

## **Hope for Tomorrow**

### **Waupaca County Family Oversees Isolation Caused by Child's Difficult Behavior**

*(This article first appeared in the Waupaca County Post and New London Press Star in October, 2003; and later in the Family Ties Summer 2004 Newsletter)*

At first glance, you would never guess that 11-year-old Jessica struggles with any disorder. With flowing blond hair and an excited giggle, she appears as happy as any young girl her age. While Jessica looks healthy on the outside, she is hurting on the inside: She has Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and an Autism Spectrum Disorder. The truth is, these disorders greatly affect Jessica's behavior. Jessica, like other children with emotional, behavioral or mental disorders, has a hard time controlling her behavior.

"When you see Jessica kicking, hitting, throwing herself violently on the floor and screaming obscenities, you are seeing symptoms of her disorders," says her mother, Tina Swinford. Swinford also adds that these behaviors are very challenging, at times embarrassing and often misunderstood. Many people, including friends and family view these outbursts as signs of an "undisciplined, spoiled rotten, and disrespectful child."

One incident occurred when Jessica and her family went shopping. Swinford states, "While standing in line to check out, Jessica became frustrated with the long wait. She began screaming at me to hurry up, hit me and then threw herself to the floor. She was hitting her head, kicking and swearing out of frustration." Swinford overheard comments from others in line, such as, "If that was my child they would never get away with that," and, "My child knows better than to act like that." Recalls Swinford, "I tried to ignore Jessica's outburst for fear she would accidentally lash out at me but hurt someone else standing in line. I was also very embarrassed. I didn't want to draw more attention to us."

This type of behavior has drawn other strong, hurtful reactions. Swinford relates that one family member responded to an incident in front of Jessica saying, "Wild animals behave better than that. Now you know why some mothers in the wild eat their young."

"These comments left me frustrated, angry, hurt, and feeling very alone," said Swinford. Soon, she and her husband limited their contact with family and friends. They refrained from taking Jessica to the store and even reduced the frequency of family outings to avoid further judgment from others.

"The sense of isolation can be overwhelming," says Hugh Davis, Executive Director of Wisconsin Family Ties, a non-profit organization dedicated to serving families that include children with emotional, behavioral or mental disorders. "Despite having family nearby, living in close-knit neighborhoods and seeing coworkers on a daily basis, many of these families feel tremendously alone."

In fact, Jessica and her family are not alone; the state of Wisconsin estimates there may be as many as 508 children in Waupaca County with emotional or behavioral disorders resulting in "extreme impairment" of daily functioning. Nationally, it is estimated that 2/3 of children with such illnesses are not getting the help they need.

Jessica, and others like her, need help controlling their behavior from parents and professionals. "Sometimes the help we give Jessica is as simple as patience, understanding, support, and a loving hug," states Swinford. "We made modifications to her room to give her a quiet and safe place to 'cool down.' We try to reinforce positive behavior and use strategies recommended by professionals to reduce negative behavior." Other assistance available to kids like Jessica include psychological counseling, therapy, special diets, medication, and in extreme instances, hospitalization. One way family and friends can help these children is to learn more about their disorder to better help them live healthy, happy and productive lives.

In Waupaca County, families that include children with emotional and behavioral disorders may be able to receive assistance from the Integrated Services Project (ISP). This county-run program is family-focused and builds upon the strengths of the child and family. "Some people may be afraid they'll lose their children if they contact the county, but this program is designed to keep children at home and in school," says Alan Stauffer, Project Director of Waupaca County's ISP. "We work closely with each family to identify supports and services tailored to their unique needs."

Through her family's involvement in the ISP program, Swinford heard about Wisconsin Family Ties. Swinford states, "I remember calling and talking with individuals at Wisconsin Family Ties who understood what I was going through. They knew how I felt and didn't judge me! I realized I wasn't alone and began healing from the hurtful comments that I now know were made because people really don't have much knowledge about children's mental health problems."

Swinford's experiences have motivated her to help others in similar situations. Through Waupaca's Integrated Services Project, Swinford learned of an open position at Wisconsin Family Ties in Waupaca County and was encouraged to apply. "All I had was experience in dealing with my child's behavior, knowledge on disorders, and getting services to better help her," says Swinford; but that is what qualified her for the job. She now works as a Family Advocate for Wisconsin Family Ties helping other families.

Swinford acknowledges the increasing need for support for parents of children with these disorders. To assist parents and caregivers, she started a local support group for families with children with special needs. The support group, called "Embrace," meets on the first Thursday of every month at 6:30 p.m. at the New London Medical Center.

Today, Jessica is learning to identify when she needs a break to calm down and spends part of her school day in a regular classroom. While her family still faces many challenges, Swinford acknowledges, "Without the services and help we received, we wouldn't have gotten this far." She hopes that by speaking out, people in Waupaca County will begin to better understand children's mental health issues. "Maybe some people will realize that what they're seeing on the outside may be due to what's going on on the inside. Maybe they won't be so quick to judge. And maybe some family that needs help will know where to start to find it."

*For more information on Wisconsin Family Ties or the "Embrace" support group, contact Tina Swinford at (920) 982-6469 or e-mail to [LossSheep@aol.com](mailto:LossSheep@aol.com).*