

How could I do any less?

Over tea and pie with his mentors, the Coles, Dave Cavagnino was learning. Hazel and Robert Cole and their daughter Grace, who has autism and Down syndrome, made sure of that, giving Cavagnino a sense of what everyday life is like for families of children with developmental disabilities.

Earlier, he'd gotten a taste while accompanying the Coles to a therapeutic horseback riding session. He'd also joined them for Grace's dance therapy, a swimming outing and a workshop on ABLE savings accounts.

His experiences with the Coles changed him. A trainee in UD's Leadership Education in Neurodevelopmental Disabilities (LEND) program, a yearlong course of study for future professionals and family members of children with disabilities that emphasizes family-centered holistic care, Cavagnino says he's "a better physical therapist now. I realized I'm part of this interconnected web of people supporting children like Grace."

With funding from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Health Resources and Services Administration, CDS launched the Delaware LEND in 2016. Program Coordinator Christine Grott says the LEND fills a void in service delivery systems that too often fail to properly support those with neurodevelopmental disabilities and their families by nurturing a new generation of professionals and advocates who embrace collaboration with clients, families and specialists in other disciplines. "We need providers who know how to engage with families," she says, "who know what resources are out there and how to get them."

To that end, the LEND curriculum exposes trainees to the disability community through lectures, panel discussions, interactions with specialists, group reflections and faculty mentoring.

Spending 15 hours with families like the Coles is a core LEND component. Their time together, says Grott, is a powerful reminder that clients live full, complex lives beyond the walls of classrooms and therapy settings.

"Families are the experts," Cavagnino says. "They're always looking to learn more." As a future professional in the field, "how could I do any less?"

Graduate students, postdoctoral fellows and family members interested in participating in LEND should contact Christine Grott at cgrott@udel.edu.



Food for thought: What Dave Cavagnino learned outside the classroom from Grace Cole and her parents has given him a new perspective on his practice as a PT.