For Immediate Release

Mommy & Me Tea Party Creates Unique Bonding Experience for Families Of Children With Complex Medical Needs

As Parents Forge Connections Over Common Experience, a Budding Network of Support Begins to Blossom

Ossining, N.Y. – Having a child with a life-threatening illness is not only devastating -- it can also be isolating. It’s an uncommon experience, and an uncomfortable topic of discussion for those who don’t share it, so parents in this position may find themselves with no one to talk to. Fortunately, that is no longer the case for 27 mothers of diverse backgrounds who came together with their children for a special Mommy & Me Tea on a warm, sunny Sunday afternoon last month at the Sunshine Children’s Home, a residential nursing facility for children with complex medical needs located in Ossining, NY.

The three-hour event, which offered these families a unique opportunity to connect and bond over food, wheelchair dancing, massage lessons and professional mommy-and-me portraits, was actually years in the making, says Sunshine’s Director of Therapeutic Activities, Dina Sternhill, who organized the event.

“When I began working at Sunshine six years ago, there was a real need for families to connect with other families going through similar circumstances,” says Ms. Sternhill. “There is so much guilt, so much worry, so much anxiety, so much grief, and no one in the community understands that the way other parents do. So, we decided to organize these mom events so that they can all meet each other and share experiences. This type of connection and bonding can be so beneficial for everyone involved.”

But first she needed to help the parents become comfortable enough with one another to open up. “It took a lot of convincing,” Ms. Sternhill said. “Our families are so diverse in terms of culture, language and religion that our early events were limited to small group retreats for families who shared cultural similarities. In fact, in 200X, just six women attended our first ‘Mommy Camp’ -- an overnight retreat featuring movies, manicures shopping and meals together.
“It was unbelievable how it took off. It was very small, but maybe it worked well because it was more intimate. The moms all sang together, cried together and shared their experiences,” Ms. Sternhill said. “Over time, the retreats grew in size, the bonds were created, and friendships began and strengthened.”

Because the Mommy & Me Tea was the first time bringing all of the smaller groups together, Ms. Sternhill says she was nervous that turnout would be low. But the success of the smaller retreats had built the parents’ confidence -- and 27 mothers attended the party.

“We started the program by having everyone introduce themselves and asked everyone to find one thing they had in common with someone else besides having a child at Sunshine -- something real. They really had to talk to one another to be able to come up with something they shared -- hobbies, family situations,” Ms. Sternhill says. Once the ice was broken, real connections began to form.

“To see this diverse group of moms hugging, exchanging email addresses and posing for photos together was so moving. This far exceeded the supportive camaraderie we were attempting to create with this event,” Ms. Sternhill says. “We watched magic unfold.”

*The mission of the Sunshine Children’s Home and Rehab Center is to create a loving and supportive environment that provides the highest level of quality pediatric care for children who require post-acute medical care and/or rehabilitative therapy, combined with psychological and developmental interventions. For more information, visit www.sunshinechildrenshome.org.*