



Department of Health
Agency of Human Services



Health Department Improves Services to Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder and Developmental Disabilities

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BURLINGTON – A year ago, Mathew and Tina Robitaille noticed their son rarely made eye contact and did not like to snuggle or be held as much as his twin brother. The twins were born prematurely at 28 weeks in October 2010. Throughout his infancy, Sam preferred to sit alone on the floor and seemed distant from his brother and parents.

One-year-old Sam, before he was diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder, was a remarkably different child than he is at 2 and a half, now tearing around the house. With the help of his Early Intervention Team and referrals to treatment specialists following early diagnosis at the Health Department's Child Development Clinic, Sam is fully engaged, thriving, and gearing up for preschool.

"There is no reason he cannot lead a normal life, and the last year of services have proven that," said Tina Robitaille. "Most people, when I say he has been diagnosed as autistic, they say What? Sam? He has come such a long way."

April is National Autism Awareness Month and the Health Department has been working to educate parents of children with developmental disabilities about the Child Development Clinic. The clinic evaluates children with Autism Spectrum Disorder and provides regionally based care coordination. As part of the clinic care coordination, medical social workers serve as liaisons between the local Early Intervention Team and the Child Development Clinic.

Janet Kilburn, a medical social worker for the Health Department, understands the importance of early intervention and treatment. She met Sam and his family and was part of his multidisciplinary Child Development Clinic evaluation team. Kilburn is versed in the broad array of resources available to parents. She is helping to streamline care and coordinate services across agencies and specialists.

Kilburn also serves as an Act Early Ambassador for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Her role as an Act Early Ambassador is to promote CDC's "*Learn the Signs. Act Early.*"

"My charge as ambassador is to make sure every child in Vermont receives the kind of early identification and intervention that Sam did. For all children to receive the care and support they need as early as possible, parents need to know to talk to their health care provider or call 211 to reach their local Children's Integrated Services (CIS) team when they have a concern."

As part of early intervention services, the Robitaille's chose a home-based intervention program run by the HowardCenter. The HowardCenter Autism Spectrum program improved and refined how Sam learned, interacted, behaved and grew. Developmental disabilities affect one of every six children. Parents often don't know how or where to reach out for support.

"When your son is diagnosed with autism you have no idea what is out there or what to do," said Mathew Robitaille. "Janet and her group sat down with us here at our places of work and said; 'Here is what is going on, here are the options, and the pros and con and the benefits of these steps that are helpful.'"

"Everybody we have dealt with has been fantastic and Sam is proof that they do good work and care about what they do." Robitaille continued. "Sam is thriving with the help of a lot of skilled individuals. He is doing fantastic. He is a completely different child, he talks non-stop, he enjoys playing with you, and he has come a very long way. If you learn anything as parents, it is that you don't get a crystal ball, you go day by day and do your best."

Increasing the percentage of children who are screened for Autism Spectrum Disorder and other developmental delays is a goal of **Healthy Vermonters 2020**.

For more information on CDC's ***Learn the Signs. Act Early.*** Program visit www.cdc.gov/actearly.

For more information on autism and developmental disabilities resources in Vermont visit www.vermontfamilynetwork.org/i-need-help-with/developmental-disabilities/autism/.

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