

Eden II opens a Staten Island center to provide diagnosis and treatment of autism

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Eden II recently opened its Diagnostic and Outreach Center in at 2285 Victory

Bld., Willowbrook. Staten Island Advance/Irving Silverstein

STATEN ISLAND, N.Y. -- Autism is a development disorder for which diagnosis and treatment is a complicated maze with limited choices, much of it very costly for parents. New York State took a major step in improving the burden for families by passing legislation mandating insurance coverage for treatment of autism. The result is an expansion of those services on Staten Island with the opening of a center by Eden II in Willowbrook. Treatment of autism is a developing field, but according to one Island expert, there is unity on one aspect of it. "One thing we all agree — if we see the kids young enough, we get the best outcome," said Joanne Gerenser, executive director of Eden II, which provides educational programs, vocational instruction and other services for people with autism. Its main campus is located in Elm Park. With the new insurance mandate, early intervention will be among the services that Eden II will be able to offer at its newly opened Diagnostic and Outreach Center. Evaluation and treatments for both the newly diagnosed and those already with a diagnosis will be provide at its 2285 Victory Blvd. location. The main method of treatment sanctioned by the insurance coverage is applied behavior analysis (ABA), a time-tested approach in Eden II's 37-year history. "We want to make sure families get the diagnosis they need so they can get these services," said Geoff DeBery, director of the center and a board certified behavior analyst. The center's goal is to serve as many children and families as possible. "There should never be a waiting list for diagnosis because how early you get diagnosed affects your child's outcomes," said Ms. Gerenser, who is a speech pathologist. The center is a compact facility that includes a waiting room with TV, wi-fi access and activities for kids; a diagnostic evaluation room, a speech treatment room, an office and a conference room. The staff includes Eden's speech coordinator Janine Kipp and psychologists Frank Cicero, director of psychological services. An autistic child fails to develop or falls behind in communication and socialization skills. A baby may not may have eye contact or respond to a smile. Babbling and interacting with gestures are not observed. At any age, speech or social skills may be lost and difficult behaviors such as hand flapping, repetitive actions and tantrums may develop. There is no blood test to diagnose autism. It is a behavioral diagnosis done through a structured observation by a psychologist.

"We create contrived play settings and see how a child performs and compare that to a normative standard of what a child is doing at these ages," said DeBery. The center's evaluation with a psychologist is provided with a detailed recommendation for treatment that a provider can follow.



Geoff DeBery and Joanne Gerenser discuss operations at Eden II's new Diagnostic

and Outreach Center in Willowbrook. The center will also provide treatment based on applied behavior analysis. The behavioral intervention, said DeBery, aims to "wipe out" autism in a very young child and to make the symptoms better in others. A baby is taught to learn from the natural environment, including the expression of someone's eyes. "We change the brain while it is still plastic," said DeBery. "Which is why you can't wait," added Ms. Gerenser. With an older child, ABA focuses on activities of daily living — such as eating, dressing and toilet training — social skills, severe behavior problems and play skills. For it to be effective, family members take an active role in both understanding and implementing the practices. With an insurance cap of \$45,000, parents, who formerly had to pay out-of-pocket for this treatment, will have access to a therapist trained in ABA who works with the child and family in their home. "This [the office] is a pretend environment. We need to be delivering services in the environment where it is happening," said DeBery. DeBery also expressed a desire to work with pediatricians on the Island to share screening tools and best practices. ABA has a 30-year history of making a difference in the treatment of autism. Providers are certified by a national board. A glitch in the New York state insurance legislation mandate is that it does not recognize the certification. As it stands, ABA is sanctioned for insurance coverage, but only psychologists are licensed to provide the treatment. Not all psychologists are board certified in ABA and many behavior analysts are not licensed psychologists. A bill is on Gov. Andrew Cuomo's desk to provide a state license for behavior analysts. Activists in the field of autism are encouraging supporters to contact his office and urge him to sign the bill. For many, including Eden II, it will quickly increase the number of providers covered by the insurance and the access to treatment .Eden II's new autism center Diagnostic and Outreach Center 2285 Victory Blvd., Suite 3 Willowbrook

Visits are by appointment only. Call 917-722-9386.