

Expecting success for kids at Four Oaks

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When Jason (not his real name) arrived at the Four Oaks campus in Iowa City, he was a defiant fifth-grader. He often refused to attend school and was kicked out of his after-school program. Despite having community supports such as therapy, he was making little progress. This strong-willed kid, who had trouble interacting nicely with other children, also was disruptive at school. Although his parents recognized the challenges, their youngest of three boys was a constant source of frustration and helplessness.

Enter the PAL (Pursuing Adventures in Learning) Program at Four Oaks. Director Karen Werner said the structured environment is an effective tool in working with kids who are used to being controlling and exhibit challenging behavior.

"Jason quickly learned that for everything you do there is a consequence. He couldn't manipulate and he couldn't get asked to leave the program," Werner said. "I have never seen a kid take to the program like Jason did. He immediately understood the expectations and realized he didn't want the consequences that come with negative behavior. He 'gets it.'"

But Jason's success didn't come without a lot of work. Not only did Jason work hard to change his behavior, his parents also were committed to the program. Werner said Jason's parents attended a parent support group and learned to duplicate the same expectations that the Four Oaks staff was using and used the advice they were given to become stronger and more consistent parents. After a year in the program, Jason made the successful transition to a traditional after-school program.

Each year, the PAL program serves between 20 and 30 youth. Like other nonprofit agencies, the funding is precarious. With many families experiencing changes in their work status, their qualifications for assistance may be at risk. Insurance does not cover participation in the program.

In the past, the program has received funding from Johnson County and United Way, which Werner noted is critical and greatly appreciated.

In addition to the PAL program, the other programs receiving local funds are Cornerstone (Self-Sufficiency Program) Youth Emergency Shelter, Structured

Community Treatment (delinquent kids), Remedial (skill building), Therapy, Safety & Permanency, After-care, Recruitment and Retention of Foster Care, and School-Based Programs.

As a Four Oaks location, the Iowa City campus is committed to the agency's "Expect Success" vision. Jason reached the goal, with proof from his family. His mother wrote a note to the Four Oaks staff expressing her gratitude for her changed son.

"What Jason has learned at PAL will stick with him! He is a heck of a kid, and I am so proud of him for all the work that he has done to turn his behavior around! I am ... so grateful for everything that each and every one of you have done for Jason, and all the other kids!"