



Family Service of Rhode Island

F O R B R I G H T E R F U T U R E S

Helping a Silent Child Speak

For Bethany Tassoni, her son Jackson's first word was more than a cause for celebration, it was a miracle.

Jackson had been a perfect baby, never crying, never fussing, but he had also been silent – not making those little baby babbling noises that suddenly one day come together as “dada” or “mama.” Still, Bethany wasn't particularly concerned. Her precocious daughter, Madeline, 16 months older than Jackson, was

Everyone but Bethany had realized that there was “something really different” about Jackson.

keeping her hopping and she just felt grateful to have an easy baby.

Then, during his 12-month check-up, it became obvious that Jackson wasn't responding to sound. Deafness ran in the family but testing proved that Jackson wasn't deaf.

His pediatrician recommended our Early Intervention program. A Family Service team including a

service coordinator, speech therapist, and occupational therapist began working with Jackson and the whole Tassoni family in their home.

In addition, they connected Jackson with a special play group, child psychologist, teacher, and nurse assistant.

At Christmas, Jackson severely burned his hands holding them against the glass screen surrounding a lit fireplace. Bethany had to grab his hands and pull them away from the screen. Jackson wasn't responding to pain, he didn't even cry. Later, when the doctor cleaned his wounds, Jackson, fascinated by a bright light, didn't react at all.

This time, the referral was to a neurologist, who examined Jackson for 20 minutes and diagnosed autism spectrum disorder. Shocked, numb and still clinging hard to disbelief, Bethany took her beautiful, perfect son to two more neurologists. They confirmed the diagnosis.

Bethany then was doubly shocked to realize that no one was surprised – not her husband, not her pediatrician,



Jenn Parsons, Early Intervention service coordinator, working with Jackson in his home.

not her Family Service Early Intervention team.

Everyone but Bethany had realized that there was “something really different” about Jackson. At 16 months of age, he became one of the youngest children in Rhode Island to be officially diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder. Bethany felt clueless. She

had no idea what Jackson's condition would mean for him or for her family.

The Family Service team made Bethany their partner in Jackson's therapy, teaching her to work with him at home, helping her learn about his condition, and connecting her with other parents and parent support classes.

The next year was "the longest year of my life," Bethany recalls. "Working with speech therapy pictures and signs was arduous. First Jackson had to understand that the pictures meant something, then that he had to hand the picture to someone, then he had to learn to talk over the picture. It was incredibly slow. I thought for a while he might not speak ever."

Then suddenly it all paid off! Jackson handed her the picture for apple and made an "apple-like" sound. She handed him a piece of apple and he ate it. Then he made the sign for "more." She handed him a second piece of apple and he ate it. He had said his first word and it was "apple"! Bethany cried with relief. Still crying, she called her husband and then Jen Parsons, her Early Intervention service coordinator – and then everyone she knew.



Jackson's pictures for happy, sad, wait, yes, no, help.

The Family Service team shifted into overdrive. If Jackson could say "apple," he could say other words. Each new word was a miracle and a celebration.

"Our life is very different now, but we have more reason to celebrate because of Jackson," Bethany explains. "Normal is only what you do every day. Jackson



Jackson's Early Intervention team: left to right, Jackie Mallette, occupational therapist, Jenn Parsons, service coordinator, Debra Charzewski, speech therapist.

smiles at you and it's like you won the lottery. Every time he asks for something, gives kisses, makes a puzzle, takes turns with his sister, it's a miracle. Every day, he shows us something new. He learns in a different way, but that doesn't mean he can't learn. There is no closed door. It's unknown what Jackson can't do or can do. He blesses us every day, just being him. He's a great kid!"

Today, Jackson is three years old and with the help of his Family Service team has successfully transitioned to a small intensive pre-school program in the Smithfield public schools.

Jackson loves school and loves his teachers. He waits for the school bus with his dog, Sam. He speaks in short sentences and can dress himself. He likes Play-Doh and splashing in the water and hates Band-Aids.

