

Alvaro Lopez, Jr., Semcac Head Start Success Story

Alvaro joined the Semcac Head Start classroom in August of 2011 as a three year old boy. Alvaro has made tremendous developmental progress while attending, as he is also managing symptoms of Williams syndrome. With the guidance and expertise of the St. Charles Early Childhood Special Education program, a collaborative approach was constructed to provide Alvaro with a solid path towards advancing and improving.

To better understand the amount of progress that Alvaro has made, some information about Williams syndrome should be included. Williams syndrome is a rare, neurodevelopmental disorder with common symptoms including mental disability, heart defects and problems, failure to gain weight appropriately and low muscle tone.

It is through Alvaro's determination and positive attitude that he masters various skills while Semcac Head Start teachers are there to assist, demonstrate and encourage. Recently, Alvaro has demonstrated the ability to remove his own winter apparel, independently.

Physically, Alvaro has grown five inches and gained eight pounds. He has evolved from eating a special diet to eating the same foods as his peers at Head Start meal time. Alvaro now drinks from a typical cup and is feeding himself.

When Alvaro started Head Start, he was able to walk but steadier with assistance. Alvaro was unable to step onto a stool to wash his hands unless he had support from an adult. Alvaro climbed up the steps of the jungle gym on all fours. Now, he walks and runs independently, demonstrating increased balance and muscle control, regularly. Now, he pedals and steers a tricycle while smiling and laughing. He climbs the jungle gym ladder without assistance, giving a huge smile. Alvaro continues to impress staff with his uncanny ability to dribble a ball.

Previously, Alvaro's motor skills were limited; he had difficulty using his thumb to grasp objects. He has since progressed, significantly. First, he was able to demonstrate a pincher-grip. Then, refined wrist, hand and finger movements. Now, Alvaro can hold small pegs on puzzle pieces, completing four piece puzzles with very little adult assistance. As his fine motor skills increase, his exuberance is evident as he claps his hands to congratulate himself for his accomplishments. He now uses a rolling pin with ease at the Play-Doh table. He interacts with friends and shares creations with them.

Individuals with Williams syndrome often have phonophobia, which resembles noise-induced hearing loss due to a malfunctioning auditory nerve. However, they also tend to demonstrate a love of music. Alvaro shows many examples of his ability to hear pitch well, and enjoy music greatly. Alvaro is always willing to show adults a cow and reveal the best "moo" sound. Recently, he is teaching all of us the sound that a donkey makes! Alvaro loves to sing, as well. He has progressed from joining in during the final chorus of familiar songs. Now, his favorite song is *Old McDonald Had a Farm*. It highlights his

ability to hear pitch. Anytime musical instruments are added to our musical experiences, Alvaro's smile and enjoyment are compounded exponentially.

Alvaro's progress can be attributed to his family; particularly his loving mother, Maria, and her tremendous commitment. She is devoted to learning everything that she can about Williams Syndrome and advocates for Alvaro, continuously. Semcac Head Start staff works to empower the parents and families of the students, Alvaro's mother is a wonderful example of an empowered parent. His mother is the primary decision maker for Alvaro and Head Start staff supports their healthy relationship.

The Semcac Head Start, in St. Charles, has helped Alvaro develop an excitement for learning. It is through his tremendous spirit and engaging personality that we learn from Alvaro. He is an inspiration to all who meet him.