

# Spotlight on Cole



On October 4, 2007 we received a phone call that there was a one month old baby boy with Down Syndrome who was coming into foster care, and asked if we might be interested in providing care for him. He was only a few days old and was in Children's Mercy Hospital due to medical conditions including: a duodenal atresia (intestinal surgery, two holes in his heart (ASD & VSD), failure to thrive due to his inability to bottle feed, and he was acutely ill with sepsis and endocarditis (infection on his heart valve).

We said, "Absolutely! When can we meet him?"

The next week we were told we could go to Children's Mercy (CMH) and see him. He was beautiful and instantly became a part of our family. We knew his name would become Cole David if/when the adoption would go through. We spent the next 1 ½ months at CMH. Finally, just days before Thanksgiving, this sweet baby boy was able to come home from the hospital with us. Although we had a very positive experience with all of his doctors, nurses, and therapists at CMH, we were so excited to be in the comfort of our own home. This was not without its challenges, though. He still had many medical needs, including lots of medications (still had a PICC line for 2-3 more weeks), a nasal gastric (ng) tube for feedings, numerous doctor appointments, and he would soon need to be set up with therapies. In addition to all of this, he was our very first foster placement. Looking back, it's hard to believe there was even any time to simply enjoy this beautiful baby...but we loved every exhausting minute.

I should briefly describe our backgrounds, as it explains why we were initially called in this particular instance. Teresa and I were specifically wanting to foster (and eventually adopt) a child with special needs. We both have a long history of working with children and adults with developmental disabilities. Because of the joy we've experienced through this over the years, we knew we wanted this same type of joy in our family. This experience also helps us feel somewhat equipped to deal with many of the challenges we know will lie ahead.

As working parents, we knew that one of the first and biggest challenges we would face would be to find a good preschool for our son to grow and learn while also meeting his special therapy and medical needs. We were told about the Northland Early Education Center, and decided to check into it. Within one visit, we knew this was exactly where we wanted Cole to go. He would be in a classroom based on chronological age,

not abilities/disabilities. He could receive his PT, OT, and Speech therapies all onsite, which would be a major convenience since he already had so many other outside appointments. The fact that NEEC is fully inclusive was one of the main reasons for choosing them. We feel strongly that integrating both children with special needs and children who are typically developing is equally important for everyone. It promotes compassion, acceptance, and respect for all people. This teaches us that we can all learn from each other no matter what our abilities.

Cole started in the Pink Puffins room at 5 months old, and was so much smaller than the other children in his room, but within no time at all we could see the great progress he was making. He was getting stronger and meeting so many of those milestones we were thrilled to see. His teachers and therapists were so loving and encouraging; returning to work wasn't nearly as difficult as I thought it would be. Eventually Cole had to have a Mic-Key button put in for his feedings. Although we were all trying our hardest (his teacher, Miss Paula, having the most luck with his bottle feedings), it was determined that it was going to take our little guy longer than most to take enough nourishment by mouth to gain and grow. We were at ease with his return to NEEC after this procedure because we knew that the staff at NEEC had experience with these types of feedings and equipment. We knew we did not need to worry. It's hard to express what kind of peace of mind that gave us.

Cole has recently moved to the Green Grasshopper room where, once again, he seems so small compared to his classmates. But, as we expected, we are continuing to see nothing but great strides in his progress. He's doing everything he can to keep up with his peers, it's so wonderful! And again, Cole has more great teachers (while still receiving all his therapies). In fact, thanks to all his therapists and previous/current teachers, Cole has just mastered signing "more." We couldn't be happier!

To close, I would like to mention that Cole David was officially adopted on October 3, 2008. This was almost exactly one year to the day of receiving our first telephone call. It was one of the best days of our lives. We purposefully stopped by NEEC afterwards to share the news (and joy) with everyone there. We were so touched by the staff's response of hugs, congratulations, and even a few tears of happiness for us. Although we have never been the typical, conventional family, the staff at the Northland Early Education Center has never treated us like anything other than a typical family. We are all so fortunate to be a part of this experience with NEEC. Cole will bring many people into our lives based solely on his special needs, some will come and go. Others will always have special meaning to our family. I think NEEC will always have special meaning to Cole and our family.