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A pair of CNY mothers start SPD Parent Connections group.

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Michele Hawthorne, of Phoenix, was convinced something was different about her son Jonah since he was turning 3 years old.

He seemed to have a lot of anxiety. He'd scream at the doctor's office. He didn't want to do things, like go to a restaurant or go swimming, that he wanted to do before. And loud noises, bright lights and crowds would make him shut down or even spit, drool or hit himself.

"It was heartbreaking," Hawthorne says. "One day he would act normal, and then the next day I'd go, 'What's wrong with my child?' He wouldn't look at you. You had to carry him places because he wouldn't walk."

"A lot of people would pass it off as bad behavior," she says. "I got a lot of dirty looks and comments."

Then Hawthorne found out her son, who is now 4, has sensory processing issues, and he started getting treatment for sensory processing disorder. SPD is associated with the brain's inability to process and properly respond to the stimulation of the senses. As a result, stimuli such as noises, lights, tastes, smells and the feel of certain textures elicits an abnormal reaction in the child, according to the Denver-based SPD Foundation.

SPD symptoms are frequently associated with other disorders such as autism and cerebral palsy, but the American Psychiatric Association hasn't recognized SPD as a stand-alone disorder. The SPD Foundation estimates one in every 20 children may have it.

Hawthorne and Caryn P. Daher, of Clay, founded SPD Parent Connections, a Central New York chapter of the SPD Foundation, to offer support for parents dealing with the same issues their kids were facing. The group meets 7 p.m. Thursday at the North Syracuse Public Library, 100 Trolley Barn Lane.

Daher says she hasn't been able to give her 3-year-old-son Jonathan "anything close to a warm bath" because he's very sensitive to heat. He complains food is too hot even when she has let it cool for a while.

Jonathan also has problems with auditory processing, which make him overly sensitive to sound. When music was turned on at a Valentine's Day party at his preschool, he immediately walked away from the dancing children to the other side of the room.

"I was trying to get him to go back," she says. "But his (occupational therapist) stopped me and told me it was too loud for him."

The women started the group because they found few Web sites or support groups focused on SPD. Daher and Hawthorne plan to ask experts, such as occupational therapists, speech therapists and psychologists, to speak at group meetings.

“As parents we want to know we’re doing the right thing,” Daher says. “But you end up feeling very helpless because you want to do the best for your kids, but you don’t feel very educated.”

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