



Aaron Houston/The Journal News

Kathy Beltran plays with her 4-year-old twins, Kiely and Kieran, Wednesday at her Peekskill home. Kieran has a learning disability. Beltran takes the children to a nursery inclusion program in Katonah every morning.

REGION

Inclusion helps kids, families

Classes combine youngsters with, without disabilities

Kate Levin
The Journal News

Every morning during the school year, Peekskill homemaker Kathy Beltran packs her two children into the car for their 30-minute commute to the Country Children's Center in Katonah. While Beltran could easily take her kids somewhere closer to home, the center is among the 17 county facilities to offer inclusion nursery programs.

Because it is designed to integrate children with developmental problems with "normal" children, 4-year-old Kieran Beltran, who has such disabilities, can share a classroom with his twin sister, Kiely, who has been classified as a "regular" child.

"You walk into that classroom and you wouldn't be able to tell the kids apart," said Beltran. "The teachers treat them all equally."

For many parents like Beltran, inclusion classes, especially at the preschool level, provide an opportunity for their disabled children to get the physical, occupational, and speech therapy they may need as well as a chance for their "regular" children to learn acceptance of differences at an early age.

On the Web

To learn more about Westchester Arc, please go to the Web site, www.westchester-arc.org.

Spokeswoman Jane Dove explained that this is among the center's hopes.

"The beauty of this program, aside from its academics, is that kids have so much to learn from each other," said Dove.

"There is a sense of compassion that is taught in the classroom that we hope they carry on through life."

The 17 inclusion programs run in conjunction with the Westchester Arc and its Children's School for Early Development in Hawthorne.

Once children are evaluated by a professional, their families can enroll them in various county preschool inclusion facilities starting at age 3.

While the Westchester Arc's school provides each individual school with special education teachers, the classrooms are also staffed with general education teachers.

Country Children's Center nursery school program Director Niki Guida and Executive Director Polly Peace recently received the "Partnership in Inclusion" award from the Westchester Arc for their participation and work in inclusion programs.

Guida, who explained that her classroom curriculum is dually designed with the Westchester Arc's school, uses a multi-sensory approach to teaching, engaging the students in various creative projects throughout the year.

She said each child, regardless of disability, is involved in the same music, gym, art and literature activities with some modifications for safety.

"Everyone that walks into that classroom is treated equally," said Guida.

The Little People's Learning Center in Lincolndale is another location in Westchester offering preschool inclusion programs.

A general education teacher there, Katie Greczylo, is familiar with the success of the program.

Her son E.J., who has Down syndrome, was a student in the school's preschool program before she began teaching there. Twelve years later, E.J. is 17 years old and playing football for Somers High School.

Greczylo credited the school's program and resident physical therapist Lynn Hall with her son's ability to participate in high school sports.

"Without the program, I'm convinced he wouldn't be playing football today," said Greczylo.