

'Everyone is just one of the gang'



ANGIE BEAULIEU/Staff photos
Sammy Sansil laughs as he attempts to walk at the Professional Center for Child Development in Andover. The school specializes in the care of students with severe special needs. Sammy, 3, has Cornelia De Lange Syndrome and was born without hands. He is now learning to experience the world with his feet.

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Child development center works with youth of all abilities

Three year-old Sammy Sansil experiences the world feet first.

Born with Cornelia de Lange Syndrome, Sammy's arms have no elbows or hands. He makes up for it with extra sensitive feet — and plenty of smiles, says his mom, April.



Sammy Sansil uses his toes to press buttons on a tiny keyboard at the Professional Center for Child Development in Andover.

"I call him my happy pill," said April. "He's very easy going. He's very silly, he loves to try and make people laugh. If you laugh, he laughs even more." Sammy is very affectionate, said April, and loves to give hugs by wrapping his legs around you.

It is Sammy's special needs that brought him to the Professional Center for Child Development on Osgood Street. PCCD's developmental day school serves children ages 3 to 7 with complex medical needs, moderate to severe developmental delays or other disabilities.

But PCCD is so much more than a school, said April Sansil. "Sammy has found a home," she said. "(PCCD staff) are really easy to talk to. They're more than just teachers."

With a staff of nurses, nutritionists, social workers, therapists and special educators, each student at PCCD receives an individualized curriculum, including physical, speech and language and occupational therapies.

Sammy and his classmates start the day off with circle time and free play. Students interact with each other and staff, singing, reading books or playing with specially adapted toys that talk or play music

when activated by a child. Throughout the day, classrooms are visited by therapists, nurses and nutritionists who work with one child at a time.

PCCD also has art, music and pet therapy — a recent lesson included "painting" with shaving cream or pudding, which Sammy did with his feet.

In one year at PCCD, April said she has seen Sammy's legs and core become stronger. He is learning to express himself, make choices and try new types of foods.

"He makes sure he doesn't fall asleep until the bus ride home, because he loves it here," said April, watching a recent class where Sammy worked with a therapist and a specialized walker. "He definitely has fun here, and he gets so much stimulation."

PCCD also runs a preschool program for children of all abilities. Often, lessons for the preschool and day school are combined, said Linda Sliwoski, program director, including trips outside to PCCD's handicap accessible playground.

"They play and learn together. Everyone is just one of the gang. They don't see them as any different," said Sliwoski. "It happens naturally, as it should."

PCCD also runs parent groups for their community to share ideas and resources on parenting a child with special needs.

"Because we're a small school, we have those relationships," said Sliwoski. "This is a partnership. We're not alone in this, and they aren't either."

PCCD was started 36 years ago by two-and-a-half Andover nurses as a private nursery school for disabled children in the basement of Christ Church. In 1986, the center moved to the former Knights of Columbus Hall on Osgood Street, adding on a new wing in 2006.

"Our students have unique needs, and are not traditional learners. They learn in all kinds of ways, and the staff pulls it out of each student

differently. Because of their disabilities, their abilities are all different," said Sliwoski. "They each have so much to offer."

The Sansils are from Chelmsford, and students at PCCD come from all over the Merrimack Valley and surrounding area.

Cornelia de Lange Syndrome, or CdLS, is a genetic condition is typified by developmental delays, missing hands, forearms or fingers, feeding difficulties and small growth rate and body size. No two cases of CdLS are alike, each patient has a different grouping of symptoms.

Sammy, who will turn 4 in November, is roughly the size of the average 18-month-old, said April, and he just learned to sit up on his own. Although he doesn't talk, Sammy is very good at communicating through nonverbal cues and body language, April said.

April said he had never heard of CdLS until Sammy was born and diagnosed. It is rare enough that some doctors have not even heard of it.

Through sharing Sammy's story, April hopes to spread awareness of CdLS.

"We get a lot of stares. I want people to come up to me and ask questions, I don't want them to be afraid, or shush a child that points (at Sammy)," said April. "It's not something I want to hide. It's something I want to explain."

For more information

On the Professional Center for Child Development, visit www.theprofessionalcenter.org or call 978-475-3806.

On Cornelia de Lange Syndrome, visit www.cdlsusa.org

Mark your calendars: The Professional Center's annual "Trot for Special Tots" fundraiser will be Oct. 18. The event is a 5K road race, fun walk and costume parade, held at the center at 32 Osgood St.