

BULLETIN

One word at a time: helping children communicate

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by DAN KEETON

Shari Shabits Speech/Language Pathologist North Okanagan Neurological Association

If you were to describe HSA member Shari Shabits as a person with a mission, you wouldnt be far off the mark. The Vernon speech language pathologist and HSA assistant steward is waging a personal effort to reduce waiting lists for young children in need of speech therapy. She finds the current situation appalling.

-There are waiting lists up to two years long," Shabits said. -By the time the children get to us, its often too late."

Early intervention is crucial in Shabits profession, whereby children as young as two years are aided to overcome speech challenges. The problem is that there are not enough speech pathologists being trained or retained in British Columbia, she says.

Shabits works for the North Okanagan Neurological Associations child development centre in Vernon, which concentrates on pre-school age children.

Some of Shabits charges face challenges arising from disorders such as Downs Syndrome or cerebral palsy. Others are children who simply have a hard time speaking, often for unknown reasons.

Shabits works flexible hours to allow her to visit children in preschools, daycares or at their homes, or at the centre. Sometimes the job means working with parents instead of directly with the child.

-My activities are quite varied. Sometimes Ill teach parents activities to reinforce at home what their child is learning. Other times Ill teach the parents directly, instead of the kids. In each case, I make that decision jointly with the family."

Shabits uses a variety of methods to help verbally challenged youngsters gain speaking skills. -Lets say a child really likes playing with bubbles. Well be blowing bubbles and each time we do, Ill repeat the word, â€˜blow.

-After a while, Ill wait before blowing the bubble. Theyll try to tell me what they want. Maybe theyll push the bubble maker towards my mouth. They might make a pucker motion with their lips. Most often, the child will try to make a sign. Ill give the child lots of different ways to tell me, but Ill always say the word at the same time Im performing the motion." The success rate is high, Shabits adds. Most children learn how to speak.

Shabits passed on a medical career after a year of pre-med schooling which she found demanded too much of

her already busy life. She was inspired to study speech language pathology after her mother, a teacher, said she would have preferred to take up the profession. Born and raised in Manitoba, Shabits had to leave the province to get her training.

She moved to Vernon to take her current job in 1992. About six years ago, HSA approached the centres workers. -It was a tough decision for people; not one theyd take lightly," Shabits recalls. -We had lots of discussion around unionizing. On the whole we decided it was in our best interests, and we havent looked back."

Since then, Shabits has been assistant steward. But her involvement with HSA really intensified when the chief steward had to take some time off recently. Shabits attended her first HSA convention last year and attended several steward training workshops.

-They provided a much broader perspective," Shabits said. For example, regarding the recent strike vote, -I was able to give members a sense of why these issues are important. The on-call issue doesnt really affect our members at the centre, but its a big issue province-wide. Its good to understand that and make decisions in solidarity with other members across the province."

Another HSA concern Shabits feels very personally is recruitment and retention. Shes spending her own time trying to put speech language pathology higher on the governments agenda, and is gathering information to make her case. The problem with two-year waits for speech language service is that children frequently arent referred until theyre three or four years old. Add two more years and its too late because the child has passed a key developmental period. The result is a lack of communication skills that adversely affect their schooling and adult life.

-I would really like to see government increase funding for early intervention services," Shabits said. Shes been working with a parent group to lobby for better services, and works with a professional group called the Speech and Language Council, which advises the government. She is also in touch with a parent group in the Lower Mainland.

The groups web site is www.waitlist.ca. Shabits can be reached through her email address: ShariShabits@telus.net.

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