Parenting without limits
Berkeley nonprofit helps parents, children with disabilities
Page 22
Making parenting more accessible

By Peggy Spear

When 3-year-old Jean Lorenz goes out to play, she wears an ankle with little bells on her foot. While most little girls would love the accessory just because it’s pretty and makes a fun noise, Jean’s bells serve another purpose: It helps her mom, Jessie, who is blind, keep track of the rambunctious preschooler.

“It’s called adaptive parenting,” says Lorenz. “We’re always having to improvise a little to make things easier.”

Lorenz is quick to point out that as a single mother, she has a “beautiful village” of support, not least of all the support she receives from Through the Looking Glass, a Berkeley organization that has been serving the needs of disabled parents for more than 30 years.

The nonprofit is a nationally recognized center that has pioneered research, training and services for families in which a child, parent or grandparent has a disability or med-
"We have the same concerns as able-bodied parents, but we have to learn to adapt."

— Dina Velazquez, who uses a wheelchair and has a 10-month-old son

Through the Looking Glass
Ed Roberts Campus, 3075 Adeline St., Ste. 120, Berkeley, (510) 548-1117 or 1-800-664-2666, TTY: (510) 548-1117, Fax: (510) 548-1117, 9:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m., Monday through Friday.
www.lookingglass.org
International Conference on Families with Parental Mental Health Challenges: April 25-27 at the Ed Roberts Campus. For more information, visit www.lookingglass.org.

The program taught Velazquez how to modify Dominick's crib so she could have access to him, different positions for breastfeeding and ways she could connect with the baby.

"The hardest thing for me was not being as hands-on as I wanted," she says. "I couldn't dress Dominick or change diapers. I couldn't lift him myself."

Because most of the baby care fell to Velazquez's husband, Miguel, she felt that she wasn't bonding with Dominick like she should.

"With the help of EHS, we learned to be as normal as we could," she says. "For instance, when Miguel was holding Dominick, I could be right there, talking to him, being in as close contact as possible."

Perhaps the most important thing the program brought to Velazquez was a sense of independence.

"I learned I could go for walks with Dominick, something I thought I'd never be able to do," she said.

Staff from the school helped rig a car seat to Velazquez's wheelchair, allowing her to take Dominick out and give her husband a break. As her son grew, they "adapted" again, designing a special seat belt on the chair that allowed him to sit on her lap.

And parents aren't the only one who benefited. Velazquez says that somewhere along the way, Jean learned to knock on the floor or furniture to get her mom's attention because "she knows mommy can't see her, but I can hear her."

The toughest part of being disabled and raising a child is the common societal misconceptions, Lorentz says.

"I was on a plane recently with Jean, and my seatmate made a comment like, 'I'll bet she's a lot of help to you.' Well, that's not Jean's job. I'm her mom. It's my job to care for her," Lorentz said. "(Through the Looking Glass) and the Early Head Start program taught me that I'm not helpless, just blind."

Each morning, Lorentz drops off Jean at the Early Head Start school in Berkeley, then commutes by BART to her job running the Independent Living Resource Center in San Francisco.

"I'm not a superhero, or someone deserving of pity," she says. "I'm just a mom raising a kid. But I am blessed, with all the support I have."

Beth Smith, a clinical supervisor at Through the Looking Glass who uses a wheelchair, argues that society expects disabled people to be unable to do things, or they label them as inspirational and heroic.

"We have the right to be ordinary," she says. "Disabled people can, and have the right to do ordinary things, even if we need help."

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