

Building Bridges at the Westchester ARC

By Laura Apel

For many parents of children with disabilities, one of the first great battles that they will face, aside from medical issues and complications, is finding the right services to help their child reach his or her fullest potential. From early intervention to pre-school to higher education and eventually employment, the journey is never easy, and there is no set plan of action that will work for every family. At the Westchester Arc in New York State, parents and professionals are working together to ensure that the information and services every child deserves are provided. They have been doing it since 1949 and by fostering independence, productivity, and participation in community life have established an extremely successful agency that has improved the lives of countless individuals.



What began as a small group of parents seeking companionship for their children with intellectual disabilities is now the oldest and largest agency in Westchester County, serving children and adults who have developmental disabilities and their families. The Westchester Arc has over six hundred employees who provide more than 1,600 individuals throughout the county with a broad range of innovative and effective programs and services. Through a process called person-centered planning, Westchester Arc enables those it serves first to define their dreams, and then, with the help of family, friends, and staff, to work toward realizing them.

Services for life

They are successful in this venture due to the wide range of programs and services that they provide to people with developmental disabilities of all ages. Among these are: early intervention for infants, toddlers, and their families; a preschool program; educational advocacy for children from five to 21 years; youth groups for teens; transition planning for students preparing to leave high school; vocational training and job placement; daily living skills classes for adults; independent and group living in 42 residences; respite care for children and adults; recreational activities including a sleep-away camp; 24-hour crisis management; individual and group psychological counseling; self-advocacy training for adults; bilingual (English-Spanish) outreach to un-served or underserved members of minority groups; social work that fills gaps left by other services; and guardianship for adults whose families are no longer able to care for them.

Early integration

An especially impressive part of the wealth of services offered by the agency is the Children's School for Early Development, which provides educational, social, and support services for children, from birth to five years of age, and their families. These services are provided based on the philosophy that children and their families should be given a choice of resources to maximize their child's potential.

In keeping with their mission of promoting community integration for people with developmental disabilities, the Children's School is the largest provider of community-based services for children with developmental disabilities in Westchester County—in terms of the number of children served and the number of community sites at which they have opened inclusion classes. Their early intervention services are

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These children are taking part in activities at the Country Children's Center in Katonah, NY

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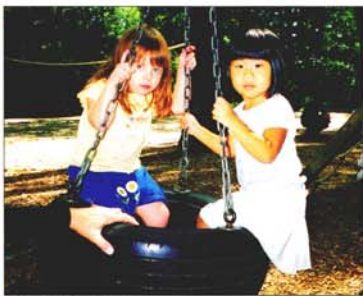
now delivered entirely in community settings, and more than 80 percent of the pre-school children served attend community schools. They also provide traveling teacher services to children attending community programs chosen by their parents, while maintaining two self-contained classes at their center in Hawthorne, NY.

Inclusion for all

Over 500 children have graduated from the preschool since its first inclusion class began in 1994, and The Children's School has been recognized by the New York State Education Department's Board of Regents as a model for inclusionary placements in collaboration with community early childhood educational settings. The staff feels very strongly about the positive benefits that inclusion provides to children with and also without disabilities. They feel that attending community schools enables children with developmental disabilities to observe and model the learning and social behaviors of typically developing preschoolers. For typically developing children, they feel that inclusion teaches important life lessons concerning compassion, tolerance, and the range of individual differences. These children also benefit from the increased professional staffing provided to special classes held at integrated settings—professionals such as psychologists, clinical social workers, and speech, occupational and physical therapists.

The staff continuously involves the parents through every level of their child's experience. They understand that different parents have their own expectations and they meet the parents where they are. As one Children's School staff member explains, "some just want their child to call them Mom."

The Westchester Arc Family Resource Day is an especially good example of professionals working with parents to ensure that all of their questions are answered and they are as informed as possible when dealing with the many issues facing the education of their child. Three hundred family members and social service professionals attended the most recent event and benefited from workshops and a resource fair offering practical answers to hard questions relating to people with developmental disabilities. Included in the day were sessions simulating meetings with grade and high school Committees on Special Education (CSEs), which captured the real-life conflicts that can accompany the creation of special needs education plans. The implications of increased life expectancies for people with developmental disabilities, guardianship legalities, and financial planning were also examined in detail.



Measuring success

Eighty percent of the children graduating from the pre-school classes in the spring of 2005 went on to regular kindergarten settings. Most of these students will be fully included in kindergarten classes in their local public school either without any supports or with minimal support services. This high level of success is no surprise to Anne Majsak, the President of Westchester Arc. "The Children's School is a wonderful example of Westchester Arc's tradition of caring innovation," she explains. "My son David, now 18, benefited from both the school's early intervention services and classroom teaching. The staff taught my husband and me to trust our instincts and to advocate effectively for David. The teachers and therapists help parents see their kids' potential, often transforming anxiety into hope and joy."

The goal at The Children's School is to prepare the students and family for any challenges that they may face. Families are supported and advised by the staff as their children approach graduation from the pre-school so that they leave with the confidence needed to succeed in community settings.

Supporting the services

Because parents are never charged for any of the services provided by the Westchester Arc and government funding doesn't cover the state-of-the-art programs offered, they rely greatly on voluntary support and fundraising. The Westchester Arc Foundation was established to raise monies in support of the agency's unfunded or under-funded programs, and the foundation concentrates on major and planned gifts at the same time that it sponsors special events.

Strong supporters of the programs offered have no doubt in the value of a financial investment that ensures every child receives the best services available. As Bernard A. Krooks, a Board Member at Westchester Arc, and a founding partner of Littman Krooks LLP, which specializes in special needs planning, explains, "A deep respect for individuality is apparent in all Westchester Arc services—our arts and recreation programs, high school, career counseling, community-based residences—programs that nourish personal development throughout life." •

For more information on the Westchester Arc please visit <http://www.westchesterarc.org>