

Northborough nonprofit helps kids with social learning challenges to make friends

By Lori Berkey
Contributing Writer

Northborough - Nancy Swanberg had been working in the mental health field for 25 years helping individuals with autism, Asperger's Syndrome, and other communication and connection challenges when she got three calls in one week from parents who were sobbing into the phone because their children didn't have any friends. She was inspired to start an agency that would help isolated kids make con-

Continued on page 17



Nancy Swanberg, founder and executive director of the Friendship Network for Children, joins intake coordinator Alexis Ohanian in showing off some of the instruments that are used for music therapy at their Northborough agency.

community news

Nonprofit helps kids with learning challenges

Continued from front page
 nections with others. In 2004 she founded the Friendship Network for Children Inc., a nonprofit organization in Northborough that provides therapeutic socialization to children with social learning difficulties.

According to Swanberg, the network uses helping strategies that go beyond teaching socialization skills to include therapeutic and psychodynamic methods that support them in making authentic connections with others.

"In order to be emotionally happy, you need to connect with others on the planet," Swanberg said.

She added that the network aims to provide an atmosphere that makes socialization accessible for those with social learning disabilities.

"If you had someone with a physical disability, and they couldn't get up the stairs," she said, "you'd build a ramp for their wheelchair to get in.

"I can't say enough how they have helped my son and our family. They have taught him to feel comfortable with who he is and accept others who also may appear different."

Jen Brown
parent

They'd still need their physical therapy, but you'd want to make their world accessible."

Likewise, the network builds a different kind of ramp for kids with social learning challenges. To make the environment accessible for children at the network, a structured space has been set up with instructions so that the children know what to expect. Most of the doors have numbers on them, and comfortable sofas set an inviting tone. A clear agenda is explained to the kids, including the presumption that if they misunderstand what

they are supposed to do, it is the fault of the workers - not theirs, and they are accepted completely the way they are.

Programs offered by the network include individual consultation and counseling, therapeutic socialization groups, workshops for parents, workshops for professionals, and music therapy. A workshop for siblings is being planned for August.

The Friendship Network serves children ages 2 to 17. Swanberg said she loves her job and finds complete joy in watching isolated kids make friends for the first time in

their lives. She gets great satisfaction from nurturing those friendships through birthday parties and other activities that are organized at the network.

Jen Brown is the parent of a child who has benefited from network services.

"I can't say enough how they have helped my son and our family," Brown said. "They have taught him to feel comfortable with who he is and accept others who also may appear different ... They have taught him how to interact with his peers and make friends. He is an 11-year-old boy who is just starting to have friends over and also go over to their houses."

Brown said the workers take the time to get to know the children before setting up groups, and then each child becomes a contributing member with all the kids learning from each other.

"All the children look for-

ward to their weekly groups and often keep in contact at other times," Brown added. "I would highly recommend the Friendship Network for Children for any child who may have any type of social disability ... I am a big fan."

Already, the young organization has become an award-winning entity. Both Swanberg and the network's intake coordinator, Alexis Ohanian, were recognized for their work at the agency when they each were recently presented with the "Home, School and Community Award" for Outstanding Service Provider from the Autism Resource Center of Central Massachusetts.

The Friendship Network for Children welcomes volunteers to help with clerical and cleaning tasks and accepts tax-deductible donations to support its programming. For more information, visit www.networkforchildren.org or call (508) 393-0030.