

DARLINGTON CHAMPIONS BOOST CHILDREN'S GROUP

A new support group to help children with Down Syndrome learn and have fun is set to expand thanks to support from the Darlington Champions.

The group, which only launched last November, already has 17 sets of parents and children and is now set to launch a Saturday Club.

Extra cash to help the group buy new equipment and contribute towards specialist staff was given by County Durham Foundation's Darlington Champions fund. Darlington Champions was launched last year to attract new business donors from the town who wanted to help local charities and organisations.

The Down Syndrome support group currently meets every Friday morning in Beaumont School on Glebe Road but is set to move into Haughton Education Village, the UK's first privately-funded "superschool".

It was set up in partnership with the national organisation Down Syndrome Educational Trust to help pre-school age children with Down Syndrome to improve their language, reading, writing and numeracy skills.

The group was set up by parent Maggie Hart who found there was nowhere north of Chester to get practical early educational help for her young son Alexander. With the help of other parents she applied for funding and started meeting every week at the school.

Mrs Hart, of Edgecombe Drive, Darlington, said: "The plan has just snowballed really. I visited a specialist centre down in Portsmouth and developed its model on a smaller scale.

“The group is proving really popular and when we start to meet at our new venue we can use some of the extra funding from Darlington Champions to expand the service we offer. As well as Darlington we have parents coming from across County Durham and Teesside.”

When the group moves it plans to open the Saturday club for school-age children with their friends and siblings, allowing them to integrate with non-disabled children in a safe and friendly environment.

The Darlington Champions provided a grant of £7,000 to help the group to carry out its expansion plans. County Durham Foundation hopes its Darlington Champions will help the foundation boost its endowment fund from £5 million to £10 million by 2010 and is appealing to more businesses, organisations and individuals to get involved.

Gillian Stacey, chief executive of County Durham Foundation, said: “As a Darlington Champion, you will join a team of business professionals and local people who are already helping to make Darlington one of the most exciting places to live in the North East. Our aim is to encourage local people and business to help local people.”

Darlington Champion Eddie Humphries, of Lingfield Point, also appealed to his fellow local businesses to get involved. He said: “We are very pleased to be a Darlington Champion to help provide support and funds for extremely worthwhile projects like this.

“The Darlington Champions has given us a focus for fundraising and I would urge other businesses to get involved no matter how big or small the donation. It’s about local businesses putting something back into the community.”

For more information about the support group contact Maggie Hart on 01325 369895 or by email: king_maggie@hotmail.com.