

BULLETIN

## No child left behind

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**AS ANYONE WHO HAS OBSERVED** a group child care situation knows, there are always children who don't fit in. Kids who sit alone in a corner, kids who disrupt the group, kids the others avoid or pick on, kids the supervisor doesn't know how to handle, and kids who end up getting pulled from the program, leaving their parents, and themselves, in the lurch.

HSA member Christine Ambrose is there to help these children.

As a Supported Child Development Consultant with the School Age Therapy program at Queen Alexandra Centre for Children's Health in Victoria, Ambrose's job is to set up support, as needed, for kids aged six to 12 years old in out-of-school-care (OSC) programs. These programs provide care for children after school and during school holidays.

The children Ambrose helps have a range of support needs. -I have worked with kids who live with blindness and deafness, kids with muscular dystrophy, cerebral palsy, ADHD, FASD, language disorders, encopresis/enuresis, learning disabilities, and the whole range of the autism spectrum. Children are also referred for behaviour and mental health issues that result in challenging behaviour and possible exclusion from an OSC program." Ambrose's goal is to allow the child to stay in the care setting and have a positive experience there.

This is something these kids really need, says Ambrose. Inclusion is a key factor for healthy development. -We keep kids with support needs connected to their community," she says. -It is critical for children to be included with their peers, and this increases as they grow older. As children become youth, and later adults, peers, friends, and future partners will play increasingly important and vital roles in their lives."

Social isolation, and the lack of opportunity to learn how to function in a group situation, puts children at risk for behavioural and health-related problems as they develop.

-Socio-emotional skill development can act as a protective factor, increasing resilience, self-efficacy and self-concept. Children need opportunities to observe and practice making, keeping and maintaining social interactions and friendships with peers through play," says Ambrose.

There are a number of things Ambrose can do to make this happen. Her first step is close observation of the child in the care setting. She also talks to the child's parents to learn their goals. Then, she can consult with the care provider to set up strategies, which may be as simple as posting a visual schedule or monitoring the noise level. If needed, she can authorize a staff member, funded by her program, to work in the child care center one-on-one with the child, or several children can share this support. She will also consult with, and make referrals to, various other health care and education professionals.

-It's fascinating and rewarding to be able to collaborate with centre staff, occupational therapists, physiotherapists, speech language pathologists, teachers, and educational assistants (EA), and others. Together we are able to make a successful, long-term OSC experience for the child," says Ambrose.

The care providers they work with can have as little as 20 hours of training, and so the support and education is a huge help for them.

-One really important thing we do is help care providers build relationships with the children. If they don't have a connection with the child it's difficult to do much," she says. To this end, she finds it very helpful to teach communication skills.

-It's very important that staff use positive directive language," she says. This means, for instance, saying, "We use our walking feet inside," or "We keep our hands close to our bodies," instead of repeatedly saying, "No, don't do that."

The Supported Child Development Consultants also provide a range of specific training courses ranging from philosophy of inclusion to introduction to cooperative games to sign language, and much more.

Ambrose says the hardest cases ... but often the most rewarding ... are those of children who spend much of their school day in self-contained classrooms, working one-on-one with education assistants, rather than in groups with their peers. After school, these children suddenly find themselves in a busy, stimulating environment full of other kids. They aren't used to all the sensory input, the interactions, and the need to fit into a larger structure. This can be very exciting and very overwhelming, all at once.

-This could be the child's main opportunity to be included with peers and be social, to have relationships and play with other kids," says Ambrose. "We take it a minute at a time, helping with the transition, helping the child settle into an activity, balancing between being with the group and out of the group." The support worker might begin by bringing the child into group play for five minutes at a time, then moving back into individual play, increasing the ratio incrementally. If things go really well, the child may end up being part of the group the whole time, says Ambrose.

There are approximately 80 supported child care programs in BC, serving an estimated 9500 children annually and funded by the Ministry of Children and Family Development.

Ambrose moved to Victoria in 2003 from Williams Lake after funding cuts eliminated her job as Coordinator of the Child Care Resource and Referral (CCRR) Program. Deprived of a job she loved for eight years, she decided to get more education.

"I went back to school because I wanted to find another job I could love and feel fulfilled by," she says. In November, 2009, she completed her Masters of Education with a Special Education focus from the University of Victoria, adding this qualification to Early Childhood Education (ECE) & Infant/Toddler ECE certification, Child & Youth Care (CYC) diploma and a Bachelor Degree in CYC.

The funding cuts that eliminated her Williams Lake CCRR job were in fact reversed, but her life had already changed course ... a twist of fate that she in no way regrets. "Reversing the funding was a good decision by the government, and the good news for me is that I did find that new job that I love and feel fulfilled by," she says with a satisfied smile. 

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