



Photo by Elliot Ferguson

ROUND AND ROUND: Senior kindergarten pupil Jessica West of enjoys a dance in her honour Thursday afternoon at A. J. Baker Public School in Kintore. West has autism and the dance was a fundraiser for Autims Ontario.

Students jitterbug for Jessica

SCHOOL RAISES FUNDS FOR AUTISM ONTARIO

By Heather Rivers
STAFF WRITER

KINTORE — They jumped, jived and jittered.

Donning their finest, and wearing hats and antennae in honour of the event on Thursday, the students of A.J. Baker Public School also dipped, stomped and slid all for a good cause.

And in the centre of it all was five-year-old Jessica West, an autistic student in senior kindergarten, who inspired the fundraiser.

Students brought in loonies and toonies for the event, with the final proceeds of \$415 going to Autism Ontario.

Jessica, dressed in a pink spotted yellow dress and white stockings and runners, happily held hands with her friends and danced to the music.

And while Jessica, who is non-verbal, may not be fully aware of the significance of the goings-on around her, she knew something was up.

"I think she has an idea that there is something special for

her today," said principal Jason Pratt before the event.

In a gym decorated with ladybugs, the Grade 8 student council would lead the youngsters in a variety of "funky dances," Pratt said.

The event was spearheaded by West's teacher Pam Kittner, who was inspired by Toonies for Autism, a fundraiser at a previous school where she worked.

After getting the go-ahead for the fundraiser, Kittner brainstormed with fellow teacher Scott Purvis, who suggested they hold a dance.

"Jessica loves to dance," Kittner said.

While having a student with

autism can prove "challenging," Kittner said, it helps that Jessica is "super happy."

Jessica has her own educational assistant (EA) and is frequently visited by a representative of the Thames Valley Children's Centre, a rehabilitation centre for children.

Kristi Torrance, an instructor therapist from the centre, said her job is "to support the EA in an appropriate communication system for Jessica."

She currently uses a picture exchange communication system to communicate and has learned the numbers from one to 10 and the word "bye."

Jessica is also undergoing intensive behaviour interven-

tion through the children's centre.

Jessica's mother Melanie West said her daughter was diagnosed with autism in 2005. Jessica, who had learned a few words, suddenly stopped speaking at around 18 months to two years.

Today, she described her daughter as "very, very active." "She keeps me busy," West said. "But I have great people to help us."

West said she was impressed with the school's fundraising initiative for autism.

"It's great the school does what it can," she said. "When it's one of their own they stand up to the plate."