

Hearts United: Inspiring friendship blossoms in physical therapy

OSF HealthCare Newsroom

Matt Sheehan – Media Relations Coordinator

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What started as a happenstance turned out to be a beautiful friendship.

"They've always had physical therapy together on Tuesdays for the last year or so. They've grown a bond and love seeing each other, saying hi and giving kisses," says Courtney Klein, the mother of Parker Klein.

Parker and her best buddy Elliott are both 2-years-old and have been diagnosed with [Down Syndrome](#).

Elliott's mother Elizabeth Widolff says the experience has been beautiful for not just Elliott and Parker, but everyone around them.

"It's absolutely wonderful for him to be in communication and interacting with a kid of his own age. It doesn't need to be with someone with the same diagnosis, or the same diagnosis at all. They definitely feed off of each other, which is nice. It's also great to be in the community with another parent, so that way we see we're not the only ones going through the attitude that comes with that extra chromosome. Because that's all it is, it's pure spice," Widolff laughed.

Klein agrees, saying physical therapy for Parker benefits all areas of her life.

"It's helpful not only to see them grow physically, but also be able to develop that bond and see that social aspect as well," Klein says. "It's super easy. It's literally like she's just playing. She loves it, most of the time. It's a fun way to watch her play and grow."

Saundi Pugh is the pediatric physical therapist with OSF HealthCare helping lead the sessions at Five Points Washington with Parker and Elliott. She says the two kids consider physical therapy their weekly date.

"They really think the other is their best friend, or that they're dating. They come and they're so excited to see each other and it's more motivating, we can get them to do more when they're both here," Pugh says.

Widolff says while Elliott may be growing at a different pace than other children, that's part of the journey, and it's a wonderful thing.

"He's scooting now. He wasn't doing that before; he was rolling. He would literally walk on walls. As far as his vocabulary goes, it's getting better the more he's around other children. His favorite word is 'ow,' which is really fun. Ya know, 'ow!' No one is hurting you dude," Widolff laughed.

Pugh says right now Parker and Elliott are working on walking, and they're both making great strides.

"We also work on moving between positions. That's why climbing on the slide ladder can help them get some strength in their legs. Sometimes on the swing we can get some sensory experience, get

them alerted,” Pugh says. “Kids with Down Syndrome tend to be a little more on the lower muscle tone side. So, if we can bounce them on a ball and get them excited, that helps alert them a little bit so they can do more things gross motor.”

As Widolff says, seeing her son grow every week in all facets of life has been a blessing. It’s an added plus that now Elliott has a “little girlfriend” to experience it with.