

Sue Sullivan, who works for an early intervention program to help kids with developmental delays get a good start, interacts with 13-month-old Kayla Caple. Sullivan visits the Caple home in Champaign each week to work with Kayla, who is visually impaired.

EARLY INTERVENTION

Therapy has positive impact on lives of impaired children

By LYNN CRANDALL ■ For The News-Gazette

Three-year-old Hunter O'Connell perches on her knees on the floor in her family's living room and brings a red block close to her face. Peering intently at the plastic block for a moment, she then places it in a corresponding red cup sitting in front of her.

"Way to go! You did it," says Sue Sullivan, who then coaxes the child to try again. "Can you put one in the blue cup?"

The little girl complies, and Sullivan cheers again. "I'm so proud of you, Hunter!"

"I like the way she's looking and putting them in today," Sullivan tells the child's mother, Amy O'Connell.

It's therapy day in the O'Connell home in Colfax, and Hunter's accomplishment is stellar because she is legally blind, diagnosed in infancy with physical, motor and speech challenges and persistent hyperplastic primary vitreous and retinal dysplasia.

As her therapist the last two years, Sullivan has watched Hunter make huge strides in development. Working with therapists since she was 9 months old, Hunter learned to crawl, walks with assistance and is about to graduate to preschool, milestones doctors pre-

dicted she would never reach.

It's the type of phenomenon Sullivan sees every day in her work as a developmental therapist and certified vision teacher for the Illinois Department of Human Services' Early Intervention program.

"When I first started working with Hunter, she was scared and she wasn't reaching for things at all," Sullivan said. "Now she's totally fine with her environment."

"Children with visual impairments are afraid of their environment because they can't see what's out there," she said. "And because of that, they can have delays in development and movement. There are so many things doctors told her parents Hunter would never do and it hasn't been true. I hate the word never."

Another day, in Champaign, Alisha Caple cradles her cuddly 13-month-old daughter, Kayla, while Sullivan pulls bright-col-

ored musical toys from her bag.

Diagnosed with optic nerve hypoplasia, Kayla is visually impaired and just beginning her therapy with Early Intervention. Already her mother is singing its praises.

"She's the bravest little girl and a blast to be around, but nobody in my family has ever had a child with any kind of impairment, so none of us knew what to do. It was scary," Caple said. "With Sue coming in, it was a huge help. Every time Sue comes it seems like there's something else Kayla can do. It's really encouraging. I love the program, and Sue's a great person."

Hunter and Kayla are just two examples of the positive impact the family-centered Early Intervention services can have on lives, Sullivan said.

"I see miracles on a daily basis," she said. "I think Early Intervention is giving kids such a boost over what they would have been like without services when they start school. If a child is delayed, if they work at it, they can catch up and not even qualify for extra services when they go to school or have to attend special education classes."

Administered since 1998 by

Child and Family Connections agencies throughout Illinois, Early Intervention is funded by the state and seeks to boost development in children with disabilities or delays by providing therapy in the home or learning environment during a child's critical first three years.

By going into the child's home, providers not only work with the child but also offer tools to parents so that the child is exposed to active learning opportunities in a natural setting, seven days a week.

Sullivan, who is pursuing a master's degree in special education at the University of Illinois, said medical studies have shown that a window of opportunity for maximum growth potential exists in the human brain between birth and three years of age. During this time, the brain is building pathways that will form the basis of the child's abilities into adulthood.

Though capitalizing on the window is important for all areas of development, it is particularly crucial for children with visual impairments, Sullivan said.

"Every kid needs to learn how to use their eyes and how to

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see," she said. "The kids who have delays or have something preventing them from seeing, ... we have to find cool ways to entice them to use their eyes and help fire those brain synapses and build the connections between the brain and the eyes.

"It can make a difference between being legally blind and needing vision services in school or not even needing a vision

teacher," she said.

As of early spring, about 4,000 therapists from various disciplines were listed as actively serving 16,356 children statewide. Children and Family Connections 16 at Crosspoint Human Services in Danville offers the services of about 225 providers and takes referrals for approximately 1,200 children annually from families in Champaign, Ford, Iroquois, McLean, Vermilion and Livingston counties, said Becci Cline, the agency's program manager.

The program offers free eval-

uations to any child in the state and 12 different developmental therapies to qualified families. To qualify for services, a child must have at least a 30 percent developmental delay, a qualifying medical condition, such as Down syndrome or cerebral palsy, or meet three risk qualifiers, such as homelessness or neglect. The services are billed to private insurance companies or the state.

Cline said referrals can be made by anyone who is concerned about a child, but the first step for children with visu-

al concerns is to visit an eye doctor to get a diagnosis. It troubles her, she said, that her agency currently has a lower referral rate than the state average, because that means a lot of children are missing opportunities for a better life.

"I would encourage anyone who has a concern about a child to give us a call. Personally, the hardest thing for me is to see a child who is 5 years old and walks into the first day of kindergarten and isn't ready," she said. "You wonder where the system missed the child."

The program does face challenges in recruiting enough qualified providers, said Jim Dentino, director of developmental services at Crosspoint Human Services. Providers receive about \$50 an hour for their billable services, out of which they are responsible for all their expenses, including medical insurance and gas to travel to clients' homes.

Like Sullivan, whose travels include Kankakee, Danville and Charleston, most providers rack up a lot of miles each work week and can't bill for travel time.

Providers haven't received a salary increase in eight years and a recent bill in the Illinois legislature to provide a 3 percent cost of living adjustment was not funded.

For information about a child's developmental delay or hearing or visual impairments, contact Early Intervention at 800-877-1152 or visit the Web site of Hearing and Vision Connections, a statewide program assisting infants and toddlers with visual or hearing impairments, at www.morgan.k12.us/isd/hvc.