

A Friend of His Own

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I'm letting go
of the idea
that it's up to me
to control how
Luke's life turns out.

Photos of Luke (above)
and with his friend (right)
by mom, Michelle McConnell.

Frog and Toad stayed on the island all afternoon. They ate wet sandwiches without iced tea. They were two close friends sitting alone together.

Alone by Arnold Lobel

Some days the possibility of my son Luke having a true friend of his very own seems as realistic as a fantasy about talking amphibians. Still, as his mom, I need a hope to cling to – something concrete that shows me such a friendship is possible. I'm not picky about where I find inspiration. An amphibian friendship will do.

I remember when Luke first expressed his longing. It was my favorite kind of day. The sun was shining, the temperature was exactly comfortable. We'd gathered at a local park with other families. I took a break from my chat with another mom to do a scan for my four children. Three accounted for. But where was Luke?

It didn't take me long to spot him up a tree at the park's edge – high as he could manage, before the limbs grew too narrow to hold his weight. I made my way towards him. "Hey buddy, how's it going?" He responded with a sigh. "What's up?" I waited close by, hoping he'd decide to talk. Eventually, he did. "It feels like they think I'm invisible." "Who?" "Aaron and Sarah and their new friends. It's like they don't see me."

I'd never heard Luke express his feelings in such a profound way. It was easy to assume that Luke liked being alone, that he wasn't aware of his differences. Today he was able to articulate otherwise, and upon hearing it, I had to choke back tears. I tried to stay in this place with him, where he was aware of his own feelings, could describe them, and wanted to share them. He described what it felt like when his brother and

sister were successful at making new friends but he felt left out. Eventually, after trying to participate, he'd gone off by himself to climb a tree. It made me sad.

This is much more complicated than an odd-ball older brother whose siblings avoid him. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Aaron, Sarah, and Mary adore Luke. They seek him out to play. They've even been known to fight over him! No, the problem isn't that they don't want Luke to play. The problem is finding the perfect moment. When the time is right, imaginative stories take off with heroes and villains combined from a wide variety of plot lines: Ben 10 (Cartoon Network) meets Creepie ("Growing up Creepie" on Discovery Kids) meets Molly (from American Girl.) Other times, though, it's as if he can't "turn on" whatever it is that makes one want to connect with others. And so I hear Sarah (who does **not** have trouble expressing her feelings) exclaim, hands on hips, "Mom! Luke won't pretend with me and I asked him to nicely and that hurts my feelings!" I usually respond with some variation of, "None of us can control another person, we can only control ourselves and we're doing well if we manage that. I suggest you use self-control to be patient." Then I try and talk with Luke about why he's choosing not to play. He usually can't articulate a reason. It's not that he's choosing TV or computer over interaction, either – screen time is only an option certain times of the day. He's just choosing to be alone. He, who complains about feeling lonely, when met with the perfect opportunity to interact, often chooses to be alone. It baffles his siblings just as much as it does me.

Similar situations occur with potential friends (other than his siblings). I recall another day at a different park, where I noticed something

odd happening. Luke appeared to be “playing dead” while a group of children he’d previously been positively interacting with looked on, perplexed. I intervened, started asking questions. His response that day? “They won’t leave me alone, I just want to be by myself!” Exasperated sigh (by me). “Do you remember what you told me a while back, about how you feel invisible?” Pause. Silence. “Yeah,” he mumbled. “Why do you think that is?” “I don’t know.” “I wonder if there is anything you could do differently? I know you want to make friends. These kids are nice and they really like you.” Pause. Silence again. “Right now I just want to play by myself. I want them to leave me alone.”

It’s frustrating being the mom. Luke is a homeschooled 11-year-old Aspie; it’s getting harder to facilitate “friend-making” situations for him. Even when I do, I can’t guarantee success. So I’m letting go of the idea that it’s up to me to control how Luke’s life turns out (or any of my children’s lives). But I do want to serve as a faithful guide or a wise coach. Yet, with Luke and this issue of feeling lonely while simultaneously actively choosing to be alone, it’s tough to know how to help! I try not to let my own desires for him get in the way, but I confess: it’s hard.

With this goal of friendship making in mind, we recently enrolled Luke in an afternoon program at the local YMCA. It’s sponsored by the Autism Foundation, and is based on reverse inclusion. Children on the spectrum participate alongside peers who are handpicked from the Y’s after-school care program and trained about spectrum disorders.

As soon as I heard about it I knew it was something we should try. The jury is still out on how successful his time there is proving to be. I am encouraged that he is eager to attend - that alone is a “win.” The teachers are supportive and overall find him polite, friendly, and helpful. But is he making friends? Maybe that will come in time. Again, it’s something he longs for, he’s been placed in an ideal situation to help facilitate it, and yet - none of us can do it for him.

I don’t want to paint a picture of Luke as suffering. If you asked him who his friends are, he would rattle off a short list of names, those people we interact with the most. I think Luke knows he is dearly loved by those who matter most, and I don’t discount the importance of that. I also feel confident now that he will express his feelings to me when he can and needs to. For all this, I am grateful.

But I still have a dream for Luke: a friend all his own. True companionship. Arnold Lobel’s *Frog and Toad* stories are long time favorites of ours. When the local Children’s Theatre put on a production not long ago based on the books I was first in line for tickets. We laughed till our stomachs hurt, but as the show came to an end I was fighting back tears of grief and sadness. Why? Because it was clearer than ever to me: Luke is Toad, and he needs his Frog. Like Toad, Luke is difficult and ornery and obsessive and yes, sometimes self-absorbed. He likes his routine and he likes to be left alone. But also like Toad, he is caring, sensitive, and loyal. He would make a wonderful companion to someone patient enough

to realize it. I can’t help but think there’s a Frog out there that needs his or her Toad, too - who is gentle and longsuffering, who gets what it feels like to crave time alone yet despises feeling lonely. I rest my hopes on the idea that when the time is right, their paths will cross, and when it does, they will both recognize the opportunity and seize it. After all, we all need someone to share life, as Arnold Lobel described perfectly: “two close friends, sitting alone together.” ■

