

Mentors help kids with Type 1 diabetes reach for their dreams

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Sarah Baldwin of Dallas recalls the shock of being 10 and learning she had Type 1 diabetes.

"It was extremely scary," she says. "It was very frightening and very bewildering, and I wasn't sure what to think or what to do."

Baldwin, now 19, and a freshman at Middlebury College in Vermont, has come a long way. She credits a lot of her confidence in handling her disease to her doctor and mentor, Dr. Greg Clark at UT Southwestern Medical Center, who has Type 1 diabetes, too.

"Every time I go in to see him, I learn so much," says Baldwin. "I learn so many tricks on how to handle problems, what to do if my sugar level goes up or down when I exercise."

Type 1 diabetes, usually diagnosed in children and teens, often scares parents as well. Because the pancreas doesn't make any insulin, a patient has to test blood sugar and inject varying amounts of insulin three or four times a day. Mistakes can lead to seizures, coma, complications and death.

Pairing a child with a mentor who can demonstrate that kids with the disease can have a good life, can be crucial for the family, says Dallas therapist Jeanine Connolly.

Connolly, whose doctors diagnosed her Type 1 diabetes when she was 4, says she frequently sees how fear of the illness can lead to emotional difficulties in both her patients and their parents.

"Parents are doing the best they can and they're terrified they're not doing enough," says Connolly. "It's hard, complicated and stressful and sometimes kids will try to escape through eating disorders or drugs or alcohol or by becoming perfect little robots."

Connolly, whose practice (online at www.WinWithDiabetes.com) specializes in helping people with chronic medical conditions, says she works to help families focus on the positive.

"The children have dreams but they lose sight of them because they get discouraged and burned out," she says. "I have diabetes and I know that diabetes can knock you on your butt. But it can also teach you perseverance and determination. If you can deal with diabetes, you can deal with anything."

Dallas Stars player Toby Petersen started playing hockey in his native Minnesota before his diagnosis at 5. He says it helped that not long afterwards, he met Wade Wilson, who made the Pro Bowl as a quarterback for the Minnesota Vikings despite his Type 1 diabetes. Wilson went on to play for several teams, including the Dallas Cowboys, where he is the quarterbacks coach.

"It opened my eyes that a diabetic could be playing in the Pro Bowl," says Petersen. "I did draw inspiration from it."

Amy Biggs of Frisco, whose 7-year-old son, Tristan, was diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes at 4, says she is grateful for her son's friendship with Drew Holder, who was 3 when doctors diagnosed his Type 1 diabetes. Holder, who lives near the Biggs family in Frisco, was drafted by the Houston Astros and played in the minors for years. Tristan loves baseball and enjoys getting together with Holder to toss a ball and make a game out of testing their blood sugar to see whose is closest to the normal range.

"We feel God planned for Tristan and Drew to meet so they can have this special bond and teach others with diabetes to live life to the fullest," Biggs says.

Holder says his mother often read him a verse from Jeremiah, "For I know the plans I have for you, plans to give you hope and a future," and encouraged him to pursue his passions. Now he enjoys encouraging Tristan, he says.

"My parents instilled in me not to let diabetes be a hindrance and I took that to heart. Some parents feel that their kids are handicapped, and it's just not the case."

Clark says mentors are also needed for adolescents and young adults, to give them the confidence to leave the safety net of home and make the transition from pediatric to adult care, as Baldwin has.

"I am so hopeful for Sarah. She is going to a great college and I think she has a great future."

As for Baldwin, she's treasured what Clark has taught her by example — that diabetes does not have to stand in the way of achieving her dreams, just as it didn't stand in the way of Clark becoming a doctor.

"It's important to have that kind of mentor, to see someone have what I have and to see he's doing fine," she says. "Hopefully, someday I'll be that for someone else."

To request a mentor, please contact the JDRF Greater Dallas Chapter:

Online: <http://support.jdrf.org>

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