk. Most babies learn to walk around their first birthday and they learn to talk before their second birthday.



Some people have two eyes but they see things differently. They have ears but they hear things differently and even though they can speak with their mouths the words come out differently. Some children are born with something called autism. One of your classmates has autism. His name is Tate.



Tate likes a lot of the same things you do, but he likes them in a different way. When Tate plays in the sandbox, he doesn't build castles or make roads. He sifts through the sand and watches it fall through his fingers. You might think that is fun, too; but you would get bored watching the sand fall after a few minutes. Tate would watch the sand fall for a very long time. Then he would miss a lot of other fun activities before he tried something different. Tate would need someone like you to show him how to make a sand castle.

## Class Story Example (continued)



Tate can talk like other kids, but he cannot have a long conversation. Conversation is when friends talk to each other about things they see or things they like to do. Tate tries to talk to other kids, but sometimes his words seem very strange. He likes to repeat the words he hears from movies or reads in books. You can talk to Tate about things you like, too.



Tate doesn't talk as fast as other kids do and he doesn't think as fast as you can. It takes Tate several seconds to understand what is said to him. He will talk to you if you give him enough time to think about what he wants to say. Be patient and wait for Tate to respond when you ask him a question. Then listen because sometimes Tate has some really neat things to tell you about.



Tate is like you if you love books. He can read. Tate is probably different than you because he likes to memorize all the words in his books.



Most kids like to try new things. Trying new things makes Tate very nervous. He likes for everything to stay in its proper place, and for things to be done the same way every time.

## Class Story Example (continued)



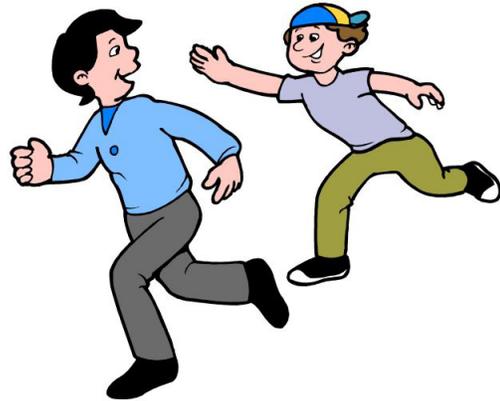
When Tate gets nervous or excited, he might wiggle his fingers back and forth or rub his hands on his lap. When Tate does these kinds of things, it is hard to get his attention on anything else. You can help Tate by talking to him. Try to get his attention on something. You could show him a picture you drew or talk about something the class is doing.



You can help Tate. You can be his friend. You can teach him lots of things he needs to learn. When you ask Tate if he wants to play, he might say "no." Don't give up. Ask again later. He might play the next time.



You can invite Tate to see the book you choose in the library. You can ask Tate to play with you at recess. Talk to him about your pets and ask him about his pets. There are lots of ways to help Tate learn how to make friends and have a conversation. It will make you feel good to know you are helping Tate.



If you are playing a game and you are going to touch Tate, be sure to tell him first. If you need to hold his hand or tag him, just let him know. He doesn't really like surprises so explain what is going on. When Tate understands what you want he will be much more likely to play nicely.



## Can't Make Your Own Story? Try This!

Geek Club Books has created engaging tools for you to bring the topic of autism into the classroom. Use them as your introduction followed by your talk about your own child. Find everything at <http://geekclubbooks.com/autism-edu>

## Autism Disclosure Example:

Dear Parents,

Your child has a classmate with an autism diagnosis. His name is \_\_\_\_\_.

Autism is a neurological disorder characterized by difficulty with social interaction, verbal and nonverbal communication and repetitive behaviors.

Your child may have questions about \_\_\_\_\_ and some of his behaviors. If you have any questions about autism yourself, \_\_\_\_\_'s parents are very willing to discuss autism and how it affects them.

We will be reading some age appropriate books about autism in our classroom to help educate the students. Your child will be encouraged to interact with \_\_\_\_\_.

## Parent Permission Slip Example:

Dear Parents,

Your child has an opportunity to participate as a peer model in a lunch group this year. This program was designed for a classmate with an autism diagnosis. We will be working on teaching social communication and modeling age appropriate behavior for the child with autism. Ultimately, we also hope to build lasting friendships.

Typically, the lunch group will be made up of three or four students and one adult each day. If your child chooses to be a part of this group, he will be asked to commit for a week at a time. He may be able to participate more than once each semester, depending on the number of students who wish to be a part of the group. We will have a scheduled sign up sheet in our classroom.

Your child will be given instruction on how to interact with his classmate. We plan to meet briefly before lunch begins each day to discuss what is expected and to consider topics of interest for our lunch conversation. We may meet for a few minutes after lunch to discuss what worked well and what did not and to discuss any questions your child may have.

Attached is a permission slip, which needs to be signed and returned in order for your child to participate.

This program is being overseen by \_\_\_\_\_. Please feel free to call \_\_\_\_\_ if you have any questions.

I give permission for my child \_\_\_\_\_ to participate in the Lunch Bunch Program.

\_\_\_\_\_ Parent/Guardian

*“Tate’s classmates treat him as a valued member of their class, an equal.”*



# Thank You Baldwin Bulldogs, class of 2020!

*"So many children with special needs have to worry about bullies. So many children with special needs are lonely or forgotten. Tate has never been bullied, not even once, that I am aware of; and many of his peers call him "friend" although Tate does not often reciprocate their kindnesses. Tate's understanding of social skills and reciprocity is greatly lacking. His peers know it and they accept it. They give, asking nothing in return. They include Tate whenever possible. They gently give him social skills instruction when it is needed. They help him with tasks that are difficult for him. They teach him and encourage him. They make him feel like one of "the guys."*

*It does not matter that he comes in last in all the races. I've heard them cheer as if he's crossed the finish line in record time! It doesn't matter that he is still reading picture books while they read novels. It does not matter if his presentation is short and very simple compared to theirs. They are excited to see Tate's achievements even when they are very small.*

*Tate's classmates treat him as a valued member of their class, an equal. For this, I thank them. I thank these students for being kind to Tate and for making his life easier. I thank these students for making my life easier. I do not have to worry or wonder about Tate while he is at school because he has friends who look out for him. Thank You Baldwin Bulldogs, class of 2020."*



**Follow Lisa's example! Take the steps to create a loving, welcoming environment for your child.**

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