

Author hopes book will shape attitudes toward children with autism



STAFF PHOTO/JAIMIE WINTERS

Jean Buesser and her sons, Adam and Joshua, enjoy a sunny day outdoors. Buesser found a unique way to educate the public about autism.

'They need support and friends like everyone else'

BY KELLY NICHOLAIDES
Staff Writer

Ignore. Tease. Avoid. These are sometimes common actions some people take due to how they perceive someone who's "special needs." Perhaps they cannot be bothered to make the effort to communicate with them due to lack of knowledge about their specific condition. Perhaps there's a fear that reaching out to them will only highlight flaws and embarrass them. Positively interacting with someone who is "different" gets shuffled into a corner and forgotten.

Jeanne Buesser is helping to change this. She is bringing attention to autism awareness and related advocacy through a different approach. Buesser, a former Rutherford resident, self-published and illustrated a 17-page booklet "He Talks Funny" (2010) to help parents and educators understand the difficulties and the tools of dealing with special-needs children. Her son, Adam, 15, a sophomore at Ridgefield High School, has apraxia; and Joshua, 11, a sixth grader at West Brook Middle School in Paramus, is autistic.

"I had the story in my head since 2006. I sent the manuscript through the children's publishers regular and special needs on the Internet for a few years," Buesser says.

The book is especially important in a time when bullying has become a hot-button issue. Buesser knows this first-hand.

"When my older son was in middle school he was bullied," Buesser says. "It was hard because the teacher didn't see it happen. She wasn't in the room. Another person only saw the physical action, not realizing what had been happening."

The best tool to prevent bullying is education, Buesser notes, in her booklet. And it seems that parents of special needs kids fare best when they seek support groups such as the Apraxia Network and get support from other parents as well as educators. Above all, everyone needs to know about the misconceptions associated with special-needs children.

"They need support and friends like everyone else....not to be left out from activities that everyone else does. People need to be educated so we all can work together to make

the world a better place for all—especially as they get older and go out into the world," Buesser notes. "Like getting experience from finding real jobs, being self-sufficient."

In her booklet, dedicated to her deceased husband, Ray and her first son, Danny, "Joey," a child who has apraxia and struggles with speech/communication issues, is having trouble making friends on a playground. Educators and other children soon find out how to effectively communicate with him and what letters and sounds are hard for him to pronounce.

"I want to learn how to listen to you. Will you help me?" Mrs. Brown asks Joey in the book.

"It really helps educate the reader about how apraxia affects individuals and how to effectively communicate with them," Buesser explains.

In reality, Buesser's children have been lucky with school so far, she notes.

"I've been very lucky regarding the schools and what my kids have been offered...like speech therapy, occupational therapy. I have always paid for once-a-week extra speech therapy for them for many years,"

SEE AUTISM, PAGE A4

AUTISM

FROM PAGE A3

Buesser says.

Adam is in special classes but he is integrated with others in certain classes, she notes. "He doesn't have an aide, but a teacher's helper who explains things to him if he has questions. My younger son now has an aide to help him focus, and is in a small group," Buesser says.

Her typical day is getting the kids up and off to school before heading off to her part-time job.

"I have about one hour to myself before the kids arrive home. They do their homework, and we squeeze in dinner. Depending on the day, I may have extra therapy after school, for either of them...or

other activities lined up for them or me. They shower and off to bed. Many times I don't get time to read the newspaper or watch TV," Buesser says.

Both boys enjoy bowling, and swimming.

Buesser, who is president of the Apraxia Network of Bergen County, says she's working on a future documentary on apraxia and would like to finish a poetry book on the subject. For now, she says she wants to educate the public in schools, hospitals and colleges.

"It's about getting my book out there and making a difference to all future generations," Buesser says.

In addition to the story of "Joey" in the book, Buesser provides a wealth of resources and web links

as well as a detailed list of warning signs for autism and related spectrum disorders.

Adam was diagnosed after he was 2; Josh was around 19 months.

The boys' grandfather, Carl Schlesinger of Rutherford, understands the difficulties and challenges.

"They hear you but they don't speak well when they want to. They speak to you when they want to...and there are shortcuts for everything," Schlesinger notes. "For example, if one wants a glass of milk, he'll just say 'milk.' Both kids read but not as much as I want them to. Then again, who does?" he jokes.

Schlesinger has seen profound differences in his grandsons.

"The longer you wait, the more difficult it is to reach goals," he says with regard to therapy.

He notes that he can play checkers and chess with them. And bowling is an activity that helps them concentrate and strategize, improving their reasoning skills.

"You learn to control the ball, that the pins are out there for a reason...everything is a lesson in life. If I take them to the supermarket, I can say 'look at these tomatoes and look at those...see the difference?'" Schlesinger notes.

His grandchildren have indeed made progress. "In reading, for my older son, it was very difficult to decode new words he had never seen before and try to pronounce them when he was much younger," Buesser notes. "In math, multiplication was very hard to learn because of repetition and short-term memory. My younger son has a very little problem with math and reading. He does math problems in his head. In reading, he decodes new words much better than his older brother. They are doing much better from when they were first diagnosed."