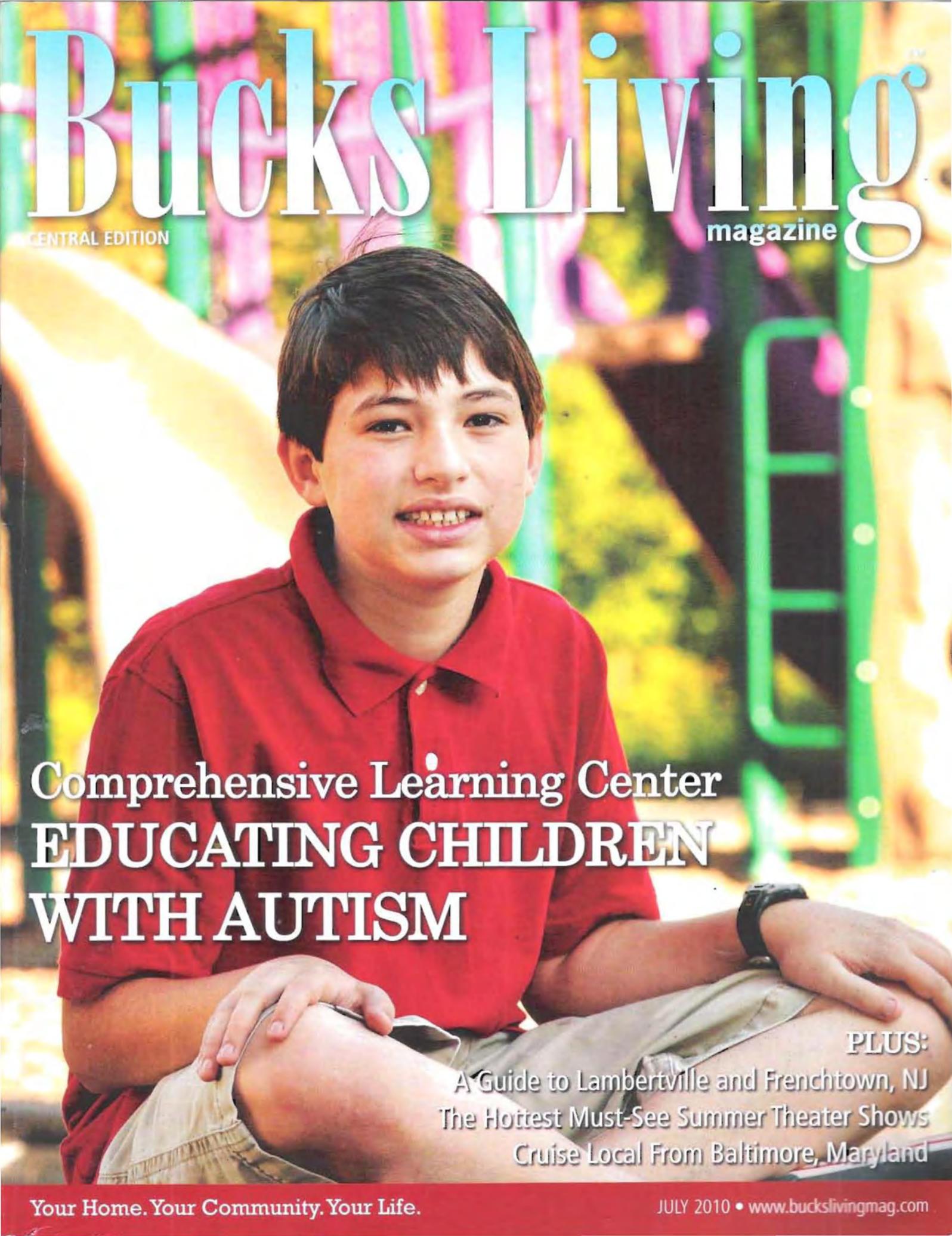


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Comprehensive Learning Center EDUCATING CHILDREN WITH AUTISM

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Comprehensive Learning Center

Educational improvement tax credit program connects businesses

and education. By Brenda Lange

Ten-year-old Drake loves school. He loves to swim, play checkers and computer games and watch movies. Drake is like many kids his age, and he has autism.

