

# An alternative for autism

Family shares new approach to child's world

Dale Rodebaugh, Durango Herald Staff Writer, January 11, 2010



India Downing plays with her son, Saxton, 5, who has autism, while Downing's husband, Thomas, and older son, Isaiah, 8, watch Jan. 4 at their home off Trew Creek Road northeast of Durango.

"We used to try to push our child into our world," India Downing said last week. "Now we try to join him in his world."

The interview with India and Thomas Downing took place in their A-frame home near Lemon Reservoir. They explained the philosophy behind recent training they took and then demonstrated how they interact with Saxton, 5, who has autism. Big brother Isaiah, 8, doesn't have autism.

The Downings - she's a financial consultant at NIA Consulting in Durango, he recently gave up his job at Gardenswartz Sporting Goods and part-time basketball coaching to develop a Team Saxton support group - took an intensive six-day course in early December at the Autism Treatment Center of America in Sheffield, Mass. Citizens of a dozen countries were enrolled in the session called the Son-Rise Program.

Most available literature about autism, a developmental illness characterized broadly by lack of social and communication skills, describes symptoms, sometimes person-specific, that require individual treatment.

"We don't comment on specific treatments," a spokeswoman at the Autism Society of America said in reference to the Son-Rise program vis-à-vis other approaches to dealing with autistic children. "We support what's best, what works for each family."

WebMD Health, a respected online source of medical information, voices a similar opinion. A statement said in part: "When you are considering any type of treatment, it is important to know the source of information and to ensure that studies are scientifically sound. Accounts of individual success are not sufficient evidence to support using a treatment. Look for large controlled studies to validate claims."

Before immersing themselves in The Son-Rise Program, the Downings were getting nowhere with the applied behavior analysis approach to bring Saxton into the family and prepare him to integrate into general society. The Son-Rise approach was devised in 1974 by the parents of an autistic boy.

Under applied behavior analysis, the child is bombarded with "Do this, don't do that" to modify behavior. Son-Rise instead uses motivation and acceptance, with the parents or caregiver going with the flow by joining the child in his or her activities.

"Our attitude had been applied behavior analysis for his whole life," Thomas Downing said. "I had about given up, but I learned that I had underestimated his (Saxton's) potential and ability. Our attitudes have changed."

The Downings traveled to Massachusetts with \$8,000 of support from their First Baptist Church of Durango congregation, friends and family. The donations, raised in about 10 days, covered travel, workshop tuition, child care while they were away and the first steps to construct a playroom for Saxton.

A one-way window to be installed in a downstairs playroom-in-progress will allow observers to watch caretakers – either the Downings or adult volunteers - as they interact with Saxton. The Downings don't have a sure source of volunteers but think students in certain majors at Fort Lewis College could need credits from volunteer activities.

A scant month since they returned from the Son-Rise workshop, the Downings have noticed a change in Saxton. A monosyllabic, nonpotty-trained, disengaged loner on a special diet is starting to come around. Saxton now connects two or three words, understands the concept of continence and laughs and joins mom or dad in bouncing a ball.

Saxton's parents join him in stimming - self-stimulation evidenced by repetitive activities. When Saxton flaps his hands or rubs a certain spot on his head, they go through the motions, too.

Speaking is a challenge for Saxton, but he handles language better in song, singing along with his father and even continuing on his own when dad stops.

"The other day he said, 'I like that song' - a full sentence," Thomas Downing said. "His grandfather says that even his smile seems different."

The walls of the playroom will be bare except for a shelf, head high to an adult, to hold Saxton's favorite toys. The reasoning behind the elevated shelf is that Saxton will have to go through his playmate to obtain a toy.

Saxton is going to leave Riverview Elementary School, where an aide works with him, and stay home to interact with his father and possibly with volunteers.

"We're going to give it three years and see where we're at," Thomas Downing said.