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A look at autism and the services provided for autistic children

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ROBIN CLAYTON

STAFF WRITER

If every student at Southwood Elementary School worked as hard as Atashia Ellis, the school year could be completed in half the time, says Principal Jerry Walton.

"She is just a working machine," he said, explaining that when given a stack of worksheets, the rising fifth-grader will work non-stop until they are done.

Atashia doesn't work hard to gain praise and she barely acknowledges the rewards she re-ceives for being a good student.

She is nonverbal and she uses pictures and sign language to communicate. Atashia is one of six children in Southwood's classroom for autistic children.

Autism is a developmental disorder that affects about 1.5 million Americans, both adults and children. The majority of autistic people are diagnosed by the time they're 3 years old. The origin of autism is controversial, but over the years researchers and doctors have begun to understand more about the disorder and the ways to treat it.

That understanding has led to specific treatments and an array of programs that, even in rural counties like Lenoir, make the help of professionals available to families touched by autism. But finding that help remains the job of parents, who must evaluate advice and choose between varying forms of assistance in order to find the best individualized treatment plan for their autistic child.

Diagnosis: autism.

Now what?

Being told that your child isn't "normal" can be overwhelming and heartbreaking, but many parents of disabled children already know that something is wrong long before the diagnosis.

Teri Smith is an occupational therapy assistant who spends much of her time working with autistic children. She knows how the parents of those children feel. Her son, 11-year-old Grant, has Down's syndrome. He was diagnosed at 10 days old, but Smith said she knew something was wrong "as soon as I saw him."

Instead of grieving and wishing her son was different, Smith grew determined to find the best course of action for his care and became his No. 1 advocate. She urges the parents of autistic children to do the same.

"You have to be very proactive," she said. "Resources are out there, but you have to take the initiative to find out about them."

Smith suggests that parents of recently diagnosed autistic children use their child's pediatrician as a primary resource. While autistic children are typically referred to specialists, pediatricians can offer advice and often steer parents in the right direction.

Mental health centers, such as Eastpointe, also provide invaluable resources for parents. According to case manager

Shawn Howe, there are many programs available for autistic children and their caregivers.

Early Childhood Intervention programs are available for children up to age 3. Once a child is too old for that program, Community Alternative Programs (CAP) are the most-desired programs, said Howe.

"That's what everyone wants," said Howe.

Howe said CAP is the "top of the line" service and the most inclusive. The problem, however, is that it's expensive and difficult to get into.

Other options include case management, which matches autistic children with case managers who act as advocates. Howe said getting a case manager is the most available option for autistic children.

"If I had a kid with autism, the very first thing I would do is get a case manager," he said.

Some parents choose to take an alternate route by doing their own research and using multiple therapists to oversee the treatment and care of their children.

When Jeanine Howard's 5-year-old sons Jackson and Jacob were diagnosed as autistic about four years ago, the Kinston mother of four took the initiative to find the best possible treatment plan. Her background in psychology gave Howard an advantage because she knew more about the resources available and how to utilize them.

On any given day, the street in front of Howard's home is lined with cars as therapists trained in various disciplines come to her home to work one-on-one with the boys. This is a part of applied behavioral analysis (ABA) therapy, which combines treatment from multiple therapists. On average, each boy receives 56 hours of intensive therapy a week.

Speech therapist Connie Carlton works with Jackson and Jacob Howard twice a week. She said the therapy is unique for each boy. Jackson, who is about to start school in the fall, is farther along with his speech therapy than his brother. Howard said Jacob is more affected by autism so his speech therapy consists of "very basic structure therapy."

Howard said the therapy her boys receive requires a lot of dedication from the people working with them. Rather than taking her sons from appointment to appointment, Howard integrates therapy into the boys' everyday lives. Flexible therapists help make this possible.

Debbie Eubanks, another Kinston mother, also takes advantage of at-home therapy. Her son, 15-year-old John Paul, has Asperger's syndrome, a high-functioning form of autism, as well as Tourette's syndrome. Rehabilitation aides come to the Eubanks home each week to work with John Paul.

Debbie Eubanks said education is key when it comes to finding the right therapy for an autistic child.

"You have to be informed and educated," she said.

Both Eubanks and Howard also use animal therapy to help their children. John Paul Eubanks has been riding horses since he was 5-years-old and has won numerous awards for his riding skills. The Howard twins have received animal therapy from Carlton, who works with Bright Star Farms to provide animal therapy to developmentally disabled children.

Although not widely known, there are summer programs and extracurricular activities that are aimed toward children with autism and other disabilities. Challenger League base-ball, which wrapped up its first season Saturday, is one activity that gives local disabled children a chance to play ball and be a part of team. An art camp sponsored by the ARC of Lenoir County also provides activities for handicapped youth.

Autism in the schools

Chrystal Wilburn's Southwood Elementary School classroom looks strikingly similar to those of her colleagues. Bookcases piled high with materials paired with comfy chairs perfect for reading make the bright, sunny room look like it could be the second home of any elementary school teacher. But Wilburn's class is unique in Lenoir County. It is the only classroom in the school system made up of autistic children.

Although there are autistic students at each of the county's schools, Wilburn's class is a "satellite" class, which means it is comprised solely of autistic children from all over the county.

There are six students in Wilburn's class. Those children range in both age and severity of disability. A couple are nonverbal, like Atashia Ellis; one is overly social and the others fall somewhere in the middle. Each child lives in a different world, one that is sometimes difficult for others to enter.

That's where Wilburn's job begins.

Two of her students spend a portion of their school day in other classrooms with children that do not have autism. While they are gone, Wilburn works individually with the remaining children; when they return, she does the same with them. The work the students do depends on their IEP, or individualized education program. An IEP is a curriculum created specifically for a certain child, depending on his or her abilities.

Although Wilburn only has six children to teach, she deals with many difficulties mainstream teachers don't see.

"You have to think outside the box," she said. Teaching autistic children requires a lot of imagination and a lot of trial and error. "You have to be open to all ideas."

Wilburn said she is required to stay as on track as possible to the North Carolina Standard Course of Study, which determines what skills should be taught in each grade.

"But sometimes you have to modify it," she said.

Wilburn said teaching autistic children is challenging, but the rewards more than make up for the obstacles.

"When you've been working on something over and over and it finally clicks," said Wilburn. "That's what makes it worthwhile."

Robin Clayton can be reached at (252) 527-3191 ext. 273 o

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