

Halton Development Centre

Severely retarded, handicapped train

Impossible is a word seldom used at Halton Development Centre.

"If a program doesn't work for a child, it's not frustrating," said Lawrence Smuckler, the director of the centre. "It's a challenge to find a program that will work for the child."

HDC is a centre for severely retarded and multiple-handicapped children between the ages of five and 18, in quarters at the Drury School in Milton.

The HDC serves Halton Region and is funded by the Provincial Ministry of Community and Social Services. It is operated jointly by the North Halton, Oakville, and Burlington and District Associations for the Mentally Retarded.

Different R's
It's a place where students who don't fit in with the regular training programs for the mentally retarded learn self-help skills, speech development, conceptual development, gross motor development and toilet training.

"When most people talk about the Three R's they mean reading, 'riting and 'rithmetic," Mr. Smuckler said, "but here we mean toilet training, dressing and gross motor development."

Gross motor development is the professional term for developing muscular strength. At HDC this involves teaching students how to stand up, sit down and walk.

When the centre opened in April this year, Mike, a little blond youngster, couldn't walk a step. Today he can walk on his own. It's a slow, awkward looking walk which would probably cause a few stares on Main St., but it's a walk.

Can't talk, walk
Some of the other students haven't yet learned to walk and some may never learn. Most of the students can't even talk.

Dianne Young, a language teacher at the centre, said only about three of the 21 students can talk. Others make sounds which are sometimes similar to words.

"Some don't need to talk," she said. "They can communicate with body language and get along without having to talk."

One of the hardest tasks is teaching the students to use the toilet. Mr. Smuckler said their aim is to get the students to the point where they can pull their pants up and down and go on their own steam, but he says they're happy when a student just realizes the purpose of a toilet.

"Some of the kids have no concept of what a toilet is used for," he said.

Learns more
For some students, the centre uses an intensive training toilet program. For two weeks one teacher takes a student, spending extra time teaching him what the toilet is used for.

"A language teacher just went through the program with one of our students," Mr. Smuckler said. "While this happened the other children's language exercises suffered. But after two weeks, not only could the student go to the toilet but his language development had improved too."

"Some people think the teaching is simpler if the child's level of intelligence is simpler," said Mr. Smuckler, "but actually the level of sophistication in teaching has to go up, the more severe the mental retardation."

21 steps
As an example, he said with normal children you can point at a red object and say, "That's red," and the child will understand. At the centre they'll use a painstaking 21 step program just to teach the child the concept of red.

Hardly any program or exercise can be taken just at its face value.

In one room a boy about 10 years is hopping in and out of hula-hoops on the floor, while his instructor and volunteer helper watch him. To an observer, it would appear this is just a simple co-ordination exercise. Actually the teacher is working on three different areas with the child.

The exercise works not only on muscular co-ordination, but with teaching him the

concept of "in" and "out" as well as getting him to do something when you want him to.

Give rewards
Getting the students motivated to do something is the hardest part of teaching them, according to Mr. Smuckler.

"Playing with blocks might be fun for the child," he said, "but the child doesn't know it, so he won't try it."

Mr. Smuckler said the way to get around this is to reward them with something like candy.

"Eventually, the candy is faded out when the activity becomes more interesting than the reward," he said.

The strength of the instruction at HDC rests on its volunteers.

"The teacher gives the instruction and it is the duty of the volunteer to carry out those instructions to the best of the child's ability," Mr. Smuckler said.

For every three children attending the centre the staff is allowed one instructor, but with the addition of volunteer staff members the ratio of children to staff is one to one.

One over
Currently the centre has eight teachers

and 21 students. It can handle up to 30 students.

"The government knows we're one teacher over our limit, but I don't think they'll take the teacher away from us," Mr. Smuckler laughed.

Along with the instructors, HDC has around 80 volunteers of which he said 90 per cent come once every two weeks.

"We always need new volunteers," he said.

Although he would prefer volunteers to come more than once every other week, Mr. Smuckler admits it does have advantages.

"The child can learn to generalize his behavior with different people," he said. "With different people working with him, there is less dependence on one person. Since our teachers are specialists, the child interacts with several different teachers."

Tantrums
There are several disadvantages to the changing faces of volunteers.

"Say a child has a behavior problem like temper tantrums which we want to eliminate," Mr. Smuckler said. "The way these are maintained is by responding to them

and giving the child attention when he throws a tantrum."

"We'll all sit down and decide to ignore him when he throws a tantrum. But when a new volunteer comes in and responds to the tantrum, it's enough to sabotage the program," Mr. Smuckler said.

