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Staying on time

Metronome therapy helps develop motor skills

By Kevin Cullen, Journal and Courier

Tick, tock ... tick, tock ... tick, tock ...

Most people have a natural metronome in their brain. Like a pendulum whose arc never varies, it provides the timing needed to walk smoothly, clap hands, climb stairs, connect thoughts and read.

David Foster's subconscious drumbeat is "off." The 9-year-old from West Lafayette has learning disabilities, attention deficit disorder and poor coordination.

"It's like he had a brain for each limb," says his mother, Mary Beth. "He can't jump rope, or play most sports; he would have no idea what the point was."

She calls her son "exceptionally bright" but "exceptionally delayed" developmentally.

So for one hour, three times a week, David receives Interactive Metronome Therapy at Greater Lafayette Health Services' occupational and physical therapy center, near St. Elizabeth Medical Center. It's the only place in the region that offers it.

"It's very exciting. It is re-establishing something that is innate to the rest of us," says Karrie Canary, David's occupational therapist, who specializes in pediatric cases.

During the session, David wears a special headset that emits signals. Prompted and monitored by Canary, he tries to clap his hands and move his feet to match the steady rhythm he hears. Sensors wired to a computer record his activity.

The headset emits a pleasant sound when his timing is correct. A high-pitched signal is heard when he responds too early. A low-pitched sound is heard when he reacts too late.

As David's timing develops, his responses will become faster, more synchronized, and automatic. Eventually, he will do between 1,000 and 2,000 repetitions per session.

The same interactive, computer-based technology is used to improve the performance of pro athletes, musicians, dancers and students with no developmental problems.

After just three sessions, David has started to internalize the natural timing that most people never think about.

"Since I've been doing the exercises, I've been rocketing along!" David says, gleefully. "It seems like I'm doing it in my sleep. When I go to the Y, I'm Superman! I'm great!"

"I think it makes a big difference. After only three sessions, he is doing better at tasks," Mrs. Foster says. "I want a therapeutic approach to address the problems. I have hope."

Six patients, most of them school age, are involved in Interactive Metronome Therapy sessions. The sessions typically continue for five or six weeks. Three occupational therapists are certified to provide them and monitor the computer that records the patient's progress.

"Each person we've worked with has scores mostly in the acceptable range," Canary says.

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Interactive Metronome, of Weston, Fla., developed the technology. It is used in more than 1,700 clinics in North America. David is the 13th patient to use it since GLHS brought it to Lafayette in 2004.

It also can help people who have had strokes, brain injuries, Parkinson's disease, amputations, multiple sclerosis and balance disorders.

Research has shown that by building mental sequencing ability, patients can walk and move better. They also have more focus and stamina, and can filter out internal and external distractions. That helps them speak more connectedly and process information better.

"I see it helping with the ability to sustain effort," Mrs. Foster says. "He couldn't keep doing something (before). His sense that there are patterns is being strengthened."

Tammy Frost, of Lafayette, is the mother of an 8-year-old named Billy. He was born prematurely, suffered a stroke at birth and received a kidney transplant from his father. He has developmental problems.

Billy, a first-grader at Vinton School, went through Interactive Metronome Therapy in 2004. Because he was ill for three months last fall, he needs some "booster" sessions, his mother says.

Before the therapy, "he was so out-of-sync that he couldn't get anything together," Tammy Frost says.

Last summer, for the first time, he was able to clap his hands to a beat. He can run without stumbling, and his attention span has lengthened. He can tap his fingers to time and play clapping games.

"We're all really happy with it," Mrs. Frost says. "He could keep up with his brother outside, and had a lot more energy and a lot more attention, with fewer distractions."

FYI

For more information about Interactive Metronome Therapy, call the manufacturer toll-free at (877) 994-6776 or visit its Web site at www.interactivemetronome.com. More information about the therapy that is offered by Greater Lafayette Health Services can be obtained by calling 423-6885.



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