

# School tackles neurological disorders by engaging its students one-on-one

By LEAH R. FIELDING  
For The Herald

BYRAM — Parents of children diagnosed with neurological disorders such as autism and Asperger's syndrome often are offered very little hope that their children will ever be able to function normally in society, but believers in a new line of clinical concepts hope to prove such thinking wrong.

Celebrate the Children, a private school that opened its doors here two years ago, is among them.

"It's a working process, finding out what works with what individual kid," said Mallori Osgood, the school's director's assistant, "getting inside their world and getting them comfortable."

The school, which opened with three students and now enrolls 42, offers a program that stresses one-on-one social interaction as a way to advance development by focusing on the stages of each child's ability to relate, communicate and think.

It has worked well for at least one student. "I can control my temper better," said 13-year-old Joshua Kitts. "It's a lot more fun and I can tell the teachers really care."

Joshua's mother, Natalie, said Joshua got frustrated while attending public school and expressed his emotions in class. Although he didn't experience feelings any different than a typical student when being reprimanded, he couldn't keep it to himself when he was upset, his mother said.

"Josh was a mess when he first came here," Natalie Kitts said, "but now he's a

different kid."

In fact he received Most Improved Student last year.

Kitts' advice to other parents with special needs children is to become an expert on your child's disorder, so you can meet their needs, rather than leaving it to people who don't know them.

The approach used at Celebrate the Children is called Developmental, Individual, Relationship-Based, or DIR.

The idea behind the DIR model is to help children use relationships to regulate their responses to the stimuli that sometimes overwhelm their senses. Celebrate the Children uses the systematic DIR approach advocated by Floortime, a Baltimore-based nonprofit organization.

"We give them the tools to have successful lives," director and founder Monica Osgood said.

One-on-one work featuring parents, teachers and therapists is crucial to the approach. It can be just 20 to 30 minutes of just playing on the floor with the child, which encourages typical child interactions. The goal is to get the child away from self-stimulating activities.

"We work very hard on the social aspect," said Monica Osgood, director of Celebrate the Child in Byram. Osgood received her training from Dr. Stanley Greenspan, one of DIR's two developers.

Children with neurological disorders often have difficulty understanding social cues, such as recognizing when someone is happy or sad, and can miss how speaking



Hunter Zuidema, 10, bounces on a ball with the help of Matt Pavlisko, a teacher's aide at Celebrate the Children.

loudly or getting too close to another person offends others, according to Floortime. Such children have difficulty processing sensory information: What they hear, feel, see, smell and taste. Since information is processed through the senses, a misperception of information often leads to a sen-

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Simon Alexander, 14, receives help from Karen McDowell, a teacher at Celebrate the Children.



Nick Furth, 7, participates in art class.



Hannagh Smith, 10, works with Michele Leach, a teacher's aide, on math problems.

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sory overload, which can lead to anxiety, the Web site says.

Expecting a special needs child to behave in an obliging manner is a common mistake, Floortime says.

Celebrate the Children encourages students and their faculty to be silly, thus creating the necessary bond that will aid the child in feeling comfortable interacting.

The individual attention and respect goes very far at Celebrate the Children. The children with sensory needs tend to react well when they are allowed, for example, to decorate their desks and walk around with no shoes on, Monica Osgood said.

Celebrate the Children, which will hold its second annual benefit dinner Saturday night at the Lake Mohawk Country Club in Sparta, is becoming more popular as people hear about its cutting-edge program, she said. "We're growing drastically, but we're being careful about it because we want to maintain our quality."

Photos by Ellie Ashby/NJH