

A Focus on Community Mental Health: 3 Therapists Join Sorenson Legacy Foundation Center for Clinical Excellence, Bring New Therapy Techniques

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Joe Kotynek, Jacob Cameron, and Dallas Spencer got their feel for Utah State's stunning campus this Fall as they joined the Sorenson Center for Clinical Excellence psychology and counseling team in September.

Dallas Spencer, a Licensed Clinical Social Worker, has spent the past 12 years working with youth and adults in rural Idaho. He worked with those struggling with depression, anxiety, PTSD, and substance use disorder. He is excited to work with this population in Cache Valley and to also work with students as the Sorenson's core values emphasize. Spencer focuses on being an advocate for his clients and finds joy in helping others find their own strength and autonomy.

Joe Kotynek, a Licensed Clinical Social Worker, worked with adolescents and adults struggling with substance use disorder and emerging substance use disorder.

Kotynek and Spencer are newly trained in Parent Child Interaction Therapy (PCIT). PCIT is designed to strengthen the relationship between parent and child. "Essentially, we're teaching the parent techniques to help them build a relationship with their child before they get in to addressing problem issues and challenges," says Spencer. "This way the child both has trust and a connection to their parent when their parent inevitably has to discipline them."

PCIT focuses on the utilization of PRIDE skills – Praise, Reflect, Imitate, Describe, and Enthusiasm. During therapy sessions, Kotynek and Spencer will review these skills and help parents identify opportunities to use them throughout their sessions. Sitting behind one way glass, Kotynek or Spencer will observe a parent and child interacting and playing together in one of their observational classrooms. The parent will have a listening device in one ear where they can hear instructions and advice from their therapist. "If their child is, for example, cleaning up blocks they were playing with, we'll advise the parent to praise them for appropriate behavior," Spencer explains. They aim for specific praise as well. Instead of saying "Good Job", they'll tell them to say "You're so good at putting away your blocks quietly." Specific praise helps children, and let's be honest, all of us, understand what we're good at and what good behaviors to repeat.

Kotynek and Spencer encourage a wide range of use of all the PRIDE skills. Parent Child Interaction Therapy and the introduction of PRIDE skills typically involves parents with children ages 2-7. These are the critical years when forming attachment skills and building a bond with their caretaker/s is taking place. This age range is where the parent has the most influence on their child. PRIDE skills however, can be practiced all throughout a child's life. Kotynek laughs as he reflects on the ways he's tried these skills on his teenage son. "The other day we were in the kitchen together and he starts to make himself a sandwich and I'm finding myself sitting there describing what he is doing in detail and telling him how good of a chef he is. I kept doing this with random things he would do within the next couple of weeks. At one point he turns to me and goes, "Dad, really? You're weird." Our relationship has shifted though in a very positive way." Kotynek approaches PCIT with theories relating to his previous work in substance use disorder within adolescents and adults. As he's observed clients struggle and suffer later in life, he feels like a lot of their pain and suffering could have been alleviated by having better relationships with their primary caregiver/s. "Our attachment and relationship to our primary caregiver/s is one of the fundamental protective factors for how we mature and engage in our relationships and life later on," Kotynek explains. By providing a therapy that enhances and encourages parents' relationship with their children, Kotynek hopes these stronger relationships and secure attachments will help these children later on in life when they begin to experience the hardships that come with the human experience.

Kotynek and Spencer also hope to help parents of Cache Valley. "Believe me I've been there. When my son was

younger, I was I had someone telling me these things," says Kotynek.

PCIT is for parents whose children have behavioral struggles and for those that just want to build better relationships with their children.

The overall goals of PCIT is to:

- Decrease frequency, severity, and/or duration of tantrums
- Decrease activity levels
- Decrease negative attention-seeking behaviors (such as whining and bossiness)
- Decrease parental frustration
- Increase feelings of security, safety, and attachment to the primary caregiver
- Increase attention span
- Increase self-esteem
- Increase pro-social behaviors (such as sharing and taking turns)

Starting January 9th 2024, Kotynek and Spencer are hosting an 8 session in-person group therapy for parents of 2-12 year olds to learn these PRIDE skills and how to interact with their child differently to strengthen their relationship.

Jacob Cameron, PhD, is a recent graduate of the Clinical Psychology program at Palo Alto University in California. He enjoys learning – so he decided to study the brain.

Dallas, Kotynek and Cameron, along with the Sorenson Center want the Cache Valley Community to feel supported.

All providers are currently accepting new clients. Clients can be seen in-person or via telehealth. Insurance and sliding scale fee may be utilized.

For more information or to schedule an appointment, please call 435-797-3401.