

LOCAL NEWS

Edinburg Center helps keep parents, kids on top of their game



Leah Davis of Bedford, in-home behavior therapist with The Edinburg Center, left, works with Tammi Gomes of Billerica and her great-nephews Brody Arnold, 8. JULIA MALAKIE/LOWELLSUN

By **SCOTT SHURTLEFF** |

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The daily commotion at most American households — where working parents and school-aged children manage the tight quarters and misaligned schedules to form a workable routine — has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 restrictions and uncertainties. And for Tammi and Danny Gomes, that harmony is slightly askew.



With a few of their own children and grandchildren, along with two grandnephews they have gained guardianship of, the household of nine is an active place. Further complicating things is the behavioral difficulties of the 8- and 4-year-old grandnephews, who are part of a family collaborative that support and assist each other.

But sometimes it takes more than love and care to raise a child, particularly in these unusual times. So the Gomeses reached out to the Edinburg Center, a Bedford-based organization that provides outreach clinicians for some in-home parental coaching.

Leah Davis is one of about 15 in-home behavioral therapists at the Behavioral Services Division of Edinburg.

And it was Davis who was assigned to the boys at the Gomeses' Billerica home in April 2020.

"It was challenging at first," said Davis. "Because of COVID restrictions, we were only doing telehealth through video calls. But by summertime, we were meeting for some outdoor activities.

"It is important to have a rapport with the children," she added. "It was challenging at first to build a relationship" through a computer screen. But Davis and her colleagues were the "forgotten army" of care providers who worked throughout the pandemic, despite the obvious impediments.

For Tammi Gomes — and, presumably, others like her — the effort and sacrifice of the Edinburg Center's clinicians is very much appreciated and quite effective at reducing the youths' interfering behavior and providing parents with effective tools.

"She comes a few times a week," Tammi said of Davis. "We go on community outings and we do home activities. It all relies on how we do it to keep the behavior intact. Leah suggests 'Try this.' Or 'Try that.' Then I try it."

One strategy that Leah has coached Tammi to use is providing praise and reinforcement when the boys are following directions, utilizing coping strategies and transitioning from one activity to the next throughout the day. If the boys are engaging in unsafe behavior, Davis has coached Tammi to calmly prompt them to take a break rather than yelling or providing attention to the behaviors.



Davis has also helped Tammi to structure the home environment by utilizing a visual schedule of activities or tasks that they need to complete throughout the day. They worked together to create charts, including behavior expectations, coping strategies, and house and community rules. These visuals are reviewed with the boys daily, ensuring that everyone is clear on what the expectations are.

"They absolutely get very excited — 'Leah is coming!'" Gomes said, "and they know why she is there. We will talk about that behavior."

Davis coaches Tammi on behavior strategies three afternoons a week. During off-times, the strategies are applied in day-to-day life.

It is through observing both the behavior and the parental reactions to those behaviors that Davis can understand the dynamics and apply feedback "based on principles of applied behavior analysis" to teach the parents an effective course of actions — and to teach the children coping skills in difficult or unfamiliar situations.

"The goal is to help minimize those interfering behaviors," she said.

For Davis, the satisfaction of success is equal to that of the children and the parents.

"It is very rewarding to see that the strategies have worked and that the parents have learned how to manage the situations," she said.

Jennifer Rooney is the director of Behavioral Services at the Edinburg Center and reflected on Davis' gradual triumph with the Gomeses' grandnephews.

"Leah has taught these behavioral strategies to not only Tammi, but her older children as well, to ensure everyone is on the same page," Rooney said. "It is imperative that everyone is responding the same way in order to see true behavior change. Tammi has consistently engaged in our services throughout the past year. She has worked tirelessly to implement the strategies recommended, and this is reflected by the progress both boys have made.

"When services opened, the pandemic was underway and (In-Home Behavioral Services) was provided through telehealth. Due to challenges with engaging the boys through this modality, Leah shifted to in-person so she could support the family more efficiently."

Rooney said anyone can refer a youth between the ages of 2 to 21 for In-Home Behavioral Services. Insurance requires the youth to have a behavioral-health diagnosis and for the need to meet medical necessity. She summarized the growing need for in-home behavioral services.



“As the pandemic unfolded, the way of life for so many of us changed in a moment’s notice,” Rooney said. “What was once done in person quickly shifted to online. Teachers, therapists and behavior analysts had to reinvent the wheel on how to reach children utilizing this new technology. Parents had to shift their focus from their daily responsibilities to assisting their children with remote learning. This is where In-Home Behavior Clinicians came to the rescue for so many families.

In-Home Behavioral Services “is a part of a larger wrap-around team that also works with the youth’s school team,” she added. “During the pandemic, we were the eyes in the home witnessing the struggles that parents were facing. ... Clinicians worked cooperatively with teachers to create reinforcement programs to motivate children to engage in online learning in the home setting.

“We also helped caretakers implement accommodations from their child’s (individualized education program), including movement breaks, visual schedules, how often to provide positive praise, when to ignore attention-seeking behavior while rewarding on-task behavior, to name a few.

“Overall, it was alarming how quickly life shifted, but inspiring how fast we as a society were able to adapt and work together to support our youth whose lives were completely disrupted. As schools reopen, I’m confident that we will see a lot of (In-Home Behavioral Services) referrals for school refusal over the next month.”

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Scott Shurtleff



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