



By Jeff Graves

LESSONS TAUGHT BECOME LESSONS LEARNED

Therapist Gretchen Thomasson knew that 13-year-old Jaclyn Cox was making progress. Still, she wondered, just how much progress? After all, Jaclyn, whose verbal and signing abilities consisted of a handful of words and sounds, couldn't tell her.

Then it happened, the clarifying moment when lessons taught become lessons learned.

The therapy session at Island Dolphin Care in Key Largo, Fla., had just ended, and Thomasson moved the computer they had been using to a cabinet next to the door. Jaclyn jumped up from her seat at the table and ran to the computer. Frantically, she began pushing buttons on the touch screen of the computer, which was developed specifically for children with special needs.

"I stopped her, and I said, what do you want, Jaclyn?" Thomasson said. "Then she hit the toilet button like five times." Thomasson immediately took Jaclyn, who

was not toilet-trained at the time, into the hall, where her mother, Sharon Cox, was talking with IDC director Deena Hoagland.

Thomasson told Mrs. Cox that her daughter had something to say. "And right then Jaclyn pointed to toilet," Thomasson said. "I will never forget the look on mom's face."

At Island Dolphin Care, where dolphins are a big part of its "recreational therapy" and kids are encouraged to laugh and play, therapists work hard to improve the lives of children. Sometimes, they can make a significant difference.

Mrs. Cox said she was "overwhelmed" by what she called "the first glimmer of hope that Jaclyn could be potty-trained ...

I took her to the restroom and she went in the toilet. For a 13-year-old in diapers, this was a very big deal."

For the Cox family, very big deals have sometimes been very hard to come by.

Born March 5, 1992, Jaclyn was just over six months old when she was diagnosed with static encephalopathy, a condition in which a person's brain injury or damage is thought to be unchanging, and global developmental delay. Her father, Tom Cox, says he vividly recalls the time period, "because I remember spending that Thanksgiving in the hospital."

Mr. Cox said his daughter's disability, which sometimes is accompanied by seizures, has been a huge challenge. To control seizures, the family had to put Jaclyn on a ketogenic diet, which provides only about 75 percent of a child's caloric requirements.

The diet, which increases levels of ketones in the brain, did stop the seizures and resulted in the first normal EEG - an electroencephalogram detects abnormalities in the electrical activity of the brain - in Jaclyn's life. However, the diet leaves children hungry all the time, said Mr. Cox, who added that after five years Jaclyn finally was taken off the diet. She was relatively seizure-free until about 18 months ago. Both parents said they consider the diet a success, but are pursuing other means to control Jaclyn's seizures.

Jaclyn continues to work with the computer, called a Tellus, at the family's home in Oklahoma. Progress continues, though of course not as quickly as the family would like. Even so, Jaclyn is still interested in the





computer, which is a triumph in itself.

The problem now is setting aside enough time to spend with Jaelyn using the computer, said Mrs. Cox, who home-schools Jaelyn and says the computer has been a useful tool for teaching spelling and math. "She's just so far ahead of me on that thing I can't keep up."



In the past, therapists and teachers had tried a plethora of strategies aimed at improving Jaelyn's communication skills. Picture cards, signing and speech therapy all had produced results, but even in combination, did not enable Jaelyn to successfully communicate.

Thomasson, who has a bachelor's degree in special education and more than six years of teaching experience, described Jaelyn's inability to express herself as having left the child with "a sense of urgency, almost desperation."

Hoagland, who met the Cox family in 1999, noted that positive changes within Jaelyn have occurred gradually. She remembers watching a video tape the family had submitted of a then seven-year-old Jaelyn in which, "Jaelyn is surrounded by all these toys, but there is no

continued on page 40

According to its website, Island Dolphin Care "believes that children with special challenges can and should enjoy the full range of activities that life's experiences can offer, and that every child deserves the opportunity to play, giggle and have fun."

