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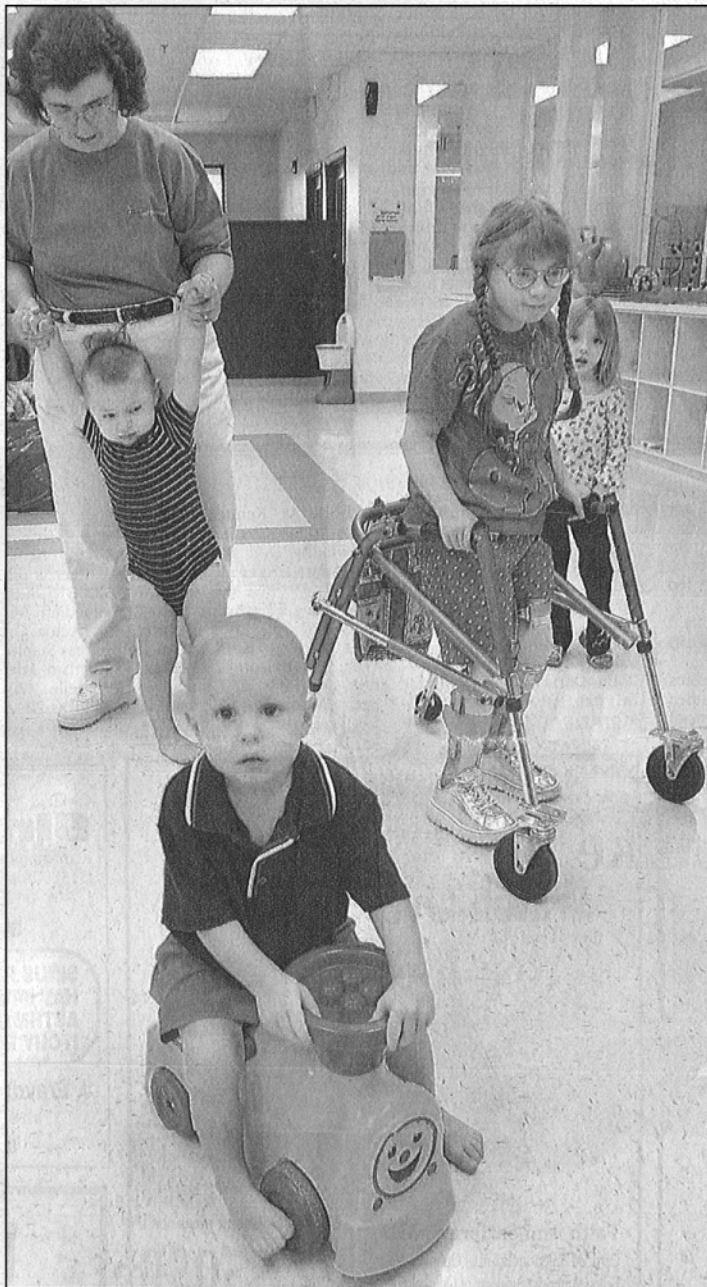
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STAR-BANNER

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SECTION D

Special care



Pediatric center is a haven for children with medical needs

By MARIAN RIZZO

STAFF WRITER

At first glance, it looks like a typical day care. Colorful plastic toys spill out of cubicles along the wall. A television displays "Sesame Street" characters belting out the song "We Are All Earthlings."

A toddler scoots across the room dragging a stuffed dog behind him, while other children sit on the floor playing. They don't appear to have any special needs.

But they do.

Every four hours, little 18-month-old Devon, who has cystic fibrosis, gets medication to open his lungs. Four-year-old Kevin, who suffers from Prune Belly Syndrome, has to be tube-fed. James is developmentally delayed and had to learn how to eat. And, Allison goes from bed to wheelchair to walker.

