

As an Occupational Therapist who has been providing services to children for many years, families have identified problems interfering with their child's access to healthy socialization with peers. This is caused in part by a lack of awareness and in part by lack of funding for appropriate occupational performance activities for all children including special needs children in rural communities. Children with disabilities and their families do not have access to supportive opportunities for various forms and stages of "play" or recreation with typical and non-typical peers. Five local community members chose to meet to discuss the lack of space and potential needs of the children who would benefit from access to recreational community play based programs. I helped to increase awareness of the problem and shared resources identifying the benefits for the children participating in community settings describing the following as important aspects of play:

- Each stage of development requires these children to relate to new discoveries with their senses and bodies, and to express themselves inwardly and outwardly through art, crafts, games and outdoor play. It is a natural way to learn, grow and make connections. Interest and curiosity emerge and throughout life so children want to learn and find ways to grow.
- Learning through play is one of the most important occupations for young children. Play promotes the process of spontaneous discovery, and self-discovery laying the foundation for sharing, learning and growing together. "Will you play with me?" is really a question about "who am I in the world?" It is a way to discover the world and oneself in all different ways.
- Young children learn about differences between themselves and others in play, as well as how their individual strengths support each other. This is where life's most

important lessons begin, helping children learn how to get along, work together and find ways to contribute meaningfully to family, community and society.

The following identifies suggested improvements to develop new programs:

- Supporting children to experience new social environments
- Offering an appropriate, safe sensory based play approach to support children's natural development to expand socialization skills
- Providing opportunities for participation in inclusive community games and activities with peers outside of home and school activities
- Teaching parents how to become observers of their child and to know their child's developmental process with a focus on play
- Offering extended family, community providers, teachers and peers opportunities to learn to engage with special needs children in positive ways outside of home and school

A program called TCC (Therapeutic Community Connections) was created with the goal of helping young children with challenges succeed in the "occupation of childhood" TCC is designed to maximize each child's ability to play, learn within the various environments he or she encounters, especially in non competitive peer-activities that support and facilitate positive social interactions among children with learning differences and developmental delays so everyone benefits from all the forms and stages of "play" within peer learning environments. Measuring the success of the TCC program was important to help establish evidence for program success and increase ongoing networking opportunities. This was accomplished using Goal Attainment Scaling (GAS), a technique for evaluating program effectiveness related to goal achievements under specific circumstances during a specific time period. In this case, GAS was to be used to measure goal achievement for children's

development and participation in a variety of play settings to show how the program benefits children and peers. These factors were suggested as possible measures of change.

- Numbers of children attending specific program offerings
- Effective ways for children without differences to interact with children with differences, and grow in understanding and respect
- Measures of positive social behaviors within each play environment

I helped write a grant through the Laughing Waters Foundation to establish networks and to promote ongoing collaborative efforts to help address these needs. I have served Vermont children for the past 30 years working with private and public agencies that are reaching out to find ways to expand services to families through a collaborative effort. The broader mission of Laughing Waters, Inc., established in 1986, is to promote creative education and the healing arts, where such activities encourage interaction, communication and exchange of understanding between individuals of differing abilities, ages and backgrounds. Laughing Waters' financial resources come from royalties (from swing suspension equipment). These swings were distributed for use in local community programs introduced during the Meeting Space Program. Initially funded by the Woodstock Learning Trust, one of these swings has been successfully marketed with steady sales for more than a decade through Southpaw Enterprises, a leading manufacturer of sensory integration equipment serving occupational therapists nationwide. A special focus of the mission for Laughing Waters is serving children with severe challenges and intensive needs and providing them with opportunities for social inclusion. Their ideology emphasizes the contextual, environmental relationship and a fundamental spiritual connection between the individual and the whole. In realizing this mission, they have both initiated programs and supported other local organizations, such as the Woodstock Learning Trust, the Upper Valley Crafts Center and the Chandler Center for the Arts. As a co-director of Laughing Waters.

Laughing Waters Foundation has supported similar projects such as "Meeting Spaces" and the positive results demonstrated a need for continued support for funding as mentioned by the Woodstock Learning Trust Board. "We have been very impressed by your ongoing commitment to improving the lives of children with developmental and physical differences. Your innovative swings are clearly making a difference to those children and families by allowing them freedom of movement, giving them much needed sensory input, and providing them with an important way to communicate with others. We are delighted to be able to support your efforts and are very grateful that we've been able to contribute in a small way to the important work that you and Laughing Waters are doing. We wish you every success in the future and hope you will approach us in the again should you need funding for another project."

Yours, Mary Blake, OTR/L, BCP