

Psychology students helping retarded children function

By Kim Martin

Area retarded children with severe behavioral problems may have a brighter future because a handful of psychology students wanted to see behavior modification in action.

A 10-year-old boy who could only recognize eight words in 40 on printed cards now constructs five-word sentences. An elective mute — a person who refuses to speak — now talks.

Fifteen students are working one-to-one with such children at the Arlington Training Center as part of a special program developed by Dr. James Kopp, assistant professor of psychology, in cooperation with the Child Study Center of Fort Worth, a private organization.

The training center is designed to handle children who cannot function even in special education classes.

Jackie Mallernee, a special education teacher at the center, cares for 13 children daily.

All are retarded. IQs, when assessed, range from 35 to 50 on a scale where 100 represents average intelligence. Ages range from about 6 to 12 years old.

The kids are trainable, though. They can learn to help themselves and master minimal academic skills, explained Kopp.

But how do you teach a screaming, biting, intractable child — or one who refuses to communicate — to do anything?

Put him on a program of behavior modification. Reward him every time he does something acceptable, according to Kopp. Gradually increase the

criteria for reward until the child functions well enough to attend a regular special education class.

The key to behavior mod's success is the reward itself, and rewards are as numerous as children. For some, it's cereal, raisins or Doritos. For others, it can be the opportunity to wear teacher's warm-up jacket or sit on a motorcycle, or receive a shot of Pepsi from a squirt gun.

"Anything that works is fair game," said Kopp, "unless it is obviously not beneficial to the child."

The graduate and undergraduate students spend a half-hour a day at the center and attend a weekly seminar to discuss individual programs. They receive three hours of research credit.

The only prerequisites, Kopp said, are desire to participate, some background in operant techniques and a promise not to withdraw from the course once enrolled.

Each semester the children at the center are placed on a continuum of skill levels — no speech, some speech, naming objects, recognizing words, constructing sentences, reading books and, finally, reading texts. Once placed, individual behavior modification is initiated.

An autistic girl progressed from picture recognition to reading storybooks, quite an accomplishment.

This child in this instance called her teacher "Miss Jones" for a month, although her name is Mallernee.

"Autism is bizarre," said Kopp. "It is a misplacement of normal behavior. People used to call it childhood

schizophrenia."

"We're all born with deficiencies," explained Kopp. "Nature selects against those (deficiencies) which oughtn't be repeated."

With these children, he added, "sooner or later the best parent asks 'why don't you straighten out?'" The child cannot respond appropriately, Kopp said, and learns counter control behaviors — screaming, hitting, emitting meaningless sounds — to get these demands off his back. The training center is the last stop for such children.

The program began in September 1972. Since that time, 30 students, in addition to the 15 currently enrolled, have participated in the research.

An in-class program for the center is also being developed, as well as a behavior mod program for the Veda Knox School, which is composed entirely of special education classes.