The children are clients of Prescribed Pediatric Extended Care, a medical center in Ocala. PPEC (pronounced "pee-peck") centers are not classified as day cares. These facilities take in children from birth to age 20 who are medically challenged and give them

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PHOTOS BY DOUG ENGLE/STAR-BANNER

Prescribed Pediatric Extended Care is a day health facility in Cala Hills that offers skilled nursing care for children with medical conditions such as diabetes, leukemia and cerebral palsy. Above, Sandra Jefferson helps 18-month-old Devon walk as Josh, 2, and Allison, 10, play. At right, Jefferson comforts Elyssa, 4, at the center last week.

Skilled nurses, social time lessen parents' stress

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personalized nursing care throughout the day.

The Ocala center has a full staff of nurses, plus independent contractors who provide speech, occupational and physical therapy. The Ocala center, which is open 12 hours a day, is the seventh PPEC facility in the state. Other centers are in Daytona, Orlando, Lakeland, Sarasota, Tampa and St. Petersburg.

Linda Wilson, a registered nurse and administrator of the Ocala center, said it's a two-fold plan. Children with medical needs get close supervision, and they get to socialize with other children like themselves.

"You know how some special needs kids think of themselves as oddities?" Wilson said. "Here, they're normal. Here, they don't even worry about it because everybody comes here with something. I just know there are so many kids here in

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Deborah Frazee

Pediatric Health Choice

Marion County that could use this facility. They don't have to be isolated from their peers."

The center runs like a

well-oiled machine. If a medical emergency occurs, one nurse evaluates the child's needs while someone else dials 911 or phones the child's parents and pediatrician. Cost is dependent upon the level of care needed. Most of the clients are covered by Medicaid or private insurance. The parent, physician, pharmacy and nursing staff work together for the benefit of the child, Wilson said.

"Everything we do here is by doctor's order," she said. "It's not just changing diapers. It's skilled nursing care."

Marion Pediatrics pediatrician Dr. Yves-Lande Pierre has several patients who attend the Ocala health center. Their conditions vary from bad asthma to congenital heart disease, from developmental delays to feeding problems.

"We know that they're getting equal care and getting everything they should be getting while they're sick, to a certain extent," Pierre said. "One little guy who we had in the hospital recently was able to go there, and his mom was able to go back to work and feel OK about leaving him and that he would get the medicines he needed.

"That's what's so attractive about it. You knew they were getting the care they would get if they were in the hospital, without being in the hospital."

Linda Nikolajski, a spokeswoman for Munroe Regional Medical Center, also sees the day health center as a positive step in the health-care industry.

"That's been needed here a long time, and this is the first one," Nikolajski said.

"With this program, parents have the opportunity to have their children cared for in a safe and professional environment while they are at work. I'm excited for the community to have that."

The idea is to provide long-term health care as well as intermittent services, said Deborah Frazee, vice president of clinical services for Pediatric Health Choice, a Tampa-based private, for-profit organization that owns the seven centers



PHOTOS BY DOUG ENGLE/STAR-BANNER

Elyssa and Josh watch Allison dance to the beat of an '80s tune.



Triston, 2, sits on the lap of Celeste Niner, the director of nursing at Prescribed Pediatric Extended Care.

and offers home-based services.

"We like to be characterized as the 7-Eleven for kids," Frazee said. "We can basically provide everything from skilled nursing to therapy. We like to maximize children's potential, not dwell on their limitations."

As far as parents are concerned, the day center alleviates the stress of caring for a child 24/7.

Marianne Prout knows what it's like.

Her adopted daughter, Allison, has cerebral palsy and needs daily injections for diabetes. At the center, Allison's medical needs are met, plus she gets

educational instruction from teachers sent by Marion County Public Schools.

And, she plays.

"Allison never was in a day care before," Prout said. "She never was even with a baby sitter. She really loves it. She's happy every day. And I have the whole day to myself now."

Teachers who are trained to work with various levels of disability go to the center two to four hours a week. Paula Barnard, director of exceptional student education for Marion County schools, said the center is a good alternative for children whose medical condition

prevents them from going to school.

"Think about it," she said. "This is a wonderful answer to so many needs of so many parents and children."

"The children have the opportunity to be with other children, and the parents can go to work and have the peace of mind knowing that their children are going to get an education. So, we welcome it."

For information about Pediatric Health Choice day health center, call 873-7247.

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