

AUTISM

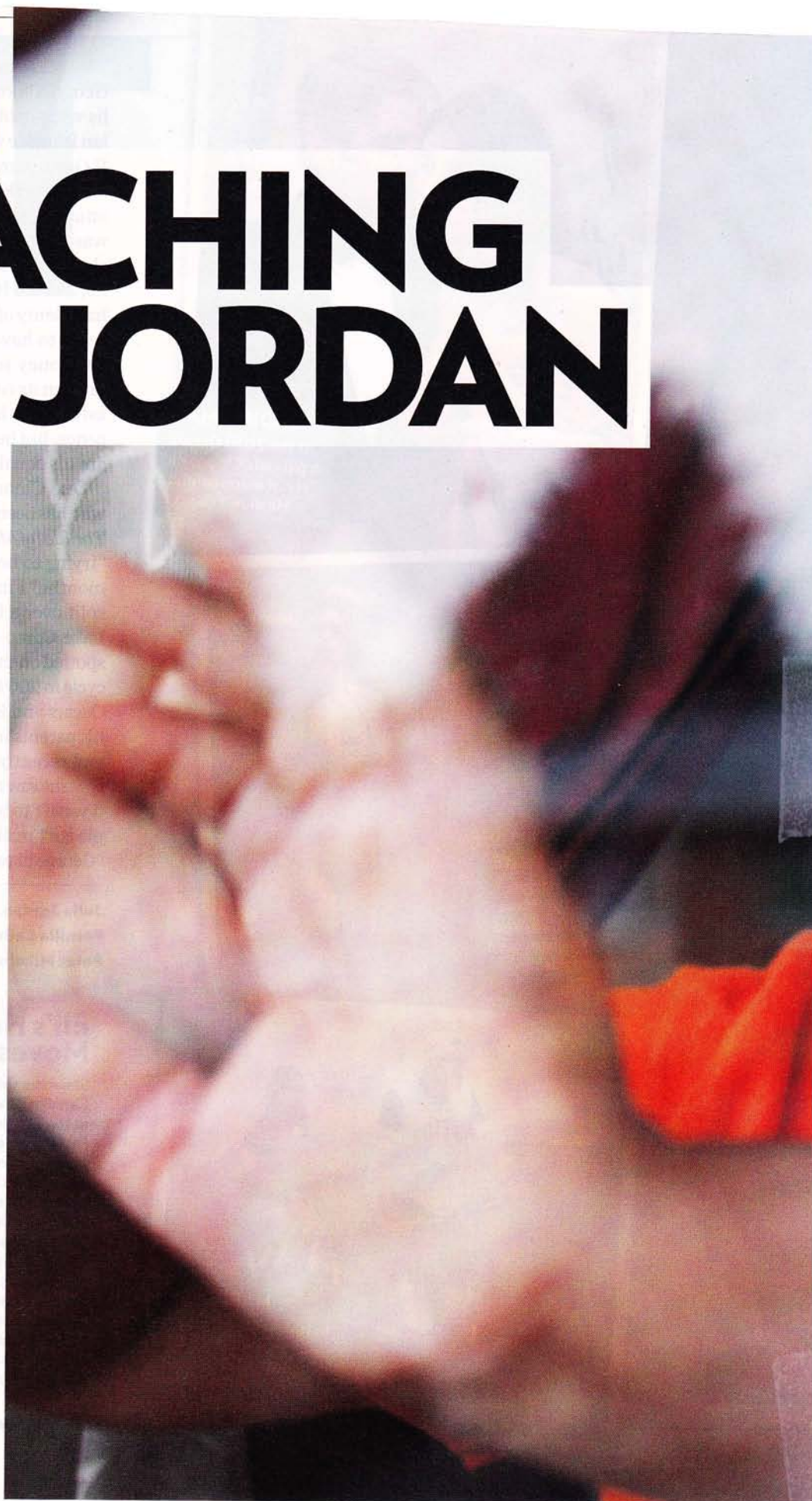
New Hope

REACHING JORDAN

AT 15 MONTHS,
JORDAN
SALAZAR'S
WORLD WAS
CLOSING IN
ON HIM. THEN
HIS PARENTS,
NICK SALAZAR
AND OLIVIA
WHITEHEAD,
ENROLLED
HIM IN AN
**EARLY-
DETECTION
AND
TREATMENT
PROGRAM**
AT THE
UNIVERSITY OF
MICHIGAN—
AND SAW THEIR
SON COME
BACK TO LIFE

