

Family therapist assists with special needs preschoolers

By JASON PARSLEY | Forum Publishing Group

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Michelle LaRocque said she believes families are like baseball teams: Each member has a position to play and the family only wins when team members work together.

LaRocque, a behavioral therapist who specializes in special-needs children, is the director of child development for Families By Design in [Boca Raton](#), which offers a wide variety of therapies for children and families. She has worked with children and parents throughout the county.

"You can't change a child's behavior without changing the parents' behavior," she said. "Families have to learn how to positively interact with their children if they want positive behavioral results."

In addition to providing individual and group counseling sessions, LaRocque said she usually likes to see the children in their natural environment, such as at home or school, so she can identify the needs of the child.

"[Michelle] is caring, she's on the children's level," said Shari Young, director of early children for [West Boynton](#) Temple Torah's preschool, Wiston Family Torah Tots. She "works with parents and has a way about her to reassure them, she's a resource for teachers and parents."

LaRocque has worked with Young to help special-needs children at the preschool, which Young said fosters inclusion programs, which is what makes LaRocque a perfect match for the preschool. Inclusion programs allow special-needs children to attend class with other children.

"Children even with special needs should have the same opportunities," Young said.

She and LaRocque agree that inclusion helps all of the children at the preschool. "Each child comes with something special and unique about them, therefore we take in children with special needs," Young said, adding that the policy also teaches regular children how to have empathy for other human beings, something that can't necessarily be taught by a teacher.

She told a story about how one 3-year-old with special needs, with whom LaRocque worked, sometimes would hit her head against the wall if she sat too close to the blackboard. On one occasion, one of the other students, also 3, got up and walked over the wall and put his hand against it so she was hitting his hand instead of the wall.

"If children don't get to see these things or experience them they don't learn how to treat another human being," Young said.

What LaRocque enjoys most about her job is "that light bulb moment when the child enjoys interacting with their peers and sees the value of it," while the most challenging part of her job is "to help parents understand that some challenging behavior is age-appropriate and not the disability."

LaRocque lives in [Delray Beach](#) and has two children of her own, Elaina, 6, and Olivia, 4. Both of them participate in her group therapy sessions.

For information, visit www.familiesbydesign.net.

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