

Profiles in Caring



Rich & Akiko

Challenges become manageable thanks to support program

Every parent knows how challenging it is to raise a child. But imagine handling those challenges without the support of extended family. Then imagine the added challenge of raising a child with a disability.

Rich and Akiko don't need to imagine that scenario – they've been living it every day since the birth of their son, Kohhei. Akiko's family is in Japan, and Rich's family lives hundreds of miles away. They knew all along that they'd be missing the support of nearby family. But what they didn't know until later was that Kohhei has Autism Spectrum Disorder, which presents additional, significant challenges.

The autism diagnosis came shortly after Rich changed jobs and just before the family of three moved to Lake County. Public school districts in Ohio offer special education programs for preschoolers, but they felt the program in their new school district was lacking. From agencies they were involved with, Rich and Akiko learned of the Family Support Project offered by Family Connections. Part of the Neighborhood Family Support Initiative funded by United Way of Greater Cleveland, the Family Support Project offers support, information and encouragement to families raising preschoolers with special needs.

The goal of the project is to empower parents to achieve the best possible outcomes for their children. Families dealing with unique challenges can choose from a comprehensive menu of offerings including parent support and discussion groups, facilitated parent/child playgroups (even a dads/granddads only group), parent education and advocacy, Individualized Education Program (IEP) assistance and a bi-monthly newsletter highlighting events and resources of interest to parents of children with disabilities. Family Support Project Director Holly Palda, LISW, MSSA, also helps families connect to other programs in the community thanks to relationships that have resulted from the core programs at Family Connections.

"We serve about 60 families over the course of a year, and while preschoolers are the primary focus of the program, we're growing right along with the children – as they get older, we're working to add services to support them or link them to programs that already exist in the community as we want our families to have the support needed at each stage of their child's life," said Palda.

Support of others makes a world of difference

For Rich and Akiko, their four years of involvement with the Family Support Project has meant many things. It has become their extended family, and given them somewhere to go to share and learn from others in similar situations. And it has given Kohhei the opportunity to interact with other kids in a safe environment.

"Outside of Family Connections, Kohhei's behavioral issues are not necessarily accepted. But here, we're accepted as we are. I don't have to worry, explain, or apologize," said Akiko. "And the other families here know Kohhei, so when he makes a small bit of progress, they realize what an accomplishment it is. It's so wonderful to have this extended family, to be able to share our happiness about his progress with them."

Kohhei, now six and a half, is going to school while he and his parents remain actively involved with the Family Support Project. Rich and Akiko have spoken at monthly parent-to-parent support groups, and Rich has helped with fundraising for Family Connections. "We were so lucky to be in the right place at the right time," he said. "Family Connections has become the core of our support community and played a major role in our search for an appropriate school district and our decision to move back to Cuyahoga County. Without the Family Support Project, it would have been very difficult to know where to turn."

About Family Connections

The mission of Family Connections is to provide the ideal environment for parents to become highly involved in their child's positive growth and better equipped to ensure their success. Family Connections has two locations, one in the former Sussex Elementary School in Shaker Heights, and the other in the former Coventry School in Cleveland Heights. For more information about programs and services available, go to familyconnections1.org or call 216-921-2023 (Shaker Heights) or 216-321-0079 (Cleveland Heights).

United Way of Greater Cleveland helps you help our community. To learn more about how, or what you can do to support the 2011 campaign, call 216-436-2100 or go to unitedwaycleveland.org.

**United Way of
Greater Cleveland**

**United
Way**

