

COLUMBIA MISSOURIAN

Father and son return after trip to China for stem cell transplant

By [Samantha Clemens](#)

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Luke Pickett, 21 months old, laughs while he plays with his dad, Clint Pickett, at their Wardsville home on Dec. 6, 2008. Clint and Luke Pickett went to China for more than a month, where Luke had a cord blood stem cell transplant. Luke's parents hope the treatment will help with his cerebral palsy. | [Samantha Clemens](#)

WARDSVILLE — Clasp ing his toddler-sized fingers around his father's, a high-spirited Luke Pickett giggles while he and his brother play with their dad.

Luke Pickett, now 21 months old, went to China for a donated umbilical cord blood stem cell transplant. In September 2007, Luke's parents, Clint

and Cheryl Pickett, learned he had spastic quadriplegic cerebral palsy, a neurological disorder affecting his muscle tone that causes gross motor delays.

After raising \$30,000 and spending Oct. 4 to Nov. 8 at the Chengyang People's Hospital in Qingdao, which is in northeastern China, Luke and his father are back, hoping for results along with the rest of the family.

"His head control is a lot better," Clint Pickett said while holding his son on his lap. "I don't know if it's because he's gotten bigger or he's just getting stronger, but he just feels like a more solid kid."

While in China, where the nurses always wanted to see Luke's smiling face and referred to him as "Lukeeee," Luke received two intravenous treatments of cord blood stem cells and five lumbar (spinal) injections.

"The nurses couldn't get enough of him," Clint Pickett said. "I couldn't walk down the hall without them stopping and holding his hands or rubbing his little face."

The cord blood, which is collected from the umbilical cord and placenta after a woman has given birth, contains stem cells that are being used internationally to attempt to treat various conditions. Autologous transplants use the patient's own stem cells, while allogeneic transplants use donated stem cells from related or unrelated people. Cord blood stem cell transplants are being done in the United States but are not available for cerebral palsy.

Although the Picketts said the treatment was a blessing, the process at times left Clint a little overwrought. During the two intravenous treatments, he was able to sit with Luke on a couch while the "yellowish-color" stem cells in "a bag about the size of half a sandwich" transferred into his son. During the lumbar injections, however, Luke was separated from his father.

"They'd take him away, which is kind of hard to do," Clint Pickett said. "Being in a foreign country and having people you can't really understand sedate your child was pretty rough."

Despite the few anxious moments, the time Clint and Luke spent together allowed the opportunity to strengthen the bond between father and son.

"I learned so much about Luke," Clint Pickett said. "Just taking care of him 24 hours a day, him looking to me for all his meals and bottles — I never got to have that much time with him."

Cheryl Pickett sees that bond now. "He seems closer to Clint to me," she said, watching her husband play with Luke. "He just seems more attached."

Although they were missed, Clint and Luke's month away provided some one-on-one time with Cheryl and Cody, the Picketts' older son, especially before adding the newest members to their family — twins Ethan and Emily, who were born two minutes apart shortly after noon on Dec. 16. Cheryl and Cody made a paper chain together, ripping off a link each day to signify how many days were left until their boys came home. Cody recognized, as much as a 3-year-old can, where his dad and brother were.

A print of Charles Ebbets' 1932 photo, "Lunch Atop a Skyscraper," hangs in the Picketts' dining room. The iconic image of workers eating on a beam above New York City was a reminder to Cody that "that's where Daddy was," Cheryl Pickett said, "because Daddy was in a big city."

With the family back together at their home in Wardsville, just south of Jefferson City, Luke and Cody

play with “diggers,” Cody’s new collection of miniature plastic trucks. Able to sit up with the comforting hands of his father holding onto his crisscrossed legs, Luke’s beaming smile emerges as Cody laughs uncontrollably while playing with his brother.

According to the Picketts, Luke’s therapists have noted that his head control, sitting and hand movements have improved.

“His movement in his hands seem more purposeful,” Cheryl Pickett said. “He can see something, reach out for it and grab it, instead of just whacking at it.”

Clint Pickett said he was told by doctors in China that the treatment for neurological conditions typically shows results three to six months after stem cell transplants, a contrast to some of the more immediate results those with other conditions had in China.

“There were a lot of kids there with optic nerve hypoplasia,” he said of a condition that is usually associated with vision loss. “There was a little boy there from Florida that, after having his first IV treatment, he could see his mom waving her hand in front of his face. Some of those were there, but the other parents there with kids that have cerebral palsy or any other kind of brain injury, we didn’t see as many results right then.”

While in China, Clint collected mementos to bring back to Missouri. Small packets of dried food, a newspaper the day after the presidential election and one keepsake that is a bit more permanent: a tattoo. In Chinese, reading up his forearm, is the symbol for “love” and the names of Cody, Luke, Ethan and Emily — names he and Cheryl kept a secret until they were born.

“It just seemed like a good present to myself, to bring home something that I’ll have forever,” Clint Pickett said. “My kids’ names — I couldn’t think of anything else better to have.”