

## **The Gift of Accessibility** **Special Needs Families Receive Instantaneous Support**

One young New Haven stay-at-home mom must walk her two little ones to activities while dad uses their only car for work. Mom would like both of her children --especially her toddler with special needs -- to have access to more educational, developmental and recreational activities.

Thanks to KIDSTEPS -- a Connecticut Birth-To-Three program that is a division of SARAH Inc. -- and a \$25,000 grant from The Ronald McDonald House Charities of Connecticut and Western Massachusetts (RMHC), this family, and others like them, are enjoying computer accessibility to a world of resources.

"Many of the families of young children with special needs, particularly in these economically-challenging times, feel isolated, alone and sometimes insecure in their parenting skills," said KIDSTEPS Director Elisabeth Teller. "Often due to a lack of transportation, money, education and other resources, these families negotiate through their children's special needs with undue hardship and strain."

The grant has equipped KIDSTEPS Early Intervention professionals with nearly two dozen laptops, wireless internet access and printers that they now bring along to their weekly or monthly home visits to families. These therapists and teachers have long been teaching and assisting families of children with special needs (such as Down syndrome, Autism and Cerebral Palsy), but the technology has expedited many solutions.

"KIDSTEPS and SARAH Inc., fit like a glove with our mission," said Daniel Ashburn, President of the Ronald McDonald House Charities® of Connecticut and Western Massachusetts. "Our mission is to create, identify and support programs that directly improve the health, education and well being of children and families in Connecticut and Western Massachusetts. This KIDSTEPS program brings solutions directly to the source, effectively improving the health and well being of children."

### **Access is a gift**

On the surface, some of the connections may seem so simple. Yet, access to technology and the internet is essential.

Among other solutions, the New Haven family mentioned at the outset of this story is now using internet-generated coupons to reduce costs for everything from formula and diapers to nearby family recreation.

"The technology package has been a tremendous gift to the families we serve," said Early Intervention Specialist Mackenzie Hanna. "Not only can we help them learn about

their children's special needs, but we can facilitate timely completion of the paperwork necessary to access various community and state services."

"We are better able to teach the families how to access information and services that uniquely and directly support the development of their children," added Early Intervention Teacher Laura Gilbert. "We are able to bridge the barriers of transportation, money and education that many of these families face.

"Servicing some 400 families, we see a wide range of concerns. Two children with the same conditions, living in two different communities, might be facing very different challenges. Some parents tell us they just need coaching and guidance. They have computers and internet access and simply desire help interpreting and understanding the information they find," Gilbert said. "Others are stuck with few or no technology tools to bring the outside resources into their homes. Now, we can bring all sorts of resources right into their homes."

"Scientific and anecdotal research has shown that technology can strengthen the physical and emotional development of children with special needs, from birth to three," said Teller. "We at KIDSTEPS Birth-to-Three see firsthand what a difference these additions have made already. Long-term, we expect to continue pioneering solutions for this population."

#### **About SARAH Inc. and KIDSTEPS**

SARAH Inc. is a community service provider, headquartered in Guilford, serving individuals with disabilities in more than 40 communities across the Greater New Haven and Shoreline areas, including the Eastern Region of Connecticut, to the Rhode Island and Massachusetts borders. KIDSTEPS, a division of SARAH Inc. offering a State of Connecticut Birth-to-Three program in 27 towns including the large cities of New Haven and Norwich. Through their Family and Children's Center, they offer programs and workshops for older children and their families. The organization's work enhances personal/social development, language development and physical dexterity. For more information, visit <http://www.sarah-inc.org/> or call toll free: 877 KIDSTEP (543-7837.)

#### **About Ronald McDonald Charities (RMHC)**

Since 1988 RMHC of Connecticut and Western Massachusetts has provided more than \$6 million to over 400 non-profit organizations, helping thousands of area children lead happier, healthier and more productive lives. For more information about RMHC visit [www.rmhc-ctma.org](http://www.rmhc-ctma.org).



*KIDSTEPS Early Intervention Specialist Mackenzie Hanna (right) uses a wireless laptop to help the mom of a child with special needs quickly access internet resources for her family. The technology was provided primarily through a grant from Ronald McDonald Charities® of CT and Western MA grant.*