

Inspired teacher pens book for kids with ADHD

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Preschool teacher Stephanie Poindexter was inspired by the progress made by one of her students who, at first, never seemed to be able to sit still in class. Poindexter used that inspiration to write and self-publish a book to help children with attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder stay on task.

The J.T. Barber Elementary School teacher's book, "Octavious and his Busy Tentacles," tells the story of an octopus with attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). The octopus learns to keep his "busy tentacles" still so he does not fidget in class, so he can wait his turn during games, and so he can remember all his school work.

Poindexter is a preschool teacher for children with autism, attention deficit disorder and attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, as well as More at Four program students.

She was inspired to pen the work by 5-year-old Anthony Hill, who is autistic and could never sit still. She found ways to help him, such as letting him sit in a rocking chair to stay focused, and making checklists to help him remember all of his work.

"His arms were always going, his feet were always going, he couldn't sit on the floor in crisscross like the other kids, he couldn't sit in a little cubby chair because he was just moving so much," Poindexter said. "He struggled a lot last year, and this year, he's amazing."

Anthony's mother, Nikia Hill, said he's made "tremendous progress," and doesn't have to use the rocking chair any more.

"If they get a teacher like Ms. Poindexter, (and with the parents) not being in denial, and willing to help their child, anything is possible," Hill said. "I love the book, it really explains how he really was."

Poindexter sat down to write the book when she couldn't sit still herself while on maternity leave for four months. She said she had tried to submit her idea to a few publishing companies, but she got responses such as "thanks, but we don't really cater to special needs subjects."

So she self-published it on the Web site lulu.com.

She chose the ocean theme for the book because of her love of all things aquatic, and it wasn't the first time her ocean and teaching interests have converged.

She discovered her love of working with children with special needs while volunteering at a dolphin-assisted therapy program one summer as a student at the University of South Carolina.

A teenager with autism came to the center to swim with the dolphins, but he would not come out of his family's recreational vehicle for the program. Poindexter thought she could help. She went to see him, introduced herself slowly, and showed him a videotape of children swimming with dolphins.

"His face just brightened up, he got really excited when he saw the dolphins, and he put his hand in mine, and off we went," she said. "Something just clicked, it was pretty amazing."

She later worked in children's water therapy for an adaptive aquatics program in Charleston, S.C., and started a dolphin-assisted therapy program at SeaWorld in San Diego, Calif. She also worked for TEACCH Autism Program in Greenville, which stands for the Treatment and Education of Autistic and related Communication-handicapped Children.

She said she hopes her book helps children help themselves to be successful.

“(The point of the book is) to empower the kids to take responsibility,” she said. “A simple book like this, it’s a simple step, they can read it, and say, ‘oh this is something I can do.’ ”

Sue Lee, a pediatrician at Pamlico Pediatrics, said she bought 20 of the books to hand out to parents and children. She said helping children address issues through reading — called bibliotherapy — needs to be expanded.

“A lot of times, reading about a character is a wonderful way to put a thought to a child that they’re struggling with in context,” Lee said. “I love this book. The idea of an eight-armed octopus with ADHD really resonates with me.”

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J.T. Barber Elementary School is part of the Craven County Schools in New Bern, N.C.

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