

Early Intervention for the Mentally Disabled Child

Babette Katz

A 1988 estimate of the number of disabled people in South Africa (excluding the TBVC states) suggests that there are 125 000 people with an IQ of 50 or less and 1 185 000 with an IQ of 70 or less. Looked at in relation to the services available for the mentally disabled, these figures are overwhelming.

In 1988 a study, by Cartwright and others, of the provision of services for the mentally disabled children on the Witwatersrand shows the paucity of services for preschool mentally disabled children, especially among African children. According to this study, the proportion of needs met were as follows: African - 7,6%; coloured - 9,3%; Indian - 26%; white - 69,7%. Economic recession and the shortage of professionals, compound the problem. In rural areas and among more destitute urban families, only few benefit from the services provided.

Available services cater for three broad categories, special care centres for profoundly and severely handicapped people, training centres for children with moderate handicap and work and occupational centres for handicapped adults. Although there are other services offered at a local level, including toy libraries and home training programmes, these are dependent on local resources and are not readily available to those who require them.

The START Initiative

With the aim of facilitating greater service provision, home and community based programmes have been developed by Strive Towards Results Together (START). These programmes, currently in Eldorado Park and Kwathema, actively involve parents and the community.

START is an early intervention programme run by Sunshine Centre Association in collaboration with the Transvaal Memorial Institute for Child Health and Development (TMI). START, in association with Toy Library, is part of a community outreach service of Sunshine Centre Association. At Kwathema, START is based at Phelang School for Mentally Disabled. In addition, parents in the area have set up their own day care centre where they use START for stimulation activities. START is also training community based

family support workers.

START and Toy Library collaborate at the Harvey Cohen Centre in Eldorado Park. With the assistance of a START worker, families find an activity relevant to their child and borrow toys to continue their activities at home.

Training courses are also run regularly at TML. Course participants return to their places of employment and assist their workers in the use of the START kit which comprises books and manuals.

The Advantage of Early Intervention

Early intervention which aims to enhance the development of infants and young disabled children has been seen to be of benefit to both the parents and their child. Parents benefit from reduced feelings of helplessness, frustration, depression and guilt about the child, an improved sense of support and acceptance of the child, improved self-worth and confidence as a parent, and an improvement in child rearing practices.

