



Christine Schollenberg, executive director of the Children's Rehabilitation Foundation



Shawna Semenowich

A centre of hope

A local organization offers a place for children with special needs to realize their full potential.

by Andrea Danelak photography by Ian McCausland

A large, unassuming building blends right in with the other structures on Wellington Crescent, only there is one major difference: this is a place of healing and of hope. The Rehabilitation Centre for Children (RCC) is a community-based healthcare facility that provides services to thousands of children with special needs in Manitoba and surrounding areas each year, helping them realize their maximum potential.

"We are trying to maximize participation in whatever is important to the child and the family," says Cheryl Susinski, executive director of the RCC. "We put the necessary supports into place so they can do what they want to do, whether that's at school, at home, on a sports team or in a daycare."

The one-stop centre offers an array of family-centred programs and services, education, research and innovative technologies to ensure every aspect of a child's condition and well being is covered. "We have a variety of clinics that are focused around specific issues or specific diagnoses, where we bring a multidisciplinary team of providers together to address all aspects of care," says Susinski, who has acted

as the centre's executive director for the past nine years. "We're set up around specialty clinics but we're a team of people who come together around specific issues."

The list of programs and services available at the RCC is exhaustive, with staff treating conditions in areas spanning from orthopedics to neurology to spina bifida and more. There are also a number of specialized clinics like the Feeding Clinic, which provides assessment and treatment of feeding concerns in children with dysphagia, physical, neurological or developmental disabilities.

Children who have lost a limb or are born without a limb can access the services of the Juvenile Amputee Clinic, and the RCC also boasts a prosthetics and orthotics program to help the children lead as normal a life as possible. "We actually have a manufacturing shop that manufactures those for the child," says Susinski. "We do the entire process, right from the assessment through to the manufacturing to the fitting." The shop even offers the children their choice of design for their prosthetics.

Another distinctive offering is the centre's

Augmentative and Alternative Communication Program, where speech language pathologists assist children with physical disabilities who have difficulty communicating using speech.

"There are children who can't speak because of physical limitations—they have an intention to speak and want to communicate but their body doesn't allow them to," says Susinski. "The other group of kids don't really have the intention to communicate with you—they aren't looking at you, they don't know what they want to communicate or if they do, they have no idea how to." The centre can help bring the children up to the development level where they want to communicate and can use their speech, whether they need an assistive device or not.

Similarly, another unique service the RCC offers is the Assistive Technology Clinic. Because children living with physical disabilities often require specialized equipment to aid in mobility, seating, standing and the activities of daily living, RCC staff design and create new devices as well as modify or customize existing commercial devices so the children can use them.



Cheryl Susinki, executive director of the Rehabilitation Centre for Children

"Any kind of adaptive equipment that a child needs is brought in and reviewed by a team... we can actually fabricate equipment from scratch or adapt commercial equipment to include things like feeding systems, walkers, standing trays," says Susinki of the RCC's Mechanical Design and Services Program.

Shauna Semenowich's eight-year-old daughter Silver, a client of the centre from the age of six months, uses a specialized Freedom Concepts bike, which can often run thousands of dollars.

"Specialized equipment is extremely expensive and lots of times, families can't afford it, especially if they need more than one piece," says Semenowich, who was originally referred to the RCC by Silver's pediatrician.

It's thanks to the centre's fundraising arm—the Children's Rehabilitation Foundation—that families like the Semenowichs can get the specialized equipment they need. "We get requests then we look for the funding," says Christine Schollenberg, executive director of the Children's Rehabilitation Foundation. "The list is always growing and the need is always there. We always have children waiting for equipment."

The foundation, which raises money through its events, from grants and by private donation, has been able to provide Silver with a walker and the bike to help her with her mobility and increase her muscle tone.

"Now she can walk on her own instead of me carrying her and she can ride the bike on her own, too," says Semenowich, who used to visit

the centre weekly so her daughter could use its physiotherapy and occupational therapy services. "It's a rear steering bike, so her legs are attached to the pedals and go around while I'm pushing her. Now, because we've done it so much, she's strong enough that she can actually pedal herself."

Stories like Silver's are what make the job so rewarding, say staff members of both the centre and the foundation. "The first time you see a child ride a specialized bike, that is something that just makes you want to cry," says Schollenberg. "I've had to pull my car over when I see a child riding one of the bikes, whether we funded it or not. What every other child really takes for granted, these children don't." Adds Susinski, "I'm inspired daily by the stories of these children and their families."

In addition to the services at the actual centre, the RCC also delivers its services in homes, schools and daycares throughout Manitoba with its rural clinics and outreach programs. The Provincial Outreach Therapy for Children Program, for example, provides occupational therapy and physiotherapy to children and their families in their natural environments. "We try to go out to where the child is as much as we can," says Susinski. "Two-thirds of our visits are done out into the community."

New to the RCC is a program focused on wellness and therapeutic recreation, which offers adapted programming such as art, gardening, cooking and music. Another of its components, the Active Living Program, lets families take out specialized equipment—everything from bikes to bocce balls—at no cost to them. "If

you have a child with a disability or special needs, recreation equipment seems to take the backburner because you're paying for so many other things," says Schollenberg.

In the near future, the RCC will be able to offer even more services to children and youth, as it will soon be moving into a new \$16.7 million facility for the Specialized Services for Children and Youth project, of which it will be one of the co-locating services. Expected to open in 2012, the new facility will hopefully bring with it a reduction in the waiting lists that span the centre so more families can access its services. "I would definitely recommend the RCC for anyone who has a child with a disability. They were really willing to help right away and gave us a lot of support services," says Semenowich.

Until the new centre is open, staff continue to try to raise awareness of the centre and the many ways in which it helps children with special needs. "People always say, 'I never knew this went on here,'" says Schollenberg. "But once people come for a tour of our facility, they understand. You just cannot not understand the need."

For more information about the Rehabilitation Centre for Children or the Children's Rehabilitation Foundation, visit www.rccinc.ca or www.rccf.ca.