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Need for Services for Children with Disability

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Psychologist to open clinic for handicapped

By SHAUN McILRAITH, Medical Correspondent

The time to start helping intellectually handicapped children is from birth, according to a psychologist who is starting an early education clinic in Sydney.

A baby born with a handicap such as Down's Syndrome (mongolism) can be taught to master the graded steps in normal child development, the psychologist, Mrs Sandra Leonard, said yesterday.

It can be taught to focus its eyes, to respond to a voice and to take a proffered article in its hands.

And the baby's parents can be the teachers. They can be shown how to "shape" a baby's actions by moving its head or its hand in the normal response pattern.

Mrs Leonard, a mature-age graduate of Macquarie University with two children of her own, deplores the fact that, too often, the education of intellectually handicapped children is left until they enter a special school at five or six.

"Then they say you can't do much with the child because the first five years were wasted," she said.

Worse still, many babies capable of acquiring basic skills, were placed in institutions where their condition often deteriorated.

Mrs Leonard has been a teacher in the Down's Syndrome Program of Macquarie University, which aims at giving Down's children the skills acquired during development by normal children. A research activity, it caters for only 25 children.

On February 6 she will open an early education clinic in the Baby Health Centre at Cremorne for all types of intellectually handicapped children, aged from birth to five.

The clinic is being established with the co-operation of the

NSW Health Commission and the North Sydney Council.

It will follow the same teaching methods as the Down's Program and will have informal links with the Macquarie University team.

"I decided I wanted to set up something for all the other kids who weren't getting help," Mrs Leonard said.

"Early intervention is offered to the blind, the deaf, the autistic and children with cerebral palsy.

"But there is virtually no early education for the biggest group of handicapped, the intellectually retarded."

The Down's Syndrome Program had demonstrated that some children classed as being incapable of being educated were not, she said.

"Some of the children have been able to go on to normal schools.

"Our aim will be to help each child to achieve its full potential and to offer training in a teaching method to parents who want to keep their child at home.

"In some institutions, the children are left in the cots all day.

"They are left in their cots because they can't sit up and they can't sit up because they are left in their cots. It's a vicious circle."

Parents will be asked to pay \$20 for one hour of individual tuition. The charge will be reduced or waived for those who cannot afford it.

Mrs Leonard has applied to the Youth and Community Services Department for a grant to run the clinic.

She will be using her own money to buy the few items of furniture and equipment needed for the clinic and expects to work for nothing for the first couple of months.

A physiotherapist and speech therapist will work part-time with her.

Parents interested in the clinic should write to Mrs Leonard at P.O. Box 261, Cremorne, 2090.

"I wanted to set up an intervention service that will cater for all the children who were not getting any help. Our aim will be to help each child to achieve their full potential and to offer training in a teaching method for parents who want to keep their child at home."
- Sandra Leonard. The Sydney Morning Herald December 30 1978.

In 1978 many children with a disability could not access early intervention services.

A group of teachers in special education were concerned that many children with a disability could not access services early in their lives. They started up an early intervention service for young children aged 0-5 years who had any type of disability or developmental delay. Sandra Leonard, a psychology graduate from Macquarie University who had worked as a teacher with the Macquarie university Down Syndrome programme, was the main driver of this initiative. She was supported by Moira Pieterse from the Macquarie Down Syndrome programme as well.

The centre opened for 2 days a week in 2 rooms at Cremorne Baby Health Centre. North Sydney Council and the Health Department supported Sandra in obtaining the premises. Parents held street stalls and donated toys and there were many requests for help to the community and to Government bodies.

Families paid \$20 an hour for the 1-1 sessions if they could afford it. Otherwise the fee was reduced or waived.