



Living: Robert Watts, second from right, with his parents Neil and Sadie and sister Sarah

Photograph: PA

# Hidden handicap of a gentle giant

East Anglian Daily Times 21.02.05

Life followed a slightly different path from the one envisaged by Neil and Sadie Watts when their son, Robert, was born with hydrocephalus. But it's a path that has brought huge rewards as well as challenges, as **Sheena Grant** reports.

**L**ITTLE Robert Watts seemed like a perfectly healthy baby when he made his entrance into the world 17 years ago. But, within weeks, alarm bells started to ring for his parents, Neil and Sadie Watts.

"We'd had the usual scans during a pregnancy. There were no indications anything was wrong and it was a normal birth," says Mr Watts, now head teacher at Northgate High School in Ipswich. But when Robert was about five or six weeks old we became concerned that his head was very, very floppy. Then we began to get concerned about the size of his head, which was growing. "We finished up at the West Suffolk Hospital (in Bury St Edmunds) and were transferred to Addenbrooke's (Cambridge), where he was diagnosed with hydrocephalus.

"At just nine weeks old he had a shunt fitted, which is a mechanical device to drain brain fluid into his stomach. The tubes that should do this naturally had not developed properly."

Up until then Mr Watts had only ever heard of hydrocephalus in his professional life as a teacher. He

and his wife had no idea what it would actually mean for the family in practical terms and it was difficult for doctors to make any kind of prognosis, as individual cases vary so much.

People with hydrocephalus have an excessive build-up of fluid in the brain cavities, which can cause several different symptoms. It is often treated with a shunt operation, which involves the insertion of a fine tube into one of the brain spaces, to drain excess fluid to another part of the body, where it can be reabsorbed safely.

It was a difficult and upsetting time for the couple, who also have a daughter, Sarah, now studying at university, and they did not know who to turn to for help.

"The effect on development can be very significant or virtually not noticeable," says Mr Watts. "What we needed was a

helpful guide to the various aspects of hydrocephalus and the best ways of helping our child cope and succeed. We just looked around, as parents do, for anyone to talk to or anything to read to help us prepare for what lay ahead."

In this way, they came into contact with the Association for Spina Bifida and Hydrocephalus. Mr Watts is now chairman of the charity's education advisory committee and has contributed the foreword to its new information book, *Your Child and Hydrocephalus*.

Written by specialists from both the UK and U.S. specifically to help families with children who have hydrocephalus, it's the first information book of its kind and exactly what Neil and Sadie would have liked to have had, but didn't, when Robert was diagnosed.

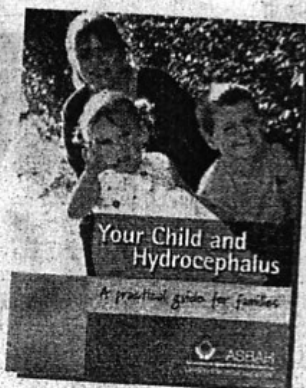
*Your Child and Hydrocephalus*

deals with both the physical and psychological effects of hydrocephalus. Specialist research, presented in simple terms, covers a range of issues children and their parents face from the initial diagnosis. The book also offers strategies and management techniques to help parents and carers as the child grows up.

It was unveiled by Lord Filkin, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at the Department for Education and Skills, at a House of Lords reception.

Mr Watts, along with ASBAH executive director Andrew Russell, also met Lord Filkin to talk about the broader context of learning disabilities relating to education. Mr Watts' dual perspective on special needs, both as a parent and teacher, gives him a valuable insight to the issues.

Despite a scary and uncertain beginning, the family's resolve to remain positive and determined to have a "normal" family life has paid dividends. "Robert has developed, probably far more than we could ever have hoped for," says Mr Watts. "He has got a learning disability and has



Continued on Page 24