

# Therapists aid autistic children at MindSource Center

By KRIS HILL  
Staff writer

Autism doesn't have to be a scary diagnosis for a child and his or her family. Treating it shouldn't be a daunting task, either.

Carrie Sheppard, a psychotherapist in private practice for more than 20 years, decided to bring services for autistic children and their families to Covington when she opened the MindSource Center just off Kent-Kangley Road in 2003.

"This came about, really, because of my own son," Sheppard said.

Her youngest son, Aaron, now 12, was diagnosed with autism when he was 2.

"I had to go miles to get most of his services. I had to drive to Seattle," she said. "There's really not much of these services in south King County. My vision is really to offer services where people live ... to make it really user-friendly and accessible."

In the simplest terms, autism is a brain disorder that can interfere with a person's ability to communicate with and relate to other people, according to WebMD.com.

But how it affects each individual varies, and Sheppard has assembled a team approach at MindSource to treat each person based on their needs.

Sheppard had worked with autistic children early in her practice, but her approach to treating the disorder has become more refined over the years.

"I didn't really get interested in autism until I had children of my own," she said. "My youngest son was diagnosed with autism, and that's when I really got interested in autism and wanted to learn everything I could."

As she immersed herself in



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**Luke Olsen, 20 months, plays a follow-the-flashlight game with Kathy Patten, an occupational therapist.**

learning about it, other therapists that knew her began referring autistic children to her.

"I kind of became a magnet for (autistic patients)," Sheppard said.

Though she treats patients with other disabilities, about 80 percent of her practice is work with autistic clients.

Sheppard began to focus on a specific area that she felt wasn't getting treated.

"What I was most concerned about — my son's (disability) and these children I was serving — was their social, emotional and relational functioning," she said. "There are many, many therapies for autism, but there's a huge gap in that area."

Often, autistic children experience the world in different ways and find it difficult to cope when they are overloaded with stimuli or are not stimulated enough.

Some children are sensitive to sound while others are sensitive to touch or the way their clothes feel on their body.

Some, according to occupational therapist Kathy Patten, have

vision problems. For example, both eyes may not be tracking what they see in the same way. So, that conflicting information confuses the child's brain.

Patten said one mom brought her daughter in thinking her little girl had always been a good baby. But by age 3, she had no muscle tone, and she wasn't calm and still because she was a good kid. The little girl was so overstimulated, she was afraid to move.

Sheppard discovered with her own son that he had a hard time relating to her and often retreated to his own world.

She worried that someday, when he went out into the world on his own, that he wouldn't be able to function.

"Lots of areas cover ... the development of speech, the development of behavioral compliance, the ability to function in a classroom," Sheppard said. "But it doesn't necessarily lead to the kinds of skills that will help them be successful in the world ... if you think about having friends, getting married, holding down a job."

Studies show, she said, that many autistic adults have academic skills but can't keep a job or have relationships.

"It's because they don't know how to relate to people," Sheppard said. "The missing piece is about developing connection — a true, genuine connection with other people and being motivated to make that connection."

During her research, she discovered a method called relationship development intervention (RDI) in 2001.

"Up until that point, I felt very estranged from (her son) because he was in his own world," Sheppard said. "What RDI did for our relationship, it gave me hope for having a strong bond with him that wasn't there before and right away it started working."

She began to incorporate RDI into therapy for her patients to help parents let go of the fear that often comes with a diagnosis of autism.

"But, it requires a bit of work," Sheppard said. "They have to simplify their lives and make the focus on really developing the relationship with their child."

Patten complements Sheppard's work with parent-child relationships with her hands-on style, which is foundational because it helps identify what each kid is experiencing and how to treat the symptoms.

"What Kathy knows is how to deal with kids that are really confused. They have so much happening in their bodies, you cannot reach them because they are not OK in their bodies yet," Sheppard said. "When they're regulated and modulated on the inside, then there's so much you can do. That's why we do a team approach here. If we were each doing our own little piece, we wouldn't get very far — we rely on

the different parts of our team to make it work."

Children can come in to MindSource when their body is giving them information they don't know how to deal with.

"Some kids may seem lethargic ... but, really, their arousal level is so low, they are just barely able to keep their body upright," Patten said. "A child's job is to play. That's how they learn, that's how they develop."

So, her therapy room is filled with toys and balls, bean bags and ropes suspended from the ceiling.

It's meant to look like a play room.

But the work at the treatment center is just the beginning.

"Even if they get a moment of organization, they're empowered. They go home and start doing it at home," Patten said.

Patten said she likes the family oriented approach of RDI treatment.

"The piece that's huge when treating a child is I always have the parent in the room," Patten said.

"It's not something you can do on your own. It's not something you can do one hour a week. The child has to believe they can do this at home with the safety of their mom."

Patten calls her patients little diamonds that can shine with a little work and polishing.

Sheppard said the work is important and has a purpose.

"I really believe every child has their place in the world," Sheppard said. "And (it's satisfying) helping them to figure out where that place is ... all of those things that will help the child be independent and self-sufficient and as successful as he or she can be."

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