

'Everything happens for a reason'

Local mothers say sons' autism has been a blessing

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Two local mothers believe they've found a silver lining around what most consider the dark, dismal cloud of autism.

And they want to share their newfound optimism with others in similar situations.

Nancy Bruce and Andrea Zealand met last fall at Waterloo's KidsAbility Centre, where their then two-year-old sons, Liam and Coleman, were attending classes for children with special needs.

Both mothers said their sons seemed to function normally for almost the first year of their lives.

But then suddenly, it seemed all of the knowledge they'd gained just disappeared.

"He just didn't seem connected to us," Bruce said of Liam's change in behaviour.

Other common symptoms of autism can be: using only peripheral vision, running sideways and flapping arms.

When Liam and Coleman were diagnosed with autism last year, their mothers began searching together for ways to help their sons — and themselves — adjust to life with the developmental disorder.

"It was a huge pill to swallow, but it was actually a relief getting the diagnosis,"

Bruce said. "Because then we could move forward and figure out what we had to do."

Their search led to IMTI, which stands for Intensive Multi Treatment Intervention, a relatively new program based in Toronto.

Bruce said part of the program involves switching autistic children to a special diet that cuts out a lot of sugars and dyes, and the rest of the program involves both parents and trained volunteers who work with the children in their special playrooms, equipped with only a one-way window in the door and one shelf of toys to be played with one at a time.

Bruce said the unique part of the program is that parents and volunteers are taught not to discourage the children from acting out.

Instead, they're supposed to follow the child's lead, and let them learn for themselves what not to do.

"Other programs encourage parents to redirect and force when their child's acting out," Bruce said. "For example, if a child tends to bite a lot, parents are often taught to give them gum."

"This program encourages us to let him do different things, and learn on his own. It lets him know he can love and trust us."

"It's made a huge difference in his behaviour. I used to try to stop him from doing things, and he'd throw



Waterloo mother Nancy Bruce says the IMTI program has improved her son Liam's behaviour.

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a temper tantrum. Now for example, when he throws food, instead of reacting, I hand him a cloth and ask him to clean it up. The amount of food he throws now has really decreased."

Zealand said she's had similar experiences with her son, Coleman.

"He liked to mouth objects," she said. "I tried to stop him, but it only upset him. Then one day he was

sucking on some play cars, and I decided to pick one up and suck on it too. It was a really special moment with him. After about 30 minutes of doing this, he looked up at me, smiled and made eye contact. It was a huge step."

Bruce said Liam has also made personal progress, saying more words than ever before.

"He's said some new words lately like 'baby' and

'mommy,'" she said. "We all know the words are in there, we just have to find a way to get them out."

"Autism is a social disease more than anything else. If you say no to an autistic child, they shut down and they're gone for a while, until they're ready to love you and trust you again."

Zealand added, "When most people think of

autism, they think of rocking and headbanging, but that's not accurate. These children are so smart. Coleman can say the alphabet from start to finish, and from finish to start, and he can now count to 10."

Both mothers agreed IMTI has shown them the light at the end of the tunnel.

"When Coleman was first diagnosed, people basically said, 'He's autistic. Period.' But that's not necessarily true."

The key, she said, is sticking with the program.

"We've learned that if you work with the children between 40 and 60 hours a week, we could see recovery within one year," Bruce said, admitting most doctors wouldn't commit to that hope.

"We're hoping for a full recovery. Until then we're going to keep working with him on his communication, and staying with the special diet."

"Everything happens for a reason, and Liam is a blessing."

"The boys have actually taught us to be more social, and they've made us notice the simple, most beautiful things in life, like when the sun shines on the snow," Zealand added. "Things the rest of us usually take for granted."

For more information on IMTI, e-mail Bruce at nancy-bruce@rogers.com.