

Toy Mod Program Receives GE Grant

Program provides adapted rehabilitation toys and equipment; enables disabled children to interact with environment

Anna is a physically impaired 9-month-old who had never experienced the magic of hitting a button and having it light up from her efforts. Ian is an autistic 5-year-old who avoided interaction at all cost. Shawna is a 15-year-old whose inability to express herself had left her emotionally and verbally paralyzed.

For these and other children with cognitive, physical or social impairments, the Toy Modification Program has been a godsend. Thanks to their efforts, Anna now only has to roll slightly in her crib to connect with a large switch that sets off flashing lights on an adjacent toy. It's a motion she'll delightedly repeat over and over. Ian is enamored by the artwork he's created with a spin art machine. He now will sit next to others during this activity. Shawna can now communicate by pressing various color-coded enabling switches with pre-recorded phrases.

These success stories are repeated again and again, and they all begin in a 25x20 room that is a little bit Santa's workshop and a lot of ingenuity. Each toy modification begins with the same question: how does this work? As volunteers sit at benches, pulling apart toys and trying out various buttons and switches to see "what makes what happen," a cacophony of light and sound fills the room. Now the real challenge begins: how to adapt the toy so that it can be operated by an impaired individual. The volunteers have more than 500 years of lifelong experience. Someone always has a solution.

GE Volunteers has approved a \$5000 grant for the Toy Modification Program, a volunteer effort by the Schenectady GE Volunteers and Schenectady Senior Elfun (retirees). It was organized in 1995 by the Schenectady Elfun to provide adapted rehabilitation toys and equipment for use by licensed therapists/facilities working with disabled clients.

The group's primary emphasis has been adapting battery-operated toys so that they can be accessed via large external buttons/switches that a disabled child can use. Volunteers purchase new battery-operated toys that provide sensory inputs (such as song, lights and vibration/movement) and other therapeutic benefits that assist the child's development. Volunteers disassemble the toys, and rewire them using special "enabling switches" of various sizes that volunteers make from wooden bases, plastic jar tops and micro switches. These are designed to be plugged into the modified toys so clients lacking fine motor skills or adequate vision can then operate the toys. While some of these toys/equipment are commercially available, the Toy Modification Program provides them at no cost to the therapists or facilities – a significant factor in the current era of financial constraints.

The group also modifies computer mice so either the left or right click button can be operated by one of the external switches they make, enabling many of the disabled to use a computer for the first time. And more recently, they have developed new therapy equipment called "AND" switches that require two extremities to be operable, or that encourage client interaction.

During 2012 the group expects to modify/assemble and distribute a total of 350 toys, computer mice, voice recorder/playback devices, and "AND" switches. After the toys are adapted, volunteers deliver them to the 15 licensed service providers in the Capital Region with whom they interact. During the course of a year, each adapted item will be used for close to 155,000 hours. More than 15,000 disabled individuals have benefitted from the modified toys over the years.

The group meets weekly in office and workshop space supplied for free by the Schenectady GE Energy Campus. There currently are 11 regular volunteers coordinated by GE Senior Elfun and in 2010 they donated about 2000 hours toward this effort. The group also gets ongoing volunteer help from GE's Asian Pacific American Forum and several local GE business teams. The Northeastern Woodworkers Association has provided wooden bases for the switches. 1st National Bank of Scotia has facilitated converting the Grant monies into MasterCard gift credit cards for toy purchases at no fees.

To learn more about this program or how you can become involved, contact John Hoff at ElfunToyMods@nycap.rr.com