This is a guest post by Nora Rubovitz, Autism Speaks Family Services Project Manager, and Ali Hines, Family Services Associate Manager of Communications.

A few months ago, the Family Services team received a call from a fourth grade teacher at PS 7 in Brooklyn. Through a “Penny Harvest,” her class had raised $900, $300 of which they decided as a group to donate to Autism Speaks. Last Tuesday, we traveled out to Brooklyn to visit their classroom and accept their generous donation in person.

“This is Nora and Ali from Autism Speaks!” Mrs. Pavane announced to the 100+ students in the auditorium. A little girl in the class walked up to the microphone to announce that she had helped her class choose Autism Speaks because her older brother is on the autism spectrum, and it would mean a lot to her family. We walked up and thanked her very much for thinking of us and sharing information about autism with her class.

“Does anyone know what autism is?” we asked at first. We got little to no response. We didn’t think reciting the DSM-IV criteria would really captivate the fourth grade crowd, so we decided to read the story “Since We’re Friends” so they could understand a bit about the issues faced by children with autism. The book conveyed to our audience that children with autism are just like them; they are fun and wonderful friends who might sometimes need a little bit of support. Much to our surprise, given our recollection of our attention spans at that age, the class seemed fascinated by the story. A boy and his friend with autism were swimming, playing baseball, running around and having fun! The only difference was the few times the boy needed to push his friend a little to make sure he was comfortable and calm. Through reading the story, what may have first sounded to them like a scary disease now came across as something that affects lots of kids. Kids just like them, who they can help, simply by being their friend.
By far the highlight of their morning came next. We decided to play a video filled with pictures and facts to help the class to see a little more about autism. We figured the shorter the video the better for this age group, so we chose a two-minute video often used at Autism Speaks events. We know the kids loved the pictures and were intrigued by the facts displayed, but we could really see their enthusiasm based on the loud claps and high voices coming from the audience while Alicia Keys “No One” played in the background of the video. They were up on their feet singing every word while watching our video. We think Mrs. Pavane learned during our video that all she needed was a little Alicia Keys playing in her math class to really get the group going during multiplication lessons!

At the end of the presentation, we took questions from the group. Hands flew up immediately when Mrs. Pavane asked who would like to ask us something about autism. Is autism contagious? Can you only get it when you’re a little kid? How can I help someone with autism? We were floored by how interested this group of 10-year-olds was in learning more about autism, and how much they wanted to help. We handed out Autism Speaks awareness bracelets, and smiled as the kids walked out wearing their puzzle pieces with pride, armed with a new understanding of autism. One young boy held back from the group as they walked out, and turned to us with a dollar bill: “Here is one dollar for autism.” That, in itself, proved what a wonderful morning it had been. All it took was a simple story and a music video to teach a group of 100 4th graders about autism, and to inspire them to help make a difference in the lives of kids with autism. Kids who are just like them.

SOURCE: http://blog.autismspeaks.org/2010/06/21/just-like-them/