

Inventing new ways to help the disabled

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Give a baby a rattle and he'll probably shake it. It's natural. Touching is how he learns about his world.

Touching isn't so natural for many of the developmentally disabled adults in day programs at the Elizabeth A. Connelly Community Resource Center in Willowbrook.

"Many of our clients will not manipulate things, and manipulation is how you learn about your environment," said Scott Ellner, a consulting speech and language therapist for the Staten Island Developmental Disabilities Services Office (SIDDSO).

Teaching language to someone who doesn't touch is almost impossible, Ellner found.

So, teaching touching became a priority, and Ellner and his colleagues became inventors.

Based on his own ideas and suggestions from other staff, Ellner has devised an array of contraptions to interest his clients — many of whom have the mental capacity of infants — in their environment.

"Give it a squeeze," Ellner instructs a blind client. "Great — good job." The client is holding what looks like a fat, red jump rope handle.

A squeeze of the "pneumatic grasp switch," which Ellner developed with the Maddak Corporation in Pequannock, N.J., will activate just about any battery-operated toy or gadget. Ellner usually has to modify the objects in some way to fit the switch, but he enjoys playing electrician.

Another man squeezes the handle and soap bubbles come flying out of the toy, eliciting a little smile from the client.

Besides stimulating the clients' interest in their environment, "You have to grasp to feed yourself; you grasp to pull your pants on," he said. The handle also works in reverse for tight-fisted clients. When they loosen their grip, the toy is activated.

If the task seems simple, keep in mind that Ellner's clients "don't respond to simple directions — they don't respond to their names. They don't make their needs known in any socially acceptable way."

He partially blames "learned helplessness," a theory that suggests if a person is constantly ignored or punished when asking for help, he learns to be helpless. "So, on top of the brain damage, there is this learned helplessness," Ellner said.

Approximately 70 profoundly retarded clients, all with behavior problems, attend programs in the Connelly Center, located on the grounds of the former Staten Island Developmental Center. SIDC's closing last fall spawned SIDDSO, which has taken over the role of the former Borough Developmental Services Office in referring any Staten Island clients with developmental disabilities.

Many of the Connelly Center clients used to be patients at SIDC's notorious predecessor, the Willowbrook State School for the mentally retarded.

According to the learned helplessness theory, a 34-year-old man curled motionless on a padded mat "used to do more." But as a child in the former Willowbrook institution, where he was one of 75 or 100 clients being watched in a ward by one aide, "he got no response when he cried out because his diaper was dirty. In those days, the only things in the ward to manipulate were the

aide's purse and lunch."

Today, with one staff person responsible for seven clients, individualized programs are carried out daily.

"Presumably it would make a difference" if the client had received sensory stimulation at a younger age, Ellner said. "He would be exploring his environment a little bit more, instead of rejecting it."

Another hurdle the staff faces with many clients is their failure to recognize that they have any control over their environment — that they can cause a reaction.

"Jimmy wants you to be close, but he'll smear spit over you, and you'll walk away. He doesn't understand that he's the cause of you leaving," Ellner said. "So you give him an opportunity to affect his environment — to do something socially acceptable."

Ellner positions Jimmy's wheelchair near a piece of chord dangling from a doorway. Jimmy pulls the loop of a chord that starts a toy bear in motion and sound. Eventually, instead of having a loop to pull on, Jimmy will face the more difficult task of grabbing just the loose chord, Ellner said.

"We work with them on one level above their current function level, he said. "We all need new challenges."

