

# VIVE LES DIFFÉRENCES!

As many parents of children with special needs can attest, the journey to find a school environment that is a good fit for your child's particular strengths and differences can be difficult and confusing, but it is also necessary and rewarding and can often lead to a better understanding and appreciation of your child.

HERE IS ONE FAMILY'S STORY.

By Raquel Willerman

**C**HILDHOOD is one of life's great journeys, and 11-year-old Adrien Verglas is in many ways very well suited for it—with his soaring imagination and adventurous spirit. But like a lot of children with learning challenges and other special needs, Adrien only really began to thrive once he was placed in a school environment with teachers particularly attuned to his mix of strengths and hurdles, which include dyslexia and attention-deficit-hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). His journey and his family's—as described by his mother, Christiane Celle, the owner of the Calypso boutique stores—in a general way will be familiar to other parents and children who have traveled similar paths, but that doesn't make it any less inspiring, instructive and hopeful, especially for families at the beginning of their special journey.

Christiane Celle and her son, Adrien, photographed by Josh Lehrer



Did you think anything was wrong with Adrien when he was little? No, not really. He was a beautiful and engaging baby. He was very active, whereas Julien, my older son, played quietly and amused himself and was easy. It was clear that Adrien was really smart. The only things we noticed when he was very young was that he wasn't comfortable when we would put music on in the car, and he didn't like going to birthday parties with kids screaming. He would be overwhelmed. Too much excitement was not good for him.

**When did Adrien start having trouble?** For kindergarten, we put Adrien in a small private school downtown, and the first week of school he broke his arm. All the kids were jumping from the roof of a dollhouse. Outside of school, I was used to him being very active and had always monitored him closely. But at school, there is so much happening that the teacher couldn't do that. When we went to the doctor two weeks later to check Adrien's progress, the doctor asked, "Did you know he broke the cast? He must be pretty active, huh?" The doctor in all his years had not seen a cast broken this way! At school, Adrien just couldn't sit still, and the school itself was very structured, so he was always getting into trouble. Well, I began to think that the school in general wasn't a good fit for Adrien, but I also suspected that something else was wrong. I just didn't know what it was. I wanted someone to tell me what was wrong with Adrien. I asked the teacher if she thought Adrien was hyperactive, but she said she didn't think anything was wrong in that way. The school just thought he was ill-behaved.

**Did that make you question your parenting?** Some people did ask me if anything was going on at home, if something was wrong with my relationship with my husband. But

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no, I never questioned our parenting, because Antoine and I have a great relationship and because Julien, my older son, was in the same school, and he never had these problems.

**What happened in first grade?** First grade was both a terrible and a wonderful turning point for us. It was terrible because Adrien was so unhappy. He is a really bright kid, so he knew that he was falling behind the other kids. I would ask him all the time, "Are you OK?" But he never said anything. He just started acting out. I would be called to school all the time to find him sitting in the nurse's office. He would be there because of fight-

ing with other boys. The good thing was that Adrien's first grade teacher was much more experienced than his kindergarten teacher and knew immediately that something wasn't right. Within weeks of the school year starting, she called us in to tell us that she noticed he had problems focusing. And then, finally, Adrien came home one day and admitted that he couldn't read. He said he didn't understand the letters. He hadn't wanted to tell me because he didn't want me to say that there was something wrong with him. See, even now, this makes me cry. He really wanted to learn how to read, and he was so embarrassed and frustrated at not understanding what was happening in school. So we went to the NYU Child Study Center for some tests. The guy said, "Definitely, this kid is ADHD."

**How did you react?** I was crying and asking myself how it was possible that I didn't know this. But at the same time, it wasn't a surprising diagnosis, given the way Adrien was acting. I told my pediatrician and he said, "No way, that's impossible." But I'm the mother, and I thought, "All this activity—this is just too much, something is probably wrong." To find out more about the consequences of ADHD, we had a very comprehensive evaluation done at SPOTS (Special Programs in Occupational Therapy Services). They told me Adrien also had fine motor control problems and sensory integration issues. You should have seen the stack of papers about what was wrong with him. His motor skills were at the 9th percentile. Visually, he scored in the 94th percentile, but the visual-motor integration, which is hand-eye coordination, was at the 21st percentile. And even though I felt like he was a pretty normal and wonderful child, their diagnoses made sense. He had always hated sports. He couldn't catch a ball. Fine motor control was one of his biggest issues, and the doctor (at SPOTS) told me he would never be able to write with a pen or pencil. As it turns out, I don't think this has had such a big impact on his life because of everything that can be done on a computer these days.

**Did he start doing better in school with occupational therapy?** Well, that's a very important issue, because motor control problems and even ADHD didn't account for how badly he was doing in school. It was Prudence Heisler, one of the founders of SPOTS and a fabulous person, who told me that I needed to get Adrien tested for learning disabilities. So we saw Dr. David Salsberg at the Rusk Institute of NYU Medical Center. He told us that Adrien was dyslexic.

