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Group simplifies toys for disabled children

Volunteers lend a hand at Replay for Kids

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Plain Dealer Reporter

Jonathan Sakai is wrist-deep in bear fluff. His fingers probe for the elusive wires that trigger the stuffed, battery-operated critter to warble a chorus of Christmas tunes — over and over and over.

Sakai, of Cleveland, is among the volunteers at RePlay for Kids, a nonprofit group that repairs or adapts toys and other devices for children with disabilities.

Founded by Bill Memberg, a biomedical engineer at Case Western Reserve University, the group works with area agencies that serve such children. Memberg estimates that volunteers associated with RePlay have made more than 450 repairs and 160 modifications since 1994. More than 100 of those were in the last year.

The work is all free, saving agencies thousands of dollars a year in replacement costs.

“It’s a wonderful group,” said Kathy Zielinski, a speech pathologist for the Cuyahoga County Board of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities. “They’ve been willing to take on things from our schools as well as things from a family’s home. I’ve been so impressed with Bill.”

Without RePlay, she said, agencies would have to discard many toys too expensive to repair or replace. Zielinski also said that RePlay’s efforts give children with disabilities the chance to play with more of the toys available to their unencumbered peers.

Memberg, of Medina, was working on his master’s degree

at Case when he saw an item in The Plain Dealer listing volunteer opportunities. He signed up with the county MRDD board.

Within a few years, he and others he recruited were holding informal workshops. And by 1999, Memberg founded RePlay for Kids.

The group holds workshops year-round, most on the Case campus. But the pace picks up around the holidays. This year, in addition to toys funneled through partner agencies, RePlay volunteers are adapting toys donated by the U.S. Marines “Toys for Tots” program.

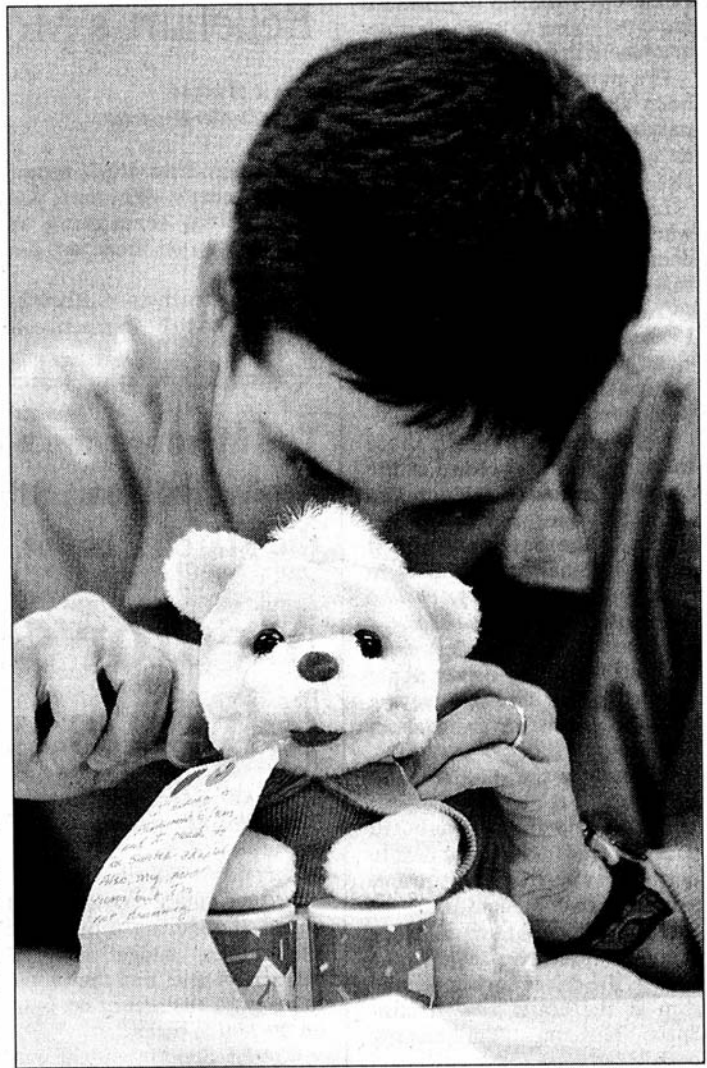
During a recent workshop, volunteer Ed Rapp, of Cleveland Heights, paused to marvel over the complex innards of a talkative Winnie-the-Pooh.

A mainstream “talking” toy may be activated by a small switch well concealed in folds of fluff — an almost impossible task for some children with disabilities. RePlay volunteers connect that switch to a much larger and more accessible external button. Or, to serve some youngsters with specific disabilities, adapted controls may respond to a puff of air or a nod.

Rapp, who has been volunteering with RePlay for about a year, said he was drawn to the group because “it seemed like a worthy cause.”

New toys, either donated directly to RePlay or to one of the service agencies, are welcome, Memberg said. The toys should be battery-operated with only one or two switches to produce the sound or movement.

RePlay operates on individual donations and small grants,



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Jonathan Sakai, a volunteer for RePlay for Kids, works on adapting a battery-operated bear for a child with disabilities.

Memberg said, adding that volunteers are always needed.

At the last workshop, Eric Sadowski, of Olmsted Township, tested the doll-sized pink motorcycle he had just adapted, celebrating as it sped down the hallway. Roger Lin, a graduate student at Case, grinned as the kangaroo he modified went through its paces.

And Memberg turned another

toy in his hands speculatively, a slow smile spreading as he observed, “Sometimes the first thing you have to do is figure out how it’s supposed to work.”

More information about RePlay for Kids is available at www.re-playforkids.org.

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