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# Local

## Research on the road

### NSU to embed team in therapy programs

BY SUSANNAH BRYAN  
Staff writer

SUNRISE — For 300 special-needs kids and their families, the Children's Ability Center at JAFCO is like a home away from home.

The one-stop shop for therapy, child enrichment and respite care will become a lab of sorts for two researchers from Nova Southeastern University

working to determine which programs work — and which don't.

They'll share the results nationwide in hopes of guiding other centers dedicated to helping families raising children who have autism, spina bifida, cerebral palsy and other developmental disabilities.

The research team includes professors Marcelo Castro, Angela Yehl and two research assistants.

"We're embedding researchers in the setting where services are being provided," Castro said. "Most subjects would come to the university. This is the university coming to the service

provider so we can learn what works. That gives you a huge advantage."

JAFCO is funding the initiative with the help of benefactors who donated more than \$100,000 for the yearlong research project, said Sarah Franco, the center's executive director.

"We're very excited about entering this world of research," Franco said. "We think we're helping. But how do we really know? Nonprofits don't always have the chance to do research to understand what our strengths are and where we can improve. We're hoping

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### NSU

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the research will help us help as many families as we can."

The Children's Ability Center, at 5100 Nob Hill Road in Sunrise, serves clients from birth to age 22. The center was designed for the entire family, with the second floor reserved for parents who want to watch their child receiving therapy or playing on the first floor.

Programs include social skills and life training; music, pet and art therapy; physical, occupational,

speech and behavioral therapy; and extended respite care that allows parents to get away for anywhere from two hours a day to two weeks out of the year.

"Our focus is not to find a cure for autism, but to really focus on the family," Franco said. "While other entities are looking for the cure and the cause, we are trying to help families find a way to cope."

The identities of the families who agree to participate in the research will be kept confidential, as required by law, said Castro, a clinical psychologist with a doctorate in special education.

"One thing we will look at is whether the services decrease the stress on parents," Castro said. "We'll work with these parents before they get the service, watch how they receive the service and then interview them afterward."

By the end of next year, the research team plans to submit research papers to child development and educational journals. JAFCO will also share the findings on its website.

To find out more about the research project, call JAFCO at 954-315-7033.

sbryan@sunsentinel.com or  
954-356-4554