

SOUNDLIFE

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Pierce County agencies aid kids with disabilities

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Dylan Sessions points to a shelf of toys beyond his reach. He knows which one he wants. Speech therapist Julie Cross knows what Dylan wants, too. But rather than give him the toy immediately, she coaxes Dylan into using words to ask for it.

It's part of her strategy for helping the 2-year-old, who suffers from a speech delay, learn to communicate.

Dylan asks first for a box of blocks, then for some bubbles, which he blows with gusto around the room.

His dad, Army Sgt. Cliff Sessions, sits in on the therapy session so he can learn how to help improve his son's speech.

Parent participation is part of the philosophy at the Children's Therapy Center, a Kent-based service which opened a new facility in Tacoma in July.

"We require parents to participate," says Jennifer O'Neal, communications manager for the center. "We want to show parents how they can take the activities from the center and put them into practice at home or at grandma's house."

Sessions says the therapy has produced "dramatic changes" in his son, who talks more at home since he started therapy in the summer.

The Kent-based center chose to expand services in Pierce County following the closure of a large therapy clinic last year. When Puget Sound Therapy Services pulled out of Tacoma in March 2007, some 300 disabled children were left without services, creating long waiting lists at remaining clinics.

The new center where Dylan gets his speech therapy once a week is part of a partnership with another children's service, A Step Ahead in Pierce County. A Step Ahead, a seven-year-old nonprofit organization, employs preschool teachers and child development



JANET JENSEN/THE NEWS TRIBUNE

Speech therapist Julie Cross works with Dylan Sessions, 2, as Dylan's dad, Army Sgt. Cliff Sessions, sits in to learn how to help his son speech development.

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As Jennifer Engler works with her son, Riley, Lam Mai engages with his son, Bill, at the Pierce County nonprofit A Step Ahead.

experts who teach children with disabilities in a classroom and through one-on-one home visits. Using play, they help children with physical and mental challenges improve their social interaction, feeding skills, muscle movement and sensory development. A Step Ahead, funded by state and federal dollars, offers services free to children from birth to age 3.

Children's Therapy Center is a nonprofit organization that bills insurance plans, both public and private, for its services. It offers scholarships and a sliding fee scale, based on income, to families.

The two agencies teamed up to remodel an old motel on South Hosmer Street, transforming the building into a bright, welcoming space for kids and parents. One side of the single-story building features the therapy rooms used by Children's Therapy Center. The other side includes a preschool classroom used by A Step Ahead. In between is a kitchen and

conference room shared by both agencies. In the back is a playground.

Many children, like Dylan, receive both therapy and educational services. In Dylan's case, he gets speech therapy once a week from Children's Therapy Center, as well as visits from A Step Ahead teachers who come to his day-care center.

"Our teachers can visit a therapy session, or therapists can provide support for a child who needs it in our classroom," says Candy Watkins, A Step Ahead director.

A Step Ahead serves about 200 children a month. Children's Therapy Center served 71 children in August and hopes to double that number by this time next year, says O'Neal.

When Puget Sound Therapy Services, a for-profit organization, closed its Pierce County clinic in 2007, officials said low reimbursements from state and private medical insurance left the company unable to survive as a business.

"They couldn't make a profit because reimbursement rates were so low," says O'Neal. But as a nonprofit, Children's Therapy can use fundraising to close the gap between what insurance pays and what it costs to provide therapy.

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At the hop

WHAT: Dinner and sock hop, featuring Daryl & the Diptones

WHEN: 6 p.m. Nov. 8

WHERE: Emerald Downs, Auburn

WHY: to benefit Children's Therapy Center of Pierce County

DETAILS: The event is free, but guests will be asked to make a donation to the center.

MORE INFO: 253-854-5660 or www.dynamicfamilies.org