

The Moore-Weis Children's Center of Austin

By Julie Tereshchuk

This article first appeared in *Tribeza* magazine, April 2005

Providing a unique lifeline to families of children with autistic disorders, Austin's Moore-Weis school blends treatment methods to create an environment of success for the young students.

It's about dedication. The kind of dedication that makes parents' voices crack with emotion as they talk about the advances their children have made. It's also about treating each child as an individual, while teaching each one how to interact in a wider community.

"Socialization is one of the greatest obstacles facing children with communication delays," says Suzanne Moore.

As co-founders of the Moore-Weis Children's Center of Austin, Moore and Kelly White are skilled practitioners of their craft. It's been seven years since Moore, the center's Program Director and a child development specialist with 32 years of experience; and Weis, Business Director and specialist in early childhood special education, opened their school in the leafy Old West Austin neighborhood. The dedicated pair continues to hone the programs offered to their students, who all have communication disorders.

"We provide a total educational and therapeutic experience for children, and help create a complete treatment plan for the child and family," Moore explains. "Our natural setting creates a positive and nurturing environment empowering children to develop effective, life-long communication skills."

The center's 15 students, aged 2 to 8 years, have autism spectrum and other similar diagnoses. According to the Autism Society of America, autism is a brain disorder that affects a person's ability to communicate, to reason, and to interact with others. It is a spectrum disorder that affects individuals differently and to varying degrees of severity. ("Autism" and "autism spectrum disorder" are often used interchangeably). It is the fastest growing developmental disability, more common than childhood cancer, cystic fibrosis, and multiple sclerosis combined. One out of every 166 babies born today will develop some form of autism, which is also a lifelong disability.

Housed in a converted ranch-style home, every inch of the center and its large yard is put to use. One of the latest innovations is the classroom for 2 and 3-year-olds. While there is no cure for autism, the ASA says evidence shows that early intervention results in positive outcomes for children with autism; and the earlier treatment begins, the better.

The pilot project, overseen by a doctoral student and her two professors from the University of Texas' Department of Education is an indicator of the unique programming at Moore-Weis.

In another Moore-Weis innovation, Center Time was created two years ago. It's a communal play area where all the children interact together. Providing constant visual reminders is key at Moore-Weis – so while in Center Time, each child wears an oversized 'necklace,' a portable extension of the daily schedule on their individual work stations back in the formal classrooms. In Center Time, as throughout the center, the student to staff ratio is always maintained at two to one.

People with autism respond well to a highly structured, specialized education program tailored to their needs. Because it's a spectrum disorder, however, no one method alone is effective in treating autism. The ASA says other treatments that may help include: medicine, diet, vitamins, and occupational and sensory therapies. Moore and Weis pride themselves on their distinctive blend of methodologies, evidenced by the variety of learning and therapy areas throughout the center.

A table that can be filled with everything from dried pinto beans to sand or bird seed sits in the Moore-Weis sensory area. Close by is a home center – complete with play sink to practice washing dishes and child-size grocery cart. Overlooking the tree-shaded yard is the motor area – filled with a miniature playscape, thick crash mats, inner tubes and a long padded swing. Treatment is given individually and in groups throughout each child's day by a licensed occupational therapist specializing in sensory integration. "It's a critical part of each child's day, laughs Moore, as a slender giggling girl bounces among the crash mats.

"We also take the children out into the neighborhood, where they practice being out in the world," says Weis. That includes closely supervised wagon rides on the four-wheeled carts neatly lined up in the yard – teaching road safety. It might also include a ride to campus on the UT shuttle, or a milkshake at Nau's Drug – where the students practice ordering from a menu; or even shopping at Fresh Plus grocery in preparation for a cooking class.

Like most seven-year old boys, Ben Maples loves cars. Thanks to his neighborhood field trips from Moore-Weis, he's learned to watch for moving cars before he crosses the street. And he talks. "When Ben went there three years ago, he wasn't speaking," says his mother, Michelle Maples. "Now he tells me he loves me. And you can have a conversation with him – that's huge. Before -- it was all guesswork." The center has given the whole family a sense of security, says Maples. There's a feeling of community between the parents, she adds. "It's really nice to have someone who understands. Because, unless you live the life of having an autistic spectrum child in your home, you don't get it."

"It's a miracle," says Bob Baughman, father of Mimi. "She's doing all the normal things a kindergartner should do." However, as a seven-year old, Mimi could be facing her final year at the center. "We're very apprehensive," says Baughman. "There isn't anything else like it in Austin."

The center, heavily reliant on cash donations, grants and its annual spring gala, is now faced with the daunting challenge of finding more space to expand. "It's time – Suzanne has already written the curriculum for two more classes. We're ready to expand. We're ready to help more kids become effective and independent communicators," explains Weis.

For more information: www.moore-weis.com

Treatment methods used at Moore-Weis:

- ABA: Applied Behavioral Analysis
- Floortime: Child-directed approach stressing personal interactions
- TEACCH: Treatment and Education of Autistic and related Communication- handicapped Children
- PECS: Picture Exchange Communication System
- SCERTS: Social Communication, Emotional Regulation, Transactional Support

Julie Tereshchuk is a freelance writer based in Austin, Tex.

jt@jtworld.biz

www.jtworld.biz