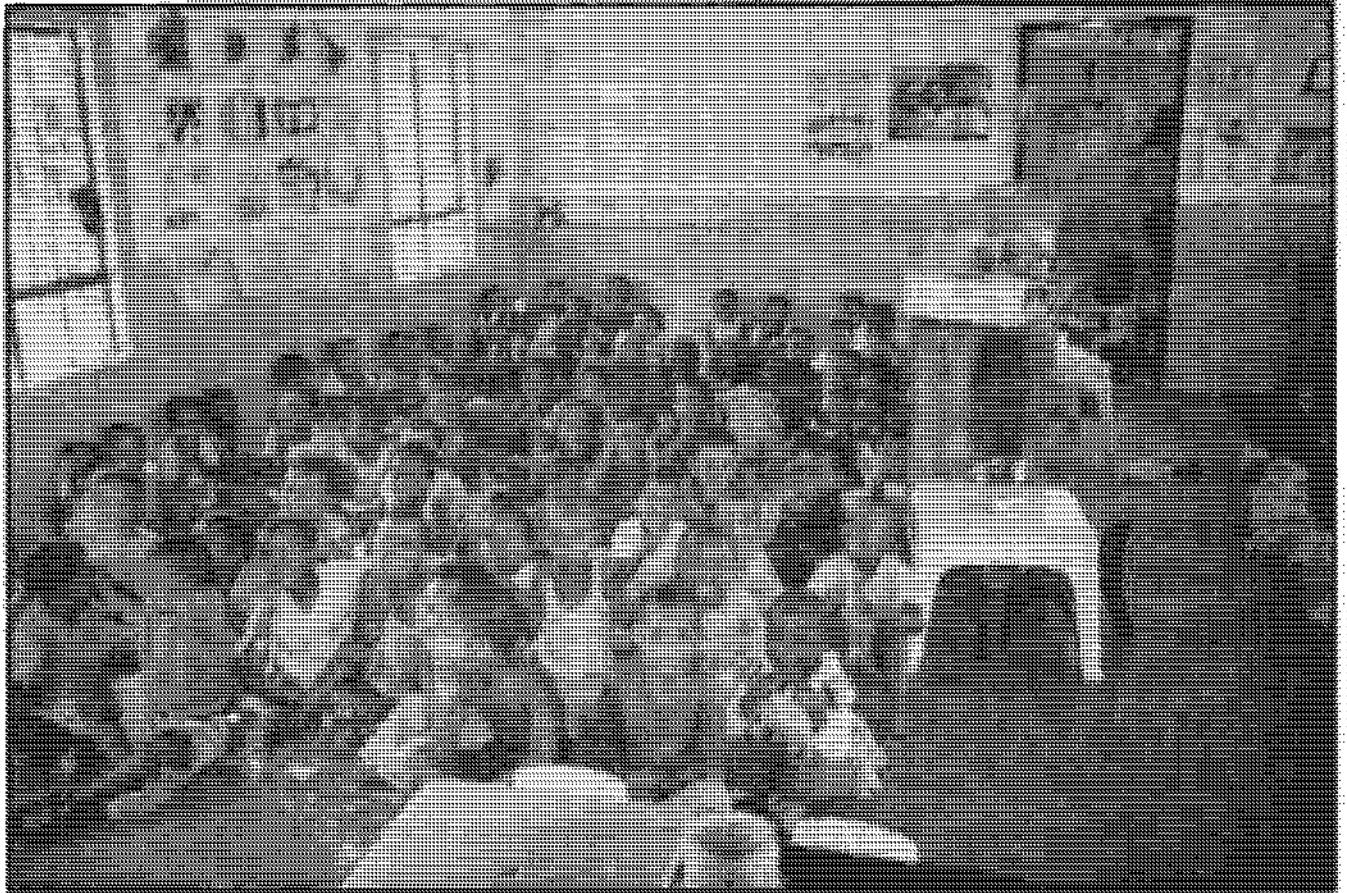
As parents know their child best, their role in the START programme is indispensable. By their involvement they gain skills, and often perform as better therapists than professionals.

The child benefits from the holistic approach of the programme. START focuses on the developmentally delayed child. The programme comprises a case of books and a manual, with an approach to all aspects of development. This includes physical development, small movement of the hands and concept development, understanding and expression through use of gestures or language, toileting, dressing and feeding, etc.

Programmes Abroad for Disabled Children

Worldwide, similar programmes, involve professionals sharing their skills. They become facilitators of learning for others who may be more accessible to people who otherwise might be denied access. One example is Step By Step in Guyana, South America, initiated in response to the needs of families and their disabled children. Step by Step was set up by a public meeting in which people volunteered to work with disabled children and their families. Volunteers came from a wide range of occupations, such as, teachers, clerks and students.

These volunteers were trained over 15 months. Training was co-ordinated by a psychologist and a physiotherapist. The volunteers worked with one or two children and a family member who performed activities with the child. The children were identified by house to house visits and referrals from professionals



The first five years are the most important for children's development.

Photo: UNICEF

and parents.

The programme was judged on the child's progress, on checklists and in terms of participants' evaluation. The majority of mothers found the programme to be helpful. The children were seen to be happier, better behaved and motivated. One of the key features of the programme is the involvement of the wider community.

In Jamaica, a programme called 3D makes special effort to recruit parents onto their staff. Parents are trained over three to four week courses and are encouraged to form a parent organisation.

Early intervention is beneficial in helping to dispel negative attitudes towards disability. It is also helpful in preventing dysfunctional families, further handicaps and preparing children to integrate into society. By adopting an holistic approach, hopefully, the physical, mental and social well being of the child and his family can be developed to maximum potential.

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