Peer support benefits autistic Neenah student

Jen Zettel, Post-Crescent Media 8:01 p.m. CDT May 29, 2015

Story Highlights

- Nick Teska is one of three students with autism who attend the Power of Peer Support group.
- The students go to POPS class with classmates, who help them learn social skills.
- Nick's classmates also benefit from the sessions by learning how to interact with him.
- They take what they learn from POPS into the regular classroom, which helps Nick, too.

NEENAH – When second-grader Nick Teska's attention drifts, classmate Jenna Clark gently taps him twice on the shoulder.

He turns to her. She points at the activity in front of them. Nick refocuses.

Nick, 8, has autism spectrum disorder, a serious neurodevelopmental disorder that impairs a child's ability to communicate and interact with other people, according to Mayo Clinic.

Jenna and fellow Tullar Elementary second-graders Elliott Pershing, Tate Rajotte and Jadyn Juedes participate in sessions with Nick called Power of Peer Support. A few weeks ago, their session included a matching game with magnets, drawing shapes on paper and playing Paper Toss on an iPad.

Peer support

Helping Nick and other students with autism feel more comfortable in school is one the program's goals, and classmates are key to accomplishing it, said Patti Davis, a speech and language pathologist.

The students give Nick support — they praise him when he follows directions, help him stay focused on what they're doing and have fun with him.

"They're going to take these skills and model them in the other classroom, so eventually, more and more students will learn how to interact and engage with students with autism," Davis said.

A grant from the state Department of Public Instruction made the POPS program possible, Davis said. Three students with autism spectrum disorder participate. POPS is only at Tullar Elementary this school year, but officials hope to expand it to other schools in coming years.

'Change for the better'

Before the school year started, Nick "wouldn't really look at (his twin brother) twice," said their mother, Lynn Teska.
Now it's common for Nick to ask his brother to play.

"To watch them sit on the floor and play a game is just great," she said.

Lynn feels the changes in Nick are the result of the POPS program, his work with teachers at school and from growing up. She hopes he keeps growing, and becomes comfortable approaching classmates who aren't in POPS with him.

Teacher Natalie Lepp said Nick doesn't need to be prompted by her as often since POPS started. He participates and is engaged in the activities the class does. Plus, he has fun.

"Everything about Nick has just changed for the better," Lepp said.

**Rooting for Nick**

Nick has also made an impression on Jenna, Elliott, Tate and Jadyn. They often return from POPS gushing with pride about the things Nick accomplishes, Lepp said.

They're invested in his growth outside of POPS class, too. The students offer to be partners with Nick when they get back to Lepp's classroom, and engage with him during activities, she said.

Seeing Nick's classmates connect with him is another victory for the family, Lynn said.

"It's no secret he has autism … how nice is it that those kids are learning how to interact with him?" she said. "It's important for them to learn that everyone is not the same. Everyone is different."