

HUNTINGTON BEACH

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Center gives teens with autism a haven to practice social skills

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Making a phone call or walking up and talking to someone is not a common homework assignment.

But it is one that inspires anxiety and trepidation at the Social Skills Development Center in Huntington Beach, which imparts behavioral and social skills to teens and young adults with autism and other disorders such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, de-

pression, anxiety, bipolar disorder and obsessive compulsive disorder.

Lisa Popper, who founded the center along with therapist Mary Nehls, says she was motivated by her son Kevin, who is autistic.

Kevin, who did not want to disclose his last name, is 22, pursuing an associate degree at Golden West College and working two jobs.

"When Kevin was a teen-

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ager, there was no place I could take him where he could learn important social skills that would help him make and keep friends," she said. "As a result, he was by himself most of the time."

But now, things are different. Kevin helps his mother in the classroom and serves as an inspiration to other students that they also can overcome their barriers, make friends and lead fulfilling lives.

The center offers two classes, one for teens and one for adults between 18 and 28.

During the classes, students learn how to conduct themselves in a group or how to start a conversation, something most people take for granted, Popper said.

"For example, when they enter a conversation, they need to first survey the situation," she said. "They need to listen to what the person is talking about and make sure they approach them properly and say things that are appropriate."

Also, those who are autistic don't understand if they are being laughed at or laughed with, Popper said.

"We help them understand how to read body language such as when a person is rolling their eyes at them," she said.

"If they are not being accepted, we tell them to walk away in a proper way so they still have the power and don't feel shunned or rejected."

Kevin helps his mother role play in the classroom. When parents see him interact and carry on conversations, they are often surprised to find out that he is autistic, Popper said.

"He gives a lot of students and their parents hope that if he could do it, they can do it, too," she said.

When Popper is in class with the students, Nehls conducts a session for the parents teaching them what their children are learning.

"It's important that parents practice with their children at home," she said. "I teach the parents how they should react if the child is resistant to practicing. We also try to resolve any issues that



PHOTOS: MINDY SCHAUER, STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Lisa Popper with her son, Kevin, 22, who has autism. He is pursuing an associate degree at Golden West College and working two jobs. Kevin did not want his last name used or his face shown because most people do not know that he is autistic.



Mary Nehls, center, and Lisa Popper started the Social Skills Development Center to help young adults such as Popper's son, Kevin.

are between them and their children."

Nehls said many parents find it

difficult to overcome their strong urge to protect their children.

"In the process, they tend to

About the center

The Social Skills Development Center is at 18652 Florida St., Suite 335, Huntington Beach. The center specializes in teaching social skills to children and young adults with autism and other social skills development needs. Information: 714-658-0797 or socialskillsdevelopmentcenter.com.

underestimate their children," she said. "When we give homework, some parents would say, 'My kid can't do that.' But the truth is that kids can do a lot more."

Her job is to make parents realize that they need to let their children do the homework and not do it for them, Nehls said. In June, the center plans to start a class for younger children.

The biggest obstacle for children, teens or young adults with

autism or other disorders is fear, Popper said.

"We ask them to do things out of their comfort zone," she said. "The first goal is to get over fear. And then once they succeed, we build on those victories."

"Each time they succeed, they do a little bit better."

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