

Mothers of invention achieve milestones

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Ilana Hoffer Skoff and Mia Buchwald Gelles met by chance in 2000 in a speech therapist's waiting room. Each has a child on the autism spectrum and, they discovered, they were using the same approach "Applied Behavior Analysis" to teach their youngsters.

"Children with autism don't learn by observation," says Gelles. "You have to teach even common behaviors, like how to greet someone and how to carry on a conversation, in a deliberate, step-by-step manner."

Everyday experiences "getting a haircut or going to the dentist" have to be thought out in advance, explains Skoff.

"Children with autism also don't generalize well, Gelles adds, "They find it difficult to apply a skill they have learned in one context to a new situation."

As they struggled to teach their children, the two mothers began helping each other analyze problems and devise strategies. They read books, attended conferences, shared information, sought out resources, hired and trained tutors. All the



Mia Buchwald Gelles, left, and Ilana Hoffer Skoff look over materials that will be presented at Milestones' upcoming autism conference.

while, they were gaining valuable expertise.

"When the kids were in school full-time we finally had the time to share this knowledge," says Skoff. "We asked ourselves, how can we make a difference?"

The answer was Milestones, an organization the women founded in 2003 whose main focus is to provide training locally for professionals working with children on the autism spectrum. Established with funding from the Mt. Sinai Health Care Foundation and the Lader, Senkfor, and McBride Family Foundations, the Cleveland Heights nonprofit rents office space in Beth El-The Heights Synagogue.

For their efforts, Gelles and Skoff are among five individuals being honored by Individuals Devoted to Educational Advocacy

IDEA honors founders of autism organization

(IDEA) at their annual Celebration of Champions dinner on Nov. 16.

Milestones' founders brought more than their personal experience with autism to this endeavor. Gelles, the organization's operations director, has over 16 years' experience in nonprofit management, project planning and administration, and custom database design. The Cleveland Heights resident also works as program director at Environmental Health Watch.

Skoff, of Beachwood, is Milestones' executive director. For the past 18 years she has worked in the development field in the areas of strategic planning, board development and funding strategies, with her specialty being grant writing. Neither woman draws a salary.

Since its inception, Milestones has presented four large conferences, featuring nationally known experts in the autism field and a large array of workshops offering continuing professional education.

"In our very first year, we drew 300 participants," says Skoff. "People came out of the woodwork; they came from all over the state."

At the request of the Cuyahoga County Special Education Service Center, Milestones also organized a week-long, hands-on training seminar for 20 public school teachers. For this course, they recruited a small "lab class" of children with various degrees of autism. After teachers were taught new techniques, they could literally go next door and practice them in a real-life environment.

Milestones also works collaboratively with other regional autism service providers such as The Monarch School and The Cleveland Clinic Lerner School.