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Finding Answers in the Uncertainty of Autism

By Jennifer Wake

When a child is diagnosed with a developmental disability such as autism, a parent's world can be turned on end. For many, questions abound about treatment options available and which approaches are the best for their child.

Area clinical psychologist Jennifer Crossland, Ph.D., who works locally as a consultant with children on the autistic spectrum says navigating through the special education system is difficult even when you're trained in it. "It's emotionally draining," she says.

The biggest hurdle for kids with disabilities, says Crossland, is being effectively integrated into the schools and into a collaborative environment. "For most levels of autism, it's more beneficial if they can be integrated into a general education classroom with special education support versus a special day class. They need the social models and need to work on engagement."

Lafayette resident, counselor and director of Enhanced Learning & Growth Center in Walnut Creek, Cindy Wilkinson, M.Ed. LMFT, adds that social isolation, bullying and ridicule - subtle and overt - can cause significant pain for students with difficulties of attention and learning. "When difficulties in communication are an issue, social difficulties are exacerbated."

For young children on the spectrum, a combination of therapies such as Applied Behavioral Analysis (ABA) and Floor Time - a therapy that increases back-and-forth interaction and communication between child and adult - work well together. Additional support such as speech therapy, occupational therapy, sensory integration, physical therapy and behavioral therapy are used in tandem with these broader approaches to elicit the best outcomes.

However, Wilkinson notes the success of any therapy (and a combined approach is often most effective), is dependent a great deal upon listening to the student, working with him/her rather than forcing something. And limited funds, time and education for our teachers makes it hard for them to meet the needs of all their students and those with attention and learning challenges. "This becomes a challenge for everyone," she says.

Many parents seek additional services outside the school system. "Some are good," notes Crossland. "Some lack data. I encourage parents that if their gut tells them to do something, they should try it, if it's not too costly."

The most effective therapies in Wilkinson's opinion are those that address the issues from the inside out - therapies that "integrate neurodevelopmental systems, regulate nutritional deficiencies, work with the child from where they are (not where they are expected to be) and allow for development and progress from there are the most sustainable."

It's also important to facilitate goals at home, says Crossland. "There's much more to a child's life than school."

Wilkinson says parents make two common mistakes: they do something for a child instead of allowing the child the extra time to complete a task; and they react to behavior rather than respond to the underlying cause of the behavior.

Parents also think the professionals they're working with are the experts, they know best, says Crossland. "Parents are the ones who know their child best. They really need to be an active part of the team - help the professionals set the goals. There should be a dialogue. It really is a team process."

And as children on the spectrum age, their needs will change.

Each year, one in 88 children are diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder and according to Autism Speaks vice president of family services, Lisa Goring, an estimated 500,000 teens and young adults will enter adulthood in the next decade.

Families and community members seeking answers about how to help their child or how to support these individuals in our community can attend the Lamorinda Family Center's first disabilities conference and resource fair, "Living with Disabilities," from 4 to 7 p.m. Saturday, October 28 at the Lafayette-Orinda Presbyterian Church in Lafayette. The resource fair will include booths with several social skills and life skills professionals, speech pathologists, respite care providers, and counselors as well as unique services such as a music therapy and a technology booth featuring programs available on the iPad. Following the fair, guest speaker Dr. Ricki Robinson, autism expert, pediatrician, and cofounder of Autism Speaks, will discuss how to understand behaviors in children with autism and other special needs, treatment approaches, how to best support children with special needs and the many adults coming of age with autism in the community.

"We're going to have a lot of kids out there who are going to need support as adults," says Crossland. "We need to be ready for that."

For more information about the conference, visit www.lopc.org. To learn more about The Enhanced Learning & Growth Center, visit www.learningandgrowth.com.

Resources for Parents of Children with Autism

The Fabric of Autism by Judith Bluestone is a wonderful book that describes the many underlying causes involved in an individual with challenges as well as effective treatments. This book applies to all issues of learning and attention, not only autism.

Smart Moves by Carla Hannaford describes sensory irregularities that effect students with challenges and gives many suggestions on how to ease these sensitivities.

Transforming the Difficult Child by Dr. Howard Glasser is a step by step parenting program that helps parents focus on positive behaviors to improve attitude and behavior.

Autism Solutions: How to Create a Healthy and Meaningful Life for Your Child by Ricki Robinson, M.D., M.P.H.

Engaging Autism by Stanley Greenspan and Serena Weider

The Child with Special Needs by Stanley Greenspan and Serena Weider

Understanding Applied Behavioral Analysis by Albert Kearney

The Out of Sync Child-Coping with Sensory Processing by Carol Stock Kranowitz

The Out of Sync Child Has Fun by Carol Stock Kranowitz

<http://www.myautismteam.com/> is a Facebook-like website that connects parents with other parents who understand as well as local providers and venues that others have found helpful.

List compiled by Sindy Wilkinson, M.Ed. LMFT, and Jennifer Crossland, Ph.D.

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