

Two steps forward, none back

Jessie Anderson and Stephen Manning report on a scheme which encourages disabled pupils to learn by moving rather than just sitting behind a desk

Bradley, a severely disabled 10-year-old, is taking his first tentative steps back to school after a long period of absence. He is anchored in his gait-trainer, a supporting mobile framework, and has to be moved every inch of the way by a helper at Mayfield, a community special school in Whitehaven, Cumbria. At first he looks totally oblivious to his surroundings, yet within the hour he is moving his "trainer" independently and taking an interest in various objects in the room.

Around nine years ago, Mayfield became the first school in England to adopt Move (Mobility Opportunities Via Education), an activity-based programme that combines education and therapy to teach disabled children the core skills of sitting, standing and walking. Fourteen of Mayfield's 98 pupils, including Bradley, are on the programme, run in the UK by the Disability Partnership.

"The premise of Move is that children, especially those with physical or learning difficulties, learn by moving, rather than being sat at a desk and told things," says Christine Shaw, development director of Move Scotland. "From a school's perspective, it is a different way of looking at things."

"We want to convince educationalists that movement is not something to be tacked on to the end of the day for half an hour when the therapist is there, but is something that should be actively incorporated into lessons."

Children, especially those with learning difficulties, learn better by moving, rather than being sat at a desk and told things

Move was created 20 years ago by Linda Bidabe, an American special needs teacher, and confronts conventional wisdom by suggesting that a child need not necessarily crawl before walking. The programme works as a collaboration. The teacher and physiotherapist discuss with the parents what the child's goals should be and what skills are required to reach those goals. Playing football with friends, for example, might be an aim that will get the child motivated.

Only two local authorities in England – Derbyshire and Kent – and nine in Scotland, offer the programme in their schools, but many more have accessed it independently.

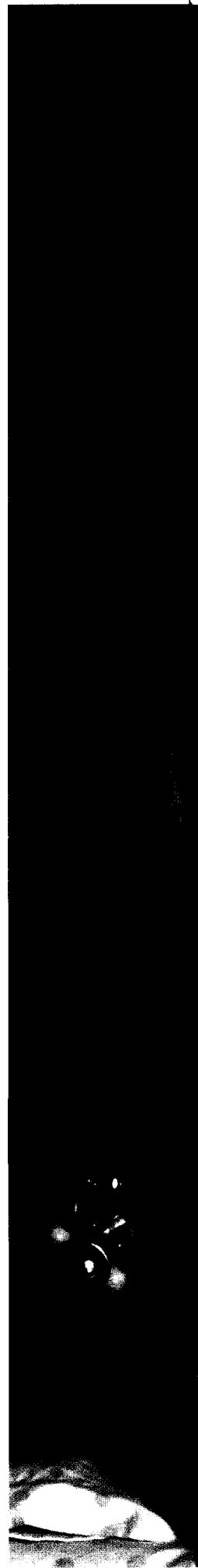
Currently 139 schools in the UK run the programme and there are eight regional centres

of excellence. More than 2,000 children have used the scheme – about 1.5 per cent of the country's 110,000 severely disabled children.

The aim is to get children out of their supporting equipment and sitting in ordinary chairs. Children who become independent walkers "graduate" from the programme.

"We celebrate what they have achieved," says Lynne Brownrigg, Mayfield's deputy head and sports co-ordinator. "It is a spectrum of ability, not disability. We try to give them the basic skills to lead independent lives. A child in control of their life becomes more mentally well adjusted." ■

A short course to become a Move practitioner costs £250, visit www.move-europe.org.uk



Helping hand: Leslie