

January 6, 2019

To whom it may concern:

I am writing in support of Merrymount Children's Centre, its staff and its programs. It would not be an exaggeration to say that Merrymount saved our family, transformed our children's lives and strengthened our marriage. Without the amazing programs and the outstanding staff that run them, I sincerely believe that our family would be struggling and broken today.

We arrived in London in the spring of 2008 during the most extreme period of crisis we had ever faced. I was pregnant with our second child, both my husband and I were unemployed, we had no home and we had a 3 year old son with undiagnosed but increasingly severe behavioural problems. At the same time, the economy was crashing and the world was entering a severe recession.

As we sought help for our son we were quickly referred to Merrymount. Within a week the staff had arranged an intake interview, assessments for our son and respite care for him for after the birth of our daughter in order for me to rest and bond with her and for my husband to search for employment. I was at high risk for post-partum depression and the staff were quick to put plenty of supports in place for us.

That summer Merrymount enrolled our son in a program to help him prepare for his entry into kindergarten. They helped prepare me, too, giving us great advice in how to approach the school and the teachers. Our son worked with a play therapist in a program called Don't Make Me Go. It was a wonderful preparation for school. My daughter would do the same program with the same play therapist four years later. Another great strength of Merrymount is the continuity afforded by long term staff who are committed to the clients.

In the fall, I began a parenting course at Merrymount to help understand child development and how to help my son with his behavioural challenges. At that time we received a referral through Merrymount to Vanier and the two organizations complemented each other as we continued to have our son assessed.

Following on from the parenting course I was invited to join a parent's support group that met on Wednesday mornings. We would play with our children for an hour and then leave them with staff while the parents met with a facilitator and guest speakers to discuss parenting issues such as nutrition, sleep, school, family life and sibling relations.

The parents in this group became a close support group for one another as Merrymount and our facilitator created a safe and loving place for us to share our fears and struggles and to help and encourage one another. I was a part of that group for six years, until my daughter was in school full time. Knowing that I had that oasis of peace and caring for several hours on Wednesday mornings was often all that got me through to the following week; that and the amazing cookies they served!

As well as the supports for our son and myself, I needed help caring for our infant daughter. We regularly attended the Friday Well Baby Clinic and got support from the lactation consultants there. We didn't yet have a family doctor so we received vaccines and general care from the nurse practitioner. All of our needs were met in one place by one set of people whom we knew and trusted. I wish that all parents could experience the feeling of security that brings.

In December 2009 our son was diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome, a form of autism, and we began another stage of our journey as we sought to understand what this would mean for his future and for us as a family going forward. Merrymount was there with us all the way. There were staff and counselors and play therapists and nurse practitioners to give advice and a friendly ear. We received assessments from a PhD candidate in child psychiatry who was doing a placement at Merrymount.

And always, we were welcome to just "be" in the building if we needed a safe space where we knew we were accepted and understood. That was an enormous gift to our family. My children especially enjoyed the library and the special bookshelf from which they could choose a free book to take home.

Over the next six years we continued to receive on going but increasingly diminishing support from Merrymount. Diminishing because they were helping us to get back on our feet, to be healthy and self-sufficient while always providing a safety net, encouragement and care as needed. We appreciated this approach because it showed confidence in us and our abilities to self-manage our lives and our children's futures.

As our overall needs tapered off, there were still times when we needed more support than other families because of the nature of our struggles. When I was diagnosed with fibromyalgia, Merrymount offered respite care for my daughter, who was only in kindergarten every other day, so that I could rest and recover. Though we never used it, we also knew that overnight care was available if we needed it. As we have no family nearby these supports were life-saving for us.

In conclusion, I would like to say that Merrymount Children's Centre has been one of the greatest blessings in our lives since coming to London. They helped us to land on our feet during a very difficult and overwhelming time. We could easily have fallen through the cracks and become just another negative statistic. Instead, today my husband and I are both employed in jobs that we love, we own our own home, our marriage is strong and healthy and our children are thriving at 10 and 14 years old respectively. We have not needed Merrymount's support for the last four years, but they remain a beloved place to us and we will always be grateful.

Merrymount is an irreplaceable asset to our community here in London. The institutional knowledge, the overarching framework, the staff expertise and the inter-agency connections make Merrymount uniquely placed to address the needs of families who arrive with a multiplicity of concerns and issues. It is my humble but sincere opinion that this amazing organization deserves the full support of our city council.

Sincerely,

Angela Connell
London, Ontario