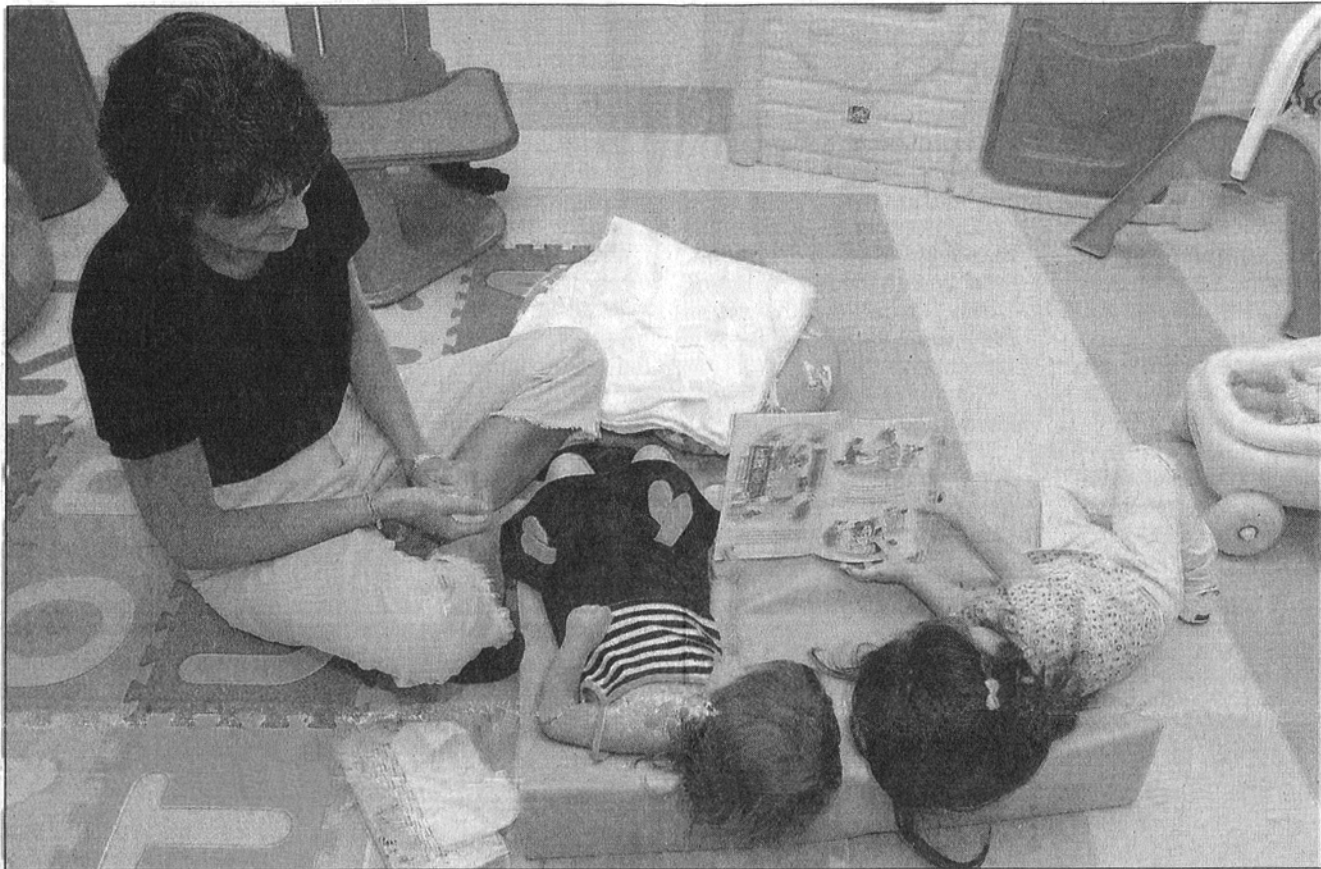


'It's been a lifesaver'



PHOTOS BY EILEEN MARIE SAMELSON/ORLANDO SENTINEL

**Fun with books.** Laurie Haas of Pediatric Health Choice reads a book with Sarah Skolnick, 2, and Cheyenne Dancause, 3.

