

Article may be reprinted with the attribution:  
Reprinted from New Jersey Jewish News with permission.

## **JFCS spearheads series for families of children with mental illness by Marilyn Silverstein NJJN PMB Correspondent**

It happened about five years ago, said the Jewish woman who was speaking anonymously at the other end of the telephone line. It was summer, and she was sitting at a Princeton Township swimming pool with her violent and difficult nine-year-old son, who had been struggling since birth with bipolar disorder, a mental illness. "I was sitting at the pool, and I saw a mom wheel in a child who was seriously physically disabled and unable to take care of herself. All of a sudden, three or four of the other moms started to hover around her," the woman said, describing the scene of sympathy and support. "And I started to cry. My friends had all abandoned me. They didn't want to be around my bipolar child. "What was flooding through me at that moment was the wish that people could understand that it's just as hard for a family with a child with emotional disabilities as for a family with a child with physical disabilities - even though you can't see it," she said. "There's nobody there to help you. As a Jewish community, we need to face this and to help other families to face this. We don't have a choice but to face it." Now, thanks to the persistence of this mother and the commitment of the Jewish Family and Children's Service of Greater Mercer County, the Princeton Mercer Bucks Jewish community is facing the challenge of children with special emotional and behavioral needs - and it is doing so in a Jewish context. Beginning Thursday, March 4, from 7 p.m. to 9:30 p.m., JFCS, in partnership with NAMI Mercer, a grassroots resource agency on mental illness, will present "Visions for Tomorrow," an educational program for the caregivers and family members of children and adolescents with emotional, behavioral, and brain disorders.

Taught by trained family members and caregivers from NAMI Mercer, the seven-week series will cover such topics as ADD/ADHD, conduct and mood disorders, phobias and anxiety disorders, early-onset schizophrenia, the biology of the brain, self-care, communication skills, and advocacy. The program, which is free and open to the community, will be offered at Adath Israel Congregation on Lawrenceville Road in Lawrenceville.

The series has been made possible by grants from the Mercer County Department of Human Services, the Public Service Electric & Gas Co., and the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Princeton.

"We opened this program at Adath Israel so that someone from the Jewish community could look at the flyer and say, 'There's a path for me,'" said Debra Levenstein, director of prevention and support services for JFCS. "What we want to do is to promote healthy families and to enhance communication. The least we could do was to partner with NAMI and create an opening for the Jewish community to get the education and awareness they were looking for." Levenstein was sitting in her office with three representatives of NAMI Mercer - education coordinator Linda McGrath and trained educators Joanne Johnson and Missy Gaunt. All three are the mothers of children with mental illness. Between the stigma surrounding mental illness and the stress and guilt surrounding having a mentally ill child, parents of such children are caught up in a whirlwind, according to McGrath. "So we come in and try to take that weight off their shoulders - just letting them know it's not them. Their child has a brain disorder," she said.

"Our main goal is to let them know it's okay to grieve and to feel angry and to feel hopeful - to empower them to be who they are.

"The course stresses brain biology and chemistry, and gets the message across that this is really a physical malfunction in the body, like any illness is," she said. "So that takes some of the weight off. Everything is designed to be guilt-busting." Gaunt, who is raising two sons living with autism, bipolar disorder, and ADHD, said that in her experience, the educational series is "empowering." "The wealth of knowledge gave us strength to cope with and learn about what's going on with our children," she said. Many people fail to understand that mental illness is a disease, just like cancer or diabetes, said Johnson, whose son has bipolar disorder, ADHD, and oppositional defiant disorder. "This is something brain-based," she said. "Their wheelchair is on the inside." One byproduct of programs like "Visions for Tomorrow" is empathy, according to the program planners. Another is a reduction in the isolation of families with children with mental illness.

"That's the glue that holds NAMI together," said McGrath. "You're no longer the only person in the world with this." Confidentiality is strictly maintained during the educational series, the NAMI consultant added. "You're in a very warm, caring, supportive environment," she said. "I think it's the best way to learn about this difficult topic." When she heard that JFCS was responding to her request with "Visions for Tomorrow," said the Princeton Township mother whose son is living with bipolar disorder, she felt happy. "I'm just thrilled. I felt like I was going to be able to make a difference - to help other people. I looked at it very much as a pay-it-forward situation. A lot of people were there for me. I try very hard now to be there for others." Ongoing support groups for the parents and siblings of children with mental illness will spin off from "Visions for Tomorrow" at the end of the seven-week series. Registration is limited to 20 participants. For registration information, call NAMI Mercer at 609-777-9766.

Marilyn Silverstein can be reached at [msilverstein@njewishnews.com](mailto:msilverstein@njewishnews.com).

-----  
Kristin Antrosiglio  
Asst. Associate Editor  
New Jersey Jewish News  
973-887-3900, ext. 3148