

For the Disabled, a Showplace of a School

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EAST HAMPTON

THE first day of school for the second grade at the Child Development Center of the Hamptons began with show and tell, an activity meant to introduce each child to the rest. Everyone sat on the floor as one child after another was called to sit in a chair and display his trinkets: a rock that reportedly looks like Jupiter, photos of cows taken on a summer vacation in Ireland, a matching pair of pine cones, a hockey trophy. "I got a concussion last year so I'm not playing hockey this year," the trophy's owner explained matter-of-factly.

Haley Sulahian, 7, sat quietly at the rear of the cluster, her ponytail held by a bow of white ribbons studded with pink hearts and her legs splayed out in front of her. Her left leg was encased up to the knee in a purple cast, the right one in pink — her favorite colors, she said later. Then came her chance to show and tell.

"Everybody turn around and face Haley," said Liz Dyer, one of two teachers assigned to the class. "I think it will be easier that way." Haley didn't appear to notice that she wasn't called up to the special chair but instead pulled a stuffed animal from a paper bag and hugged it. Covered in silver fur, the animal had a face like a puppy's. "What kind of animal is that?" asked the teacher.

"A seal," Haley, who has cerebral palsy, said, her words slightly slurred. "I got it in Maine."

Next she displayed a photo, saying something that came out garbled. From behind Haley, her aide, Fanny Wells, explained, "That's Haley and her cousins." Next came a strip of pliable white plastic. "This is my hospital bracelet," Haley said clearly.

"From when you had the operations on your legs?" the teacher prompted.

Haley nodded, deflecting further questions on the topic by announcing that she had decorated the paper bag holding her treasures with cutouts of fish and stars and real seashells. "My mom helped me," she said.

One little boy raised his hand. "I like the seashells," he said.

Smiling proudly, Haley buried her face in the seal's fur.

It is a challenge to keep disabled and nondisabled students on eye level with each other at all times. But the staff members at the Child Development Center of the Hamptons, a charter school that draws students from 10 districts extending from Hampton Bays to Montauk, says that is just one of many challenges they must meet if it is to fulfill its unusual mission: to fully integrate children with a diversity of disabilities into everything that happens there.

This year, the third since the school received its charter, about 60 percent of the student body are children with handicaps ranging from learning disabilities that can be corrected or ameliorated with therapy to permanent and severe physical and mental handicaps stemming from Down Syndrome, autism and cerebral palsy. The rest are "regular ed," not disabled in any way.



Photographs by Deirdre Brehnan for The New York Times

Each classroom has two teachers and no more than 15 students. Each child with physical limitations or other special needs is assigned an aide to attend to each of them, and the staff includes physical, occupational, behavioral and speech therapists.

Since founding its separate preschool in 1997, the Child Development Center of the Hamptons has woven disabled and nondisabled children together in one program. The preschool operates nearby in a former parochial school. But until last spring, the charter school was run out of makeshift space rented from an indoor tennis club. There, the entire program — kindergarten through sixth grade — congregated in one huge, noisy room where the classes were held temporarily.

But this year's first day of school, last Monday, was also the first day that about 100 students and more than 40 teachers, therapists and one-on-one aides reported for classes in a new building on Stephen Hands Path. Built on 10.2 acres leased for \$1 a year from East Hampton Town, the new building has allowed the center to expand to include seventh graders. It also finally permits it to address in a permanent, lasting way the myriad logistical issues raised by the physical needs of its disabled students.

Dawn Zimmerman Hummel, the center's founder and executive direc-

tor of its parent foundation, said the building has unusually wide hallways to accommodate a stream of students, several of them in wheelchairs. It has dropped ceilings made of baffled glass to shield autistic students, whose senses tend to be hypersensitive, from the buzzing and glare from fluorescent lights.

"It's hard when you have to rearrange everything," Ms. Hummel said. "We started the preschool that way. It's easier when you start from scratch by designing a new building, by living and breathing it from the beginning."

The building cost \$1.9 million, about \$600,000 of it raised from donations.

The new classrooms are also equipped with special wooden chairs that allow wheelchair users to sit at the same kinds of desks as their classmates. Being on eye level equates with equality and promotes meaningful interaction, said Patricia Desiderio, the new principal.

Nancy Piazza has four children enrolled there. Just one, her 7-year-old son Orrin, needs special services. The center's inclusive environment, as opposed to public schools where special education pupils are often segregated in separate classrooms, is more like the real world, she said.

"It's the way life is; not everybody learns the same and not everyone is

Haley Sulahian, above, took part in show and tell in her class at the Child Development Center of the Hamptons, which last week opened its new building, left.

the same," she said. "But when they're together, they can learn from each other and help each other."

Just as Haley was lifted from her wheelchair to sit on the floor when the rest of her class did, Adam Friedes, who is 11 and also has cerebral palsy, joined the rest of the sixth grade on the floor to listen as a teacher read aloud from "The Hobbit." Adam's aide straddled the frail-looking youngster between her legs and kept a hand on his chest so he didn't slump forward.

Unlike Haley, whose academic performance sometimes surpasses that of her classmates, Adam is mentally retarded and has less control over his own body, said his mother, Adrienne Friedes, who stopped by at lunchtime.

When the morning's reading time was over, the school's physical therapist, Shannon O'Connell, explained to Adam's aide how to lift him safely and strap him back into his wheelchair.

"When they started reading, they didn't have him on the floor," Ms. O'Connell said. "I told them to move him so he can be with the other kids."

While Ms. Friedes said the center still needed to iron out some kinks in its new building, related mostly to obtaining the right equipment for her son, she said there was no better place for him. Adam used to attend a special-education school run by the Board of Cooperative Educational Services, but it was in Westhampton Beach and the hourlong commute each way kept him isolated from his own community, she said.

"Now when we go to the supermarket, he calls out to the kids he knows from school," she said. "He's part of a community."