by **ANNE LANG** and
ALICIA DENNIS

photographs by
**ALESSANDRA
SANGUINETTI**





Ready or not, here we come!" The familiar words ring out in the Ann Arbor, Mich., home of 3-year-old Jordan Salazar as his mom, Olivia Whitehead, 22, ducks down between the bed and wall in her bedroom, then changes her mind, pops up and dashes into the toddler's bedroom closet. "Jordan," she sings. "Joordaaan." The boy's eyes light up as he races to his room, slides open his closet door and wraps his arms around Whitehead's neck. "You found me!" Whitehead says, smiling broadly. "You did it, Jordan!"

It may be a child's game, but for Whitehead and her only son, it's part of a triumphant, though challenging, learning process. Just a few months ago, the hide-and-seek skills

most kids take for granted—following instructions, staying focused on a task—were out of Jordan's reach. So was talking: Jordan would make high-pitched noises, laugh and cry, but he hadn't uttered a single word. The warm hug he gave his mom is something Whitehead and Jordan's dad, Nick Salazar, feared they'd never know.

Diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) at 15 months by a behavioral pediatrician, Jordan has made great strides thanks to a promising clinical trial called the Early Social Interaction Project at the University of Michigan Autism & Communication

Disorders Center (UMACC). Begun in 2007 and scheduled to run through 2012, it is one of around a dozen major programs in the country offering intense therapy to babies as young as 6 months; it also trains parents to conduct therapeutic interventions during everyday activities like washing hands, eating and getting dressed. As the April morning sun shone through the window of the couple's two-bedroom, one-story home, where Jordan's therapist helped him play hide-and-seek with his mom, Whitehead marveled at her son's progress. "He is becoming more of a normal 3-year-old," she says.

"He can color, sit in his high chair and eat with a spoon. He's doing things he's never done before."

Jordan's improvement is a heartening tale from the trenches of the autism fight. While no one knows how to prevent the disorder now diagnosed in 1 in 110 children (1 in 70 boys), experts increasingly believe the best chance of minimizing its devastating impact is to diagnose the condition very early—even in infancy—and then to commence rigorous therapies that can potentially rewire young brains. Most kids don't get diagnosed with autism until age 4 or 5, often because pediatricians take a wait-and-see approach when parents report lack of eye contact or babbling. "If we start intervention when symptoms begin," says Geraldine Dawson, chief science officer for the nonprofit Autism Speaks, "we can perhaps alter the course of development and, in some cases, prevent the full [ASD] syndrome."

The UMACC trial, which has included 56 children up to age 20 months and is no longer taking new participants, is testing four different early-intervention methods: one-on-one therapy, play groups, in-clinic treatment and home visits. The most severely affected children come to the clinic once a week and are seen at home by a therapist twice weekly. (In the clinical trial, there is no charge for therapy, which can cost up to \$150 an hour privately.) Ultimately, though, it falls on parents—who are trained to engage their babies through talking, sign language, active play and hand-eye coordination—to devote at least 25 hours a week to working one-on-one with their children. "It is so important that they take on that role," says Dr. Catherine Lord, UMACC director.

While results of the study won't be out until after 2012, already some families are seeing big changes in their children. Terri and Joe Shock of Ann Arbor had to wait nearly a year before their son Sam was diagnosed with ASD at age 3; after more than \$100,000 in therapy and special school fees, Sam, now 11, attends a mainstream school

PLAY— WITH A PURPOSE

MAKING THERAPY FUN

"We are working on social engagement," says therapist Carr with Jordan and his parents.



