

Summit children go back to school

By LAWRENCE M. FISHER
The New York Times

LOS GATOS — The lights were back on and children returned to class Monday at Lexington Elementary School near the summit of the Santa Cruz Mountains and just a few miles from the epicenter of the earthquake last Tuesday.

For children who lost their homes, who saw neighbors injured or who have spent nights sleeping in a strange place, Monday was a day of sharing their own stories.

For many of these children, life in this mountain community must seem like a series of natural disasters.

In 1982, there were floods and mudslides; in 1985, a wildfire

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scorched the hills surrounding the school, forcing an evacuation.

Rain fell in sheets Monday, but the past two years of drought have turned nearby Lexington Reservoir into an arid canyon.

Children said Monday that they had never seen their parents so frightened nor seen their lives turned so topsy-turvy. And although most seemed cheerful and excited to be reunited with friends, many said they were also afraid to go home to newly creaky houses filled with debris and ominous

cracks.

"I have a freaky feeling, like when you want to throw up," said Allison Parker, a second grader whose home is still relatively intact.

"You want to be comfortable," she said. "You don't want this to happen at all. You want to go 'Shoo! Shoo! Go away!'"

Many students said the most frightening thing was not knowing where the rest of their families were in the hours after the temblor.

Sisters were at ballet class,

brothers in day care, mothers shopping and fathers at work. Some had to spend the night here at the school because roads to their homes were closed.

"I was pretty worried for my sister," said Jessica Enright, another second grader. "We didn't get her until the next day. I started to cry when we couldn't find my cats."

Remarkably enough, there have been no known deaths in the summit area. But the authorities say that several hundred homes

have either collapsed or will have to be condemned.

This is a heavily wooded area of narrow, winding roads, and local officials say they find more destruction every time they venture into it.

Counselors visited the school Friday to work with teachers and students, urging them to talk about the experience and their feelings, but only about 20 students showed up that day.

Monday about half the school's 120 students arrived. Many other schools in the mountains remained closed and some may be condemned.

"What I'm noticing is that a lot of parents are scared," said Ann

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Davis, a first-grade teacher at the school, which is in Santa Clara County. "The children are finally calming down. They come right up and start talking and sharing. But the parents are saying, 'I just want to stay here awhile.'"

With no electricity for days, information moved through the mountains by word of mouth, and that became another source of anxiety for some children.

"At home we heard some stories that made us more scared," said Deva Dawson, a fifth grader.

"We heard our street was going

to be evacuated," she said, telling of rumors about dangers from rain and fresh mudslides. "But that was wrong. The rumors just caused more panic."

Deva said she still wanted to continue living here, although it would be nice to take a vacation away from California. Most of her classmates expressed similar feelings.

The creeks are full of salamanders to be caught, and science class is taught in the school's organic garden.

"I still want to live in the

mountains," said Seamus Ryan, a second grader. But for now, his family is living in staff housing at the University of Santa Clara, where his mother works; their home has collapsed and been condemned.

Others said they were still frightened sometimes, maybe more fearful with the passing of time and subsequent aftershocks than they were the night of the earthquake.

No one knows yet how many houses here have collapsed or been condemned, but everyone knows several friends who are camping out or staying with friends.

"I get nervous now and then, especially in my bunk bed," said Jeremy Oster, a fourth grader. "On the second night, I didn't want to go home. I said, 'I do not want to see our house; I do not want to live there.' It still seems like a very shaky place."

Rachel Nordstrom, a fifth grader whose house sustained some structural damage, agreed. "I like living in the mountains, but I'd rather be someplace else when there are so many aftershocks. There could be mudslides and we're afraid we couldn't get through."