

Play that counts: Two by Two and Two by Three playgroups pair typical and special needs children for enriching experience



Robbie Anderson, 7, of Methuen and Duncan Lewis, 3, of North Andover play at the Professional Center for Child Development in Andover. Duncan is a typically developing child who is integrated with special needs children.

By Julie Kirkwood
Staff Writer

When Paddie Riesenbergh tells other moms that her son, Quinn, goes to the Two by Two play group in Andover, those who have heard of it have one question: How did you get him in?

The play group, which pairs special-needs toddlers with their typically developing peers, has always been popular among special needs parents. For their children, the group is therapy.

But in the past few years, the play group has grown increasingly popular with parents of typical children. They pay more than \$100 a month for just 2 1/2 hours once a week.

Quinn, a typically developing 2-year-old from North Reading, was on a waiting list for about a month before he got a spot in a Wednesday morning group. That was a relatively short wait, his mother said.

"He was lucky to get in," she said. And now that he is in, she plans to hold his spot

In fact, the groups have grown so popular that the Professional Center for Child Development, the nonprofit group that runs them, created a 13th one last fall and still has a waiting list. Most parents hear about the groups from other parents.

On a chilly Wednesday morning, Quinn and his playmates, in total eight 2-year-olds, sit

in a circle on a classroom floor. Four of the children are typical and four have diagnoses such as speech delays, social and emotional delays, trouble with fine motor skills, hearing impairment or autism. Behind the children sit the staff: an occupational therapist, a teacher, a speech and language pathologist, a volunteer and an aide.

The children play a game with a "shaky ball," a plastic toy that vibrates. The leader asks each child if he or she wants the big shaky ball or the little shaky ball. The adults encourage the children to "use your words" to choose.

Joshua Wirth, a 2-year-old from Methuen who has autism, is given the little one on his turn. The class sings a song about the shaky ball using his name, but Joshua looks to the side, beyond the staff and outside the circle. He doesn't sing. He doesn't react to the children saying his name. He drops the ball.

When the song ends, though, the group leader tells Joshua it's time to share the ball.

"Give it to Daniel," she says.

Joshua picks up the ball and passes it to the boy on his left, without looking at him.

"Good," she exclaims.

It happened in an instant but it was a significant step for Joshua, said early intervention group coordinator Aimee Phleger. He is learning to share and interact

with other children.

"We've counted the minutes until the space opened up for him to come into the program," said Joshua's mother, Bianca Wirth.

Since joining this winter, Joshua has also started eating little bits of solid food, such as a Cheez-it cracker or a spoonful of applesauce, his mother said. He started feeding therapy around the same time, she said, so the play group can't take full credit, but "watching the other kids eat I know has to be a huge factor."

Quinn's mother, Riesenberg, said she's pleased to hear that her son may be helping special needs children, though that wasn't the main reason she enrolled him.

"It wasn't important to me, but it definitely was an added bonus," Riesenberg said. "Hopefully he will learn about differences, empathy and tolerance."

The real reason she enrolled him, though, was she wanted Quinn to learn social skills, like sharing, taking turns and playing with other children, in a professional environment.

"I wanted Quinn to have social interaction with his peers independent of me, but I didn't want a day-care environment," Riesenberg said. "There are very few programs available for 2-year-olds, of any ability. The void that they're filling in the community is huge."

All the children in the play group receive the same encouragement, language stimulation and social skills lessons, regardless of ability. Quinn's whole play group is learning sign language because one of his playmates is hearing impaired.

The ratio of staff to children is so high that parents get individual notes after each session about their child. And regardless of whether the parents are seeking it, children in the groups do form bonds with children of

differing abilities.

In one Two By Two play group, a 2-year-old girl had a physical disorder in which her joints turned the wrong way and her body was the size of an infant's. The other children befriended her and played with her. The girl couldn't use her hands to paint, so the other children helped her and she learned to hold the paintbrush in her mouth.

In another instance, a typical child talked to her mother constantly about her best friend from the play group. One day her mother got a chance to meet her daughter's best friend and was surprised to realize it was a severely disabled older child who uses a wheelchair and visited the group each week.

"They're very accepting," said Melanie Shipon, community group coordinator.

Some of the play groups get regular visits from older children with severe disabilities from a classroom down the hall, children like 5-year-old Seamus Slattery of Chelmsford who had a brain hemorrhage at birth that left him with cerebral palsy, hydrocephalus, low vision and the inability to talk.

Seamus gets excited about his visits to the play groups, said his mother, Lisa Slattery.

"From what I hear from everyone, he's kind of a star there," she said. "He loves singing. He loves the sound of the children. That works for him."

She also likes the idea of typical children playing with him and learning there's nothing to be afraid of.

"I feel it is good for the other kids to see a child with disabilities, so that they understand it and they're not shocked by it and they don't stare," Slattery said. "It makes them more comfortable."

Integrated play groups

What are they?

The Professional Center for Child Development in Andover runs several integrated play groups. The groups combine four to five special needs toddlers with four typically developing toddlers. The groups typically meet once a week for 2 1/2 hours. The group for 2-year-olds is called Two by Two. There is also a group for 3-year-olds called Two by Three.

Why?

The first play groups were formed in 1999 to help special needs children learn social skills in a setting where they would interact with and model their behavior after typically developing children. The groups have since become so popular with parents of typically developing children that the center runs 13 play groups a week, serving about 100 children.

Who can join?

The play groups are open to 2-year-olds eligible for early intervention from Andover, North Andover, Methuen and Lawrence, and are paid for as part of their therapy. Early intervention children from other communities may be able to join with a waiver.

Typically developing 2- and 3-year-olds from any city or town may join. The cost is \$300 for an 11-week session. Sessions run continuously, back to back, year round.

Information

Call (978) 475-3806.