"You could compare it to a payoff with a slot-machine," he said. "It only pays off about once every 50 times, but that's enough to keep people doing it. Bad behavior doesn't pay off every time, but it only takes a few responses to keep it going."

Wants co-ordinator
Co-ordinating the volunteers' timetables is a problem the centre tries to cope with.

"We haven't got a full-time volunteer co-ordinator, which would be ideal," he said. "What we could use is someone to do the out-house co-ordinating. They wouldn't even have to come to the centre. All they'd have to do is be by a phone and co-ordinate transportation for the volunteers and make sure we have enough each day. It really throws us if someone cancels their day, because it usually means an individual's program can't get done."

A large number of the volunteers come from the high schools, particularly from Acton, Burlington and Oakville. The centre does encourage parents of students to volunteer their time, but Mr. Smuckler says they don't pressure them.

"I feel they have enough to cope with at home."

If a parent does volunteer, they don't work with their own child.

Train parents
"Sometimes it's the parent's own habits which we need to break," he said, "and it's easier to train a parent when they're not involved with their own child."

Mr. Smuckler also thought having the parent around limits the child's interaction with others.

"Children behave differently when their parents are around," he said. "And more often than not it's worse."

The HDC breaks the students into senior and junior groups. These in turn are broken down into different groups depending on the child's level of intelligence.

Suitable levels
Mr. Smuckler said the teachers treat the students in a way which corresponds with their age level, even though their mental age may be lower.

"I feel if you treat them at a lower level, they'll accept lower levels of responsibilities," he said. "We try to find training materials for suitable age levels, but it's difficult to find ones that aren't infantile."

Each child has an individual timetable which includes six training period of 20 minutes each.

"We found if the periods are much longer the students can't maintain their concentration and if it's shorter the children are just getting into the exercises when the class is over," he explained.

In between each period is a play time, snack time, rest time, or lunch which stretches school time out from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m.

Excuse to wash
Every time period, even snack time, has its overall purpose for the development of the student.

"Snack time gives us an excuse for the child to wash up," he said. "This way they can relate eating to brushing their teeth and washing their hands."

In the same respect he points to a small wading pool which is used by several of the smaller children. The older students use the swimming pool at E. C. Drury.

The pool is used as a reward or during play periods or to get the students interacting with one another.

"If a child is withdrawn from the other children, the pool usually helps to break the ice," Mr. Smuckler said.

It's also an excuse to get the kids undressed.

"If you have them undressing for no reason, they tend to undress for you when you don't want them to," laughed Mr. Smuckler.

Daily evaluation charts are kept of each child to show his progress in each program. Mr. Smuckler said the programs are arranged in a "cookbook" style so they can be supervised by anyone without special background or experience.

"It's what we call errorless training. It's hard for the student to fail, so he experiences lots of successes," he said.

Each new student is given a four week assessment period during which the staff determines at what level he can function in different areas. Then they sit down with the parent and organize a six month objective in each category.

The ultimate goal of the centre is to make each child as independent and self-sufficient as possible.



LARRY SMUCKLER, director of the Halton Development Centre helps one of the children with his painting exercise in the craft room.

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If you have little children, don't miss the Free Press Christmas coloring contest.

Downtown contest

Big posters and a \$100 prize for guessing the time of completion of paving are encouraging people to shop downtown.

Accident

A car belonging to L and L Ford was struck in the garage parking lot Thursday. The other vehicle left the scene, after causing estimated \$200 damage.

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A sense of nationalism prompted Halton Region's Public Works Committee to choose a Canadian-made motor over an American one, even though it will cost an extra \$2,300.

The committee made that decision at its meeting Wednesday when it accepted a low tender of Flometric Limited for the provision of a \$42,300 low-lift-pump for the Burlington Water Purification Plant expansion.

That firm was low tenderer, regardless of the choice of motors—and consultants left that choice to the committee. Committee action needs council ratification.

Buy Canadian
Oakville Councillor Gord Brown told the committee it was time for Canadians to buy Canadian. He claimed governments at different

levels in Canada would have to face the prospect of paying more for what they buy or paying out more money in unemployment or general welfare.

Committee Chairman Jack Tafis didn't disagree with Brown's line of thinking, but conceded that he usually took the low price regardless of where it was made.

The committee agreed to support the extra \$2,300.

Two-car accident

Cars driven by Mark Heerema, Georgetown, and Raymond Jackson, Brampton, were involved in a two-car accident on Bower Ave. on Nov. 27. The Heerema car had about \$150 damage and the Jackson car estimated \$200 damage, according to police.

WHY NOT LISTEN?



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