

Jake Crawford and his mother, Shirley, have taken part in programs and services, such as those provided by York Centre for Children Youth and Families and Kinark Child and Family Services York Region. About 50,000 children in the region have been diagnosed with mental health issues.



STAFF PHOTO/STEVE SOMERVILLE

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► To accelerate the care process, the chapter is hosting two events this year. Comedian Rick Green, co-founder of TotallyADD.com, is presenting his views and hopes for those with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder Oct. 11.

► Dr. Ross Greene, a world-renowned speaker, will discuss how to deal with behaviorally challenged children and youths and collaborative problem solving Dec. 2. The chapter is also inviting families to join.

► For York Region chapter of Parents for Children's Mental Health information, call 905-471-3046 or visit pcmh.ca/york. To learn more about The York Centre for Children Youth and Families, call 905-887-5896 or visit theyorkcentre.ca

Advocates shedding light on mental health

BY CHRIS TRABER
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Shirley Crawford remembers the wrenching heartache when her seven-year-old son confirmed concerns she and her husband harboured since their boy was three.

"We were driving in the van," the Newmarket mom said. "Jake said, 'Mommy, there's something in my head. There's something wrong and I don't think you can help me.'"

"How do you deal with that?"

Ms. Crawford is among a York Region parental cohort whose estimated 50,000 children suffer from mental health issues. About 20 per cent of those youths will get help.

"You want the best for your child," she said. "We struggled since Jake was three to have him diagnosed properly. It's a fight to get services. You can go to psychiatrists all you want and hear fancy terms, but what you really need is a proper diagnosis."

The Crawfords remained undeterred. Their son's mental health issues are Tourette's syndrome, obsessive compulsive disorder and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.

Within a year, the lad was accepted at the York Centre for Children Youth and Families, a non-profit Richmond Hill centre providing a range of psycho-social services for young people and families in York Region.

Jake received therapy for 18 months

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Shirley Crawford
Newmarket mother

through day treatment and summer programs.

Finding his elementary school ill-equipped to cope with his issues and the burdensome stigma, his parents enrolled the 11-year-old Grade 6 student at Terry Fox Public School. His care was also transferred from the centre to Kinark Child and Family Services York Region, where he continued to thrive and where his parents received respite services. It made their family stronger, Ms Crawford said.

"My husband and I learned how to parent Jake and his needs," she said. "Jake wouldn't be where he is without the centre."

It takes a village and Ms Crawford's brand of parental courage when caring for a child with mental health issues, York Region chapter of Parents for Children's Mental Health leader Donna Massel said.

"You have to be an extremely strong advocate, like Shirley, to get help," she said.

October is mental health awareness month and Ms Massel and her chapter co-chairperson, Diane Legris and facilitator Jim Malcolm, also a centre family worker, have launched a full-court press to shed awareness on the many challenges facing York families.

Demand far outweighs supply within the mental health care realm, Mr. Malcolm said. Navigating the complex system and signing on with slim resources is often overwhelming for caregivers.

"Parents arrive at the centre exhausted," the father of a daughter with an anxiety disorder said.

The centre, a United Way of York Region agency, can accommodate 56 families in its day treatment program, a few hundred more through a program for toddlers and a couple of thousand through its community outreach services, centre chairperson Noreen Lee said.

The region's three hospitals offer psychiatric care. However, Blue Hill Child and Family Centre, Youthdale Treatment Centre and Kinark round out the formal mental health care facilities.

It's not enough, the experts and advocates said. As such, the York chapter of Parents for Children's Mental Health was formed in September of 2010 to help improve the lives of these families.

"We are working to build a network of support and improve the ability of parents to tell their story and to seek help," Ms Massel said.

The chapter runs support groups the second Tuesday of every month, said Ms Legris, whose two sons have mental health issues.

Through education, they hope to increase the skills of parents to help and heal their child. They also want to help decrease the stigma of mental illness.

The chapter states the stark facts: one in five children has a mental illness; only one in five of those children will get help; suicide is the second leading cause of death in 10 to 17 year olds; two children a week commit suicide in Ontario.

"The biggest issue is recognizing that mental health is a key determinant of a child's academic, social and emotional well being," Ms Lee said. "Yet, it just isn't a funding priority."

Grateful for United Way's support, Ontario's \$2 million per year, along with Trillium and Royal Bank grants, Ms. Lee said there remains long wait lists for help.

Ms Massel and her colleagues are buoyed by the last provincial budget and the province's recognition children's mental health care is greatly underfunded.

The government has allocated \$257 million over the next three years. Some of this funding is now rolling out to York Region agencies, she said.

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