

Family travels to U.S. for language therapy

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The Mallard family came to West Bloomfield Township from Geneva seeking help for their son.

They sought training at the Kaufman Children's Center to help their son Antoine, 7, who has language and sensory integration difficulties.

"In both France and Switzerland, unfortunately there are no centers or therapists like the ones you can find here," said Antoine's father, Philippe Mallard.

While Antoine's parents, Philippe, 40, and Laure, 39, are learning specialized therapy techniques, "it's really been a teaching experience for all of us here," said KCC Director Nancy Kaufman.

The Mallards present "a pleasurable challenge, but nonetheless a challenge, because of the language barrier," Kaufman said. Antoine speaks only French. Laure and Philippe have had to translate.

"But it's interesting. ... The difficulties that Antoine has in French are the same difficulties that children have in English who have language-processing challenges, as well as difficulties combining words to formulate their thoughts with adequate grammar skills," Kaufman said.

One way Kaufman works with Antoine is by telling him a story, acting out the story with characters on a board and asking him questions.

"So, I'm helping Antoine to process and comprehend what is being said to him, but also how to put words together to formulate his thoughts," she said.

Antoine receives occupational therapy from OT and Sensory Integration director Jessica Hunt using Interactive Metronome, a computer-based program that retrains his brain for better attention, timing, rhythm, sequencing and motor planning, Hunt said.



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Antoine sits on an exercise ball at a laptop while wearing headphones. A special glove wired to the laptop delivers information to the program as Antoine claps along to auditory guide tones.

"We are focused on working at how well he is able to take information in from the environment, organize that information and then interact with and adapt to his environment," Hunt said.

Antoine misunderstands cues from his environment, and his inner ear is very hyper-responsive to movement, she said. Information Antoine receives through his inner ear's fluid "comes in really, really fast, so for him what happens is in what typically would take a few seconds for him to get dizzy is taking him maybe a second to get dizzy."

"He's getting a flood of information and his brain is not able to process it that fast to then know what to do with that information," Hunt said.

In addition, his tactile system responds differently from most people's. "His skin does not discriminate or understand touch as easily as most people. He's actually very under-responsive to touch, so he doesn't notice pain as easily as other children do," she added. This "greatly affects his ability to understand real space, which ... makes it difficult to complete tasks like reading and math," she said.

Hunt says the cause is uncertain.

The Mallards took Antoine to "an endless number of specialists" in Switzerland and France after noticing difficulties when Antoine was 2, Philippe said. Eventually, the Mallards sought answers from U.S. physicians, and someone "mentioned the Nancy Kaufman Center — they thought it could be more appropriate for Antoine," he said.

Philippe describes the trouble with European specialists and the reason the Mallards began seeking treatment here.

"Once they give you a diagnosis, they cannot really find ways to put it in place, or they put it in place with little means," he said. "The second thing is that there is a lot of dogma. When you see someone ... he doesn't want to hear about other specialists' way of practicing other things to help a child." This causes medical processes to be "very closed," Philippe added. "There is no information going through from one person to the other."

The Mallards said their experience with a program called the Tomatis method demonstrates that European specialists lack communication.

"The Tomatis method, developed by French doctor Alfred Tomatis, improves brain training using auditory cues," Philippe said.

Before doing Tomatis exercises at age 2, Antoine was demonstrating signs of autism, Kaufman said.

"For Antoine, it seemed to connect him to the environment," Kaufman said, adding that Tomatis "seemed to almost turn a switch on. All of a sudden, he did start to connect to the people in his environment and those autistic characteristics seemed to kind of fade."

When the Mallards "mentioned that to the doctors who were treating Antoine, they got really mad and they kicked us out of their office," Philippe said.

"The beauty here in this center is that not only you have in one place many disciplines, but what is quite amazing and as far as extremely rare is that among these disciplines ... there is a lot of communication," Philippe said.

"You take it for granted because it's here, so you imagine it's like this or even better in the rest of the world. ... We can tell you that this center here is unique," Philippe said.

Philippe points out that "there is some kind of alchemy between the people that makes the therapy better.

"Not only are they (Kaufman Center staff) extremely good professionals ... but they love to work together and it's fun. You feel it when you get here, that people love their job, that they love to work together as professionals and this is ... really crucial, because if you have a bad atmosphere then obviously you are losing some of the learning," Philippe said.

The Mallards gave something back to the center, as well, Kaufman said.

"We have a family coming in a few weeks from Puerto Rico and that child only speaks Spanish," she said. "So (Antoine has) gotten us used to not being in this anticipation about something different."

