# Down's Learning Center busy shattering myths

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It hasn't always been easy, but for 20 years the Down's Syndrome Learning Center in Pleasant Plains has been shattering myths about the abilities of babies with congenital retardation.

Founder Teri Russo pioneered an infant stimulation program that is still going strong despite a string of financial problems over the years. While a drop in donations is forcing the cancellation of classes for school-age children, state aid and contributions keep her unique infant services alive.

The center's hands-on method of helping babies seems to produce near-miraculous results in children with Down's syndrome, caused by a splitting of the 21st chromosome at the time of conception. Besides mental retardation, the syndrome causes high incidences of leukemia, heart disease and respiratory and digestive tract problems.

A registered nurse, Ms. Russo teams with a special education teacher, a part-time speech therapist, two paraprofessionals and parent volunteers to start physical and mental stimulation of the children as early as possible.

"The babies tend to be very good babies, so it's easy to let them lie there and get very flaccid," Ms. Russo said. Inattention, she believes, has led to myths that Down's syndrome children will not walk until age 3, will not talk until age 7 (if at all) and are incapable of learning.

"We're finding that with the stimulation we're getting speech much earlier than even we had thought possible," she said. The center sets goals for normal development, such as rolling over, sitting up and tracking visual objects.

"Usually, they meet the goals and are doing things right on time the same as other babies, or ahead of them because they're getting all this attention," she reported.

In designing her program, she drew from the medical and chiropractic fields to combine physical exercises and massage. "Now I crack up because there's all these videos out for these exercises for the normal child, and we've been