# Day care gives lives back

## Center for disabled helps families

By **PURVETTE A. BRYANT**  
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

DAYTONA BEACH — Dawn Lacey loves her newfound freedom.

More than a year ago, driving to the corner grocery store to buy a gallon of milk was a huge hassle.

The stay-at-home mom had cared for her disabled son 24 hours a day since his birth. Baby sitters often weren't available, and home-health nurses weren't always reliable.

It was a wearying job that has suddenly paid off — not with money, but with the gift of time.

A Daytona Beach day-care center for severely handicapped children and young adults has allowed parents such as Lacey to go back to college or work to help their families make ends meet.

Pediatric Health Choice gives these moms and dads a break from the constant care a disabled person needs. Each morning, parents drop off their kids — ranging in age from newborns



**On the move.** Cathy Bevenger, a physical therapy assistant, snuggles with Shawn Lieby, 11, after rolling him around at the Daytona center, to his delight.



**Waiting patiently.** Sarah Skolnick, 2, will get her breakfast from registered nurse Nancy Phelan through a feeding tube.

to 21 years old — at 125 Executive Circle. Workers there take vital signs and then usher people into a spacious and colorful playroom.

Nurses, physical therapists and two administrators operate the facility,

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# Instructors work closely with kids

**CARE** FROM HI

which opened a year ago and is the sixth site operated by Pediatric Health Choice Inc., a Tampa health-care company. More are planned in the Ocala and Gainesville areas.

On average, the Volusia center cares for 12 to 15 children daily. Teachers instruct students one-on-one in small classrooms.

Lacey's 5-year-old son, Tyler, has cerebral palsy and chronic lung disease and is confined to a motorized wheelchair.

"It's been a lifesaver," said Lacey, who is going to college to become an ultrasound technician. "I have a dependable place to take him. He's pretty dependent on me for just about everything.

"Since he's been here, he's only been in the hospital once this year. It's because of the care they provide. They know the signs when he gets sick. They're able to catch it quickly enough."

Twenty-two children and young adults are enrolled at Pediatric Health Choice, which is open Monday through Friday from 6:30 a.m. to 6 p.m. Of those, 75 percent are fed through tubes, said Laurie Haas, administrator of the facility.

Because the center offers physical therapy and occupational and speech therapy, parents don't have to make an extra trip for medical services, said Beth Spano, the center's director of nursing.

The center adjusts to the needs of the parents by allowing them to drop off their children every day or just a few days a week, Haas said. Officials did not want to reveal specific costs but said they vary widely depending on how much time and care a person needs. People pay through a variety of means, including

Medicaid, private insurance and cash.

The Volusia day-care facility is a drop in the bucket when compared with the demand for these services, health officials say. The need for more day-care centers is great, said Ripple Dhillon, president of United Cerebral Palsy of Central Florida, which provides services for 1,000 children and families in seven counties.

About 220 children are cared for at the UCP's five day-care centers in Central Florida, she said.

Whether a child's disability is mild or severe, Dhillon said, all parents need a break.

"Parents who come to us are simply exhausted when they bring in their child," Dhillon said. "You can't call the neighborhood baby sitter to come watch your child."

At the Volusia center, parents who drop off their kids smother them with affection before leaving. Dwayne Wilson, 44, kissed his 7-year-old daughter, Melissa, on the cheek before he left the center one day.

Since birth, Melissa has had cerebral palsy. Wilson said he cares for her during the day and works at night. His wife works during the day and takes over the evening shift.

The day-care center allows him to rest more and build up his lawn service, Wilson said.

"Whenever I need to do something in the daytime, I can bring her here," Wilson said. "Since she's been coming here, the movement in her limbs and arms has been good.

"Socially, I think it's good for Melissa. It allows her to have a life of her own and be around other kids with similar conditions like hers."

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