

## Editor's Column

### Dr. Kitahara's school for autistic children

By Bernard Rimland, Ph.D.

Musashino is a quiet eastern suburb of Tokyo. In Musashino is a complex of buildings known as the Higashi Gakuen (School). Attending the Higashi School, more or less integrated with their 1300 normal classmates, are 500 autistic children. In all likelihood, the Higashi School program for autistic children is the largest in the world. It is also, very probably, one of the best in the world.

I was fortunate enough to be one of a team of four American psychologists sent to Tokyo to study the Higashi School by the Boston Trust for Autism, a group of American parents whose autistic children are students at the Higashi School. The American parents were impressed with the improvement they saw in their children, and wanted an independent assessment of the school by psychologists regarded as knowledgeable about autism.

The Higashi School was started in 1964 as a small private school for normal children by Kiyo Kitahara, who remains as the school's director and principal. When a few Japanese mothers approached Dr. Kitahara to ask if she would admit their autistic children, she agreed, since there were no alternatives for the children. The school now has 1800 students from kindergarten through high school, including the 500 autistic students, about 30 of whom are Americans.

My colleagues (Gail McGee, Chris Roland and Todd Risley) and I were skeptical at first. Were the children really autistic? Were they severe cases? Was the reported improvement real? After a few days, we quickly became believers. The children were in fact autistic, some very severe cases, and they were getting along remarkably well. We were surprised and pleased to learn that Dr. Kitahara and her staff had independently developed technologies that were as good as, and in some ways better than, those developed by hundreds of U.S. autism researchers over several decades.

Videotapes were available of several very severely autistic American youngsters. One three-year-old midwestern girl was anorexic. A tube had been inserted into her abdomen so she could be "fed". The incision had become infected, and her parents had brought the child to the Higashi School in despair. A four-year-old boy from the east coast was shown beating his head with both hands—bloody sores had opened. Our earlier contact with the parents of these children confirmed—if confirmation was necessary—what the videos showed. Both

of these children were getting along with few visible problems at the Higashi School during our visit.

The most striking difference between typical U.S. behavior modification programs and the Kitahara program was the continuous involvement of the children in group activities, as opposed to the "one on one" emphasis in the U.S. I now believe we Americans have been too devoted to the Helen Keller model, which, it turns out, may be better suited to students who are blind and deaf than who are autistic, even though autistics can undoubtedly benefit, and often benefit considerably, from one-on-one training. (I was an early and strong advocate of the Helen Keller model.)

By engaging the autistic children in group marching, dancing, gymnastics and other activities, with several normal Japanese youngsters serving as role models and helpers for each autistic child, the deficits of the autistic children were greatly reduced. The social rewards of being active participants turned out to be as reinforcing as, or perhaps more so than, M&Ms.

Another source of the power in the Higashi program is the remarkable energy and dedication of the Japanese teachers. Sixty-hour weeks seem to be the norm, yet morale is high. The teachers wear sweat suits and running shoes, and really burn their calories! Teachers constantly prompt, encourage, and guide the children, keeping continuously involved, with visibly good results. (Long hours seem to be a Japanese specialty. I was amazed, on being driven through downtown Tokyo after 9 p.m., to see hundreds of office buildings ablaze with lights, full of workers at their desks.) The children are also kept very active.

A very important aspect of the Higashi program is the grand public performance, including all the students and teachers, which is part of the year-end celebration. By American standards, the time and effort going into these productions is extraordinary—one would think terribly extravagant. But the performances provide a means for directing and focusing student and teacher energy and attention to a valued common goal. Unlike American school performances, which are generally the work of a few, the Japanese shows involve everyone, including the autistics, who do remarkably well when they are caught up in the teamwork and excitement.

The school emphasizes the development of unrecognized talent in its autistic students. Two American teenage boys performed for us very creditably on the piano, while another who was virtually without

speech sang popular songs (albeit a bit stiffly) at the school assembly.

Space does not permit a fuller description of the Higashi School and its program, but a report is being prepared by myself and the colleagues who visited Tokyo with me. When the report is ready for distribution, its availability will be announced in this newsletter.

In September, 1987, a branch of the Higashi School will open in Boston. We wish it well!

## ARRI is...

The ARRI is a quarterly publication designed to bring you up-to-date information from the biomedical and educational literature on autism. Our job is to search through the almost 500 articles about autism published each year in journals, and to summarize those which are of greatest interest and value to parents and professionals.

The reviews appearing in ARRI are written so they may be understood by lay readers, while yet containing information needed by professionals. Each issue will feature one or two areas of autism research; for instance, this issue offers current information about Rett Syndrome, a subgroup of autism, while a large portion of our previous issue was devoted to articles about research into Fragile X syndrome.

Funds for our first year of publication have been provided by a grant from the Hasbro Children's Foundation, enabling us to send our first four issues at no cost to parents and professionals throughout the world who are concerned with the care of autistic children. We hope to make the ARRI so valuable to its readers that we will be able to continue on a subscription basis for the second year and beyond.

### Forthcoming editorial articles in the ARRI:

- Holding therapy
- The fenfluramine controversy
- Autism research in Japan
- Vitamin B6 research
- Drugs: evaluation by parents
- Where have all the schizophrenic children gone?