Bethany has also gone through her own transition. She began a Parent Resource Center within the RI Autism Project, filling it with her collection of books and conference materials. She also coaches parents 20 hours a week, helping them learn to help their child with autism. She recently testified before the Rhode Island General Assembly regarding the Autism Treatment and Evaluation Act.

*Our life is very different now,
but we have more reason to
celebrate because of Jackson.*

"It's completely overwhelming when you first start out," she explains. "When you think of autism, you think of an adult or older child – like Rain Man. It's a huge, complicated disorder. Unless you live it every day it's difficult to understand. It has its challenges but also its joys. I tell parents that the Early Intervention program is a wonderful thing and to take advantage of all that can be done for your child at a young age. Family Service helped Jackson, my daughter, me, my husband – it was a big team effort!"

The Family Service Early Intervention program is currently providing treatment to 289 babies and toddlers at risk for any significant delay in development – not just autism. There is no charge to parents for these services. Entering its sixth year of operation, this certified statewide program has helped 1,226 children like Jackson. Call (401) 331-1350 or 294-6138 for more information or to request an in-home assessment.

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Additional facilities in Mount Pleasant, Smithfield, North Smithfield, Bristol, and East Providence

The 2005 Business Excellence Awards

On November 17th, I was very proud to accept the first Providence Business News Excellence in a Non-Profit Award on behalf of the board and staff of Family Service of Rhode Island.

While we all recognize that non-profits are different – when's the last time a business asked you for a donation? – good business practices are essential to our growth, survival, and ability to respond to community needs.

The Providence Business Awards committee cited our variety of services and our many community partnerships in making their choice. I would also like to give credit to our extraordinarily dedicated staff.

Day after day, they are the ones who create meaningful, productive partnerships with the individuals and families we serve. They are the ones who coordinate with our many community partners so that each child, each family, each individual receives the best possible care. They are the ones who keep us aware of the changing needs in our community. They are the ones who wrote our mission statement, "To respond creatively to the unmet needs of individuals, families and the community by creating partnerships that help people help themselves."

Last year in our annual client satisfaction survey, 96% of clients reported that our services helped them, 97% reported that they were satisfied with their overall care, and 98% reported that they would return to Family Service if they needed help again. That is our staff at work. And that's not just last year – that's every year. Our staff say proudly that they do "whatever it takes and more" to help their clients achieve their goals.

You can see this spirit at work as you read our cover story about Jackson.

Even before an official diagnosis was made, our Early Intervention team recognized that Jackson had serious developmental problems. They immediately went to work in the home making Jackson's family their partner in his care. Right from the beginning, they brought in community partners who could provide additional services that Jackson needed. With their combined effort and the unfailing dedication of Jackson's family, that sweet little boy had the chance he needed to learn to



PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF PROVIDENCE BUSINESS NEWS

communicate and then speak. Jackson now has a chance to achieve his potential, wherever that may take him. Outcomes like Jackson's are what I call "excellence in a non-profit."

My appreciation to the distinguished panel that chose our agency over an impressive field of worthy community organizations. My thanks to our staff. For more than a century, they have been helping people help themselves.

Open Your Heart and Home to a Foster Child



All across Rhode Island there are children who need foster homes. Whether due to physical abuse, mental health problems, or a family emergency, at times foster care is necessary.

Can you help?

"All caring, secure, supportive families are valued," says Christina Londono, Foster Care Recruiter.

Foster parents receive a nearly \$12,000 annual tax-free stipend, a \$750 annual clothing allowance, medical coverage for the child, and other benefits. Family Service's program places boys and girls who are six years old and older.

For more information, please call Christina Londono at (401) 331-1350 ext. 3371.



FOR BRIGHTER FUTURES

Our Mission is to respond creatively to the unmet needs of individuals, families and the community by building partnerships that *help people help themselves.*



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Thank you to all who attended or helped sponsor our first annual Brighter Futures Award Luncheon honoring Providence Police Chief Dean Esserman!