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Computer Project for Children with Disabilities

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There are many children with disabilities in the Chinese community. These children face many challenges. Depending on their disabilities and on whether they are recent immigrants to this country, these challenges may include physical and/or mental limitations, lack of English language proficiency, limited access to services and resources, decreased socialization opportunities, and school-related problems. Oftentimes, the parents of these children work long hours and are not aware of the various services and resources which may be available to them and their children. Many parents are also unaware of their rights and responsibilities as parents of children with disabilities. Sometimes, due to the stigma attached to having a disability, parents do not always seek out services.

The new amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) require that the individualized education program (IEP) team consider whether a child requires assistive technology and services. The term "assistive technology device" means any item, piece of equipment, or product system, whether acquired commercially off the shelf, modified, or customized, that is used to increase, maintain, or improve functional capabilities of a child with a disability. With the advent of assistive technology during the past several years and its role in assisting individuals with disabilities, the Association for Chinese Families of the Disabled, with Dr. Peter Ng's vision and leadership, agreed to sponsor the "Computing for Children with Disabilities" project. This project provides assistive technology via a home computer and ongoing bilingual computer support to help ten Chinese children with disabilities. These children were identified through the Chinatown Public Health Center and the Association for Chinese Families. They are all recent immigrants with varying disabilities, including deafness, blindness, cerebral palsy, and other physical disabilities.

Dr. Ng and I are volunteering our time to coordinate this project. Along with a volunteer group of computer professionals, college students and other volunteers were recruited to provide the in-home technical teaching and support to the children. Teams of two to three volunteers are assigned to work with each child. Team members rotate to visit and work with their assigned child about once a week. The child's parents are encouraged to be present during the weekly visits so that they will know what is being taught to their child. We have found that some of the parents themselves have been interested in learning the computer skills being taught to their children.

The teams of volunteers are resources to the families and are advocates for the children. They develop long-term and short-term goals for each child based on the child's individual needs and strengths. The overall goals for each child include:

1. promote a greater sense of independence, self-esteem, and self-confidence;
2. improve avenues of communication, decrease the sense of isolation; and
3. improve English language proficiency and academic skills.

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