

Case Study: How Living Books/Wanderful Apps Changed our Daughter's Life

This is a story of how Living Books changed our family and enhanced the quality of life for our autistic daughter in unexpected ways.

My husband Jon and I are parents of Athena – a young woman who has profound autism. In the early 1990's, Athena had become so sensitive to everything around her that her anxiety and panic reactions made it hard to take her anywhere. Her temperament also interfered with her ability to stay calm enough to learn easily.

I tried to get Athena interested in the computer but the only thing she enjoyed doing was to turn off my husband's computer in the middle of his programming.

I tried lots of educational software but Athena ignored them. If I got her to sit with me at the computer, she'd fidget and look anywhere but at the monitor, not interested at all in what was on the screen. I'd buy software for lower and lower ages but she ignored it all until we discovered Living Books when she was age nine.

Living Books are interactive storybooks that will forever mean a lot to my family, not only for being so fun and creative but for making it possible for Athena to cope with outings more easily and just making her life, in general, more easy. Living Books helped her teach herself to control anxiety and panic and motivated her to enjoy learning new things.

Before Living Books applications were introduced to our daughter, she was had little to no self-control at unexpected sounds (like ringing phones or doorbells).

Our First Living Book...

When we found our first Living Book – *Just Grandma and Me*, it was a “wow” moment. There was nothing else like it. It was an interactive storybook that was so colorful with a delightful sense of fun that drew me right in. I really, really wanted to see how Athena would react to something so cool. And boy, did she react! Her delight with *Just Grandma*

and Me was immediate. I had to see it to believe it. There was a new side to Athena, engaged and focused, determined to explore everything that Living Books had done with that story. Athena was much smarter than I thought.

Living Books Allowed Athena to Tame Her Reactions ...

We bought every Living Book application that was available. At first, the surprises from playing “inside the stories” caused Athena to get very anxious. She slapped her head, jumped, and hyperventilated, which was an expected response to how she reacted to most surprises or activities. But soon the Living Books applications became her focus. She'd point and click then yell and wave her hands, then point and click again and then react again. She kept going for hours. She stayed up all night, clicking and clicking and interacting with the pages and characters over and over again.

Athena would find an image, tense up in preparation, then click and try to stay calm. After hundreds of clicks, she managed to tame her reactions. She was in control when the sounds and images came to life. Actions like singing, dancing, morphing, other sound effects or just being silly were used as tools to practice taking on the real world.

After a while she taught herself how to face real world stimulus, hardly reacting to the spontaneous sounds all around her. Now she could go out with us and cope. For instance, she could finally stay mostly relaxed and quiet in restaurants.

She had to keep up practicing, using the stimulation of Living Books to reinforce her anxiety control. This kind of Living Books therapy still continues today. As she ponders new things that come up in life, she highlights various pages to help her work things out in her head.

We Were Shocked at the Positive Change in Athena...

We were shocked at the positive change in Athena, brought about from the Living Books applications. We showed Living Books to our friends who had kids as disabled as Athena.

We showed consultants, too. It was so much fun to watch their reactions. We knew that Living Books' effect on their kids was going to be dramatic. We dragged our computer and Athena around to Autism meetings. People were skeptical at first but there Athena

was – deftly playing with Living Books programs, serenely enthusiastic. She loved showing her Living Books to people because it socializing on her terms.

Because of us, other parents bought Living Books. Our local school district bought sets for their Special Ed classrooms, but regular Ed teachers kept taking them for their students so they had to buy a lot more sets. Everyone loved them. Teachers and parents saw the educational value and the fun.

The characters in Living Books became Athena's friends and our friends too! We'd sing the little songs with Athena that we learned from interactive clicks.

Athena's brothers thought the books were great, too. It meant a lot to Athena to see that her interests were interesting to her brothers. She'd find herself laughing along with everyone else over something she clicked on. She felt good that she was in synch with others.

The Therapeutic Use of *The New Kid on the Block*

When we got *The New Kid on the Block*, it looked different from the other Living Books. At first, we were disappointed because the pages were simple black and white drawings, not the lavish color of the other storybooks.

Boy, first impressions can be so wrong! Living Books had made an excellent choice to make *The New Kid on the Block* an interactive poetry book. *The New Kid on the Block* soon became her favorite and ours. The wacky poems had funny observations about everything, but playing “inside” the poems caused us to see Athena's deeper use of Living Books as an important therapeutic tool.

For example, the poem, *I Am Falling Off a Mountain*, had a line “Is there someone I can call?” When Athena clicked on that line, various phones rang and rang and rang.

In our home, when a phone rang, it meant a huge reaction from Athena, a startled rush of adrenaline along with screaming and slamming.

So when Athena caused the unexpected ringing in *The New Kid on the Block*, she jumped up, knocked over her chair and whacked at the computer table. Wow, I thought, she's not going to click on that again but she did. She went right back to it, clicked on it, tensed up, gasped and knocked over her chair again.

