

Flora offers ray of hope for autistic

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Radke. She asked Turner to try to put together the talking computer. "He wants to communicate and knows the machine will communicate his needs. If you don't talk, you're out of the world," she said.

She added that three or four students are now working consistently with the computer and making good progress. She predicted 20 or 25 students in the program, which includes autistic students from all of Wayne County, will eventually use the unit.

TURNER EXPLAINED the system consists of a computer display screen, a voice synthesizer and a touch panel. A photo sheet he calls a "menu" is placed over the touch panel. On one menu may be pictures of foods. Another will show children at various kinds of work or play. They have been collected by staff members, who sometimes have had to search high and low for shots of carrots or a toilet.

Each time the menu is replaced by another. Ms. Radke must change the data file in the computer.

Turner said that many have been trying to adapt computers to the needs of the handicapped. In fact, he has been involved on one for cerebral palsy students. But as far as he knows it is the first time it has been adapted for use by autistic persons.

To finance the computer project, the Garden City Lions donated \$2,000. They will provide an additional \$1,000 to pay for portable units.

"Once you see these kids, you know help is needed," said Lawrence Houff, club president.

The Redford Suburban League donated \$1,500 to the cost of the initial units and will add \$1,000 for the personal computers.

"Our members voted to assist because it is a worthwhile project," noted Amy Hoffman, president of the league. "Autism has not had the attention that the retarded have been getting, and this might be a breakthrough for them."

FOR THOMAS and Ruth Flora, the fact that some day soon their son will have his own portable computer, is an exciting thought in lives otherwise overshadowed by considerable despair and feelings of helplessness.

It is a story of difficulties over having their son's unusual behavior diagnosed correctly. It was finally called autism at the Institute for the Study of Mental Retardation and Related Disabilities in Ann Arbor.

Raising an autistic child also meant the anguish of reading so-called autistic behavior books telling them that autism is caused by unloving parents. It has meant dressing their son in bright colors so that if they lose him in a crowd, they can find him again. It has also meant times when they blamed each other for Doug's condition.

"It's hard to live with," said Flora.

"But you learn to live with it. It is something you have to accept. He's your child. You can't turn him out." Mrs. Flora indicated the boy's self-help skills were learned early. But these skills along with skating and swimming took a long time for him to learn.

"Learning to ride a bike took him many more years than it would take a normal child," she said. "He picked up a lot by watching his sister Angel ride her bike."

She added that some of their friends are "incredulous" at what the Floras have put up with through the years because of their autistic child.

"You make your circle of friends smaller," she explained. "It is based on their acceptance of Doug. The friends we have now totally include him."

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