



Photo by Angie Beaulieu

## Lawrence Eagle Tribune

### Mom of special tot to walk to help others

By Julie Kirkwood Staff Writer

Jessica DiMario was nervous about bringing her 3-week-old son home from the hospital.

Adam has Down syndrome, a chromosomal disorder that causes mental retardation and other symptoms, including floppy muscles. Just dropping his head to his chin could block his airway, so Adam had to be hooked to monitors that would sound if his life was in danger.

"If you did not hold him the right way he couldn't breathe," DiMario said.

DiMario and her husband, Michael, didn't sleep well for weeks because they were so afraid and overwhelmed by his diagnosis. Doctors gave them little hope for Adam's future, Jessica said, other than to say, "We just don't know how retarded he'll be."

"That's the word they used that made me cry for days," she said.

A year later, DiMario fights back tears for a different reason: because Adam is doing so well.

"I'm just so glad," she said, hugging her baby. "It could have been so much worse."

Adam sucked his cheeks in to make fish lips, which made his mother laugh. It's just one of countless tiny things Adam can do that many babies with Down syndrome cannot, she said.

"A lot of kids with Down syndrome don't talk until sometimes (age) 3 or 4," DiMario said. "He's been babbling, saying mama and dada, since 7 months old. Yesterday he said daddy instead of dada. ... He's almost on target as a typical child."

She credits this progress to early intervention. Within a week of Adam coming home from the hospital, the Professional Center for Child Development in Andover sent therapists to their Lawrence home at least once a

week to evaluate Adam and teach his parents how to work on his skills.

For example, when Adam was learning to sit up, a physical therapist taught DiMario how to guide him back to a lying down position - a bit of extra help he needed because his core muscles are loose.

"We play with him just like a regular baby, but we just do it more," DiMario said.

The early intervention specialists taught her how to encourage his language skills by diligently repeating back every sound he makes. When she noticed Adam was twisting his left ankle in a strange way when he was learning to walk, a therapist showed her a way to apply pressure to his leg to correct it.

"Within a week he wasn't doing it," DiMario said. "We caught it right away. I wouldn't have known how to put pressure on different points."

DiMario is so grateful for early intervention, which will continue until Adam is 3, that she's walking this weekend in a fundraiser for the Professional Center for Child Development, the annual Trot for Special Tots. The event includes a 5K road race, a walk, a costume parade and a cookout.

"I figured they do enough for me, I'm going to do something for them," DiMario said.

Ellen Waddill, parent and community liaison for the professional center, pointed out that Adam's success has as much to do with his family's dedication as it does to the therapists.

"That's the goal of early intervention, to teach the family," Waddill said. "It's really the families who do it."

But DiMario said it's more than the education she's grateful for. "If I'm feeling down about something they're right there to help you," she said. "I couldn't pick up a book about Down syndrome for a couple months because every time I opened a book I cried."

Now she feels confident about Adam's future.

"One thing I learned is you have to take 'can't' out of your vocabulary," DiMario said. "You just have to push him and do stuff over and over. We just keep going until he gets it."

If you go: **What:** Trot for Special Tots **When:** Sunday, 5K road race and walk at 10 a.m., costume parade at 11, cookout at 11:30. **Where:** The Professional Center for Child Development, 32 Osgood St., Andover **Cost:** \$20 to run, \$10 to walk. \$100 in pledges waives the entrance fee. Costume parade and cookout are free. **Information:** 978-475-3806 or [www.theprofessionalcenter.org](http://www.theprofessionalcenter.org) 10/19/2007