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## Brotherly love

By **Gail Rosenblum**, Star Tribune

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As a freshman in high school seeking volunteer hours, Abbey Davison applied to work one night a week with Lucy and Jacob Schneider, two Brooklyn Park siblings with autism. She was prepared for tough questions, and tough questions she got: What did she know about autism? "Not much, but let's give it a try!" she said. What activities might she do with Lucy and Jacob, then 2 and 3? "Play outside when we could," she answered. "Color, work on social skills." Most important, why did Davison want to work with Lucy and Jacob? "I love kids!" she said.

She got the job. What she wasn't prepared for was the griller himself: Lucy and Jacob's older brother, Luke, then age 9.

"Luke had a questionnaire for me," Davison recalled with admiration. "He watches out for them, supports them, plays with them. They depend on him." Now 21 and studying occupational therapy at the College of St. Catherine, Davison remains close to the Schneider family, still going to the house weekly to help out. Her respect for Luke, who will be 15 in two weeks, has only grown. "It's different for a 14-year-old to be like that."

It's a new year so here's a new idea: a household without sibling rivalry. Luke Schneider simply doesn't have time for it.

Luke was 8 years old in 2002 when 2-year-old Jacob had tubes placed in his ears because he wasn't responding to the world around him. His parents, Mary and Steve, feared he was deaf. Instead, he was diagnosed with severe autism which was later changed to moderate. Mary recalls "so many people" encircling the family in their living room to explain the diagnosis. All she wanted to know was, "Will he ever say, 'I love you'? Will he graduate from high school?" Seven months later, 1-year-old Lucy also was diagnosed with autism. Luke remembers his parents telling him that "life was going to be different from now on," he said. "Their brains are a little different and they can't always understand what you're saying."

That helped Luke understand why his little brother didn't interact "normally" with him, running away, avoiding eye contact, not knowing that when someone says "Hi" to you, you say "Hi" back. But even early on there were victories. "I was so happy when he learned to play hide-and-seek with me," Luke said of Jacob. He learned how to help Lucy, too, finding her blanket, pouring her orange juice and making her peanut butter sandwiches. "They're like a couple of old people," Luke said. "You have to repeat yourself a lot."

Online school offers flexibility

Luke is a bit of an old soul himself. He is smart, polite, soft-spoken, a self-professed computer geek. He didn't care much for the "distractions" of a typical high school, which

led him to enroll full time this year at Insight School of Minnesota, a fully accredited online high school administered by the Brooklyn Center School District. Luke attends school at the computer in his bedroom from about 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., pulling A's and B's in classes such as English Literature, Algebra One and World History.

His teachers describe him as responsible, disciplined and curious, a perfect candidate for online high school. Science teacher Angela Tingey advises the NASA club and said that Luke "knew the names of all the Mars rovers. He knew which one Phoenix was and that Phoenix had 'died,' or at least that they had lost contact. He knew everything about it. I said that he should be teaching the class."

The online option also allows him to help his parents when life doesn't go as planned, which happens more than occasionally.

Mary works days as an inventory specialist for the University of Minnesota Medical Center, Fairview Riverside campus. Steve works a third shift in medical printing, from 10 p.m. to 6 a.m., sleeping most of the day. Although Lucy and Jacob attend Weaver Lake Elementary School (Jacob is partially mainstreamed; Lucy is assisted in the classroom by a full-time paraprofessional), Lucy has social and anxiety issues, which mean "bad days where she just can't face going to school," Mary said. On those days, Luke postpones his studies and steps in to comfort and feed Lucy, and help her with her reading, writing and computer skills, "so I can go to work and Steve can sleep," Mary said.

Online high school also makes it easier for the family to take vacations -- such as to Disney World or camping -- at off-peak times. They drive, Mary said, because they are worried about how Jacob, with his many meltdowns, would react to flying. He also has trouble with long lines and too much sun. Because the two younger children attend school year-round, Mary said, they "don't have a problem pulling them out."

#### Alone time for Luke

Stacy Ness, 30, of Albertville, observed Luke when she was Lucy's and Jacob's teacher. "Luke is just phenomenal," said Ness, now special education building coordinator for Osseo Area Schools. She recalled that, at 9, he organized a backyard carnival, raising more than \$500 for children with autism. "He's just like another dad for them. He understands their disabilities and doesn't tease them or pick on them. I'm sure it's hard on him when they're upset, but he just works it through with them."

Luke admits that, yes, sometimes Lucy and Jacob drive him nuts. When that happens, "I try to get as much alone time as I can." Most of the time, though, "it's fun to be around them," said Luke, who hopes to go into IT work or teaching one day.

Still, Mary and Steve wisely figured out early on that Luke's young life must be defined by more than his extraordinary caregiving skills. That's largely why they brought in Davison, and many others, to help with the younger two. "Abbey came in so that we could take Luke bowling, to movies, the Science Museum," Mary said. But even she acknowledges that he's irreplaceable.

Two weeks ago, Lucy had to have dental work done under general anesthesia. Luke came along to comfort her. And when Jacob has a meltdown in Target, his mom says it's

Luke who has the best success at calming him.

"You just don't get a better brother than Luke," Ness said. "Kids with autism have so many struggles. Jacob and Lucy are so lucky to have him."

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