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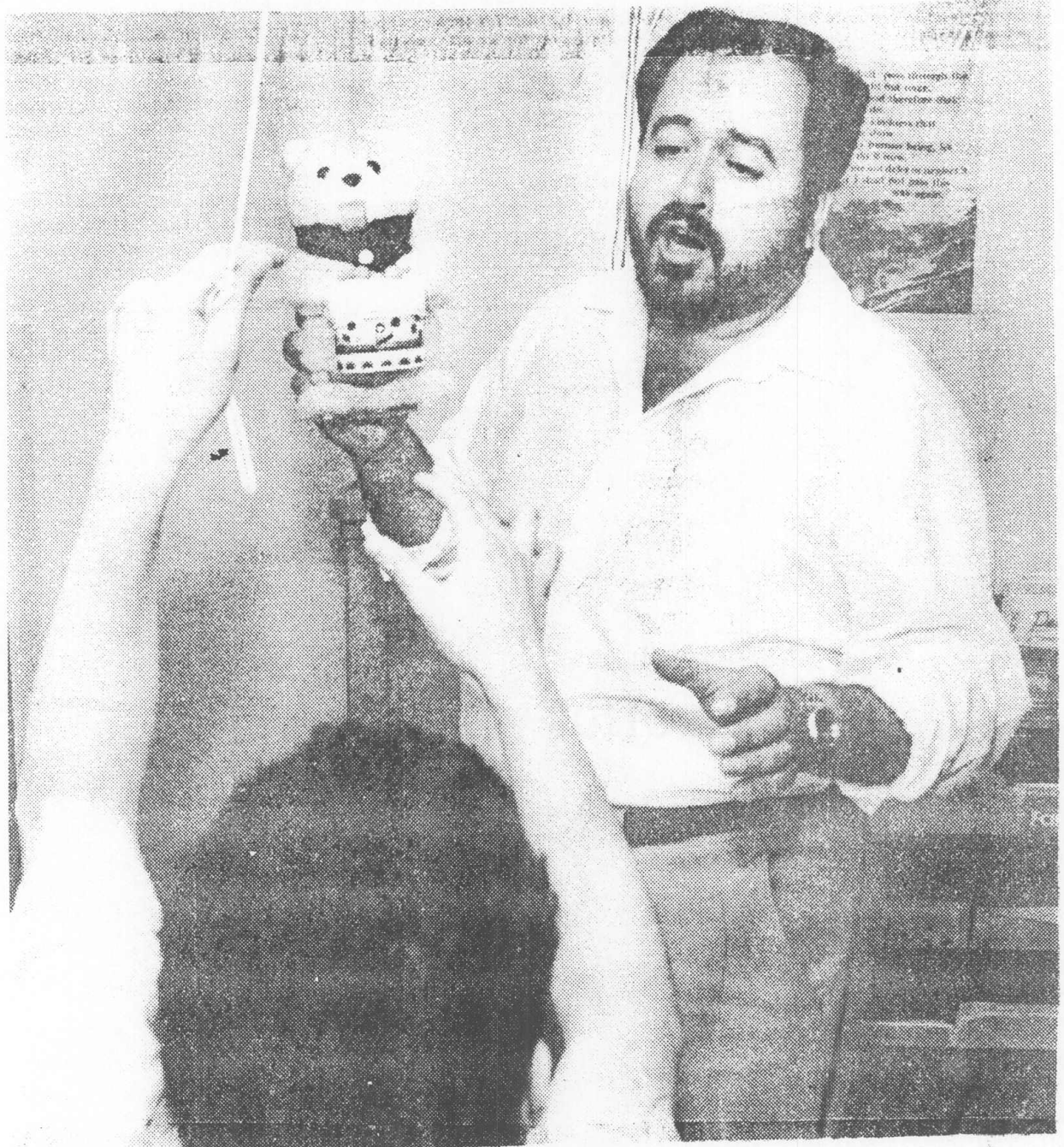
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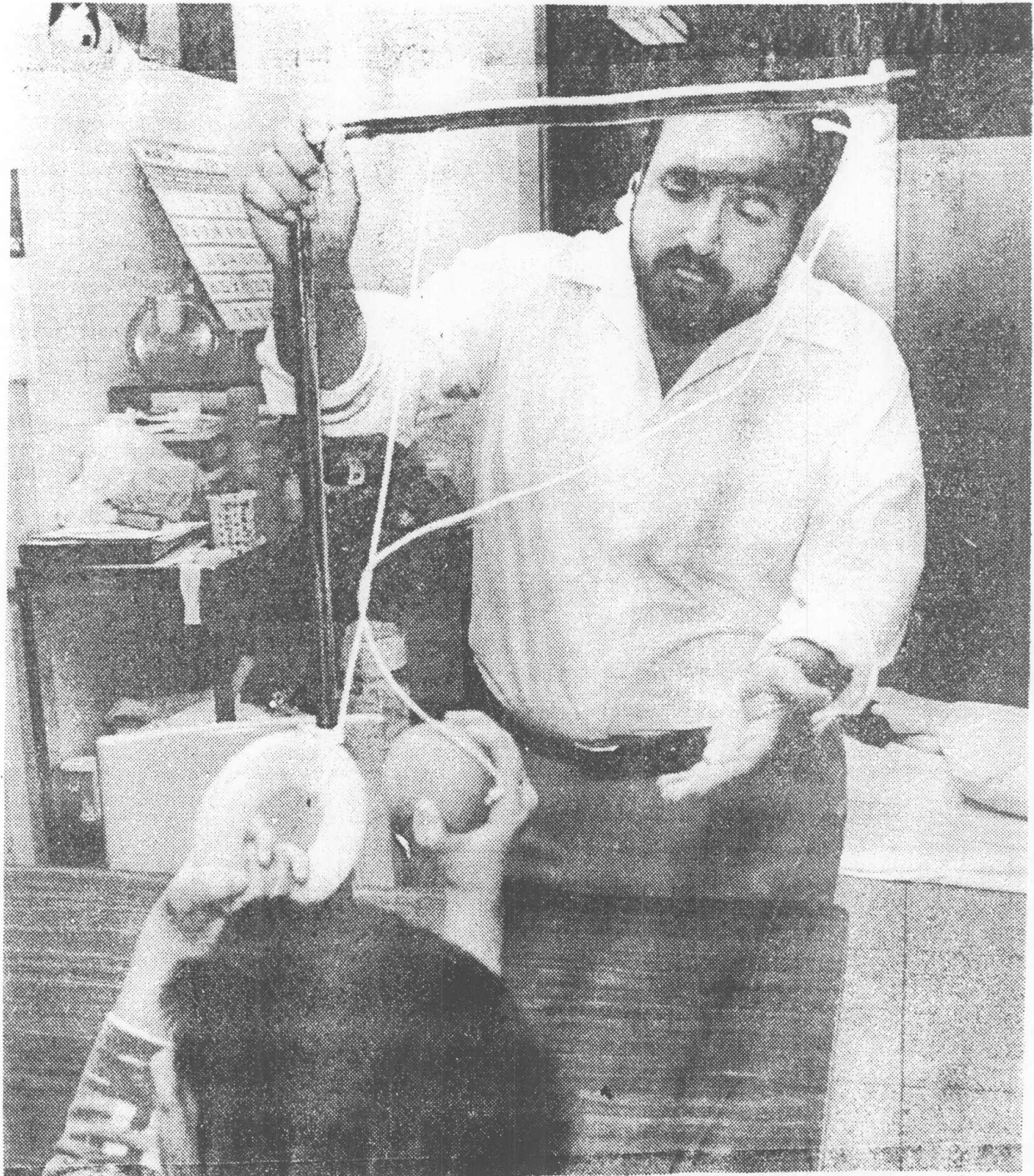
Scott Ellner, a consulting speech and language therapist for the Staten Island Developmental Disabilities Services Office (SIDDSO), makes an adjustment on a "Bubble Blower" toy used for therapy.

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A client pulls a string and works a toy as Ellner supervises.

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Ellner works with a client, who uses a toy that has been adapted for his active stimulation program.

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