Reflection of Date Night for Parents of Children with Disabilities
By Joe Linehan

Raising children with disabilities can be a full-time job. Between shuttling them to school, therapy and doctor’s appointments, cooking, cleaning, and working on their child’s goals around the home, personal leisure time is hard to come by. Without a doubt, these moments parents spend with their children are invaluable and the true foundations for promoting healthy living and developmental growth, but too often parents may find themselves reminiscing back to times that are now lost where they took vacations, went out to dinner or the movies, or even just went for a stroll around the block. This free time often disappears with diagnosis, as parents can’t find the time or may feel guilty taking a break from their child’s life, as they know how pivotal the first few years of their child’s life is to their future development.

Breaks are essential for parents with children with disabilities for many different reasons. Breaks can help parents decompress and renew the strength it takes to advocate for their child, rekindle the love that binds and supports couples when times are stressful, or even simply provide parents with time to reorganize their medical documents, fix a broken gate, or vacuum under the couch.

On Saturday, March 13th, the Early Intervention Program (EIP) masters students at the University of Oregon, in collaboration with Early Childhood CARES and Head Start, sponsored Date Night for families to celebrate all that parents do for their families by offering free respite care for their children with disabilities and siblings. Twenty EIP students and professor Erin Barton organized the event, while EIP, Early Childhood CARES’ A Child’s Garden, and Head Start graciously offered their classrooms on campus to use.

Within two weeks of opening registration time, Date Night had reached its maximum enrollment number at 32 children, serving 15 families in all. Children enrolled ranged from 18 months to nine years old, with parents dropping off anywhere from one to five of their children! The night’s activities included an outside time where children raced on tricycles and made sandcastles, dinner, inside activities like building with blocks and painting, and watching a movie in our “theatre room.” Those children who grew tired towards the end of the evening could cuddle up with a stuffed animal and pillow and rest in a quiet room.

Date Night was a huge success thanks to all of the volunteers and families that participated! Parents reported that they were able to use this opportunity to get massages, manicures, take a hot bath, or go out to dinner and a movie for the first time in years! Many families mentioned that it was comforting to know that their children were in the care of people who were passionate about and experienced in the field of special education. Volunteers said that they loved spending time with all of the children, many of which they were involved with the child’s day classrooms, research projects, and the EIP’s Adopt-a-Family program where local families with young children with disabilities “adopt” students for the academic quarter.

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