

## Mental Health

I am a mother of a Sandy Hook 2<sup>nd</sup> grade survivor. My two older children graduated from Sandy Hook last year and are now in fifth grade at Reed Intermediate School.

Over the past 9 years that my family and I have lived in Sandy Hook, I have been very involved in the education and especially in the special needs education of two of my children. My youngest, our second grader was adopted from China with a leg impairment, length difference and in the same leg, no knee reflex. Needless to say it was not at all easy for her to run from the building. Her teacher held on for dear life to my daughter praying that she wouldn't fall as they thought they were still in danger of a second gunman.

That said I come to the real purpose of this letter. I worked very closely with Dawn Hochsprung and Mary [Sherlach](#) over the years in regard to our son. He was adopted into our family from Kazakhstan at the age of 10 months. Even at that early age he experienced traumatic attachment disorder. This disorder is usually seen in children that do not receive the correct amount of bonding, love and stimulation from a caregiver in the early stages of life. Simply put, we have dealt with a number of disorders that are associated with his institutionalization including, but not limited to ADHD, sensory integration disorder, food hoarding, mild bonding issues, impaired fine motor issues and anxiety.

Most people that know me know that I have been an incredible advocate for my son. We as a family have worked diligently to find the best answers in working with his behavioral, emotional and food disorders from a very early age. We are blessed to be in a position that our son is not violent, has established friendships, does well in school and sports and has progressed beautifully with the combined effort of our family and his other first line of support – his teachers. I have sat down with each and every one of them every year before the start of school to go over what it is like to parent a traumatized child. I am always e-mailing, calling and checking in. When he would cry so badly (it would go on for over a half an hour and the Vice Principal didn't know what to do), I was there to explain that this is what happens and how to deal with the behavior. Over the years, he has grown and we are proud to say we have seen amazing improvement in him. His teachers now consider him a leader in his class. Honestly, I hope it continues because we did not believe we would hear the word leader in reference to our son. We are very proud of him.

We know that we must stay diligent in creating a home environment that promotes structure, solid parenting skills and the use of therapeutic medical services that are not easily found or available financially to all families. This is where so many, many children and families fall through the cracks.

I am a firm believer that although Dawn and Mary tried extremely hard to help all children with special needs, the needs outweigh the expertise of almost all school personal as well as many parents. So many children have emotional and chemical imbalances, not of their own doing, that

truly need help. Being able to help families get the help they need at an early stage in life and continuing that help is needed now more than ever before.

In regard to gun legislation, I firmly believe we need to have background checks that do include some measure of keeping firearms out of the hands of those that have emotional and mental imbalances that have shown potential or prior violence.

Over and above that measure in a bill, the state needs to find a constructive way to:

A. Educate all our school personnel on the special needs of the children they service. All school personal should be expected to take some type of certificate program on children with emotional and behavioral needs. This includes mental disorders, global spectrum disorders all the way down to attachment and traumatic disorders. These certificate programs need to be an integrated part of a state wide and hopefully federal wide strategy to aid our society in the dignified understanding of mental health problems in this country.

B. Give our teachers and our parents the ability to communicate to each other about the needs of these children without fear. Schools need to know that they have the ability to reach out to parents with regard to their children's needs without the fear of being sued or harassed by parents.

C. Develop education programs by licensed and certified experts in the mental health and appropriate holistic fields that show benefit for parents of children with emotional, global and mental disorders. These types of educational programs would be for parents, families and teachers. As these programs many times fail on the private level (due in part to the difficulty in reaching the parents or those in need), we need to find a way to mandate these types of programs in association with important school activities. Our educators, parents and medical professionals need to work together to increase cooperation and success for children with mental illness. We need to continue these programs and support once a child leaves school and heads out into the world. There needs to be some level of hand off to prepare professionals as adolescents turn into adults and need help in transitioning, whether it is into college or into a trade school.

D. Encourage mental health professionals to work along side other experts in the field of child and adolescent mental issues. In some instances (as reactive attachment disorder), there are very few specialists that work in this field. We need to get more doctors to be willing to take on and learn about new methods of treating children with mental illness. We need to encourage new methods (i.e. diet and holistic methods) of treatment that have shown promise in treating behavioral and emotional behaviors in mentally ill children.

E. Most importantly cut through the red tape in treating these children and getting them and their families on the road to the best possible help, medication and, if needed, group schooling where they can best be monitored and treated to maximize their success in society.

F. In a nut shell, we need to help fund programs that are proactive and work to the benefit of our school, families, caregivers and children. We need to - in a dignified and open manner - deal head on with the issues surrounding mental illness and create an understanding in our society

that the mental or emotionally ill person should not be shunned but helped in a dignified manner to be the best person that they can and achieve as good and balanced life as possible.

Mary and Dawn both worked extremely hard to help children with special needs especially those in the autistic spectrum. They did they could with the tools that the school, state and federal government would allow. Unfortunately, it is very far from what our society and our children need.

I believe in my heart that Connecticut can be the start that commences a best practice in dealing with the above issues in our school system. I am aware that there will be reluctance, and especially push back on privacy issues as well, but we need to create an environment of working change that brings a better understanding at all levels of mental illness and how to make those and their family suffer less and feel more included in our society.

I am happy to speak further on these issues with any committee. I stand with many many parents on a proactive need for change. Please help us achieve change in this vital area of our state's education system.

Thank you,

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