

Non-profit's new program brings together children, seniors in therapy - Waco (TX) Tribune

By Cindy V. Culp
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A computer program being used at a local nonprofit agency has the potential to rewire the brains of everyone from young children with learning disabilities to senior adults with age- or illness-related deficits, therapists say.

Children who have used the program so far have seen phenomenal results, said Jennifer Darwin, who runs the educational therapy program at Friends for Life. Some have jumped several grade levels in their reading skills after using the program. Others have been able to lessen or eliminate medication they have taken for learning disabilities, she said.

Therapists are expecting similar results for seniors who attend Friends for Life's adult day care program, Darwin said. The therapy that the program uses has been shown to help people with conditions ranging from attention deficit disorder to Parkinson's disease, she said.

Called Interactive Metronome, the program is based on the device musicians use to help them with tempo. It was originally developed to help children with learning disabilities, but in recent years, it has also become a popular rehabilitation tool for senior adults.

During a session, the user hears a series of tones that sound at a steady pace. The goal is for the user to predict when the next tone is going to sound and use his hands or feet to do exercises that coincide with the tones. For example, Darwin has users press a buzzer worn around the wrist.

That combination of physical and mental exercise helps the brain create more neural pathways, Darwin said. Essentially, it re-wires itself, allowing users to function more normally.

Darwin said she knows that may sound like hocus pocus. But research proves the program works, she said, adding that educational therapists have known for years that combining mental tasks with physical ones helps the brain to learn in new ways.

Such therapies can improve everything from mobility to skills involving planning and language, Darwin said. As a result, the program has proven effective for people with an array of conditions, including autism, cerebral palsy, attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder, traumatic brain injury, Parkinson's disease and multiple sclerosis.

On average, people use the program for nine months to a year, attending hour-long therapy sessions two to three times per week, Darwin said. Some children who have used the program at Friends for Life have seen dramatic results in even less time, she said.

One third-grader, for example, came in reading and comprehending at lower than a first-grade level. After nine months using the program, she was at a fifth-grade reading level and a fourth-grade comprehension level. And that was without any traditional reading therapy, Darwin said.

Friends for Life is the only Waco area organization offering the program to the public, according to company officials. Baylor University also has the program, but is using it in a research project for which only specific children are eligible.

Friends for Life received the program earlier this year from a local family, Darwin said. They bought it for their child and found it so helpful they wanted others to benefit from it, she said. Since it costs thousands of dollars, most families can't afford it on their own, she said.

Friends for Life charges for its educational therapy services, but the fee is based on a family's income, Darwin said. Also, health insurance will often cover the sessions, she said.

Friends for Life officials are especially excited about the program's intergenerational applications, Darwin said. Although the agency was started to reach out to senior adults, the founder's dream was always to offer children's services, too, so young and old could learn together.

Last summer, that vision became a reality as Friends for Life opened an intergenerational center. The plan was for participants in the agency's adult day care program to interact with children who would attend a private pre-school and kindergarten program.

The pre-school and kindergarten idea was short-lived, but the agency has been able to keep the intergenerational concept intact in other ways. For example, some children from the community come to the center to perform. Others are pen pals with the adults in the day care program.

Learning together

But one of the most promising avenues for interaction between youths and seniors is educational therapy, Darwin said.

The computer program is just one example of the type of activities Friends for Life officials plan for the children and adults to tackle together, she said.

Darwin also is developing other joint projects, such as having a child and an adult work

together to make family photo albums. That will help with skills such as sequencing and also help them form a bond, she said.

Intergenerational learning can trump age-segregated therapy, Darwin said, because of the encouragement both groups offer each other. Children with learning disabilities often feel discouraged because they think everyone else in the world can do the things they can't. When they see an adult having the same type of problems, it gives them hope that they can overcome them, she said.

The principle applies to seniors who have deficits caused by aging or illness, Darwin said. Many are frustrated they can no longer do things they once considered elementary. When they see a child struggling to learn, it makes them less self-conscious.

"It's just a great combination any way you look at it," Darwin said.

Other joint-learning projects Friends for Life plans to implement soon include a music lab, computer lab and greenhouse where children and adults can work side-by-side, said executive director Inez Russell.

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