But it's not all fun and games at IDC; therapists whose specialties include special education and clinical social work remain focused throughout the therapy season on the individualized lessons within the laughter.

Some families do visit Island Dolphin Care's 5,300-square-foot facility in Key Largo, Fla., with the singular purpose of having a great time. However, many families, like the Cox family, are looking for help.

IDC's recreational therapy counterbalances the innocent play of dolphins and children with thoughtful, data-driven efforts to improve the lives of children with serious disabilities. While time in the water is all about splash fights and dolphin kisses, classroom therapy strategies often incorporate the high-tech sophistication of today's state-of-the-art assistive and adaptive equipment.

The Island Dolphin Care center, which opened in April 2005, features three classrooms, multiple aquariums and an interactive touch tank, a round "multi-porpoise" room for family orientation, workshops and yoga and a second-story balcony where visitors can watch IDC's resident dolphins and children at play.

For families looking for resources to help their children with special needs, the center's Family Resource Room offers an array of assistive technology they can investigate as well as catalogues, brochures and articles about various assistive technology companies. IDC therapists are available to demonstrate products, discuss proven instructional applications - from simple to complex - and to answer any questions families may have.

At Island Dolphin Care, therapy revolves around the entire family of a child with special needs. All family members are invited to participate in fun art activities and are encouraged to share their experiences, frustrations and hopes with therapists.

Last year, IDC provided therapy to 240 children and their families in the five-day program. Also, IDC provided day programs to more than 300 critically ill or disabled children, their doctors and nurses. The organization's marine science education efforts resulted in field trips for 500 school children.

For more information or an application for the five-day therapy program, visit www.islanddolphinscare.org or call (305) 451-5884.

continued from page 39

purposeful playing, no focus.”

Mrs. Cox said that prior to visiting Island Dolphin Care, “Jaclyn had almost no interaction with other people at all.”

Therapists at IDC first introduced some simple signs, a few of which – music, movie, dog – Jaclyn retained. Jaclyn also was exposed to Applied Behavior Analysis methods, which Hoagland credits with revealing just how strong Jaclyn’s receptive language skills might be. In an effort to exploit that hunch and find the key to unlock the expressive skills, therapists then tried some basic assistive technology devices.

“Unfortunately, what we learned was that the symbols (used with the devices) weren’t real to Jaclyn, weren’t motivating,” Hoagland said.

The Tellus computer, which runs communication-building software called Mind Express, was different.

“As soon as we put the Tellus in front of

her, she started pushing buttons and got so excited,” Thomasson said.

The system allows users to download photos, record cues and prompts using familiar voices, and integrate music and other sounds. Users can even hook up cameras, interface with other computers, and connect to the internet.

The result is an experience that is at once engaging and stimulating. Children can explore multi-layered presentations that have been created specifically for them. Students with good fine motor skills can use a mouse, keyboard or joystick to operate the computer while those lacking fine motor skills can use the computer’s touch screen.

Mrs. Cox views the introduction of good assistive technology in Jaclyn’s life as another step toward one day enabling Jaclyn to communicate without assistance. Greater independence for her daughter can’t be far behind,

she reasons, adding that therapy at Island Dolphin Care will continue to be part of the whole equation.

From the start, IDC has been an environment in which Jaclyn seemed to thrive. Mrs. Cox said the family’s first visit some seven years ago produced amazing breakthroughs. “On the third day at this awesome facility ... she said ‘hello’ for the first time. I thought it was the most beautiful voice I had ever heard.”

Hoagland said Island Dolphin Care’s focused therapy approach works well for many families searching for options.

“I think one of the reasons Jaclyn has done so well here is that we can try a variety of approaches each time she visits,” Hoagland said. “In a school, the teacher tries whatever the district has chosen and it either works or it doesn’t. At Island Dolphin Care, therapists have the time to analyze at how a child communicates and that’s a real luxury.” **EP**