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Chicken Help

Jacob has a brain tumor. He is ten years old and was diagnosed with several other disabilities before they found this growth. His speech is severely impaired and he is not really toilet trained, although sometimes he is capable of taking care of business on his own. He seems to be in his own little world when you first meet him. He does not look you in the eye and runs off while you are talking to him, as if he is not hearing you. He is average size for his age and does not have any physical abnormalities. He is quite beautiful. His mother, Tanisha, heard about the Dreamcatcher program through the grapevine and brought him out to see if we could help him learn to listen better. He was getting in trouble at school and not listening at home to the point where she didn't know what else to do. She was willing to try anything and since he liked animals, she thought this might be something that could help. She hoped.

The first thing Jacob did when he came into my house was run up the stairs and disappear. All kids like the staircase. It goes round and round all the way to a place where they can't see. It is like Jack's beanstalk and evokes a curiosity that no child can resist. It is against the rules however, not that Jacob would know that. He didn't have time to hear the rules, he vanished so quickly. Also against the rules is me raising my voice, but I heard myself shouting for him to come down. So we had both broken the rules within our first 10 seconds together. This was going to be fun. Jacob came back down in a hurry and his mother looked completely shocked that he did. "He wouldn't have come down for me" she said. "Well all kids listen better to a stranger, especially one who's screaming" I joked. We laughed and I led her and Jacob outside to the patio to talk. There were not as many ways to get into trouble outside.

Jacob's mother and I chatted about how the program works. Since they had no funding, we decided on an affordable subsidy. We made arrangements for an appointment and they climbed into their van and drove away smiling. I was smiling too. I couldn't wait to see Jacob again.

I was in the chicken coop with six children who came every Thursday for a therapeutic group. We were cleaning it and building a pen for the five new baby chicks who had just hatched. A van pulled into the driveway and a man got out with a small boy. I didn't recognize him at first, but it was Jacob! "I'm sorry we're so early" said the man, "but I picked him up from school and he refused to get out of the van, he just wanted to come here right away." I laughed and welcomed them. One of the staff kept them busy while I finished up with the other kids and then I went to see where Jacob wanted to start.

Jacob chose to visit the chicken coop. I told his grandfather that he could come back in an hour. We waved goodbye and we were on our own. The chicken coop has two parts, an inside coop and an outside coop. Each coop has its own full-sized entrance and the two are joined together by a little chicken-sized opening so the hens can go back and forth. When we entered the inside coop, Jacob froze. He was petrified of chickens. Well, that made sense since he had never seen one up close before. "Do you want to go to the outside coop where they are not so scary?" I asked. "Yes" he said fervently. We went around to the outside coop which is an 8X4 area that is completely encased in chicken wire. We closed the door behind us and suddenly Jacob started to yell. I looked to see what was going on and found that my black lab had stuck his nose through the chicken wire. He is harmless to chickens but Jacob thought he was a threat. Before I had the chance to react, Jacob kicked at the side of the coop. The wires rattled and the uninjured dog bounded off. I leaned against the door we had just come in so I could get down to Jacob's eye level, I was going to tell him the rule about kicking in the chicken coop, but I realized the door didn't move with my weight. I tried to open it but it seemed stuck. I pushed harder on it, thinking it was just jammed a little, but nope. It was slammed, locked shut. Oh No. It was the only way out.

Jacob is very bright and immediately knew something was wrong. For the first time since I met him, he looked straight at me and said "open it." "I can't, it's locked" I said quietly. We were trapped. I tried to peer around the corner to see if anyone was out there, praying that his grandpa was still in the yard, the staff, the other kids, anyone? I called for help. The dogs came running and stood staring at us with their heads cocked to one side. That was helpful. I turned back to Jacob who was staring intently at me. He said: "Open it!" He was visibly escalating and I was unsure

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of what would happen if he panicked. I tried again to open it. I stuck my fingers through the wire and tried to grab it, I got a stick and tried to jimmy it, I glommed on to the door and desperately shook it to kingdom kom. Nothing worked. Now I knew what the chickens felt like. All I could think was: “His grandpa is going to come back in an hour and we are still going to be in here.” What a horrible thought.

Jacob said something I couldn’t make out and was pointing at the small opening between the coops. It was the door the chickens used to go back and forth. I looked at this very small hole and then back at Jacob. He said “go through it” as clear as a bell ringing on a dead quiet Sunday morning. This hole is barely big enough for a chicken to fit through, let alone a grown woman. I said “you go through it, you’re smaller.” “No way” he said. Again, his speech was crystal clear and unmistakable. He knew that if he crawled through he’d be alone with the monstrous, boy-eating chickens. There was no way he was going in there. As part of my therapeutic assessment, I made a mental note that he understood language, appeared capable of enunciating when motivated and had no problems in the area of logical reasoning. He was completely right though, going through that door was a solution. If we could get to the other side, we could get out the man door. But, holy cow, that hole was so small.

Jacob was getting louder “go through it, go through it.” I didn’t know what else to do. I got down on the ground to size it up. Through the cavity I saw ten chickens swarming around, trying to figure out what all the commotion was about. I could feel Jacob’s eyes piercing holes through me and he was making swooshing movements with his hands, egging me on, scooching me through. I stuck my head in. The chickens came closer. I suddenly understood how a deer must feel in the headlights. As fast as I could, I poked an arm through, just so I’d have something to swat them with if necessary. My chickens are tame but I saw them eat a frog once and it wasn’t pretty. I tried to get my other arm through but it was very tight. I had visions of Jacob kicking me from behind to push me through; chickens deciding if they liked me or not while I waited an hour for Grandpa to come back and pull me out by the legs; or worse, a drop-dead gorgeous fireman chain-sawing the coop off me while him and his cute buddies laughed their guts out. I needed to get through this hole.

I heaved as hard as I could and my arm amazingly popped through to join me. It looked surreal, like it belonged to someone else. I lunged forward with no difficulty until it came to my hips. Oh-oh. No way. I turned on my side and wriggled like a wet worm narrowly escaping through a mud hole. It worked and I was through! I ran around to Jacob. He was jumping up and down and clapping, saying “you did it, you did it!” I let him out and we ran, hand-in-hand, far away from the chicken coop. We went to meet the rest of the animals and every now and then he would chuckle and say “you did it.” I laughingly recorded his memory ability.

When his grandpa came back, Jacob led him to the coop and excitedly explained our adventure. He giggled while he talked and looked at me with sparkling eyes, we had bonded. Jacob did not have attachment issues and he had an excellent sense of humor. For a boy with a brain tumor, Global Developmental Delays/Disorders and Severe Speech/Language Delays, he sure was just like any other ten year old boy I had ever met.

It is almost two years later and Jacob is still telling our story. We have been working hard on his listening skills using chickens, horses, donkeys, dogs and llamas. His grandparents say he is listening excellently to them on a regular basis. He is listening better to his mom too and is succeeding at school in his specialized program. He is more capable and independent and his confidence level is soaring according to his family. He is no longer afraid of chickens and now helps me clean their coop, feed and water them, and catch and hold his favorite ones. We have had our share of power struggles, but for the most part, Jacob listens well when he is motivated to work with his animal of choice. Jacob is capable of reaching all of his therapeutic goals. If he could motivate me to get us out of that coop, he can do anything.