

# Education

## Being a buddy

Adults will be trained to help young pupils with problems

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SANTA CRUZ — Getting used to school can be one of the toughest challenges for young children. This fall, five county schools will begin a program that pairs struggling students with a special "buddy" to help them adjust to school life.

Dubbed PIP, the Primary Intervention Program is designed to spot early emotional and behavioral problems in kindergarten through third-grade children.

Five elementary schools, backed by county Children's Mental Health Services, won three-year state grants for the program this year: Vine Hill and Brook Knoll in Scotts Valley, and Boulder Creek, Quail Hollow and San Lorenzo Valley in the San Lorenzo Valley school district.

"Research shows that kids need an anchor at school," said Dane Cervine, program director for county Children's Mental Health. "When they have someone to tell them they're fine, they blossom."

With PIP, teachers are trained to screen their pupils for signs that they are having trouble adapting to school, such as excessive aggression, shyness, inattention, or restlessness.

Those evaluations are passed on to the school counselors, who decide, with parents, which pupils may need a "buddy."

The buddy — a trained parent or mental health intern — meets with pupils one-on-one for 30-40 minutes each week in a specially designed classroom on campus. The buddy uses the play time and good listening skills to help pupils develop a healthy self-image and strengthen their social skills.

Pupils meet with their buddies for 12-15 weeks, which Cervine says has proved more successful than lengthy professional counseling later in life.

"The idea is if you (work with) them in kindergarten, it will head off worse problems down the line," he said.

National surveys have shown three out of 10 school children have moderate to severe problems adjusting to school. When those problems are left unattended, experts say, they can lead students to

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drop out of school and have more serious behavioral problems later.

Early intervention has worked successfully in New York State since 1957, and has been funded in California for the last 10 years, initially with money seized from drug arrests. Local mental health agencies set up other funding in 1985.

This year was the first that the county and local schools had applied for the funding.

The two school districts will receive \$45,000 per year for three years for the program, mainly to pay the salaries of buddies. Licensed counselors and mental health staff provide back-up and training for the program.

Aides are being hired in both districts, and the first training session will be in Sacramento in October.

"We're looking for people who enjoy working with children, who are warm and nurturing," said Catherine Gallegos, San Lorenzo Valley's director of special education. "It would be nice to get variety of ages, some men if we can. We basically need people who are committed to children, positive and interact well with other people."

Gallegos said her schools hope to start using the program by Nov. 1. She estimated the buddies will see 170 pupils during the year.

"What we're hoping is that some of the students that teachers identify as being at-risk develop a good base, that it helps them bond with school," she said.

Gallegos said she is concerned about where funds will come from when the grants run out, but for now sees the program as a "nice bright spot" for her schools.

"Especially this year when all of the news we have to give teachers is so gloom and doom, it's one bright spot on the horizon, one everyone agrees kids need."