



Gavin's Worlds

Photos and story by Manuela Garay-Giraldo

Welcome to Gavin Melhuish's big, little worlds. Gavin is a curious three year old who has autism and lives in three worlds: world with mom, world with dad and world at school.

According to Statistics Canada, one in every 150 children is diagnosed with autism, and it affects boys four times more than it affects girls. Autism Speaks Canada defines autism as a complex neurobiological disorder that typically lasts throughout a person's lifetime. The disorder is characterized by varying degrees of impairment in communication skills and social abilities, and also by repetitive behaviours. Symptoms can range from mild to severe since autism is part of a group of disorders known as Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD). Gavin has been diagnosed as being on the spectrum and highly functional.

Gavin's father, Matt Melhuish, describes his son's symptoms by saying "he has issues communicating, speaking. He can think very well but it's getting those words out that's a problem."

Currently, the three-year-old attends a mainstream daycare where he has one teacher dedicated to him. The government of Canada helps the family by subsidizing Gavin's daycare, providing free transportation for the parents to and from daycare, as well as enrolling Gavin's mother, Kim Shaw, in a course about autism and effective teaching methods she can use with her son. This course also acts as a support group for parents with autistic

children. Although Melhuish would like to attend these classes, he cannot as he is the one who babysits Gavin so that Shaw can attend.

For Melhuish, this is both a blessing and a curse. He loves spending time with Gavin watching cartoons and playing Gavin's educational games. On the other hand, his own studies are affected.

"It's not always easy, especially because it's hard enough to do homework as it is," Melhuish says.

"Then I get a phone call and something's happened and he needs me. It's interruption after interruption, but I think it's gonna be worth it in the long run."

Melhuish hopes to gain full custody of his son in the near future. Currently, the father is enrolled in the electrical techniques program at Loyalist College. Melhuish's goal is to finish his studies by the end of this school year and get a steady job as an electrician. This will enable him to save money and, at the very least, rent an apartment for him and Gavin.

"I can't wait 'til I have my own place and I can just let him run free... 'cause he is a curious explorer," Melhuish says.

For Melhuish, his son's autism is not a big weakness.

"I just want him to grow up and be a good kid, and open up, and get over his... well, I don't even think it's that big of a debilitation. I mean, he is still an amazing boy."



Top left – Gavin enjoys a joke his dad made on one of the toddler's weekly visits.

Top right - Three-year-old Gavin eats supper while watching television.

Center left - Matt Melhuish helps his son Gavin go down the stairs on their way to the kitchen.

Center - Matt dresses Gavin for the outdoor weather.

Center right – Matt displays the photograph of his son he keeps in his wallet.

Bottom left - Matt watches television with his son.

Bottom right – Matt walks his son to his mother's place at the end of the toddler's weekly visitation.