Until two years ago, his mom, Maria Petsos of Ivyland, had difficulty involving him in most family activities. Taking him out with his brother Kosta, who is one year older, never went well. Drake wouldn't listen and engaged in inappropriate behaviors. But since he's been attending the Comprehensive Learning Center (CLC) in Southampton, he is easier to manage at home and interacts more easily with others.

"I've seen vast improvements in Drake," says Petsos, who works as a learning consultant for a New Jersey school district, and case manages children with autism. "The school is a good fit for him and he has better access to learning."

The family moved from Hamilton, NJ, to find more appropriate programming for Drake, but the private school tuition can run into a lot of money for private-pay families, and until recently few resources were available to help them meet those payments.

Businesses step in

CLC's families soon will have access to financial aid in the form of Pennsylvania tax credits for businesses that choose to support state-approved nonprofit organizations. The Comprehensive Learning Center received approval in June to participate in this Educational Improvement Tax Credit (EITC) program.

A simple, one-page application is available at www.paschoolchoice.org. To date, more than 3,600 companies have pledged more than \$490 million to programs across the Commonwealth.

"Companies often make charitable donations, and they have to pay their state taxes anyway," says Petsos. "This is one way they don't have to look for extra money to make those donations."

It is estimated that every child with autism who attains typical functioning will save taxpayers between \$1.7 and \$3 million in the cost of lifetime services. Students who get the preparation they need to care for themselves and perform meaningful work by age 21, become contributing members of society rather than requiring expensive lifetime care.



PHOTOS BY STEVE BROWN



Drake with his mother, Maria Petsos, a learning consultant for a New Jersey school district who manages children who have autism much like her son.

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How it's done at CLC

Tuition covers only about 80 percent of CLC's education costs, and the parents' organization routinely runs fundraisers. It is hoped participation in the EITC program will aid in covering the shortfall for some of the students.

Founded in 2000, Comprehensive Learning Center accepts children aged 3 through 21, some of whom are referred from their school districts for the individualized programming offered at CLC.

"We have a small program (currently 21 students are enrolled)," says Amanda Flavell, co-director of Education at CLC. "Our program is based on applied behavioral analysis, and it's intensive."

Instruction at CLC is provided in academics, home living skills and independence, self-care, and social and community participation. Teachers also help with job preparation training.

Various instructional strategies and motivational systems are used. Instructors and parents collect data based on these strategies which the school uses to tweak individual programs. Action can be taken quickly to change an approach that isn't working or reinforce one that is.

One boy's story

When Drake had some difficulty with his morning routine, a CLC teacher arrived at the Petsos house every morning at sunrise to help him learn the drill he could follow and incorporate into the family's life.

"Now he is washed, dressed, has made his breakfast and lunch,



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and is at the door ready to go before I can even get Kosta out of bed,” Petsos says laughing.

Two years ago, she says Drake often wandered aimlessly around the house. “He was like a nomad. He had few academic skills, and we weren’t sure what he was capable of.” Now he maintains his own calendar, uses a timer to ensure he spends a limited amount of time playing computer games or watching a movie, cooks his own eggs and pancakes, and regulates himself in other ways, such as correcting himself if he is running across the room and trips and falls. “Don’t run. Walk,” he says.

For Drake and children like him, the Comprehensive Learning Center can turn such hoped-for transitions into realities, with lifelong positive ramifications. Through the EITC, Pennsylvania businesses can help.

“These children have the potential of becoming contributing members of society, and we work with the students to match their strengths with potential employers. We look for jobs they can be most engaged in without adult prompts, and this program is an excellent way to help them do that,” says Flavell.

Comprehensive Learning Center is located at 150 James Way in Southampton. For more information on the Comprehensive Learning Center, visit www.clschool.net or call (215) 322-7852. BL

*Brenda Lange is a professional writer and editor from Bucks County
(www.brendalange.com).*

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