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Crofton specialist uses robot to help children with developmental disorders

By THERESA WINSLOW, Staff Writer

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Sometimes, a big smile goes a long way when it comes to treating children.



Arienne Teeple – For The Capital

Neurodevelopmental specialist Dr. Carole Samango-Sprouse works with Dylan to push buttons that make CosmoBot move back and forth and side to side during an office visit last week.

VIDEO



CosmoBot

Dr. Carole Samango-Sprouse explains the benefits of using robots such as CosmoBot with children who have sex chromosome disorders.

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Especially when it comes from a 14-inch-high blue robot that looks a bit like a cartoon character.

"I thought it was pretty neat," Kristal Falcone of Westerly, R.I., said after she watched her 4-year-old, Dylan, interact with CosmoBot last week at the Crofton offices of Dr. Carole Samango-Sprouse.

"I can see (children like Dylan) be more willing to work with something like that, versus a speech therapist or myself or my husband," she added. "If he thinks it's a game, he's more willing to talk."

Samango-Sprouse is a neurodevelopmental specialist and international authority on children with sex chromosome disorders.

Dylan, who has been coming to see Samango-Sprouse since he was a year old, is a "mosaic 49er," meaning he has some cells with two extra X chromosomes and some with three extra X's, not the typical 46 XY complement. Because of this, he has some developmental difficulties, including a severe speech delay.

"For all kids with severe speech and language delays, engaging them is a challenge," Samango-Sprouse said. "Boys in particular can be drawn to robots."

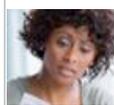
Dylan and another patient, 7-year-old Brandon Cote of British Columbia,

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Canada, spent about an hour moving CosmoBot back and forth and side to side by pressing four large, colored buttons on a console called "Mission Control."

Samango-Sprouse, who only has access to the robot at certain times of the year, can also use Mission Control with a computer program, and she does that more frequently. She hopes to have a

CosmoBot full time by next year.

She's been using robots for about three years, and has been conducting studies of their effectiveness with special needs children together with CosmoBot's manufacturer, AnthroTronix Inc. of Silver Spring.

Samango-Sprouse is the only local specialist AnthroTronix has partnered with, though the company has worked with Mount Washington Pediatric Hospital in Cheverly and researchers at Catholic University in Washington, D.C. CosmoBot is also currently in a study at the Mayo Clinic, said Charlotte Safos, AnthroTronix program director.

"One of the beauties of the robot is that children will work much longer, much harder and be more focused to get the robot to do something for them," said Samango-Sprouse, who also works with autistic children and uses CosmoBot with them as well.

Besides helping with speech difficulties, CosmoBot can assist children in developing their motor planning and social skills, and even movement. Samango-Sprouse said one of the reasons CosmoBot is so effective is that it's far more predictable in its actions than people are. Plus, it's closer to the children's own size than adults, she said.

"In all honesty, we have results better than expected," she added.

Samango-Sprouse assesses 49ers and others at her Neurodevelopmental Diagnostic Center for Young Children. She also formed The Focus Foundation, a nonprofit organization aimed at raising awareness about these kinds of disorders.

"We love her," Falcone said. "She's the only authority on Dylan's condition. There's no doubt in my mind that without her guiding us and instructing us, he wouldn't be doing as well as he's doing. We always find it amazing that we can meet with her for two or three hours and she's able to pinpoint everything."

A moving experience

"When the robot's ready, are you going to play? Shall we make him go backwards?" Samango-Sprouse asked Dylan.

He was a bit reluctant to work with CosmoBot at first, but as soon as he began pressing the buttons that got the robot moving, he laughed and smiled continuously.

"It's pretty neat," said his father, Kris Falcone. "Dylan's still a little young, but he gets the colors pretty good."

Brandon's mother, Karen Cote, was impressed, too. Because he's older than Dylan, Brandon, who is also a "49er," was able to make CosmoBot perform more complicated sequences of movements.

Like the Falcones, Cote has been taking Brandon to see Samango-Sprouse since he was a year old. Cote said she uses the expert's evaluation to develop Brandon's educational program with the school system back home.

At one point, Samango-Sprouse had both boys working with CosmoBot at once, having

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Brandon tell Dylan which buttons to push on the control console, as Brandon's sister, Trinda, 5, looked on and smiled.

"This is a perfect interaction," she proclaimed. "(Children) will do things that may be very challenging for them with the reward of the robot. It's our premium reward. It's our extraordinary motivator."

Afterward, Dylan walked over to his father and gave him a big hug.

"She's great," Kris Falcone said of Samango-Sprouse. "She knows her stuff with the kids, that's for sure."

For more information on Samango-Sprouse and her practice, call 443-223-7323 or visit the Web site at www.thefocusfoundation.org.

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