

DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES INSTITUTE THE YOUNG AUTISM PROGRAM

In 1966, a small group of parents of children with autism established a school that would address their children's special needs. Today, the Developmental Disabilities Institute (DDI) stands as a testament of their undying efforts.

DDI is a regional center of excellence in the treatment of autism and related disorders. With campuses located throughout Long Island, the institute provides educational, clinical, vocational, residential, and medical services to over 1500 children, adults, and their families. In addition, DDI has been recognized for its contributions to the autism research community. Each of its programs adheres strictly to the mission of providing help for children and adults to enable them to lead productive lives in society.

In 1995, the Young Autism Program (YAP) was established as an experimental program, utilizing the principles of Applied Behavioral Analysis to treat children diagnosed as having autism. It is a comprehensive effort with the goal of returning autistic children to regular kindergarten by age six. It is among the most intensive programs of its kind in the United States. The outcomes thus far have produced results far exceeding what is typically found in the field of autism.

Autistic children are accepted into YAP prior to 48 months of age, provided their school districts approve. Additionally, each child's parents must agree to receive training in an effort to continue the child's treatment at home. Once admitted, children receive six hours a day of 1:1 instruction and another two hours daily at home.

Since autism affects a child's ability to communicate and socialize with others, the initial focus of our intervention is to treat each child's difficulties in these two areas. Children receive continuous instruction in order to initially make beginning sounds, then words and phrases and ultimately reciprocal conversation. Though children initially spend their entire instructional day at YAP, as they progress, we enroll them into nursery schools with typically developing children. During this time, our students are taught to model the language and social behaviors of their peers. The unique balance of 1:1 instruction and group practice continues until staff, parents and the school district agree the child is ready to enroll in kindergarten.

It is well documented in the literature that at least 50% of the autistic population remains functionally mute throughout their lives. Also, as many as 80% function as mentally retarded. Previously these were thought to be characteristics of autism. However, we are finding that, with very intensive instruction initiated at a young age, these outcomes are not forgone conclusions. In fact, over 90% of the students enrolled in YAP for one year have learned to speak and will use speech as their primary form of communication. Additionally, by age six, over 75% of our students move from IQ scores in the mentally retarded to score in the normal range of cognitive functioning.