

## EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

# Parks program offers lessons for parents, toddlers

Weekly drop-in program, Together in the Park, began more than 25 years ago

By **CATHY KELLY**

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SANTA CRUZ—In a long-running program offered in county parks, parents and toddlers come together to learn as they play.

For parents, lessons from the instructor or other parents typical-

ly center on things like how to get youngsters to sleep or how to get them to stop biting other children, an instructor said. For youngsters, it can be about essentials such as how to get that toy from the other guy without getting in trouble, and how to sit still at circle time.

Together in the Park is an Adult

School program in Santa Cruz and Watsonville and is offered through Mountain Community Resources in Felton. In Santa Cruz, parents pay a \$5 drop-in fee to simply gather at the park as a group, with toys and activities for the children and the instructor and books and other resources for the parents.

Santa Cruz instructor Colleen Murphy has a bachelor's degree in

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LARISSA MUELLER/SENTINEL

Children and parents play with toys and crafts at Together in the Park at Frederick Street Park in Santa Cruz.

## PARKS

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child development and is a positive discipline parent instructor who spent years teaching preschool. Her first involvement with Together in the Park was when her 13-year-old son was a small child, she said.

These days, the aides who helped, the fancier toys and all funding other than the drop-in fees fell victim to budget cuts that culminated last summer, Murphy said. But she is still able to use the Santa Cruz Adult School van and toys and can cover the basics. And when she needs bubble station solutions, for example, she just announces it and someone offers to buy it, she said.

Parents also help haul the blocks, tricycles, clay, easels, sand toys and more from the van to the park and back again, she said.

"To me, it's about community and providing a place for parents to connect," she said. "You can be so lost as a new parent. I tell them there is no question too large or too small. I get thanked probably every day, and that is part of my pay. I know it's important."

Kevin Onorato of Live Oak brought his 3-year-old son, Sawyer, and his 5-year-old son, Rowan, to the park Thursday.

Murphy helped guide Onorato and his wife through Rowan's biting years, he said, now able to laugh about it.

"She's an ally for sure," he said. "We just talk about the stressful things parents talk about. I had never been around children very much and I was reading books and watching videos. It was great to find this.



LARISSA MUELLER/SENTINEL

Colleen Murphy scatters toys in the sand at Together in the Park in Frederick Street Park in Santa Cruz. Murphy has facilitated the program for 7 years and brings toys and crafts to the park.

## IF YOU GO

TOGETHER IN THE PARK, A DROP-IN PROGRAM FOR PARENTS AND TODDLERS

In Santa Cruz:

■ 10 a.m. to noon Tuesdays at Jose Avenue Park in Live Oak.

■ 10 a.m. to noon Thursdays at Frederick Street Park.

In Felton:

■ 10:30 a.m. to noon Wednesdays, April through October, Felton Covered Bridge Park.

In South County:

■ 10 a.m. to noon Tuesdays at Callaghan Park, Watsonville.

■ 9 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. Wednesdays at Marinovich Park, Watsonville.

■ 10 a.m. to noon Fridays, Aldridge Park, Corralitos.

"I learned that some of the things you just don't change, it's how you help them through it. You can't scare it or beat it or love it out of them. You just have to ride it out."

Nanci Rosenberg had her twin 2-year-olds, Mark and Eli, at Frederick Street. Eli was

furiously pushing a doll-sized stroller while Mark played in the sand.

"It's absolutely wonderful," she said. "I just love the sense of community."

Murphy was preparing for circle time, which includes songs accompanied by her

Autoharp.

As one dad stopped his small daughter from flinging sand around with a red plastic shovel in the background, Murphy said every kindergarten teacher hopes for a socially savvy child. And some of that savvy can come from the program, she said.

"They need to know how to wait their turn, sit in a circle, that kind of thing," she said. "With that, they can teach them anything."

All ages are welcome, but the program is geared to ages 1 to 3, Murphy said.

Together in the Park was started more than 25 years ago by Julie Olsen Edwards of Cabrillo College, she said.

For information, visit [www.adulted.santacruz.k12.ca.us](http://www.adulted.santacruz.k12.ca.us) or call 429-3966. In South County, call 786-2160. In Felton, call 335-6600.