

Watsonville Hospital opens first on-site child-care center in county

By EMILY GURNON
STAFF WRITER

Beginning Monday, employees of Watsonville Community Hospital will be able to spend the work day just yards away from their young children, thanks to a new on-site child-care center.

Now housed in a 2,000-square-foot modular unit on the hospital grounds, it seemed the center would never be more than just a good idea when hospital staff started talking about it more than five years ago.

"It's been a long time coming," said center director Linda Taylor. She added that it's ironic that employees on the original planning committee now have children too old for the center.

But the hospital's current staff of more than 600 includes many new mothers who have expressed much interest in the

center, Taylor said.

"The biggest response we've had is from women who are currently pregnant. They know they can come over and breast-feed their baby, hold their baby, see their baby during breaks."

The program will accommodate up to 46 children from the age of 3 months to 6 years. Enrollment fees are competitive with other local centers, Taylor said. Kindercare at Work, a division of Kindercare Learning Centers, has been contracted by the hospital to provide management services.

According to Marcia Meyer, director of Santa Cruz County's Child Development Resource Center, no other employer in the county currently offers child care on site. She said she hopes the hospital's program will set a good example for others.

"We really are pleased that

more employers are getting involved in work and family issues," she said. "We're really delighted that Community Hospital has moved ahead with its plans."

The county itself is preparing to open a child-care center at its Emeline Street complex in about a month, and several corporations in the Harvey West area in Santa Cruz have been talking about forming a child-care consortium, Meyer said. Other employers offer child care a distance away from their offices.

But having a child-care center right at the work place offers valuable benefits for parents, Meyer said. They can spend time with their children during the day and have fewer commute hassles. "Then there's also a lot of peace of mind," she

added. Employers have the advantage of better employee productivity if parents are less worried about their children and less likely to arrive late, Meyer said.

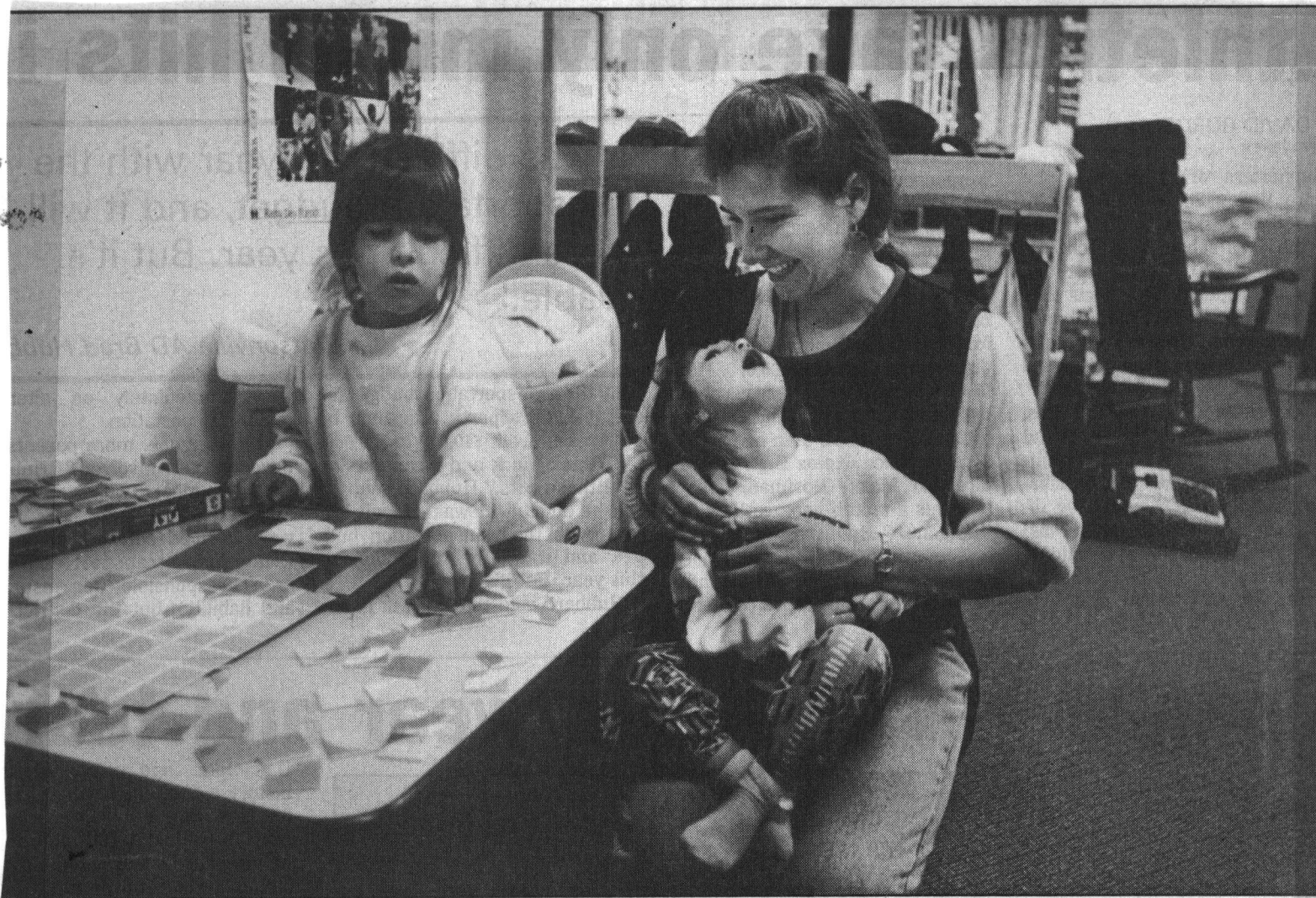
Having mom or dad close by can be reassuring for children, too, said center director Taylor.

"They'll point (to the hospital) and say, 'There they are.'"

Three-year-old Colin tried out the center last week and provided an evaluation of the facilities.

"There's a trail right there," he said, pointing to a winding path through some newly planted flowers outside. "There's a house here — a pretend house. I like the toys."

The center was funded in part by a \$250,000 donation from Louise Blanchard, a retired Watsonville schoolteacher who lives in Freedom.



Mike McCollum

Lorrie Lovell, teacher at Watsonville Hospital child-care center, holds Arielle Ferber, 2½, while Tasha Solano, 5, plays with shapes at table.