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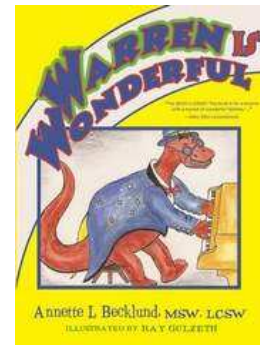
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Book gives autistic kids a kindred spirit

BY MATTHEW MCGRATH • TOMS RIVER BUREAU • MARCH 29, 2009

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BRICK — Warren is a shy, artistic dinosaur who sometimes gets so frustrated he "shoots straight from the hip."



Annette Becklund and her husband Raymond Gulzeth of Brick have released "Warren is Wonderful," the first in a projected series of books aimed at autistic children.

He's the creation of Annette Becklund, 48, a township resident and a therapist who works with autistic children. She pursued social work and a therapy career after working as a public relations specialist. Her husband, Raymond Gulzeth, illustrated the book.

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Becklund wanted to use book therapy for a summer program, so she ordered lots of books. But she could not find one that was written with an autistic-spectrum child in mind.

"I found books that were written for parents, families, siblings and friends," she said. "So I thought it was time for me to write my own book."

Warren's traits are taken directly from her experience as a therapist. She's modeled him after patients who can instantly repeat tunes played on the piano, who have a kindred connection with animals or who make lists to visualize their thoughts. He rocks back and forth as a self-calming technique.

"We're more alike than we are different," Becklund said. "It's just that respecting the diverse nature of the individual's perspective takes a lot of work."

Like many children with an autism diagnosis, Warren has trouble expressing and identifying his feelings, which causes him to seemingly lash out at friends. But he feels bad about it in the end and seeks the consolation and comfort of his mother.

The story is short, because Becklund has found that when she reads books with a lot of words, her patients lose interest. The illustrations are not colored, so children can interact with the book by coloring in the drawings.

But what Becklund really hopes to communicate is that sometimes there are no words, and that is OK.

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"Warren wants people to understand that sometimes there are no words," Becklund said.

The second book in the Warren series could deal with autistic children's tendency to look away from people while they listen or speak, Becklund said. This is not generally accepted by the "neuronormal," she said.

Becklund will sign copies of her book at Booktown in Manasquan at noon Saturday. More information is available at www.annettebecklund.com and www.lastingimpressionpaintings.com.

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