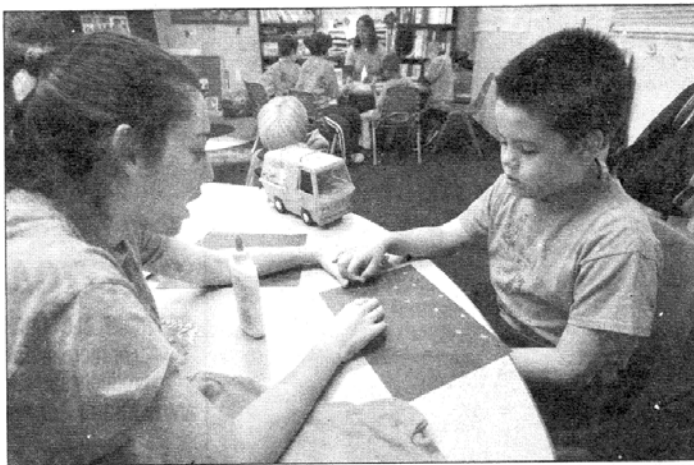


WESTCHESTER AREA

# AN ONGOING EDUCATION

A WINTER CAMP FOR KIDS WITH AUTISM KEEPS STUDENTS ENGAGED IN LEARNING OVER THE HOLIDAYS

**HELPING HAND:** Vania Garcia, a teacher's aide, works on an art project with Christopher Paterson at the Carrie Brazer Center for Autism and Alternative Approaches.



PETER ANDREW BOSCH / MIAMI HERALD STAFF

**BY DANIEL CASTRO**  
For The Miami Herald

Using glitter, glue and construction paper, children at the Carrie Brazer Center for Autism and Alternative Approaches set off to create personalized greeting cards.

They spelled out "Happy New Year" using colored cut-outs, while teachers helped and looked on. "To see these kids progressing is wonderful," said Lourdes Bauta, who used to bring her son to the center on weekends before becoming a full-time employee. "It's a slow process, but every day there is something new: a nonverbal child speaking a new word or an aggressive child being able to eat with classmates."

Children in the center's eight-day winter camp enjoy daily field trips including beach walks, ice skating and swimming. The time they do have at the center is spent in a buzz of activity: music and art classes, behavioral and cognitive therapy.

Better alternatives for autistic children over the holidays are slim. One of the few centers of its kind in South Florida, the winter camp — which runs through Friday — has a waiting list of more than 200 children.

"If autistic children sit around at home all day during the holidays, they lose the gains they make over the school year," said Carrie Brazer, who founded the center at 7425 SW 42nd St. "When school starts in January, it's like starting all over again."

Brazer, a Florida-certified special-education teacher, founded the center in 1999 with a grant from the McKay Scholarship for Students with Disabilities Program. She had been teaching in Florida public schools but didn't feel that she was making a difference in the lives of special-needs children. The center is a private institution, and most students use state vouchers to attend.

Private-school education, however, brings private-school costs. Not everyone can afford the winter camp, which costs \$75 a day, or \$550 for the eight-day camp if the child needs a four-students-to-one-teacher ratio.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

If you want to learn more about the Carrie Brazer Center for Autism and Alternative Approaches, call 305-262-5999.

Many parents, such as Rene Vega of Pinecrest, must take off from work in order to care for their kids over Christmas.

"I chose to keep my son home, and now he's driving me crazy," Vega said.

One of the difficulties autistic children struggle with is adjusting to change, and the holidays often mean breaking established routines. When children are suddenly staying at home instead of going to school as usual, the transition can be a jarring one.

Rosie Polomares has her two autistic children at home over the holidays since she could not afford to send them to the camp.

"A big thing for my daughter is transitioning from one activity to another," Polomares said. "When she's off her routine, it can make things really difficult."

Polomares even wrote a letter to family members, encouraging them to give to the center instead of sending Christmas gifts. That way, the center would have more money to spend on grants for people like her, who cannot afford the holiday camps.

"It's really important to raise funding for the center," Polomares said. "Parents can't leave their autistic kids with just anybody."

The lack of affordable, quality care for autistic children was a constant theme among parents. If anything, Carrie Brazer and her staff provide them with a much-deserved break during the holidays, a little downtime from the intense responsibility of caring for an autistic child.

"Taking care of an autistic child 24 hours a day can be an overwhelming thing," Bauta said.

Added Brazer: "Parents are so grateful. Most of the time, the reaction I get is 'I can't believe you guys are here.'"

**PRACTICING:** Kevin Villazon works on his counting skills at the Carrie Brazer Center for Autism. The center is having a winter camp that provides fun activities for kids with autism while their parents get a break.

