



A Dream Vacation

A Somerset Hills Learning Institute family celebrated a momentous purchase this past July. Their pre-vacation shopping trip marked the first time they had ever purchased sun block for their little girl, Emily, age 6.

Historically, Emily's symptoms of autism restricted her from enjoying and participating in family outings. "We were hostages to our daughter's symptoms," explained Michele Salmon. "When we would attempt to vacation as a family, I would stay with Emily in the house and try to keep her comfortable while my husband, Mike, would take our son out to enjoy all that our trip had to offer. It just never seemed like a vacation for Emily and me."

Sadly, Emily's protest behavior, consisting of crying, screaming, head banging, and aggression, did not reserve itself to vacationing. Whether at the park, food shopping, playing in the back yard, or accompanying her mother to her brother's bus stop, Emily's protest behavior was a horrifyingly controlling force in the Salmon's life.

"When we accepted Emily as a student at Somerset Hills Learning Institute in March of 2008 we learned quickly that we needed to begin her intervention differently," said Dr. Kevin Brothers, Executive Director. "In fact, we began providing services in Emily's home, rather than at the Institute. We had little choice because her self injury and aggression were so extreme in form and frequency, and she would accept nothing but her mother as a reward for her miniscule moments of appropriate behavior."

Systematically, clinicians at the Institute transitioned Emily to the school setting with her mother present daily. "We were so grateful that Emily was truly 'taught' how to attend school and not thrust into it. Dr. Brothers and the rest of the staff at the Institute put our daughter before her autism and treated her with compassion and respect," explained Mike Salmon. Over time Emily became increasingly successful at school without her mother.

In addition to teaching Emily language skills, to maintain eye contact, self-help skills, and a myriad of other skills, the team at Somerset Hills Learning Institute has taught Emily to enjoy the community with her family. Relying on Emily's data to guide their decision-making, the staff taught Emily to successfully ride a bike; play in the back yard; play at the park; go shopping with her mother; and, most recently, participate in the family vacation.

During their vacation, Emily enjoyed playing with her family at the pool, riding her bike with her brother, and perusing the shops with her parents.

“Words are inadequate to describe the overwhelming sense of joy I felt when Emily jumped into my arms while in the swimming pool. After 6 years, this is the first time we have shared this experience together as a complete family,” said Mike Salmon tearfully.

Michele Salmon recently mused, “I always thought my dream vacation would be to Paris or London or some place more exotic than the Jersey shore. But I was so wrong – this vacation was simply amazing and a lot of fun.”

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