

Butler Eagle

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Variety adds spice to lives Children receive bikes, iPads

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On his new adaptive bike, Levi Jones, 7, of Sarver is greeted with high-fives from staff during a parade at Midwestern Intermediate Unit IV in Grove City on Tuesday. Variety, a children's charity in Pittsburgh, gave a room of special needs children adaptive bikes and communication devices. Photography by Justin Guido/ Butler Eagle

GROVE CITY — A first bike is often a rite of passage for a child. But for many children with special needs, it's one they will never get to experience.

But on Tuesday, Variety, a children's charity in Pittsburgh, gave a room of special needs children adaptive bikes and communication devices, iPads with an app that allows special needs children who are unable to communicate orally to tell their parents what they want to say.

The bikes are designed to help children with special needs who would otherwise be unable to ride a bike. "Everyone remembers their first bike, the color, who you rode with," said Charlie LaVallee, CEO of Variety. "We think everyone should get the chance to ride a bike."

Rebecca Ifft of Lyndora has two children with special needs. Her son Jacob received both a bike and an iPad. "You don't know what it's like until you live it," she said. "It's difficult to find activities that Jacob can do and will like to do, so this bike is a way for him to be outside and exercise while just being a kid."

“It's also hard to find fun things to do that everyone in the family can participate in, so we are excited to be given the chance to add bike riding to our list,” she said. “Jacob's brother Aaden is also autistic. They struggle to get along sometimes, and this might be the thing that will bring these two closer together.”

As excited as they are about the bike, Ifft said the communication device is needed.

“It's hard to put into words what this means for Jacob and us. I think to understand it you must understand what an average day in our lives is like,” she said. “Now he can tell me that he's hungry, that he's hurting, that he doesn't want to go out instead of flapping his arms and hitting me.”



Natalie Menzl, 13, of Cranberry Township checks out her new iPad with her mother, Heidi Menzl, at Midwestern Intermediate Unit IV in Grove City. Variety gave special needs children adaptive bikes and communication devices. JUSTIN GUIDO/ BUTLER EAGLE

Children who cannot communicate are unable to tell their parents what they need or want and are unable to control what is happening around and to them.

“Imagine you were in a foreign country — you don't speak the language, know the customs, no one understands you, and you are trying to explain your wants and needs (simple stuff like food and water),” she said. “And even though people are around and trying to help you, they aren't getting what you're saying.”

For children who cannot communicate, their frustration can often manifest in harmful ways.

“We've had children who get so frustrated they hit themselves and hit their heads against the wall, and they have to wear helmets,” said LaVallee.

Communication devices like these help children feel like they are understood and go a long way to taking care of a child.

“Society wants to put communication in with education, but no one thinks about it in terms of health care,” he said.

LaVallee said many families with special needs children don't realize they are eligible for an adaptive bike or communication device. Families of four can have an income of up to \$98,000 to receive a bike and a communication device.

He encourages any family with special needs children to consider what Variety can do to help.

For information on how to apply for an adaptive bike, call 724-933-0460, or visit www.varietypittsburgh.org/MyBike.



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