

New program helps children with autism prepare for school



By Bill Kilpatrick

Five-year-old Jordyn Woodcock has autism, and one year ago, like many other parents across Canada who have children on the spectrum, the thought of sending her to school was something her mother Chrystal was dreading, "I was losing sleep over this," she told Bancroft This Week. Woodcock explained that Jordyn had severe separation anxiety, was non-verbal, and was very particular about who she allowed into her space. "At one point I could not ever cross the room without her losing her mind. She would bite her self and pull her hair out," said Woodcock. Woodcock did not know how Jordyn would ever be able to function in a school setting. Although Woodcock has Jordyn registered in the Ontario Autism Program North Hastings has little to no supportive services for children with autism. She looked into North Hastings Community Integration, but due to Jordyn's exceptionalities, or lack thereof rather, she did not qualify for their services. The only places that offered supports were in Belleville or Peterborough, but Jordyn was not big on traveling so these were not an option for them. Woodcock had also placed Jordyn in the Pre-School program at North Hastings Children's Services, but this did not go well, said Woodcock, due to the number of children attending, Jordyn's exceptionalities, and a lack of specialized supports for Jordyn's needs. Things were not looking up for Jordyn and her mother in terms of supportive services for a successful school transition, however, last year during a play group at North Hastings Children's Services Woodcock was informed that the Entry to School program was going to be starting up in February and this, said Woodcock, "was when the skies opened up." According to the early years manager of North Hastings Children's Services, Nicole Beaudin, the Entry to School Program began in February of 2023 after the executive director of North Hastings Children's Services, Jessica Anderson, liaised and then partnered with the Acceptance and Commitment Therapy Learning Centre or ACT Learning Centre for short. The program, said Beaudin, is a one-year school readiness program that is specifically tailored to children with autism,?

adding that, "it is a great stepping stone to support children in a group-based learning environment before entering the school system. We focus on the children's strengths and work towards goals to support their overall development. Not all children have the opportunity to attend a preschool program or EarlyON Playgroup to foster their social and emotional skills." The program is comprehensive with a supervisory team that consists of speech-language pathologists and communicative disorders assistants, occupational therapists and occupational therapy assistants, registered early childhood educators, board certified behavioural analysts, and registered instructor therapists. The program runs from February to August for up to three days a week for three hours at a time and it focuses on six areas that helps prepare children on the spectrum to develop school readiness skills such as: "play, communication, social interaction, functional routines, behavioural self-management and pre-academics, learning and attention," according to information provided by Beaudin. The program consists of two parts, the first part which is group-based and the second part that focuses on providing the children with "individual transition supports" given that students often require differing levels of support. On top of this, says Woodcock, it helped to build Jordyn's confidence as well. Further to this the Entry to School supervisory team provides "student-specific" documentation that will accompany the child as part of what is called the "transition package" which, explained Beaudin, is meant to "support children and families for being set up for success as they enter the school system." The documentation includes an "All About Me package" and an "Entry to School" final progress report that helps ensure a smooth transition into the classroom. Woodcock said that the package was a huge help for Jordyn as it contains "quirks of your child, things that they don't like, how to talk them down," and strengths and weaknesses as well adding that, "It really helped the teacher to understand what kind of child they were dealing with and when you read it you think, "They actually know this child. They are paying attention to her." Not only that, but Woodcock said that the environment created by those running the program was one of support and love, "The women working there are amazing, phenomenal people. When you drop your child off you feel that they love your child just as much as you do." "It was a miracle for us," said Woodcock who spoke enthusiastically about the changes that the program facilitated for Jordyn who learned to deal with her separation anxiety and now happily leaves her mother for school and has been able to adapt to a structured routine. Woodcock described the transition as "flawless" adding that "Jordyn was just so okay with it and is spitting out new words every day," but sadly for Woodcock, Jordyn has yet to spit out the word "mom." For those children whose transition is a little bumpy the Entry to School program also offers transition supports that can assist in the classroom for the first six months. "The Entry to School program is a great foundation for children with autism to receive additional supports in all aspects of learning," said Beaudin. The program is funded by the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services through the Ontario Autism Program and is offered by ACT Learning Centre. Beaudin said that for your child to be eligible for the program they must meet three criteria. They also must be registered in the Ontario Autism Program, be between three and six years old as of Dec. 31 in the year that they are starting school, and must be starting kindergarten or grade one for the first time. A new session is scheduled to begin on Tuesday, Feb. 13. For more information please contact the Early Years manager, Nicole Beaudin, by phone or email at 613-334-2941 or nbeaudin@nhcs.ca or you can also visit <http://entrytoschool.actlearningcentre.ca/>.