

Down's child hurdles handicaps

By Beth Thompson
Daily Nebraskan Staff Reporter

For the most part, Karen Wiekel is like other 8-year-olds. She likes to watch "Sesame Street," look at the pictures in her books and play with her toys.

But when she was born in 1976, neither her parents nor her doctor were sure if she would be mentally handicapped, until a genetics test at the NU Medical Center in Omaha confirmed it — Down's Syndrome.

Karen has 47 chromosomes in her genetic make-up — an abnormal number. Like every Down's Syndrome child, her twenty-first chromosome (out of a normal 46) has made every cell in her body irregular.

For Karen, and thousands of other Down's children, October has been declared National Down's Syndrome Month by the U.S. Congress. During this month, 600 parent groups of the National Down's Syndrome Congress hope to promote awareness of Down's Syndrome through media, displays and conventions, said Elaine Rod, program director for the Association for Retarded Citizens.

Very few of these families have two cases of Down's Syndrome in the same family. Such an occurrence is rare, she said. In fact, 94 percent of all Down's cases are not hereditary.

However, Anita Weikel, Karen's mother, has a brother who also has Down's Syndrome. So when her daughter was born, (although Down's Syndrome is not hereditary in the Weikel family) Mrs. Weikel was accustomed to the special needs of a Down's child.

"A lot of the things I did raising Karen came right out of my mother's book," Mrs. Weikel said. She said her parents used "common sense" raising her brother and "if my mother lived through it, I could do it."

Although Karen will "eat anything," her mother said her favorite food is pizza. Karen's teacher, Jean Clanton, can vouch for that. In the 13 years that Clanton has taught Down's children, she concluded that "the majority of them (Down's children) love to eat."

Besides their distinctive appetites, Down's children are physically very strong, Clanton said. And with that strength comes a lot of emotion.

These children are "almost always happy" and "very loving," Clanton said.

While most Down's children are very friendly, Clanton can account for several times when such a student becomes very obstinate. One day they are "really willing to work," and the next day they won't cooperate at all.

Clanton also must contend with a discontinued learning process. While most students see summer as a vacation, Down's students are unable to retain what they learned in the previous nine months. Thus, they may return the next school year beginning at

step one again.

Parents and siblings must constantly work with a Down's child, when he is not in school. And that's exactly what the Weikel's do with Karen.

Last summer, while the Weikels worked, Susan and Kent Weikel baby-sat their sister on alternate days. On a one-to-one basis, Susan and Kent taught Karen to write her name and say her telephone number.

Karen recently learned to pronounce the letter F. She recites the word "fish" as proof of her accomplishment.

Rod, who also is a coordinator for the Pilot Parent Program in Lincoln, said families of many handicapped children "play school" in the home.

For Rod's own Down's child, "the biggest deficit is language and speech." So they do "a lot of talking," she said.

As part of the Pilot Parent Program, Rod is a "trained parent" who contacts parents who are just learning of their infant's handicap.

Although parents' reactions often are mixed when they first meet with other parents, "many of them are just so grateful" to have another parent to relate to, Rod said.

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