

New approaches providing hope

by Mike Walker

Keith is 19 years old, healthy, and looking for a job.

But Keith is mentally retarded, and his Grade 2 education makes job-hunting a frustrating process.

There may be help for Keith, though. New ideas and fresh approaches may lead to a "cure" for mental retardation before long.

The "cure" refers to one of the most debilitating aspects of mental retardation: the retarded adult's dependence on external support for his daily existence.

And in this sense of the word, many experts agree that a cure for mental retardation is in sight.

Len Wright certainly does. As executive director of the Alberta Association for the Mentally Retarded, Wright seeks that "cure" through vocational training centres, residential and recreational programs and recognition of the human rights of the mentally retarded.

Wright says he would like to see affirmative action programs for the mentally retarded. "These people have to have a chance ... As soon as they say they've got a Grade Two education, they're screwed."

He is speaking especially of the 80 to 85 per cent of the mentally retarded who fall into the "mildly retarded" category, many of whom are not retarded outside of school.

Although affirmative action may be far off, Wright concurs with others in the field when he says Alberta "has come a long, long way in the past ten years."

Much of the credit for recent advances goes to the principle of normalization — allowing the mentally retarded to live as normal a life as possible.

Normalization and important developments in learning theory have led to far-reaching reforms for the

mentally retarded. In Alberta, this has resulted in hundreds of retarded children and adults moving from institutions back to their homes and communities. New, more effective, teaching methods for the mentally retarded and special training for their teachers have also vastly improved conditions.

Accordingly, since 1972, over 450 people have left institutions to live in the community. For example, Michener Centre in Red Deer, the province's largest institution for the retarded, has seen its population drop from 2300 in 1972 to 1650 in 1979.

To replace the traditional institutions, the province now has fourteen vocational workshops, about fifty group homes (each housing six to eight people) and numerous specialized foster homes. In addition, many retarded adults now live on their own.

Recent advances in behavior and learning theory have gone hand in hand with normalization. Dr. Gerard Kysela, a U of A educational psychology professor, says behavior modification has been one of the "major forces" behind reforms for the mentally retarded.

Behavior modification applies theories about motivation to real situations.

Kysela notes an "incredible development" of behavior modification programs for the mentally retarded. Reading, talking, motor development, social skills and self-help are all being taught through behavior mod, he says.

Another notable advance, according to Kysela, is the declining use of intelligence tests to measure the achievement of mentally retarded children.

"Intelligence measures tell you the (retarded) kid is behind, but they don't tell you how he will fare in the environment, in the community," he says.

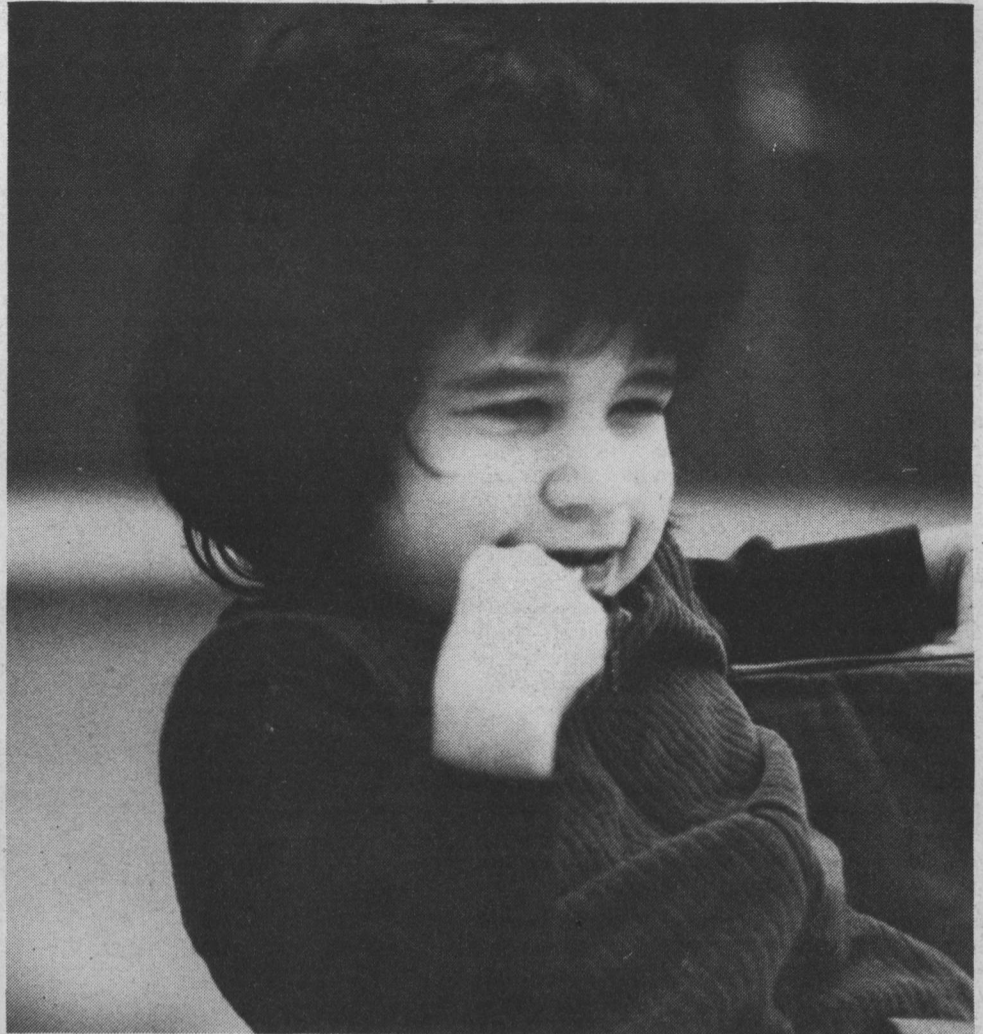


photo Rick Lawrence

"Ah heck, school's a snap," says one pupil during a break.

Kysela says traditional intelligence tests have been largely replaced by more meaningful tests of achievement. For instance, adaptive behavior indexes measure the child's ability to adapt to his environment. Criterion reference tests measure his mastery of a specific task, like tying his shoes. In both cases,

the emphasis is on functional goals, Kysela says, "rather than a comparison to other kids of the same age."

But progress in theoretical areas means nothing unless the people working with the mentally retarded are properly trained. However, training programs are lagging behind the advances in other areas, according to Kysela.

Very few training programs are directed toward parents of mentally retarded children, he says, although many group home workers and foster parents are trained at community colleges and universities.

To remedy this, the U of A's Centre for the Study of Mental Retardation sponsors a semi-annual introductory workshop for people dealing with the mentally retarded. The workshop, held weekends and evenings, is designed to provide a "positive, realistic, objective view" of the retarded and their capabilities, says organizer Dr. Bob Mulcahy.

The workshop focuses on learning, development, and recreation, Mulcahy says, using instructors and recent information from many disciplines. Included are physical education, pediatrics, psychology, sociology and education.

As for Keith, his prospects are looking up. He now lives in a supervised apartment, has a class 3 driver's license, and is driving a delivery truck for a city firm.



photo Rick Lawrence

This class is involved in a group lesson.

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