

Life with autism can be good

Covington clinic helps autistic children do what comes naturally to other kids

By PAM McGAFFIN for The Covington-Maple Valley Reporter

Speech and language pathologist Daphne Brindle was accustomed to working with all kinds of children, but autistic kids could really test her mettle. Some would hit her and refuse to look her in the eye, and their progress was painfully slow. She eventually switched to working with adults, in a large part because of those challenges. Then she had an autistic child of her own. Her daughter, Danae, was a wiggly infant. Phil, the girl's father, said changing her diaper was like "changing a rotisserie chicken." She was slow to speak, would sometimes bang her head and was prone to wandering and meltdowns. She avoided eye contact with people speaking to her and didn't respond to her name. Her diagnosis at the age of 2 confirmed what her parents had suspected but came as a blow. nevertheless. "We grieved for her present. We grieved for her future," said Daphne Brindle. "Will she go to college? Will she ever marry? Have children of her own? Be independent? "When we learned she would require a staggering number of hours of therapy in order to try to make a difference in her development, we felt thoroughly overwhelmed."

Even with Brindle's professional background, she and her husband were bewildered by the many different therapy options. It took a lot of research and some trial and error before they finally found one that worked: Relationship Development Intervention, or RDI. The relatively new treatment, which the Brindles have obtained for their daughter at a clinic in Covington, teaches parents how to motivate their children to learn the social, emotional and communication skills that come naturally to other children.

RDI will be the subject of a two-day workshop Oct. 5-6 at the Doubletree Hotel Seattle Airport. Dr. Steven Gutstein, who helped design the treatment model in 1995, will illustrate RDI via audience participation and video from actual intervention sessions. Registration (\$300 per person) and information are available at villareal@rdiconnect.com and (713) 838-1362, extension 122.



The "spectrum"

Autism is one of several disorders along an "autism spectrum" that affects normal development of the brain, experts say. Autistic children typically have difficulties with social interaction and verbal and non-verbal communication, and have narrow, obsessive interests (lining up objects, for example). Many are hypersensitive to sensory stimulation like sounds and touch and engage in repetitive movements, like rocking and twirling.

Danae and her parents, who live in the Renton area, started RDI therapy at the MindSource Center in Covington. The center was founded by mental health therapist Carrie Sheppard, the mother of an autistic child and one of the first in the Puget Sound region to offer RDI to families that have autistic offspring.

"We saw almost immediate improvement in our communication with our daughter," said Brindle. "It's been such an empowering experience, because we learned how to work with our own child." Sheppard, who has 20 years experience as an individual, child and family therapist, is convinced RDI provides the best methods for dealing with the meltdowns, withdrawal and lack of socialization skills that are at the root of most autism-related problems.



“I see such rapid results, particularly in the area of emotional connection,” Sheppard said. “Some of the techniques are amazingly simple, yet they can make a huge difference.” Whereas the more widely prescribed behavioral analysis therapy is effective in training autistic kids how to behave in a classroom, RDI focuses on helping children develop friendships, empathy and a love of sharing their world with others. The method has been steadily gaining in popularity, Sheppard said. A year and a half after she established MindSource, Sheppard has a waiting list. “The demand is so great for kids on the autism spectrum,” she said, adding that she hopes to attract more professionals to the collaborative.

1 in 150 have disorders

The demand for services may reflect a much higher prevalence of autism than originally thought. When Sheppard’s son was diagnosed in 1996, the rate of autism-spectrum disorders was estimated at 1 in every 2,000 children in the United States. Now it’s 1 in 150, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which has called autism a national health threat.

“Some is due to the increased attention to autism and better diagnostics, but not all,” Sheppard said. “It’s still alarming to see that kind of an increase.”

At the MindSource Center, families can get assessments, information, therapy and practical help from a collaboration of independent practitioners, including two psychologists and a naturopath. Sheppard also is as an advocate for autism-spectrum families in public school systems.

Brindle said the center’s “philosophy of treating the whole family” includes a “whole-person approach that takes mind, body and spirit into account.” Brindle’s daughter, Danae, is now 5 and is enthusiastically attending kindergarten with both general education and special-needs students. “She’s bright and fun and quirky, and she brings us a lot of joy,” said her mom.

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