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Brain Balance offers programs to help develop children's brains

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Three years ago, mother Jennifer Fabrizio found a new way to help her son, who was diagnosed with autism when he was 3.

"There were definitely things he couldn't do," Fabrizio said. "He couldn't cross the center line, he couldn't touch his right toe with his left hand."

Her son became the first student at Charlotte's Brain Balance Achievement Center after it opened in October 2010. Brain Balance, which has centers nationwide, helps students from 3 to 19 develop motor, sensory and academic skills, which in turn strengthens their brains.

Students are given in-depth tests to determine the age level at which they are functioning. Brain Balance does not diagnose, but instead determines which hemisphere of the brain is the weakest, owner Sylvia Moneti said.

Brain Balance is unique because of its individualized, "bottom-up approach" that doesn't rely on a blanket diagnosis, Moneti said. Although Brain Balance's programs can help children with a range of diagnoses, including learning disabilities, ADHD, autism and Asperger's, these conditions often stem from what the center calls "functional disconnection."

"When you look carefully at these kids, they have an imbalance of brain function," Moneti said, adding this is "often not readily apparent until you test them for it."

After assessing a child, Brain Balance begins an initial three-month program. Children come in three days a week, beginning in a room where they complete tasks with physical sensory objects, such as a scent or flashing lights, attached to them. They then move on to academic exercises tailored to fit their needs.

Brain Balance programs are brain-based rather than drug-based. Although Moneti recognizes the positive effects of certain medications, she also feels they can be "a good mask for symptoms."

"The problem with drugs is when they wear off, that student is back to square one. It doesn't do anything for their development," she said.

Moneti recognizes the program is “repetitive and intensive,” but she believes working with students three days a week, in addition to assigning students exercises to complete at home, is necessary.

“If you want to affect big change in a child, you have to work with them daily,” she said. “And we want permanent change.”

Permanent change is what Fabrizio saw in her son, who is now 9 and no longer registers on the autism scale thanks to Brain Balance and other early intervention.

“A week after he started the program, he could take off on a bike,” Fabrizio said of her son, who struggled with balance before beginning the program.

Kari Lennon, whose 6-year-old daughter is diagnosed with a sensory processing disorder, also believes in the importance of working with a child consistently. Originally, Lennon was taking her daughter to an occupational therapist once a week, but wasn’t seeing enough improvement.

“I needed something more to do at home,” she said. She was pleased with Brain Balance’s support system and worked on exercises and games with her daughter at home.

“I see a huge difference in her,” Lennon said, adding her daughter is less clumsy and no longer needs to touch things constantly.

While the students learn to improve sensory and motor skills, parents receive support from staff. Parents are given progress reports; behavioral coaching and nutritional consults to determine what types of foods may be affecting children’s behavior.

Moneti believes getting to “the root of the problem” and targeting the weaker hemisphere of the brain will help brain development and improve daily life. Their goal is “to give that child a sense of accomplishment and really the responsibility for what they need to get taken care of during the day,” Moneti said.

Brain Balance in Charlotte is located at 9101 Pineville-Matthews Road, suite J. For more information about Brain Balance, visit www.brainbalancecenters.com.