

Providence institute hailed

Parents fight for autistic center

By MAGEE HICKEY

PROVIDENCE, R.I. (UPI) — Seven-year-old Paul couldn't tie his own shoelaces. His mother was afraid to take the autistic teen-ager out to dinner. That was before Paul was enrolled in the Behavior Research Institute (BRI).

Now, Paul's mother says her son ties his own shoes and "can be taken just about anywhere."

The Staten Island woman is one of a dozen New York parents battling to keep their children in the controversial private school in Providence.

The 37 children at BRI — ranging in age from 10 to 18 — used to undergo a regimen that included pinching, spanking and wearing helmets that block light and pump noise into their ears.

BRI called it "physically aversive" therapy. Others called it corporal punishment — a violation of New York state law. BRI changed its techniques recently in efforts to appease New York officials.

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Paul's mother spent 16 years caring for Paul — not his real name — at home. At a New York City mental health clinic, he was given drugs to calm his hyperactive personality. Teachers at the clinic worked with Paul for years, but couldn't even get him to tie his shoes, she said.

The mother ignored advice to ship him off to a state institution. She said

Paul would have been heavily medicated and kept in restraints for most of the day. Instead, she sent him to Israel's school, which has a drug-free program.

Medical experts say autism is characterized by severe language impairments, lack of eye-to-eye contact and

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repeated physical movements, such as bobbing heads.

Some autistic children are mentally retarded. Others are extremely bright, but can't communicate or control their bodies.

There are no statistics to back up the claims of "incredible progress" made by BRI staffers and parents about students subjected to aversive therapy. But Paul's mother has proof enough.

"My son has made fantastic progress. He now speaks in full sentences," she

says. "Most importantly on the top of the list, is that he hasn't been on drugs for one year."

Some experts, however, say physical punishment never solves any problems.

June Grodin, the director of a rival Rhode Island program called Behavior Developmental Center, claims her students make equal progress using techniques that involve rewards instead of physical deprivation.

"We have had some very good results in a very short time," Mrs. Grodin said.

Her program was created a few years ago when Rhode Island mental health officials yanked state residents out of BRI program.

New York officials want to move the children to the state's new Oswald D. Heck Developmental Center in Niskayuna, N.Y. Israel says it is more expensive than BRI, but New York will receive Medicaid reimbursement for half of the \$52,000-a-year tuition.

The New York parents won a preliminary victory in U.S. District Court in Manhattan last month. They obtained a temporary restraining order barring officials from transferring the children until more arguments are heard.

Israel said last week that New York officials have refused to pay the \$30,000 a year tuition for their students, even though BRI had recently modified its techniques to please them, dispensing with physical measures and setting up a reward store in each classroom.

Israel said he doesn't know yet whether the modified techniques will be as "successful" as the techniques New York officials vehemently objected to.

"The bottom line is that we have produced results," Israel said.