

ADHD program works for Gresham family

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The pills were supposed to help Amber Casley concentrate. She took them every school day — one in the morning and one in the afternoon. She was 7 years old when she started.

School seemed easier, but Amber's

family worried. Amber was so young and the research on the long-term effects of using Ritalin to control Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder was inconclusive.

Once vivacious and outgoing, Amber seemed deflated after school. Her mother, Shelly Casley, was concerned about the future effects of the drugs. Her grand-

mother, Marlyne Casley, noticed that her granddaughter seemed tired and sluggish.

"She wasn't as bubbly on the medication. Her personality changed," says Marlyne. "We were all worried."

The family wanted to take Amber off

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Ritalin.

The problem was that the little girl had been using the medication with good results in school for nearly three years. She would be going into middle school the next year and Marlyne wondered how her granddaughter would perform.

"I knew she needed something. So I started looking for some alternatives," says Marlyne.

One program seemed promising but the cost, more than \$6,000, wasn't affordable.

Some Internet research led Marlyne to a program offered at Marylhurst University in Portland. Known as Help ADHD, the program offered a promising alternative to Ritalin for much less money. For a little more than \$2,000, Amber would receive help for nearly six months. She would work with program specialists for 90 minutes at a time, once a week, and with her family five days a week.

The work was challenging but fun. They tested Amber on Nov. 24, and she scored high in learning new physical routines and understanding symbols without words. Her low points included coordinating different learning abilities and word knowledge.

The results weren't too amazing. Amber had always loved sports. Recess was her favorite time of the day. Her bedroom was decorated with images of horses. She loved playing with the animals outside, but she didn't like sitting so long in one spot, listening to the teacher or reading on her own.

The classes were different from Amber's typical learning environment. Teachers handed Amber a long, brightly colored stick and asked her to hold the stick at both ends, horizontally, and hit a ball with it while reciting the alphabet.

Eventually, Amber would be able to hit the ball with various points on the stick while reciting the alphabet backwards and sounding out every sound of every letter.

For more information about the program used by the Casley family, call program director William Hartner at 503-635-3389 or visit www.helpadd.com.

She learned to write with her left hand as well as her dominant right hand and her family started to notice a difference.

The program was supposed to help Amber coordinate the left and right segments of her brain while incorporating movement into the process. Results varied, but the program's success rate with children and adults impressed Amber's family.

"Her teachers at school weren't convinced that she should be off the medication," Marlyne says. "But, after a couple of months, I began to see a few changes."

Amber has gone to her grandmother's house every day since she was a toddler. Her dad, Eddie Casley, is one of Marlyne and Mike Casley's two sons. Amber looks a lot like her mother, Shelly. The two have identical sheets of long, glossy, reddish-brown hair and tanned skin, courtesy of Shelly's Hawaiian genes.

Now a sixth-grade student at Clear Creek Middle School, Amber goes to Marlyne's house before and after school each weekday and spends the night sometimes on weekends. She can relax at grandma's house. She can be an 11-year-old girl there, playing video games on the computer or painting her nails blue.

The bond between the grandmother and granddaughter is apparent.

Lying down on her grandmother's couch, her long hair spread out around her, Amber plays with the same stick she used in her Help ADHD class. She pulls a green plastic duck call on and off her fingers.

"We use it to calm down the dogs," Amber explains.

"Yes," Marlyne says. "The dogs get excited when they hear a knock on the door. Amber helps me with them."

Pictures of a beautiful, smiling toddler line Marlyne's tables. Amber is the only grandchild on this side of the family and her grandparents' love for her is obvious.

It has been almost two years since Amber, now 11, stopped taking Ritalin. She is still bubbly. She swings on and off the couch and talks fast. Her subjects switch back and forth. She talks of horses, then locker combinations at school, then horses again.

Of course, this is typical of an 11-year-old girl high on life. However, Amber feels that she has really improved. She is happy to be off the medication and she is interested in science classes at school.

Two months ago, Amber graduated from her Help ADHD class. Her final tests showed a marked improvement in all areas. She is considered "far above average" in six of the 12 areas tested and she excels in coordinating different learning abilities — something she tested below average in only six months before.

"She's doing better in school, and I think it really made a difference," says Marlyne of the alternative ADHD program. "I really feel that this has helped give her the skills she needed going into middle school."

Amber agrees. She does not feel embarrassed in school anymore, does not care if she asks a "stupid" question. She still likes gym class and recess and she still feels antsy a lot of the time, but her vocabulary and reading skills have dramatically improved.

And, most importantly, she is glad to be off Ritalin.

"It made me feel so spacey," Amber says. "I was always glad when it was the weekend because I didn't have to take it. I'm a kid. I wanted to run and play on the weekends, not feel like a zombie."