A NEW SKILL

Jordan used to pick up a picture book, fan himself with it, and toss it aside. Now, says dad Nick Salazar, "he turns the pages."



POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT

Carr (left) suggests that Whitehead give Jordan a high-five, a treat or simple verbal praise when he puts a piece of the puzzle in the right place.





"My hope for Jordan," says Salazar of his son (playing on his bed after a therapy session as Carr looks on), "is that he will graduate from high school, have a career and a normal life."

CATCHING AUTISM **EARLY**

As 1 in 110 children annually are diagnosed with autism, scientists are studying promising early-detection methods:



- At Children's Hospital Boston (above) and UCLA, researchers outfit infants with autistic siblings in electroencephalography, or EEG, head gear to record responses to

faces and sounds. Researchers in Boston have identified babies as young as 9 months old as being at risk.

- San Diego pediatricians are using a 24-question autism checklist created by researchers at UC San Diego that may identify signs of the disorder in 1-year-olds. Indicators include repeating certain behaviors, a resistance to engaging parents during play and how the babies babble and gesture.

- Using MRIs, UC San Diego scientists are mapping how sleeping babies process language as they listen to bedtime stories; language-processing deficits could be a

sign of the disorder.

- The science of early detection shows such promise that entrepreneurs like Linda Craib, a mother of an autistic daughter who is also a pediatric nurse and Yale MBA, founded Alea Diagnostics. One of her ideas: an online service to help parents identify early signs of autism and assess their children.

- At UCLA, eye-tracking cameras are used to track how at-risk infants respond to faces and motion.

- Emory University scientists urge eye exams for infants to see if they fixate on objects, a symptom of autism spectrum disorder.

HELP FOR FAMILIES

- **University of Michigan Autism & Communication Disorders Center**
www.umaccweb.org
734-936-8600
- **Florida State University Center for Autism & Related Disabilities** autism.fsu.edu
800-769-7926
- **Kennedy Krieger Institute: Center for Autism**
kennedykrieger.org
800-873-3377
- **UC Davis MIND Institute**
ucdmc.ucdavis.edu/mindinstitute
916-703-0280
- **Autism Speaks**
autismspeaks.org
212-252-8584

"Now Jordan invites us to play with him," says Whitehead (in a game of peekaboo with her son). "Before, he just wanted to play by himself. Now he involves us."



“I DREAMED OF HEARING MY SON’S VOICE. WOULD IT BE DEEP? HIGH PITCHED? WHEN HE FINALLY SAID ‘HI,’ I WAS OVERWHELMED” —OLIVIA WHITEHEAD

but still struggles with social skills. After holding off on having another child to devote themselves to Sam, the couple had Jonah in 2009. When he wasn't speaking at 15 months, Terri enrolled him in the study. Now, at 23 months, Jonah has built up a vocabulary of two dozen words; Terri hopes he'll catch up to his peers by his third birthday. "Starting early," Terri says, "saved us a lot of questions and a lot of depression."

It's done that for Jordan's parents—and more. Neither Whitehead, who works the night shift at a local Starbucks, nor fiancé Salazar, an auto plant worker, had any relatives with ASD, so it was completely unexpected. Whitehead had a normal pregnancy and gave birth to Jordan on Valentine's Day. "I looked down at his sleeping face and dreamed about his future," she says. But as her son approached the 15-month mark, the new mom had a gut feeling something was wrong:

"He was more like a baby than a toddler. He didn't drink through a straw, and he wasn't progressing," she recalls. "At the doctor's appointment Jordan was crying, biting and hitting, and the doctor told me she saw some signs that might indicate autism." At first Salazar was in denial: "I just felt, 'Not my son,'" he says. "It's very tough getting over it."

