

Viera teen hopes to help kids with autism, 1 toy at a time

Sara Paulson, FLORIDA TODAY

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Andrew Stewart's ultimate goal is to be able to help kids who struggle — like his brother.

The 16-year-old's younger sibling, 10-year-old Nate, has attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.

Sometimes, life can be challenging, the rising Edgewood Jr./Sr. High 11th-grader explained. And

it's inspired him to give back. So he's collecting gently used therapeutic toys and devices designed to help children who are on the autism spectrum.

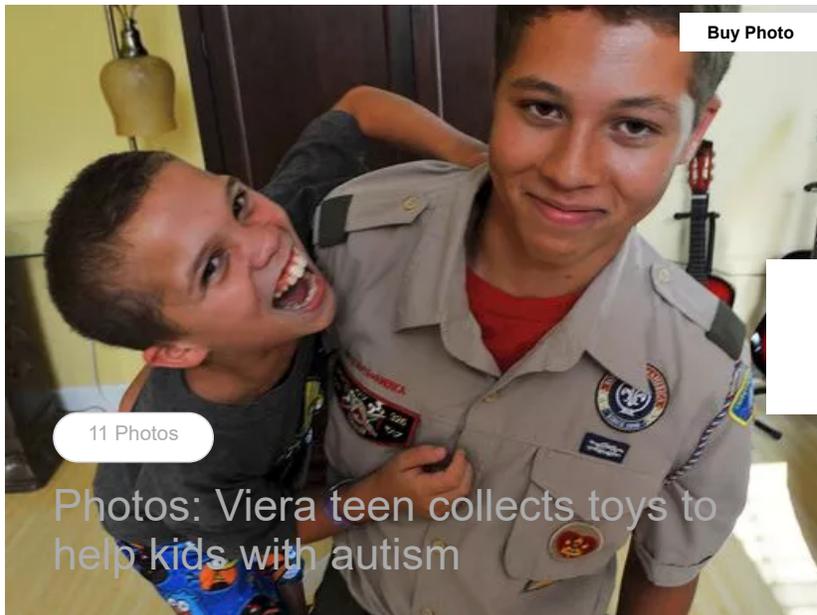
"I don't like the term 'special,' necessarily," Andrew said. "Especially now, it's used in a very derogative manner most of the time. I want to make these kids feel *special*, but in a good way. There's never anything wrong with a superhero."

That's why his Eagle Scout project is named Operation Super.

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Andrew is looking for items such as noise-canceling headphones, ring stackers, shape sorters, fidget toys and tables (designed to help kids on the spectrum channel their energy), and educational activity games. He has set up collection boxes in six spots in Brevard: Hope Lutheran Church in Viera, Faith Viera Church, the Holz Law Group in Rockledge, Parkway Psychiatry in Melbourne, Merritt Island Christian Academy and Florida Counseling Center in Melbourne.

Story continues below:



11 Photos

Photos: Viera teen collects toys to help kids with autism



Donations will be handed off to Autism Early Enrichment. The organization helps kids diagnosed with autism in Brevard through scholarships in existing programs and grants for organizations who assist children with autism and other special needs, according to the group's website.

Andrew said he's off to a slow start. Items are being collected through July 31. He hopes awareness will pull in more stuff that he's seen help ease his own brother's sensory issues.

His mom, Joanne Stewart, said she's pretty proud of her "fine young man," who had to go through a process to pitch the project and get it approved by sponsors and his troop.

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"To watch him grow through this whole process, it's really one of the most amazing things I've seen with him," she said. "He wrote the press releases, he sent them out, he contacted everybody that he needed to contact."

Andrew is a camp counselor at Kiwanis Island summer camp — "I'm in charge of a certain number of 8-year-olds," he noted — and volunteers a couple of hours a week at Viera Hospital. He said he hopes to be a pediatrician.

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"I've always liked science, and I liked working with kids," he explained.

James Holz, a Rockledge lawyer and father of a son with autism, is the director of Autism Early Enrichment. He serves as a sponsor and mentor for the project, which has also gotten support from Puzzle Box Academy.

"I was impressed with Andrew's vision, maturity, and ability to see the project completed," Holz said via email. "His commitment to Operation Super is admirable. The items collected from Operation Super will assist many developmentally delayed children; including autism, with their therapy and general well-being. The support from his Eagle Scout troop is inspiring and Brevard County could use more people like Andrew Stewart."

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Learn more

For additional information about Autism Early Enrichment and Operation Super, visit autismearlyenrichment.org.