

## Senior Dad

The Show About Parenting

Weekly from San Francisco

Hosted by Stan Goldberg



## Integrated Play-groups ANGEL Center

By  
Stan Goldberg

Last week my daughter and I visited the newly opened ANGEL center in the West Portal section of San Francisco. The center was opened in part through the efforts of Pamela Wolfberg, a Professor at San Francisco State University. I went to see the 12-week Peer Socialization Program, which is an after-school play group where children, with and without autism, learn to play together.

I called the center's director Lynda Borrromeo to clear our visit. I told my soon-to-be six-year old daughter that we were going to visit a new after-school playgroup. My daughter had concerns. Would the rooms feel friendly? Would I be there too? Did they serve snacks? I answered her questions but did not tell her anything about her playmates.

The ANGEL center is in a professional office building on a street with small stores. Lynda met us and showed us all the different playrooms. My daughter met all the center staff and started playing. Two boys also came to the center. My daughter, the two boys, and two staff members (both doctoral students) started playing together. I sat on the floor out of the traffic pattern. One of the boys sat down at the table and a staff member started to engage him. The other boy circled the room tapping the walls and knocking down a pile of blocks each pass. My daughter looked at both boys with questioning looks about their behavior. The boy at the table would only pronounce his name and sometimes make eye contact with my daughter. The other boy, after a series of trips around the room, sometimes accompanied with a shriek, started making eye contact with me to gauge my

reaction to him. After several more circuits, he too sat down and he started to draw. Then all three children cleaned up the room together and went into another room for snack.

The next activity was sponge art. I sent my daughter off with the two boys and two new teachers to an art room. When it was time to go I opened the door to the art room and collected my daughter. My daughter was just as happy as when we came, but the apprehension had disappeared. When we got into the car I asked, "How did you like it?" The answer, "Can I go again?" Then came the deeper questions, "Why didn't the boys talk?", "Why did the boy shriek?" I explained. Then she told me that the boy who had walked around the room (my description, she called him by name) could really finger paint well and she liked them both. I inquired if the rooms felt friendly and I was told they were.

The 12-week Peer Socialization Program meets twice a week. There is no charge for children who don't have autism although the program needs funding and donations are welcome (none are suggested or required, just my pitch for a worthy program). The phone number is 415-504-8820. I feel that my daughter gained from the experience. It was hard for me to just sit there and watch but I now have an even greater understanding what we all must do. If you can, call up and have your child take part in this playgroup, we are very lucky to have it in San Francisco.