

## Louisa Learns to Speak

Louisa is a gentle 13-year-old who loves to swing and ride her scooter. She is always happiest in the Keren Or Gymboree! Louisa has ocular blindness and demonstrates autistic tendencies. After a number of unsuccessful school placements, Louisa arrived at Keren Or 3.5 years ago.

When Louisa first came to Keren Or, she didn't have any social skills. She didn't know how to sit at the table or eat independently. In circle time, she pulled her classmates' hands and clothing.

Although Louisa had the ability to vocalize words, she didn't have meaningful language. She echoed others, and her inability to communicate made her chronically anxious. Louisa's family speaks Russian at home, compounding the communication challenge.

Louisa's teacher, Moriah, knew that cracking the language code was essential for Louisa's development and well-being. In consultation with the vision specialist and communication therapist, Moriah decided to introduce tactile symbols to represent Louisa's daily schedule. Her hope was that Louisa would learn words and gain control over her routine and environment.

Every morning, Moriah would preview the day's activities, letting Louisa feel each symbol. Then, at the beginning of each activity, Moriah would present Louisa with the relevant symbol. At first, Louisa would feel the symbol with interest, but didn't connect it with the concrete activity or the abstract word that it represented.

With patience and consistency, Moriah repeated the "tactile daily schedule" every day for two years. Slowly, **Louisa began to associate the symbols with the words, and even began to vocalize the words!** Once language "clicked," the communication therapist introduced a communication board with additional words.

As Louisa's vocabulary has increased, so has her confidence. She talks about things that are bothering her, asks to drink, to remove her coat or to play with particular games. She makes choices and deliberately expresses her inner world, needs and desires.

Now, when Moriah shows Louisa her daily schedule, Louisa shows the staff what activity is next! Knowing what is going to happen and being able to communicate has brought Louisa a profound sense of inner peace. She has become a calm, cooperative student who is emotionally available to work on other goals. Indeed, since learning to speak, Louisa has also learned to feed herself completely independently and is working on drinking from a cup!

We know that Louisa has so much to share with the world, and we can't wait to hear more from her!

