

KEYSTONE CHILDREN & FAMILY SERVICES

BY M. DIANE MCCORMICK

SHANNAN VANATTA KNEW BETTER THAN TO COMPARE HER SECOND CHILD'S DEVELOPMENT AGAINST HER FIRST. THE FORMER OBSTETRICS NURSE UNDERSTOOD THAT CHILDREN GROW DIFFERENTLY. BUT BEFORE TY REACHED HIS FIRST BIRTHDAY, SHE SOUGHT ADVICE FROM HER OWN MOTHER. TY WASN'T LOOKING AT HER, VANATTA SAID.



Photo courtesy of CAHS

"It's a mother's gut feeling that something's just not right," Vanatta recalls. Her mother agreed that it was time to seek guidance, and Ty's doctor helped line up an early intervention assessment.

"The worst thing they can do," the doctor told the family, "is say you don't need us, and that's a good thing."

In Pennsylvania, every child from birth to age 3 has the right to early intervention – state-funded, county-administered services and therapies targeting developmental delays. Families whose children are assessed with delays choose from a menu of service providers, and one of the Harrisburg area's largest is Keystone Children & Family

Services, a division of Keystone Human Services.

Keystone Children & Family Services works with about 600 children a year. Depending on their needs, children might get occupational, physical or speech therapy. Perhaps more importantly, the entire family is involved in the planning meant to help children and parents achieve critical goals, says Debra Reuveny, early intervention services director. The therapist's initial goal might be teaching the child to utter a few words, but when the parents just want the child to stop crying and sit down for a family meal, "that's where I've got to go," she says.

"What I'm going to say to the family is

that he's probably crying because he's not able to tell you what he needs, and he's frustrated, so we can work on that through building his language skills," Reuveny says. "It's really the goals that are important to the family and how the family can be able to involve the child in the community to the greatest degree possible. A lot of families might not take the child grocery shopping because their child cries all the time, which has a huge impact on their ability to get out of the house. Maybe the child can't go to birthday parties or can't go to preschool."

At some point during early intervention, an autism test might be called for, and Keystone Children & Family Services applies

what they call the "gold standard," the Autistic Diagnostic Observation Schedule. A team comprising a speech pathologist, occupational therapist and psychologist engage the child in "a series of tasks to elicit particular behaviors related to autism," says Dr. Carlos F. Pozzi, director of clinical and psychological services. They evaluate the quality and quantity of social interaction, language, eye contact, smiling, pointing and looking. But they also review medical and developmental history to rule out other possible causes of a delay.

"If this child doesn't know that a red block is red, is it because he's color blind and can't see red, or is it because nobody ever told him red is red?" says Pozzi.

A diagnosis on the autism disorder spectrum, Pozzi gently reminds parents, is not a cause for grief.

"This is the same child you had this morning," he tells them. "What do you need to do to assist him? Every time I say this, I feel like I'm being really cold, but grief is not going to take that child anywhere. What's going to make an impact on this kid is for you to act."

The Vanatta family, in early intervention for nine months before the autism test, was prepared for Ty's diagnosis as moderately autistic, says Shannan Vanatta. "It didn't change anything. I do have days where I wonder, 'Why is this happening to me?' But I'm a Christian, and I believe that God has a plan."

The treatment that follows a diagnosis involves the whole family, so that "almost every interaction becomes a teaching interaction, and in that case, a therapeutic interaction," says Pozzi. Vanatta has learned to "concentrate on the positives and things that make Ty happy." Therapists suggested a picture board on the wall to help Ty communicate. "Now Ty will go up to the wall, take the picture off and hand it to me when he wants a snack. That's amazing."

Denial would have been easier than accepting her son's diagnosis and taking action, Vanatta admits, but she knows that her family is better off now.

"You can't know what it would have been like, but the progress I've seen with the requesting, the communication piece, has been amazing. Who knows? Ty might be screaming and crying so much more if he could not have a picture board. I'm extremely happy. All of the therapists that have come in and out have been extremely professional. I do feel that I'm doing everything I possibly can for Ty, and that's thankfully because of early intervention and Keystone." **HBC**

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