

At the Children's School at Westchester Arc Early Intervention and Pre-School Can Change Lives

Staff Writer
Mental Health News

Westchester Arc Executive Director, Ric Swierat explains, "Our Children's School for Early Development is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year, and we have made an important difference in the lives of thousands of youngsters, many of whom have had autism." The school has been teaching children with autism for two decades, and in 2004 was recognized by the Westchester Foundation for Autism and Related Delays (WFA) for its innovative and caring approach.

The pre-school itself serves children from the ages of three to five in both center-based and community settings, but its early intervention services, available from birth to the age of three, are seen as critical to realizing a child's potential.

"Research has shown that the brain is a sponge from birth to five," explains service coordinator Isabel Leach. "If there are any delays, that's the best time to address them."

Depending upon an individual child's profile, speech, occupational and/or physical therapy may be involved. Occupational therapy involves fine motor skills such as picking up a pencil or reactions to stimuli from the environment. For instance, a child with autism might refuse to walk on grass or wear socks. Physical therapy, on the other hand, involves gross motor skills such as walking, balancing or sitting up.



Ric Swierat

At three, attention shifts to learning skills, although all other supports may continue, depending on a child's needs.

"Autism requires very intensive educational techniques that differ from those used to teach children with other developmental disabilities," explains Developmental Psychology Consultant Ann-Marie Sabrusa. "For some time, we have been using ABA/VB (Applied Behavior Analysis/Verbal Behavior), which focuses on observable speech and language behaviors." The pre-school's staff is trained by Dr Vincent Carbone, interna-

tionally recognized for his research on teaching children with autism how to communicate.

The school's center-based classes in Hawthorne are very structured and intensive, with each child's curriculum combining one-to-one instruction with "natural environment" learning. The majority of the pre-school's students, however, learn alongside typically developing youngsters in community settings. Almost half of the children who begin in "contained" settings move to community classes at some point during their pre-school years.

"Our center-based classes concentrate more on language, while the inclusion classes focus more on social skills," explains Helga Coiro, who teaches one of the Hawthorne groups. "The children who come to us don't have many words. They may point or cry when they want something. They may not know how to put a doll into a bed or a spoon into a cup." The young students first learn signs and gestures, then build upon those skills, eventually acquiring words.

Catherine M. began attending classes in Hawthorne during fall 2004. She had no language or play skills. "She would just put up her dolls," explains her mother, Theresa. "She had a lot of difficulty with transitions—you couldn't change things."

Now she can share a dollhouse with classmates. She knows her colors and can even spell her name. "She must still be prompted to use words," says Theresa, "but when I ask her what my name is, she says, 'Mommy.'"

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"I'll be his big brother," announced a little friend.

The parents of typical children are similarly content. They welcome the additional state-certified instructors that The Children's School supplies, and they value the lessons that the kids learn about diversity.

Max Damon, nearly 15, used The Children's School's services between the ages of two and five. At that time, he lacked social skills and was not expressive. He couldn't point and had to be taught how to pick up Cheerios. He was extremely sensitive to light, sound and textures.

Each day, his parents and school staff shared information about his progress in a notebook that passed back and forth. He slowly began picking up words, and once he started speaking, he never stopped. Since leaving the pre-school, he has at-

Tentionally recognized for his research on teaching children with autism how to communicate.

The Children's School's inclusion classes are held in conjunction with 12 pre-schools throughout Westchester County. There children with autism learn alongside and from their typically developing peers. Westchester Arc's pre-school was the first in the county to offer specialized, day-long inclusion classes to children with autism.

"The kids love it, and they would never do so well in contained settings," says Dana Delobery a teacher at Mascia Day Care in Tarrytown. "A child will go home and announce, 'I have a best friend!'"

Often, the children in inclusion settings have begun in self-contained classes, then transitioned to mixed playgroups and, finally, to community-based classes. In order to attend inclusion classes, they must already know how to learn in a larger group of peers, follow directions and accept the greater noise and activity level of a typical day care setting.

Inclusion classes concentrate on social skills—sharing, taking turns, learning that they won't always win—but occupational, physical and speech therapy continue. Like all pre-schoolers, the children learn their alphabets, numbers and how to classify things—"Name a vegetable." Everyone has "dolls." They might hand out napkins, be line leader or weather helper. It's a naturally reinforcing environment.

The typical children are very accepting. Delobery describes a situation in which a three-year-old boy had trouble hanging his coat in his cubby.

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tended regular classes in his neighborhood school. This year he began attending Fordham Prep, where he's a strong student.

"He was on the bowling team this year, and they won a division championship," says his mom. "Now he's helping to manage the baseball team. His goal is to go to Notre Dame and to become a sportscaster."

How do you define success for a child with autism? Teacher Helga Coiro talks about a parent who put his child on the bus daily with "I love you" as a send off. One day, she turned back to him and answered, "I love you." □

Westchester Arc is the largest agency in the county serving children and adults of all ages who have developmental disabilities.

Mental Health News wishes to thank Cathy Baban, Director of Marketing & Public Affairs at Westchester Arc, for her assistance in preparing this article.