Now, 11 months after their doctor referred them to UMACC, the couple have seen their son make slow but steady progress. They've also formed a close bond with Jordan's therapist, Themba Carr, 28, a doctoral candidate in clinical psychology. On one home visit, Jordan jumped up and down as he watched Carr arrive. "Hi, Jordan," she said, not touching him at first, since too much stimulation upsets him. For the next hour she guided Whitehead through structured play with Jordan. When Whitehead blew bubbles, Carr gently molded Jordan's hands—he's learning sign language—

to signal "more" if he wanted his mother to continue. When the little boy wandered over to the living room picture window and stared outside—a habit that can signal withdrawal—Carr suggested Whitehead find a diversion; she quickly found a water bottle and talked to Jordan about it while he took a drink. Jordan, Carr says, has some vowel sounds and is starting to babble, but "his language is far behind what you would expect."

How far can Jordan go? No one knows, but Whitehead and Salazar are celebrating every victory. He can wash his hands, fetch his diaper, and he recently started at a preschool where he has a special aide. The other day, Whitehead teared up when Jordan squeaked out a "Hi" over the phone to her from school. Shortly after that, Jordan, who normally ran away from other children, surprised everyone one evening by joining hands with the kids next door, then drawing sweeping scribbles with sidewalk chalk, a big grin taking over his face. "He was so happy and proud," says Whitehead, "my heart just melted."

Lorenzo Benet in Los Angeles



MailBag

“ Maybe things would have been different had Emily and Brad met in real life rather than on TV” **Tamara Schroeder** via e-mail

GEORGE CLOONEY

I'm sure there are some who will disparage George Clooney for splitting with yet another girlfriend. But keep in mind that George has stated many times that he has no desire to remarry, and women who get involved with him know that. Maybe in the future some special lady will come along to change his mind, but until then, let the man be who he is.

Tory Gomez Chino, Calif.

So the devastatingly handsome and elusive Mr. Clooney apparently doesn't want to put a ring on it. Would you kindly let him know that if he's interested in some company, I'm available.

Barbara Harris Phoenix, Ariz.

WHITEY BULGER

Why does Hollywood continue to glamorize thugs like Whitey Bulger, upon whose life the character played by Jack Nicholson in the film *The Departed* was based. While it is shameful that for

so many years Bulger was also an FBI informant, at least that agency finally did the right thing by nabbing this mobster in his Santa Monica lair.

Kenneth Zimmerman via e-mail

HEROES AMONG US

Thank you so much for the update on the lives of teenagers Portia, Antoine, Ricky and Dillon, who arrived at the St. Louis children's home Our Little Haven 18 years ago, born to drug- or alcohol-addicted mothers. I became a volunteer at Our Little Haven soon after they opened their doors in 1993 and helped care for those four precious babies. It was wonderful to read about how their lives have turned out and especially about how the friendship between them all has endured. Our Little Haven founders Scott and Kathleen Hummel are true angels in the St. Louis community.

Angie Wilkison via e-mail

JENNIFER ANISTON

Jennifer Aniston is an attractive, intelligent woman and a good actress, but her behavior seems to fit that of a high school girl who has a new boyfriend every week. Does she really fall for every leading man she works with? Surely no woman with her looks and talent should have to grab onto every man with whom she comes in contact.

Sally Alberts Monument, Colo.

UPDATE | JORDAN SALAZAR

In our July 11 issue, PEOPLE featured the story of Jordan Salazar, a 3-year-old Michigan boy diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Jordan is making encouraging strides in his development thanks to a promising clinical trial, the Early Social Interaction Program at the University of Michigan

Autism & Communication Disorders Center. Since the article ran, Jordan's mother, Olivia Whitehead, reports, "we are all doing well. I had lots of responses via Facebook and e-mail and tons of questions about places to go for early intervention for autism. I am grateful that the magazine reached so many families who could be helped by our story."



WRITE US

TO CONTACT EDITORIAL: Send a fax (212-522-0794), e-mail (editor@people.com) or mail (Letters to the Editor, PEOPLE, Time & Life Building, Rockefeller Center, New York, N.Y. 10020). Letters should include the writer's full name, address and daytime phone number and may be edited for clarity and space.