

## Working at Play

By Holly Lewis Maddux

It is often said that a child's work is play...but not all children know how. But now, a new program at Kennedy Krieger is teaching them.



The playroom of the ACHIEVEMENTS program site doesn't look like a typical child's playroom. There are no blocks, no books, no dolls, no trucks, no action figures lining the shelves or scattered about the floor. In fact, this playroom seems devoid of toys, but upon closer inspection, it's not. The toys are here, stored in clear plastic bins, one to a container, each container labeled with a picture and the word that describes the toy within.

This playroom at ACHIEVEMENTS has been engineered to be easily navigated by children with neurological impairments that interfere with the ability to play. Usually play is a spontaneous and inspires a host of social and communication skills that are essential for healthy development but for children with autism, some other neurological disorders and traumatic brain injuries, impairments make it impossible to play in traditional ways. Yet with therapeutic interventions, lots of support and specially designed environments like the playroom at ACHIEVEMENTS, play and the fun it inspires become possible fun for these children.

### BREAKING PLAY DOWN INTO STEPS

Children with neurological disorders including autism are unable to play without special interventions because of their inability to interact with the environments. Left alone, they explore their surroundings idiosyncratically, not allowing others to participate. Because they can't play with toys in a conventional way, they need be guided. And that is what Speech and Language pathologist Emily Tyson is doing as she directs 5-year-old Keith Carter to the table by the window. It is time to play with blocks. "Shapes" reads the bin in front of them and Tyson points to the picture beside the words "ball" and "blocks" and encourages Keith to pick out the triangle-shaped block and drop it in the like-shaped hole. Not only does she point to the picture as she speaks to him, slowly and distinctly, she also communicates in American Sign Language. Keith is not hearing impaired. He hears the words but he cannot *understand* them. It is as though he is hearing a foreign language. Keith does not comprehend spoken language as unimpaired children do, yet through the use of supportive visual tools such as the pictures and the hand signals, Keith *can* develop some capacity for spoken language in spite of his autism.

Much of the therapy that children receive at ACHIEVEMENTS is aimed at teaching them how to play, for play necessitates the very skills that autistic children lack: communication, interaction with peers, and the ability to engage in meaningful sequences of activities. Keith may lack the skills to play, but he clearly has the desire. When his teacher produces a big blue pompom, he shakes it, clearly delighting in the motion, and then he teasingly snaps it in her direction, as though he's going a swipe....and he chortles with delight at the prospect. But that is where it stops. In spite of the teacher's response and her cueing, the gesture is isolated. What seemed an overture, the beginning of a game, is fleeting and never goes beyond an inclination. "Play requires sequencing and social interaction, and Keith

doesn't have the natural ability that unaffected children have for that," Tyson explains. "So we teach him, step by step."

The teachers and therapists at ACHIEVEMENTS take children like Keith through the motions, and through repetition, the children eventually learn to sequence. Eventually, they are able to string together meaningful sequential activities in daily interactions. Keith's grandmother, Diane Armstrong, testifies to that learned ability. "Keith has come out of his shell since he began the ACHIEVEMENTS program. Before, it was like he was in his own little world. Now he plays - but it is a result of his therapists' work with him that he can do that. For example, he used to be afraid to go up a little ladder to a slide. His teachers made him do it, step by step, and he learned. But he was never just naturally inclined to do it that on his own---to explore, like other children."

### **AND NOW, AN OUTDOOR PLAYGROUND**

The staff at ACHIEVEMENTS is anticipating the completion of a new outdoor playground, made possible by funding from the Chatlos Foundation and the Goldsmith Family Foundation. It's under construction now on Kennedy Krieger's Greenspring Campus where the ACHIEVEMENTS is based. "We are so excited. It will enable us to provide children with incredible opportunities to acquire the skills they need in order to play," says Tyson. "The playground has been designed to be a highly motivating environment that will enable us to teach these children language and play skills through movement." She explains that picture symbols will label the equipment and will be specially suited to planning sequences of activities such as, "First, slide, next, swing on the tire, then, climb to the platform." As for Keith, a picture schedule will encourage him to organize his play, rather than revert to compulsive, repetitive movements as is often the case without it. "For Keith, the slide is just the beginning," Tyson says. "There's a whole new playground and a whole new world out there for him to discover!"