

A Step Toward The Light

An old farmhouse on a quiet street in Santa Cruz was recently refurbished to house a unique daycare program for six children...

The youngsters, from 6 to 11 years old, play in the yard, sit under a tree to hear a story, bake cookies in the kitchen, sing songs, draw pictures — and even walk to the Post Office to buy a stamp and mail a letter.

Why is this so unique about all this?

The youngsters who are doing these things are severely emotionally handicapped. Most of them have been diagnosed at one time as retarded, deaf, mute — and ultimately as autistic children.

Autistic does NOT mean artistic! An autistic child is an ill child — not ill in a way instantly visible to the casual eye. But ill. Ill enough to prevent him from partaking in the normal everyday life the average child should expect and receive.

The six children at the old farmhouse are "graduates" of Pediatric Treatment Center. They spent at least one year as day-hospital patients at the

Santa Cruz County Community Mental Health Services Pediatric Treatment Center.

In the fall of 1972 these parents of these children began planning for long-term care of their children who by then had completed their treatment at the Pediatric center but continued to require specialized care.

There are no community resources, no schools for these children in Santa Cruz County. The burden of providing 24-hour care is beyond the capacity of individual families.

"Joining hands" to help each other, the six families formed a Co-Operative Daycare Program, the Parents' Cooperative. It is managed by a parents' council and backed by county mental health services. A half-time Pediatric activities assistant and volunteers trained at the Pediatric center supplement the parents who spend approximately two days a week, each, at the Co-op.

The farmhouse is open from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. on week days and it requires six to eight adults a day to

provide adequate coverage in overlapping shifts.

Weekend respite is provided once a month with the children staying overnight. The "camp out" as it is called, is supervised by volunteers and Pediatric center staff members.

Self-help is the motto at the farmhouse, with children learning to dress themselves, washing their own cups at the sink and do other helpful tasks.

Parents supervise, prepare meals, plan daily schedules, field trips and maintain the house and yard.

Several hours a day the children also attend "school," an educational experiment for mentally disordered minors operated by the County Office of Education. There are no provisions as yet for the children's education when the experiment ends this spring. The school districts are sympathetic but resources are limited.

Entire emphasis at the farmhouse is not on what's "wrong" with the autistic child, but what's "right" with him.



Photos By
Manie Grae Daniel

This autistic child tiptoes out of reality, to the extent of trying to escape contact with the earth. At left, mothers, fathers, volunteers and children enter the Parents Co-op.

REGISTRATION

April 30 & May 1
3 P.M. to 4:15 P.M.

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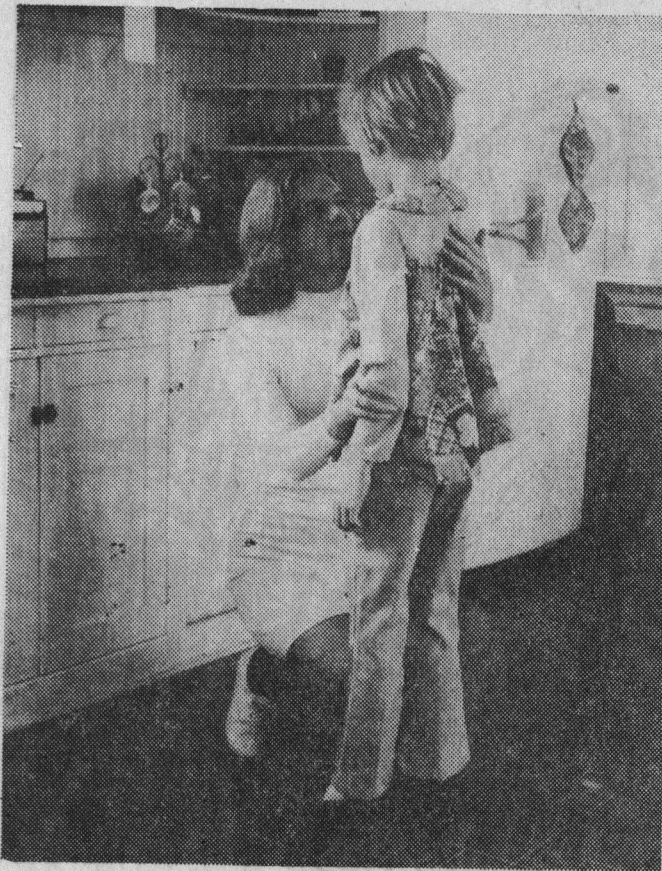
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A mother gently corrects a disturbed child.



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