

I Don't Have the PhD's, But I Love My Kids

You don't need to talk with Cassandra for very long before you know that she is a mother who adores her three boys and lives to make their lives better.

But sometimes this is not easy because all of Cassandra's sons have special needs. Her oldest has asperger's syndrome and asthma, her second has mild asthma and kyphosis (a disease of the spine that can require corrective surgery and tilts the body sideways, delaying walking and crawling), and her third, Dernell, has autism. Cassandra says, "I've educated myself because I want to take care of my kids. There's no funding to send a nurse out here ... there's no program for me ... I use a lot of creativity ... I'm doing everything I can."

Cassandra did not become familiar with Family Support Services until her youngest son Dernell received a diagnosis of autism and enrolled in Family Support Services' (FSS) Fairmount Early Intervention Center.

The program was a hit with the whole family; Dernell loved the preschool-like atmosphere and the compassionate teaching, and his mom loved the social work support they were getting along with the program.

Then came a blow - the children were being exposed to high doses of lead at home, and the family had to move, leaving the Fairmount program after only two months. They relocated three times before they found permanent housing in another part of Philadelphia. In order to minimize Dernell's risk of further lead exposure, Cassandra had to wipe household surfaces down multiple times. There were times they were sleeping on the floor in temporary housing. It was lonely. Life was hard.

Then, Cassandra says, she connected with a FSS social work support program called Family Partnership. Help arrived at her door. "Annie (the program's supervisor) came ... (and) she was right there; she got me through. You should have more Annies."

Annie helped link Cassandra's family to medical and housing resources; she talked her through her challenges, and she made phone calls on her behalf. Most important, Annie cared.

Thanks to therapy, Dernell is now verbally "unstoppable" and, Cassandra says, "he's very helpful and loving ... he loves to watch Sponge Bob Square Pants, and he loves sports, and basketball." As she says this, her voice radiates a warm smile. She is filled with pride, "You would not believe he was not talking a year and a half ago."

Cassandra concludes; "I don't have the PhD's but I love my kids, (and I hope that one day) ... my kids will be successful without limitation." So do we!