**What, if anything, helped you get through that difficult time right after the diagnosis?** It was easy to focus on all the ways he is such a great kid. He was always very funny, outgoing and charismatic, and he has an amazing imagination. We go to the country a lot on weekends, and the kids would write about their weekends for school on Monday. Julien would write, "We took a hike. We swam." Adrien would write, "I climbed a tree and saw a dragon. I caught him." A book called "All Kinds of Minds," by Dr. Mel Levine, really helped me a lot. I went to hear him lecture, and he said that kids who

**T**he more information you have to help your child, the better your child can be served," says Vanessa Markowitz, a lawyer and advocate for families with children with special needs, who organized the Special Needs Schools Fair at the JCC in Manhattan last month.

So for parents who think that their child may have some kind of problem—be it developmental, physical, or emotional—that is not being adequately addressed, the most important thing, Markowitz advises, is to take your child to a developmental pediatrician or clinical psychologist for an evaluation. Once your child is evaluated and any delays or issues are identified, you will be much better prepared to determine how best to help.

Some parents may be in denial about their child's needs, but this "is not the time to put your head in the sand," Markowitz says. She stresses that the earlier the intervention and the more parents educate themselves on the special needs options available, the better off their child will be in the future.

Markowitz emphasizes taking advantage of New York's early intervention programs, which provide a service coordinator to help you through the entire process of getting state-funded services. A program will be developed for your child that will include home-based therapies until your child turns 2 years old. At 2 years, your child may begin a center-based preschool program. In the instance that your child's special needs are not identified until 3 to 5 years of age, Markowitz again recommends

## Special Services and Schooling

getting a proper evaluation from a professional. Once that evaluation has been performed, the next step is to call New York City's Committee on Preschool Special Education, which can develop and implement an Individualized Education Program based on your child's needs.

There are a variety of different resources in New York to assist parents: a not-for-profit agency called Resources for Children with Special Needs ([www.resources-nyc.org](http://www.resources-nyc.org)), which Markowitz highly recommends, city pamphlets, the internet, and parent support groups, such as Parent-to-Parent ([www.parenttoparentnys.org](http://www.parenttoparentnys.org)).

Maybe the most challenging aspect for families with young children with special needs happens when a child approaches grade school age and parents have to find a school for their child that adequately addresses his or her strengths and challenges at this key formative time in their life. Markowitz strongly recommends using the period during the kindergarten application period (October to December) to visit schools (public and private) and attend seminars on the topic, including some held at the JCC ([www.jccmanhattan.org](http://www.jccmanhattan.org)) and at YAI ([www.yai.org](http://www.yai.org)). Other sources of info: NYC Department of Education's "Students with Disabilities Transitioning from Preschool to School-Age Program," a free orientation; and the 1996 book, "A Parents' Guide to Special Education in New York City and the Metropolitan Area," by Laurie Dubos and Jana Fromer.

—Sapna Moudgil-Shah

are different have their own ways in which they are strong. He really helped me see that Adrien was just different, not inferior or less than, and that being different had its strong points and that we could emphasize his strengths. So it was February of his first grade year that, through a friend, we found the Aaron School. We moved him immediately.

**How did it go initially at the Aaron School?** It was like being rescued in a fairy tale. First of all, we went from a school where it was kind of obvious that not everyone liked him to a place where he was very welcome. And he wanted to go to school every day! What a change! His teacher was wonderful. In one month, he was like another kid. They had a special way of teaching kids how to read, and Adrien came home eager to read everything. He would take the mail and say, "Let me read that!" He was so proud of himself.

**In what other ways did the Aaron School help Adrien?** He had a lot of problems with self-regulation. That was a big part of jumping around and going crazy. Before the Aaron School, we had tried medication—Ritalin—but it didn't work for him, and we stopped it. But the school taught him about calming and monitoring himself. They had several systems of providing positive reinforcements. That worked best for Adrien. He would get points and stickers for not talking back to the teacher, for raising his hand and for being nice to his friends. Nowadays, at 11, Adrien has gotten really good at controlling himself, and I don't think most people would realize that he is

a kid with ADHD. Now we are focusing on language therapy. He has a hard time finding the right words to say what is in his head. But my older son had vocabulary problems too, up until about two years ago. I think it is partly because we are French and they grew up learning two languages.

**Right, you are a French family living in Manhattan. Have you ever thought to move back to France to raise your kids?** My kids were born here, and I never thought of going back to France. For me, no way. Same with the kids. We love it here. There are a lot of things to like in France too, of course. People are not as work-oriented, they take long lunches, but it is a very difficult country right now. It's not like when I grew up, in the south of France. It was a beautiful country, and everyone had a job. Now there is so much crime. Paris is like NYC used to be 20 years ago. Also, in France they do not have as much support for kids like Adrien.

**How are family dynamics shaped by Adrien's challenges?** When Adrien was born, Julien, who is two years older than Adrien, came to the hospital and told the nurse, "I'm here to pick up my baby." When they were young, they were always together and played with the same toys. But when they were both in the same school and Adrien was having trouble and we still didn't know what was wrong, the boys were jealous of each other. Adrien knew that Julien did better in school, and this made Adrien uncomfortable. He would be mean to Julien. And Julien did think that Mom