



Staff and parents at the Clepington Primary School autism unit.

Extra help needed

AFTER deciding the children who study in the autism unit at Dundee's Clepington Primary School would benefit from extra facilities, a group of mums have decided to take matters into their own hands, writes Stuart Johnstone.

The education department at Dundee City Council already provides what the mums describe as "generous" funding to kit out the autism unit. Some parents, however, have taken the extra step of getting together to raise more cash to provide additional items which will help make life easier for their children.

One of the mums, Mandy Yilmaz, explained, "Autism is a lifelong developmental disorder, which affects communication, socialisation and flexibility of thought.

"What this means is that our children will never get better.

They see the world differently, but we never really understand how. Some of them don't speak, some of them won't even allow us to cuddle them.

"The education department has been very helpful, but there is always so much that the children need, so we decided to take the bull by the horns and started fund-raising ourselves.

"We want to buy equipment which will give them visual, tactile and auditory stimulation. Abnormal sensory sensitivity is common in individuals with autism and often means that one or more of the senses can be affected.

"Ordinary sensations which we all take for granted, such as sound and touch, can be perceived as unpleasantly intense or may not be recognised at all by our children."

Another mum, Wilma Lilburn,

said. "We are in the process of organising events to raise cash and the first priority for us is to raise the money for a sensory room for the children to be housed within the autism unit.

"After that, depending on how things go, we will continue to fund-raise for other equipment too."

Sue Han, who runs the autism unit, added. "The children really benefit from following the set curriculum. However, they struggle to transfer the things they learn to a real-life situation.

"We try to put the lessons into a wider context to help them understand the world better.

"We at the school are fully supportive of the mums' efforts. A sensory room would be an extremely useful asset for the unit and would make a real difference to the children."

Radical detox for drug abusers

FOR Stuart Brindley, overcoming a quarter-of-a-century of drug addiction was never going to be easy, writes Stuart Johnstone.

He recognised that to drive away the relentless demons which had dominated his life for so long, he would have to find a radical and uncompromising solution.

Eventually he found what he was looking for, but it wasn't anything and anywhere he had been expecting.

A chance meeting with a voluntary worker introduced Stuart to a radical detox programme, which is based in the Thamkrabok Buddhist monastery in Thailand.

Now Stuart works with voluntary organisation Alba-Thai, which comes under the umbrella of the Dundee Drugs and AIDS Project. Alba-Thai was set up to support people and help them go through the Thamkrabok Natural Herbal Detox process and, as Stuart did, beat their addiction once and for all.

The programme has been the subject of media scrutiny lately, after Libertines singer Pete Dinklage abandoned the programme after only a few days, describing the process as one of fear and torture.

Stuart scoffs at this suggestion. However, he does not sugar-coat the process. "I found it horrendous," he said. "Every day I wanted to quit. It was a very tough experience and I often wondered if I could get through it.

"I think a lot of it comes down to belief. When I was an addict I believed in drugs, but going to the monastery, I believed that I wanted to quit and I knew the monks were there to help me.

"It is a harsh programme, there is no doubt about it, but I got through it and in the two-and-a-half years since I left

Thailand, I have not gone back to drugs."

Since the monastery at Thamkrabok was founded in 1957, more than 100,000 addicts from around the world have had treatment there.

Three Dundee men have successfully completed the Thamkrabok detox program since May 2002. With the support, guidance and financial assistance of Dundee Drugs and AIDS Projects, Alba-Thai in its earliest stages was able to support these men.

This alternative detox programme consists of the taking of a sacred vow, a promise never again to become addicted. For the first five days of a 28-day schedule the patient drinks a herbal mixture, which induces vomiting, and takes up to 15 litres of water to help detoxify the body.

There are also herbal saunas, which further help physical purification.

Basic instructions on how to meditate are given on request and there is meditation once a day. A support worker accompanies each person during their experience at Thamkrabok.

Alba-Thai, which aims to support six people a year on the programme, will also provide aftercare and support for up to 12 months.

"I know lots of people who would be willing to go through the process," said Stuart.

"There is a willingness in a lot of addicts to overcome their problems, but the stumbling block is money.

"The programme itself costs nothing. The only cash outlay is for travel and it is an expensive business. There are plenty of people who would benefit from the programme, the only hurdle is the financial one."

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