

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

doing them for years," she commented.

The center targets mental growth as well, and involves the families. Parents work routines into bathing and changing times, and pre-school-age siblings sometimes join the children to foster mimicking behavior.

These factors and others, such as a swim program, make the center different.

"There is no program like it in New York City," said Mary Sloan of Huguenot, who enrolled her son at the center when he was 5 weeks old. "There isn't another program that will give them more than one to two hours per week."

Mrs. Sloan asked to remain anonymous, and her name has been changed in this article, because her 2-year-old son has learned so much at the center that she hopes to set a precedent when he's old enough for school.

"At 18 months, he was testing as high as 26 months. And these are mental skills," Mrs. Sloan noted.

"We are not going to list him as a Down's child when we register

him for school," because, she contends, the district automatically places such children in limited classrooms. "After he has a few years of records, we will expose him."

One of 11 infants from Staten Island, Brooklyn and New Jersey now at the center, Darren has been there 40 hours a week since the age of 8 months, so both parents could work full time.

"It's basically a full-fledged nursery environment at a much younger age than most kids would be in a nursery school," she said.

And services are free.

Through a complicated process, the school receives funds for the infants through Family Court petitions. But that money has not always been available, and even now bureaucratic delays can leave the center high and dry.

"Sometimes you're so far behind in getting paid that it's six months to a year, sometimes even longer," Ms. Russo said. Donations are needed to cover the gaps and provide more services than the state money can fund.

Raising funds can be difficult for a small, independent center such as Ms. Russo's. "She is not as publicly well known as some of the other schools that are connected to organizations," noted Mrs. Sloan.

But the center is the only one in New York to deal exclusively with Down's syndrome children, she added. A few places are starting to pay attention to her approach, Ms. Russo claims. A similar center has started in San Francisco and occasionally she gives workshops to obstetricians and others describing her program.

Never one to accept limitations, she looks to the children to define the future scope of the program.

"We keep learning from them, and they keep showing us that they can do more and more."

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