Why did she do this? Did she like torture? Not at all! Athena was brilliant to realize what this could do before I did. She could change her behavior if she practiced preparing emotionally before causing the bursts of ringing phones. After awhile, when Athena clicked, she'd merely cringe and hold her ears. Then, after dozens of clicks and days later, she just sat and laughed. Then forever after, when the house phone rang, she ignored it. My only wish now is that Jack Prelutsky would write a poem about vacuum cleaners and then include it in a new version of *The New Kid on the Block*.

No More Living Books...

I felt my heart breaking when I began to see Disney CD ROM storybooks being sold alongside Living Books with similar packaging. I noticed that customers would look at Living Books and then at Disney. Not knowing anything about what either had inside, they'd usually go for the Disney name. Bigger names were able to market mediocre products that took the spotlight away from the products that truly deserved the attention, like Living Books. By the late 1990s, Living Books stopped making products.

Now we have had to keep older Windows 98 and Windows 2000 computers working and in good health to run Living Books for Athena. Unfortunately, they don't work on new computers.

After all these Years Athena Still Uses Living Books...

After all these years, Athena still uses Living Books as her emotional anchor and as a way to stabilize her anxiety. As her awareness about life continues to expand she sees new aspects in her Living Books. She especially revisits the stories in the two Berenstain Bears books, *The Berenstain Bears Get In a Fight* and *The Berenstain Bears In the Dark*, paying close attention to the bear family relationships, rather than just clicking on fun things. Once she started to cry, something she rarely does, while playing with *The Berenstain Bears Get In a Fight*. I thought she'd gotten hurt but it was actually a new awareness about the Bears' relationships. She was being sentimental. She's cries more often over the new aha moments she finds in those stories.

She also loves *Sheila Rae the Brave*, which she uses to reach deeper understandings about relationships. Recently, she turned to me and said "Athena cry." I thought again, that she'd gotten hurt but she had an unusual dreamy smile on her face. She looked toward a page on the screen that where Sheila Rae was playing and then back to me. I repeated a

line from the current page and said, "Athena cry," She again repeated, "Athena cry." We were on the same page both figuratively and literally.

There's a beautiful song in *Sheila Rae the Brave*. It starts

I'm all alone.

It's just me.

How I miss my family.

I wish it were yesterday.

Today I don't feel very brave.

Then the little sister and Sheila Rae sing a lovely duet. It makes me misty every time I hear it. Athena likes it that I am moved by a lot of what Living Books has to offer.

Athena has rejected all other software programs. She must have "spider sense" or something; she needs to feel some good vibrations from an educational work or she won't have anything to do with it. I'm still trying to find something she'll want to use. There are several Mercer Mayer books from Ocean House Media that look like Living Books. But Athena doesn't like them at all.

Living Books Revived...

Though Athena still has access to the Living Books products on CD-ROM on our old computers, we couldn't understand why these great creations were not still available for children like Athena on today's modern computers and now mobile devices. We had proof of how profound an impact these products could have on autistic children and were frustrated! I would occasionally do searches for Living Books on Amazon, but would only find the old CD-ROM products we already owned.

Then one day, I noticed an article about Mark Schlichting, the creator of Living Books, in one of my searches. When I read that he was part of a company called Wonderful I was overjoyed. Wonderful was reviving Living Books for the tablets and phones, and for modern computers! We were ecstatic! We got in touch with Mark to share our story with him and bought many of the Wonderful Apps for our Android tablet. Athena can now take her beloved Living Books with her on her tablet anywhere. She still prefers to use them on her computer, and we are anxiously awaiting the release of the Windows versions that work on Windows 7.

Unfortunately, Wonderful has not been able to secure the rights to release all the Living

Books as Wonderful Apps. Two of her favorites are not available (*Sheila Rae the Brave* and *Just Grandma and Me*) so we must continue to maintain our Windows 98 and Windows 2000 computers and hope that someday Wonderful will release these two interactive storybooks as well.

But in the meantime, parents, teachers and developmentally challenged children around the world can share the magic of Living Books as Wonderful Apps. Most of the great products have been released and they are working on more. It is so exciting to my husband and me. We can't thank Wonderful enough for making this happen!

We hope other families are as enriched by these amazing interactive storybook apps as our family has been.

And, recently, we relived the fun of showing off Living Books. We showed a friend a Wonderful app, *Harry and the Haunted House*, using our Android device. She couldn't stop playing with it and bought it immediately for her granddaughter. She also happens to be a case worker for developmentally disabled adults. She said she is going to show these apps to them and other case workers. She said a lot of people in her case load would love them and use them.

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Note: This case study was submitted to Wonderful so that the story could be shared with other parents who may be able to learn from our experiences with these great apps.