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Center helps your brain work better

The Brain Trainer can aid in overcoming problems, gaining an edge for learning

By Lauren Bailey

Charlie Miller was a bright, active and intelligent 3-year-old. He knew his numbers, colors and letters. He spoke in full sentences.

But by the time he was 4, he could no longer form words or sit still. Late-onset autism had reversed his ability to talk and focus.

Charlie's parents, Carlene Miller and Jason Batcheller, took him to doctors, specialists, speech and occupational therapists. They tried natural medicines and homeopathic remedies.

Nothing worked.

Then, when Charlie was 8, they heard about The Brain Trainer.

A contestant on the show "The Biggest Loser" had a high-functioning autistic child who used The Brain Trainer services in South Carolina, and it seemed to be helping.

"We were willing to try anything as long as it didn't hurt Charlie," said Miller.

She looked up The Brain Trainer and found that a location had opened in south Charlotte near Providence and Ardrey Kell roads in September 2010.

The for-profit center, led by Dr. Vicki Parker, is an evidence-based brain training and speech-therapy center. Parker and her staff help improve people's memory, attention, auditory and visual processing, processing speed, logic and reasoning, language, speech and more. Costs range from \$80 to \$95 an hour depending on the specific needs of the child.

Parker is a speech-language pathologist with a background in neurological disorders. Before opening The Brain Trainer, she practiced for more than 25 years, primarily in hospitals.

"Dr. Parker spent an hour with Charlie and caught on more than most people do in a week," Batcheller said.

After assessing Charlie and noting his behavior, lack of focus and specific sounds he made, Parker designed a program for him.

The program currently focuses on cognitive learning. Charlie is doing tangrams - shape-based puzzles - playing matching games, learning to track something with his eyes and how to focus on tasks and instructions.

According to Charlie's parents, his trainer, Elizabeth Geoghan, 27, is perfect for Charlie.

Slideshow

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Charlie Miller, 8, was diagnosed with autism at age 4. After three months at The Brain Trainer working with his trainer, Elizabeth Geoghan, 27, he has gained significant focus and organizational skills. Photos by Lauren Bailey - Special to South Charlotte News

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"Just him sitting there with Elizabeth for an hour and 15 minutes without trying to run out the door is huge," Miller said. "He performs well for her. She is the most patient person, and very calming to Charlie, too."

After one week at The Brain Trainer, Charlie's parents noticed a difference. He folded a blanket neatly, an act of focus and organization they had not seen from him before.

In addition to speech regression, Charlie exhibits signs of autism including running in lines until he exhausts himself, constant tapping and making messes.

Now, three months after beginning with The Brain Trainer, Charlie will sit and watch TV or watch his dad play video games for 10 or 20 minutes.

"We're talking about a kid who never watched TV," Batcheller said. Parker and Geoghan hope to eventually get Charlie's focus to the point where he can start writing or signing to communicate with his parents. While speech is the ultimate goal, it may not be possible.

"He could write me a note," said Batcheller, laughing. "That would be fine."

While Charlie is one of their extreme cases, Parker said, The Brain Trainer has many clients who come to them for a few months and leave with what they need: Becoming a faster or better reader, improving memory skills, speech therapy and auditory therapy are examples.

Even some gifted students come to The Brain Trainer to gain an edge.

According to Parker, The Brain Trainer recognizes and works with base skills.

"It's not like a school curriculum. We look at their strengths and weaknesses, and we actually try to look at some of the root causes of their difficulties and work through those," Parker said.

For Charlie, this is essential. While he is enrolled in a special program for autistic children at Selwyn Elementary, the school still has to follow a certain curriculum that is difficult for Charlie.

"They do the best they can," Miller said. "Charlie just needs a lot of individual attention, and (dealing with) six kids on all different levels of the spectrum makes it difficult."

The Brain Trainer provides that individual attention four days a week, and so far, Miller and Batcheller say they are very happy.

"He's not talking to us yet, but he will engage us more - grab one of our hands and point to what he wants," Miller said. "It's a huge jump."

Lauren Bailey is a freelance writer for South Charlotte News. Have a story idea for Lauren? Email her at lbailey.charlotteobserver@gmail.com.

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