

TELLING OTHER PEOPLE

First My Parents, Then the Teachers

A Parent's Perspective

Sharing Information Strategically

By Anonymous Parent

I felt obligated to tell a number of people about my preschool-age son's viral hepatitis. First, my parents. My mom was going to be doing a lot of childcare for me when I worked, and I wanted to make sure that she knew how to use standard precautions and how important they were. I'd never heard about them until my son Jason was diagnosed. I knew for sure that she didn't have the foggiest idea what they were.

It wasn't easy to tell Mom and Dad about Jason but I was all prepared and that helped.

First, I had them come over to the house when there was nobody else there. Then I told them about Jason. I told them how upsetting his diagnosis was and how much I needed them and their support and how much Jason needed their support.

Then I took them to see Jason's doctor. I asked her to share Jason's condition with them. Then I left the room. They were able to talk to the doctor alone and ask questions that they knew I would be upset to hear. It actually went pretty smoothly. They have been very understanding and supportive. I think it really helped them to get to talk to a medical expert because they told me later that they had always thought hepatitis was a "sex thing."

Now that they know the truth, they are ready and willing to help Jason and me. And they haven't told anyone else. I asked them not to and they understood why. They didn't want people to be prejudiced against Jason because of his health, either.

I also wanted Jason's preschool teacher to know. Children at the preschool are supposed to be immunized for hepatitis B, but I was afraid that some of the parents might have decided against the vaccine because of scare stories. I wanted to make sure that the

preschool teacher used standard precautions and I wanted to maintain a sense of trust between us.

I had to be realistic. I was going to have to take Jason out of school for ongoing doctor visits and it was only a matter of time before she figured out that something was wrong. I thought that being up front with her was better than acting as if we had something to hide.

I set up a parent conference with the teacher and had a county health nurse come with me. We told her about Jason's diagnosis and gave her a chance to ask questions. She seemed surprised by the news, but not blown away. The nurse told her that I had a lot of courage, coming to talk to her and not being secretive.

I left her a lot of information, including a photocopy of a letter we'd seen that was written by a lawyer. It talked about the legal right to privacy and the legal right not to be discriminated against because of a medical condition. I don't know how much of an impact that letter and our visit had on her, but she never treated Jason any differently after that. After all, he's just a kid. He's not a threat to anybody. Ignorance and intolerance are the real threats.