

Video promotes understanding of autism

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 STAFF WRITER

NEW BRUNSWICK — Taleana Hurst's 7-year-old autistic son, Xavier, doesn't have a lot of "meltdowns" when they're out in public, but when it happens, it can be bad.

"And I get looks and stares from people all around me saying, 'Why don't you do something with that kid?'" the Plainfield resident said. "They just don't get it, and I can't help but to think, 'What do we do now?'"

To help others understand the situation, Hurst and her son were one of several families who took part in a 25-minute educational video that is part of the "Make Friends with Autism" community-focused autism awareness program.

The program was launched Thursday morning at PSE&G's Children's Specialized Hospital in New Brunswick. Its objective, according to autism educator and Scotch Plains resident Adrienne Robertiello, is to better educate the community, specifically businesses and recreation providers, about people who have autism.

"This program will fill a void of missing information," said Robertiello, adding that one in 94 children in New Jersey have autism, the highest rate in

the nation.

"I really do believe that this video and this program will make a big difference in the lives of a lot of people," Robertiello said.

Hurst said dealing with her child's disorder is an everyday process that only becomes more demanding when they're in public.

Interaction at restaurants and shopping centers

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 can, at times, be very tiresome, she said, mostly because employees at these establishments aren't trained to deal with children with this disability.

"A lot of people need to know the struggles we as parents who have autistic children go through," Hurst said. "It's not an easy job."

The video was produced by Children's Specialized Hospital in Mountainside, which partnered with Kohl's Care, the community relations department of Kohl's department stores, to jump-start the initiative.

According to video narrator and WPIX news anchor Jim Watkins, the video dispels fears and false perceptions and encourages the acceptance and inclusion of people with autism in communi-

ties.

Watkins said that a lot of progress has been made over the years in educating families about how to deal with their autistic children, but less progress has been made in "teaching the world at large.

"It's unfortunate in that the incidence of autism has increased so much that we all are kind of finding ourselves in the need to be educated one way or the other," said Watkins, whose 12-year-old son Liam was diagnosed with autism at age 20 months. "We simply cannot avoid it anymore."

The video, which was shown to more than 100 people in an auditorium at the hospital, explained how businesses can help families with autistic children.

The video, according to Robertiello, is free to watch on the "Make Friends with Autism" Web site at www.makefriendswithautism.org. The video also will be used statewide during informational training sessions for many businesses, organizations and schools.

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