

# right on target

## Roberto Wirth Fund newsletter

Dear Readers,

In this issue of "Right on Target" we are pleased to announce the opening of our multisensory laboratory at the Roberto Wirth Fund. This laboratory is dedicated to deaf children with a special focus on deafblind children. It was inspired by the "Snoezelen" philosophy that helps the child use his/her senses to interact with the world, to communicate and to gain self understanding.

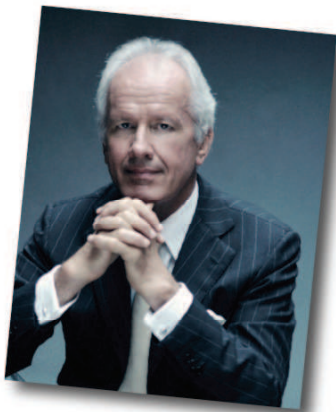
Thanks to Johnson & Johnson and its support, we were able to realize and equip this laboratory with highly specialized communication tools, equipment for the observation of children, many games and multisensory materials. The laboratory also has a space dedicated to receiving and supporting parents.

Before leaving you to read this newsletter, always full of useful information about the world of deafness and deaf-blindness, I would like to inform you of another major initiative: The Favors Roberto Wirth Fund ONLUS. With RWF Favors we hope to support our many projects. It is a small gesture, but full of meaning.

Enjoy!



Roberto E. Wirth  
President



## We help deafblind children to realize a dream ... Communicating With - Touch

Communicating With - Touch is a project that addresses deafblind children from 0 to 6 years of age and their families from all across Italy.

RWF aims to encourage the communicative and linguistic development of deaf-blind children and support their emotional and social development within the relational contexts in which they live.



In order to accomplish this RWF needs your help: every child must be followed continuously by a highly skilled multi-disciplinary team and have the right advanced technological devices available to meet their needs.

With a small contribution, you will guarantee that every deafblind child has the fundamental right to ... communicate!

For more information about how you can donate see the box on the last page of this newsletter.





# Activities and projects

## Multisensory laboratory to promote communication: a planet of touch, light, colour, sound and smell....in every sense

Roberto Wirth Fund Onlus has developed a laboratory inspired by the "Snoezelen philosophy". The laboratory is a multisensory accessible environment for deaf and deafblind children. The laboratory was made possible thanks to the great support of Johnson & Johnson who believed in our project and allowed us to take a major step forward in the world of deafblindness.

The word "Snoezelen", a contraction of Dutch verbs "snuffelen" (sniff) and "doezelen" (relax), indicates a multisensory approach that was developed from the intuition and professionalism of two psychologists and rehabilitation therapists in the Netherlands, Jan and Ad Hulsegge Verheul. The aim of the Snoezelen approach is to help the individual to perceive the world around them, starting from self and later with the skills gained through authentic experiences the individual can then grow and develop.

The core of this philosophy focuses on the senses as a channel to understand life, to communicate with the outside world and to be totally present in the "here and now". The senses are the "gateway" through which all sensations are perceived.

The laboratory consists of games, tactile materials, children's furniture and tactile/sensory equipment. It also includes tools that facilitate communication, psychological tests, and specialized technological equipment to observe and assess children. A special space has been dedicated to the reception and support of parents. The Snoezelen philosophy is at the foundation of the laboratory such as: ensuring the right atmosphere is present, the right rhythm for the exploration of the experience is provided and the use of repetitive stimuli in relation to the individual needs and reactions of the child.

At the laboratory, RWF's staff will carry out, "Communicating with Touch: an educational program for deafblind children" which aims to promote the communicative and linguistic development of deafblind children. It will also encourage their growth from a cognitive, emotional and social context.

Deafblind children are unable to use their vision and hearing or don't have the opportunity to learn by simply observing the world around them. They often have difficulty in developing a perceptual framework of the surrounding environment. Very often they don't have an adequate level of language to communicate and an accurate means of accessing non-distorted input from the environment to allow the deafblind child to develop the ability to interpret information from the external environment and interact with others. This condition can harm the overall development of the child often causing a serious delay in the process of learning and the child being at risk of experiencing emotional and social isolation.

