



“Daisy is always happy to see me,” Kevin says.



**Synthesizing information** As you read these articles, look for details that help you understand people with autism.



**LOOK FOR WORD NERD'S 7 WORDS IN BOLD**

# Kevin & Daisy

For a boy with autism, a horse teaches powerful lessons

BY JANE BIANCHI

**T**hirteen-year-old Kevin hops on a horse named Daisy, takes hold of the reins, and rides her slowly around an indoor ring. This is their weekly routine: a quiet half hour of walking and trotting around and around. There will be no wild rides or fancy jumps, no cheering crowds or shining trophies.

But that's fine with Kevin. This half hour with Daisy is the highlight of his week—and not simply because it's fun. Riding Daisy is helping him cope with autism, a condition he has struggled with his entire life. His time at the stable is actually a form of therapy—**equine** therapy—designed for kids with special needs. “Daisy has taught me so much,” Kevin says.

## A Mysterious Disorder

Autism is a disorder that usually appears in the first three years of life and affects a person's ability to learn, communicate, and interact with people. Most experts believe that children

are born with autism, though its causes remain a mystery.

In severe cases, children with autism face **devastating** problems. Some cannot speak or learn. But no two cases of autism are alike. And many kids, like Kevin, have far milder cases. “People look at me like I'm different,” Kevin says. “But I'm just like everyone else.”

Kevin goes to a regular school, is obsessed with the TV show *Doctor Who*, and loves to read. Visit his family's roomy apartment in Queens, New York, and you'll find him doing homework, drawing pictures, or enjoying a round of *Minecraft* while his 9-year-old brother, Ryan, looks on.

But Kevin does face challenges, especially when it comes to getting along with other people. His temper can boil out of control; he doesn't simply get annoyed when Ryan touches him, for example. “I feel like I'm going to explode,” Kevin says. “Like a bomb.”

In a group, it can be hard for him to read

JOE POLILLO PHOTOGRAPHY

other people's moods or emotions. A joke that cracks up other kids might leave Kevin feeling confused or even hurt. He rarely finds it easy to be one of the gang, to just hang out with other kids.

"The other day, I was telling a story in my school cafeteria about my Kindle, and nobody was paying any attention to me," says Kevin. "So I walked away and ate lunch by myself in a corner."

**Humiliating** experiences like this are common for Kevin. Kids in his school try to be understanding. But often Kevin feels lonely and frustrated. So how does Daisy help?

### A Powerful Bond

"There is something particularly special about having a relationship with a horse," explains Alicia Kershaw, co-founder of GallopNYC, an organization that provides equine therapy to Kevin and other people with special needs. "You have to earn a horse's trust. You need to behave and speak with confidence in order to command a horse; otherwise, it won't do what you ask."

Bonding with a horse is powerful for almost anyone, Kershaw says. "But it's especially powerful for kids with autism, who often feel out of control of their lives. Suddenly, they learn how to make a horse go left or right or stop and go. It boosts their self-esteem when they realize that they're in charge."

Learning to ride a horse well isn't easy. Horses are very sensitive and quick to startle.



Kevin's half hour with Daisy is strenuous and helps him build his strength. But there's also time for hugs.




To ride Daisy successfully, Kevin has had to develop the ability to focus and stay calm. Kevin's therapy instructor will say: "Try being quiet on the horse for five minutes. Close your eyes, breathe deeply, and imagine yourself in a place where you are relaxed." This technique helps Kevin as a rider and also at home and at school. "Now instead of screaming at the top of his lungs and shoving Ryan away, Kevin will close his eyes and take deep breaths," says

Kevin's mom, Fanny.

Kevin is one of thousands of children with autism who **benefit** from equine therapy. "It's astonishing to watch how these kids create **bonds** with horses and how that connection translates into the rest of their lives in so many positive ways," Kershaw says.

Kevin agrees. His nearly three years of riding Daisy have helped him feel calmer. His muscle strength, another problem for some kids with autism, has improved through the **rigors** of riding. Caring for Daisy has encouraged him to reach out in other ways. "Now, sometimes at school, after class, I offer to help my teacher clean up," Kevin says. "I like feeling that I can be helpful."

Perhaps most powerful is the bond Kevin feels with the gentle creature he spends time with each week.

"Daisy is my friend and my companion," he says. "It makes me feel good inside, knowing that she's happy to see me. We understand each other. She's always there for me." 

BOTH PHOTOS: JOE POLLIO PHOTOGRAPHY

STEPHEN DUPONT

## INTERVIEW

# "My Brother Has Autism"

Maybe you know someone who has autism and wonder how you can be a good friend. Here are some suggestions from Grace Dupont, 11, based on her experiences with her 10-year-old brother, Carl.

### What do you want people to understand about Carl?

He goes to a special school where many of the kids have autism. Even though he has a lot of challenges, there is a lot that he's good at.

### What are some of the things he is good at?

He's really good at spelling, remembering things, directions, and geography. He loves trains, elevators, and airplanes. He loves music, and he loves to sing.

### What are some of his challenges?

Sometimes he doesn't like to interact with people. It's hard for him to pay attention well and to find the right language to communicate. Sometimes he repeats things that he has heard people say or lines from books, movies, or songs.

### How would you hope that people treat him?

Be kind to him. Make an effort to include him. If he has challenging behaviors,

don't hold it against him. He doesn't like it when people distract him when he's playing on an iPad or reading a book. Pick a time when it seems he's in a good mood—because sometimes he's very touchy—and then talk to him about something he's interested in, like places you've traveled and how you got there.

### What do you wish people wouldn't do?

You might notice behavior that's not ordinary—he might make funny noises or flap his hands when he's anxious or excited. Don't laugh at him. That's really mean. Don't give him strange looks if he gets

upset or talks loudly in public. I've seen people give him annoyed looks, and this really upsets me, because he can't help it. They don't know the situation.

### What might surprise people?

I've had people I know say, "It's so sad your brother has autism. I feel so bad for him." There's no reason to feel bad for him. Carl is a sweet and amazing boy. We do everything together as a family. We travel. We visit friends. We go to parties. We love him, and his friends love him, for who he is. He has a very happy and interesting life. ■



Grace and Carl

## WHAT'S THE CONNECTION?

Imagine a boy or girl your age moves in next door, and he or she has autism. Write a paragraph using details from both articles explaining what would be important to think about when meeting your new neighbor.

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