

A chance to

STaR



Time to shine: Will enjoys friendship at a STaR-affiliated childcare centre.

When parents realise that their child's development is not progressing in line with age-appropriate norms, they face concerns about the child's present and future. They want access to high quality services for their children and to information and support for themselves. They want opportunities for their children to reach their potential and for their own involvement in decisions about day-to-day learning and the transition to school. And they want their children to be accepted and included in a community that values and becomes more knowledgeable about difference. Access, opportunity and acceptance are what the STaR Association represents.

The STaR Association is a small registered charity established by a group of parents and professionals who believe in the value of inclusive education. Since 2001 it has provided early intervention support for children with disabilities within mainstream childcare centres. An ongoing partnership with Macquarie University, where the intervention procedures were developed, ensures that all programs are research-based and uphold the principles of best practice in early intervention. Funding comes from the government and industry sponsorship.

Will, now nine and doing well in a mainstream school with his sister, began to shine while enrolled in the STaR Childcare Support Program in a Sydney childcare centre. He had spent the first six months of his life neglected and malnourished in an overseas orphanage. Will began to walk at 27 months and spoke his first words soon after, his naturally cheeky and loving personality gradually emerging. Will's adoptive parents attribute

his remarkable progress to the patience and input provided by STaR staff as they trained his carers in how to assess his skills and develop an appropriate individualised program embedded in the centre's daily routines and activities. As the photo shows, Will also gained enormously from his interactions with other children in the centre and their acceptance of him.

The Association also provides support to the families and carers of young children with disabilities, since they can easily be overwhelmed by the unexpected journey they take with their unusual children.

STaR parents can take advantage of the opportunity to work without being limited by half-day or 9am-3pm programs for their children. They also have access to STaR's Caring for Carers support program that provides information sessions, workshops and networking opportunities for families of children aged 0-6 with disabilities. Sharing the challenges, and the joys, of parenting with others "in the same boat" has been appreciated.

While continuing to provide its original programs, now in more than 12 childcare centres, the STaR Association has recently turned its attention to young children whose development is advanced. Little attention has been paid to these children who have special learning needs in their areas of outstanding strength or to their parents, who can find it difficult to talk to others about their enjoyment of their children and their concerns.

STaR has introduced a Playgroup for families who believe their child may be gifted and an enrichment program for three to five-year-olds who are intellectually advanced. These operate weekly in north-western Sydney. Finding out what works for these children and their families is the short-term goal so that, over time, teachers in preschools and childcare centres can be trained in evidence-based approaches to recognising and responding to potentially gifted children in their centres. Inclusive and appropriate education for children whose special learning needs emerge from developmental differences is the long-term goal of the STaR Association.

Playgroup NSW is keen to provide to parents information about other community services that may support their children's development. If you would like to have a profile for a service included in Totline, please contact Playgroup NSW's CEO, Deb Ryan, on 1800 171 882.