This project provides psychological support to parents and encourages them to become conscious agents of care both in the familial and



educational spheres. Family members are in fact actively involved in all phases of the project and will be taught communication methods specific to their child's needs. This will allow them to establish a bond with their child. With psychological support and provision of a language training course to family members, it is our hope that they will be able to establish a meaningful relationship with their child both on a communicative and emotional level. The key goal will be to ensure that the child has a "communication partner" with



## A socio-cultural integration of deaf and hearing children

The Roberto Wirth Fund and the ISISS, State Institute of Specialized Education for the Deaf in Rome, in collaboration with Il Treno and Gruppo S.I.L.I.S have launched the project: "Bilingual Education in a model of integration between deaf and hearing children." Activities started on September 8th and will conclude at the end of the school year 2010/2011.

The overall objective of the project is to provide a bilingual environment (LIS - Italian Sign Language and Italian) that fosters an exchange of communication and the full integration of deaf and hearing students' at ISISS Magarotto 173 ° Circolo Didattico of Rome.

Up until this point the LIS laboratory at primary and middle school are headed by Vincenzo

Speranza, a LIS professor and expert in deaf bilingualism. Thanks to the scholarship from Roberto Wirth 2009/2010, Vincenzo Speranza has specialized at Gallaudet University, Washington DC, the only bilingual university in the world (American Sign Language and English) that is fully accessible for deaf and hard of hearing students.

The project applies the latest bilingual teaching techniques taught in the U.S., and provides guidance to deaf educators, communication assistants at ISISS, which actively collaborated in the creation of the LIS Lab.

The Laboratory LIS is divided into two phases:  
1) Intensive LIS Laboratory: for deaf and hearing children at primary and middle schools, built in the first two weeks of school;  
2) Annual LIS Laboratory: for deaf and hearing children in kindergarten, primary and middle schools, still in progress.

Bilingualism is an indispensable tool for overcoming communication barriers, promoting socio-cultural integration of deaf and hearing children. Moreover, bilingualism allows a deaf child to develop psychologically, educationally and socially. It can also help overcome the issues of lack of integration or isolation that may be due to lack of interest in activities that take place in the classroom, mistrust or aggression towards teachers, staff and classmates.

For hearing children, bilingualism can be an opportunity to learn LIS as a foreign language, a language which has the added ability to strengthen and enhance the cognitive skills of attention, discrimination and visual memory.





# Scientific articles

## The role of play in the social and cognitive development of a deaf child

The psychosocial development of deaf child requires special attention from parents and educators. In fact, the achievement of positive results leads to the development of a sense of competence and self-confidence.

Play covers a key role in achieving a positive psychosocial development in deaf children, as shown in many studies. One of the first research studies done in this area was conducted by Higginbotham and Baker in 1981. The authors conducted a comparative study on deaf and hearing children aged between 47 and 66 months. They concluded that deaf children as compared to hearing children, devoted less time to play and cooperative activities and significantly more time to solitary activities. The results of this study are not likely due to deafness itself, but to difficulties of communication and to the lack of social skills that did not allow for optimal interactions amongst deaf children

Subsequent studies confirm these initial results. In particular, Vandell and Gorge compared dyads composed of deaf children in play in dyads composed of their hearing peers in play. The results showed that deaf children initiated interactions to a greater extent than their hearing peers. However, hearing children responded to requests to play by their peers 75% of the time, while deaf children responded about 40% of the time. The authors attributed these results to the fact that deaf children were not aware and did not notice the play requests being made.

Deaf children, who use communication systems where visual space is essential, often fail to respond with gestures or signs when their eyes are

"attracted" by the objects in play. In fact, they have difficulty dividing attention between the demands of their peers and the activities in play. In particular, as they are engaged in an activity, the parallel conversation, that is so important in cooperative play is often forgotten. Hearing children have the opportunity to listen to and respond simultaneously at the same time while playing, thus developing social skills but deaf children must choose to "engage in" or "respond to" during play.

The most recent research focused on cognitive aspects play, specifically the symbolic one. It was seen; in particular, that play is a critical component in the development of thought leading to flexibility in cognitive processes and skills of abstraction. Symbolic play, in particular, incorporates reality and fiction, allowing the child to distinguish between objects and their meaning, making easier to think about the mental representations of those objects, the protagonists, of the game.

The community and the culture in where a deaf child lives, significantly influences the evolution of behaviour in play and shapes cognitive behaviour. Delays in language development and inappropriate social interactions can interfere with the acquisition and manifestation of symbolic play. In other words, the level of symbolic play that a deaf child is engaged in can act as an indicator of his/her level of language development, social behaviour characteristics and his/her cognitive abilities.

