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## Boy, 6, educates peers on disability

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By **CLAIRE CUMMINGS**  
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TROY - Joshua Cueter is a fighter.

The 6-year-old Troy resident, however, doesn't show his perseverance by using his fists. He wrestles with spinal muscular atrophy.

Joshua and his father, Joe Cueter, put the battle into perspective for students at Martell Elementary School recently, where five children asked the first-grader about his disability. The taped discussion aired on the school's daily morning announcements and will appear on Troy Schools TV in the next month.

"I'll take a room full of kids any day, with Josh and his chair, versus a room full of adults, because they don't have the predisposed cultural biases and tendencies that we learn over time," his father said after the taping. "Kids are just so genuine and natural around him. It's great."

Spinal muscular atrophy is a neuromuscular disease that blocks spinal signals from reaching the muscles, causing weakness, said Dr. Harold Finkel, a pediatric neurologist at the Michigan Institute for Neurological Disorders.

At age 2, Joshua was diagnosed with spinal muscular atrophy type III, which his parents said is the mildest form. Children who have this type usually live into adulthood but can be at risk for respiratory complications, they said.

Joshua sat in his red motorized wheelchair as fellow students fired questions about living with the disability.

Before the event, students throughout the school were asked to write questions they had about Joshua. One child from each grade was chosen to participate based on the submissions.

Emily Fritz, 7, who is in Joshua's first-grade class, said she learned some new things about his condition.

"He is a very good friend of mine, and I still had some questions to ask him," she said.



Joshua Cueter is a first-grader at Martell Elementary School in Troy. -The Daily Oakland Press / VAUGHN GURGANIAN

Joseph Paul Cope, 8, said he has tried to sit by Joshua in the cafeteria on numerous occasions, but the seats are usually taken. The third-grader, who describes Joshua as "responsible" and a "good friend," said his situation is easier to understand now.

"I learned that sometimes he has trouble doing things, and he probably wants to feel free and be able to walk," Joseph said.

Joshua said his participation in sports, class and life isn't hindered by his disability. He enjoys taking spelling tests and playing baseball. Although an aide assists him throughout the day, teachers say they don't think of him differently.

"When we play soccer, I like being the ref," Joshua said.

Joe Cueter said his son expects some difficulty, but he is often reminded that there are no limitations.

"We try to project the attitude that he can do anything he wants to, and from talking to some of the people here, he's doing that," said Joe Cueter, an Asia Pacific Operations manager for Ford Motor Co.

Joshua's mother, Kris Cueter, said she believes an active lifestyle helps her son physically and mentally.

"He is very aware of what's going on, and he takes it in stride," said the Grosse Pointe kindergarten teacher. "We try to engage him in everything possible.

"He has his regular group of friends like any 6-year-old would."

Cynthia Joyce, executive director at the Spinal Muscular Atrophy Foundation in New York, said more than 25,000 people in the United States have the disability, and 7 million Americans are carriers of the recessive gene.

Both of Joshua's parents were unaware they carried the gene until their son's diagnosis. Although the Cueters' 4-year-old daughter, Erin, is healthy, there is a 25 percent chance for each child they have to exhibit the genetic disorder.

Depending on resources and funding, Joyce said researchers hope to have a treatment within five years.

"The chances of finding a cure are so good that it is important for everybody to know about it," she said.

There are 12 drug trials around the world, and Wayne State University physicians are working to provide one in Detroit, said Joshua's father.

Physical education teacher Lauri Bussell chose the disability for this year's school fund-raiser focus. Students will walk the track during gym class and are encouraged to donate money to support the cause.

"I do think that Martell will take little steps to make a big difference," Bussell said. "I'm sure we will be fighting SMA at Martell for a number of years now."

But Joshua hopes the battle will soon end. Then, he can show his strength in other ways.

He dreams of life without a wheelchair - walking the streets as a police officer.

For information on spinal muscular atrophy, go to [www.fightSMA.com](http://www.fightSMA.com).

