



## ring the alarm

LEARN HOW TO SPOT THE WARNING SIGNS OF BEHAVIORAL AND LEARNING DISORDERS IN YOUR CHILD

Parents look at their children and see the bright promise of their future, so the appearance of a learning disability or a behavioral disorder in a child can knock an entire family for a loop.

Lori Jiminez\*, a cartoonist in San Antonio, took note of her son Hunter's\* developmental delay before he was three. "He talked late, he was repetitive, he had no spontaneous speech," she says about her now 12-year-old son, who has been diagnosed with a pervasive developmental disability.

Children can illustrate signs of

mental, emotional and behavioral disorders ranging from anxiety to depression, and even more severe issues such as autism and schizophrenia, at an early age. In addition, the diagnosis of learning disorders and attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) continues to rise. But the fact that the problems are widespread does not make it any easier for a parent.

Carrie DaWitt\*, a Granby, Conn., mother felt "crushed" by her discovery that three of her four children—daughter Terri, 14, and twins Nick and Nina, 9—suffer from bipolar disorder.

"Terri was always a difficult child. She didn't sleep well as an infant and never took naps as a toddler. She would have night terrors—but the biggest problems started when she was in fourth grade, about age 8," says DaWitt.

Early warning signs can vary depending on the issue the child is developing. In cases of emotional or behavioral disorders, some symptoms include poor sleep patterns, lack of appetite, severe mood swings and unrealistic phobias or negative thought patterns. Early evidence

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of learning disorders is often marked in preschool children by late speech development, problems with such motor skills as balance and manipulating small objects and trouble with learning routines.

With proper pediatric care, it may be possible to diagnose a problem in its earliest stages, says Dr. Lynette Wilson-Phillips, a pediatrician based in Decatur, Ga. "In our practice, we use a developmental screening tool, which is a questionnaire we give to parents at the nine-month, 18-month and 36-month check-up. [But] we do rely a great deal on the parents' observations," she adds. "They often notice where a child might not be as

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far as another child of the same age or maybe [they are] not where an older sibling was at that age.”

Despite consistent pediatric checks, some parents do not become aware of any serious problems with their child’s learning ability or behavior until the child enters school. Teachers can also notice symptoms, such as difficulty in processing new words, an inability to sit still or concentrate, poor memory, aggression toward peers or an inability to relate to other children. Since socialization is such a crucial part of a child’s school life, it can be tough going.

“It’s definitely hindered Terri’s social development,” says DaWitt of her teenage daughter’s mood disorder. “She had a meltdown a couple of times with friends in middle school, and that was the end of those friendships. She can also get very intense about a new friendship, which can scare the new friend away.”

Pat Kennedy, director of Exceptional Student Services and Pupil Services for the City of Decatur (Ga.) Schools, notes that school systems across the country offer assessments and assistance for students who have special needs, ranging from in-classroom aides to pull-out programs, where the child may go to a special education teacher for specific instruction. However, parents’ experiences with schools can vary widely.

DaWitt’s experience was largely positive. She reports that most of her children’s teachers were very understanding and that they had “had good luck with 504 plans” (a specific instruction plan designed to address the needs of the individual child). Jimenez, however, was embittered by her experiences with her now 15-year-old daughter Sunny’s middle school. “My daughter is ADHD. We withdrew her from middle school to home school her until high school, because we had simply come to a point where it was easier. She was miserable, depressed and angry [at school].”

Early intervention is generally regarded as the best course of action, as many children can successfully thrive at home, in school and with friends. According to research by the Center on Human Development and Disability at the University of Washington, learning disabilities that are not addressed with appropriate interventions can have lasting consequences, such as failure in school and at jobs, resulting in low self-esteem.

In addition to forming a partnership with their children’s doctors and teachers, parents can connect with support groups to learn how to provide emotional support as they help their kids navigate their way to a brighter future.

“I think the best thing parents can do is to help their child feel that they are loved and supported,” says Kennedy, “and that this problem that they are having does not define them.” —Jaymi Curley

\* Names have been changed

embrace the present moment, and ask yourself some tough questions,” says Honor. “Why do you want your parents to stay together? Is it for yourself? If they honestly tell you that they will be happier apart, how can you begin to accept that?”

For Dwayne Jacobs, that internal conversation was therapeutic and gave him the tools to deal with what he felt was a serious loss.

“I had to take a long look at my mother,” says Jacobs. “And I realized that I had a lot of respect for her. She found herself in an uncomfortable situation and she was brave enough to follow through with the decision to free herself. It takes a strong woman to do that. And as time went on, I had to admit that she seemed much happier. So as much as I thought she and my stepfather were perfect together, I had to realize that I might not have known everything about the relationship.”

Patricia Weston, 32, thought she knew—and accepted—everything about her parents’ relationship. The stay-at-home mother of three in Boston knew that her parents had a shotgun wedding just three months before she was born.

“My mother was only 15 when she got pregnant with me,” she explains. “She was married at 16 and I don’t think they ever really wanted to be together for the long term. Growing up, they never seemed particularly happy together. But it was a classic case, in my opinion, of staying together for the kid’s sake.”

Weston’s parents did not divorce until Weston was 27 and married with a child of her own.

“I definitely thought they’d grown to love each other,” says Weston. “And even though I knew the marriage wasn’t ideal, I was disappointed that the ‘headquarters’ of my family was falling apart. It was all very civil. But still, for me, it was sad. It’s funny. Some people say you should stay together for the kids. I wanted them to stay together for the grandkids.”

Honor urges those in similar situations to take comfort in the way the separation is handled.

“Many people end their marriages in bitterness, anger and violence,” she explains. “It seems that [Weston’s] parents were insightful enough to understand that they had outgrown one another and that remaining together would not be the healthiest and wisest choice. When things can be dissolved this way, we should be grateful that the end of the relationship—however painful for us—was at least not acrimonious. And remember, their split does not have to mean that your own relationship is doomed.”

Ultimately, the best discovery is that although we are always our parents’ children, as we grow, our dependence on them changes in small and large ways.

“Once I took myself out of the equation, I realized that my parents had to do what was best for them—not me,” says Dwayne Jacobs. “My well-being isn’t reliant upon their staying together. So I guess if I’m counting blessings here, I’m glad this happened now and not when I was a teenager. And as a man, it will make me more vigilant about protecting my own relationships.”

Honor says that Jacobs is handling this in the best way possible.

“It’s all about changing your perspective,” she says. “This can also be looked upon as an opportunity to embark on a new path, a rebirth, a time to move on and celebrate—for everyone.”

—Additional reporting by Shydel James

\*All names have been changed.

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