By optimizing on the techniques and strategies used in the family, this can help in the development of symbolic play and the achievement of positive results in the psychosocial process. In fact, the power of play not only improves the caregiver/child interaction in a mutually satisfying way but also facilitates the achievement of a secure bond.



## Rome joins Roberto Wirth in celebrating his 60th birthday

On a warm spring evening, family and closest of friends gathered to celebrate Roberto Wirth's 60<sup>th</sup> birthday. The festivities took place at the exceptional Hotel Hassler, located in the heart of Rome, where deaf actors, singers and belly dancers graced the evening and where hundreds of people rushed to the occasion.

Roberto Wirth thanked everyone for their participation and all the affection shown for his 60<sup>th</sup> birthday, a birthday celebration that taught the true meaning of giving.

Mr Wirth expressed, "On my 60<sup>th</sup> birthday, the smile and the serenity of deaf and deafblind children are the most beautiful gifts!", and with these words he requested that all gifts be donated to the Roberto Wirth Fund Onlus, an organization that has worked many years with passion, energy and commitment in supporting deaf and deafblind children.

During the evening, Dr Stefania Fadda, Director of the charity, announced the collaboration between RWF and of two illustrious professors: Prof. Corrado Moretti (Head of Pediatric Intensive Care University of Rome La Sapienza) and Prof. Rocco Agostino (Head of Neonatal Intensive Care of Fatebenefratelli Isola Tiberina).



The highlight of the party was the cutting of the cake, where Roberto Wirth, alongside his son and daughter, Robertino and Veruschka, blew out the candles. Simultaneously they launched 60 white balloons into the sky and offered a splendid banner greeting they had designed, to a visibly moved Roberto Wirth.

## Charlie Chaplin, "The art of silence": charity event held at the Shenker Institute

On Wednesday May 19 at the Shenker Culture Club at the Spanish Steps there was an exhibition of Natino Chirico's "Charlie Chaplin: the art of silence". It was an enchanting evening where many guests got the opportunity to visit the exhibition and admire the beautiful paintings dedicated to the famous actor.

Natino Chirico, a renowned artist of Calabrian origin, has donated one of his most wonderful works to Roberto Wirth Fund Onlus. The proceeds of the sale was allocated to the English teaching project and specifically to the English/ASL Language Lab.

The English/ ASL Language Lab is a linguistic laboratory designed to support English/ASL language learning. Both hearing and deaf students learn English and ASL in a full integrative atmosphere.

The Roberto Wirth Fund warmly thanked the Shenker Institute and Natino Chirico for their generous collaboration, one that we hope will lead to the actualization of another major project dedicated to deaf children.



## Roberto Wirth Fund Onlus Party Favors: a gesture that lasts

They are finally here! The Roberto Wirth Fund Onlus Party Favors. Now you can replace the traditional favors with a gesture of solidarity on behalf of deaf and deafblind children.

The RWF party favors are designed for any occasion: wedding, birth, baptism, communion, confirmation, 18<sup>th</sup> birthdays, graduation, silver and golden wedding anniversaries. For each event you can choose between two designs.

RWF staff will send you the ready-made scrolls: just roll them and close them with a ribbon of your choice.

The proceeds from the favors will be used to implement the many projects that Roberto Wirth Fund Onlus is dedicated to in supporting deaf and deafblind children and their families.

For orders and more information visit our website [www.robortowirthingfund.net](http://www.robortowirthingfund.net) or write directly to [info@robortowirthingfund.net](mailto:info@robortowirthingfund.net).

## How you can support us:

Donate online at our website:  
[www.robortowirthingfund.net](http://www.robortowirthingfund.net)

Bank transfer made out to the Roberto Wirth Fund Onlus, Piazza Trinità dei Monti 6 – 00187 Roma.

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Bic/Swift: NVRBIT2N060

Please indicate your name, address and telephone number on the transfer, so that we can send you a receipt.

Postal checking account N° 88221536, made out to the Roberto Wirth Fund Onlus, Via Nomentana 56 – 00161 Roma.

Non-transferable check made out to the Roberto Wirth Fund Onlus and sent to the Roberto Wirth Fund Onlus, Via Nomentana 56 – 00161 Roma along with your information (name, surname, address and phone number).

**Remember - your donation is tax deductible!**

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**"It does not matter how much  
you give, but how much love  
you put into giving."**

Mother Teresa of Calcutta