



Sandy Brown holds Jill Britten, a 2½-year-old regular at Play Center, who once in a while feels the need of some loving from her director.



Today Vanessa Bongiorno is a bride. Tomorrow, some from the dress-up box, a favorite of the 4-year-olds. There are all kinds of characters to assume.

Staff photos by Randy Borst



Cousins Kurt Ditzel (at left) and Jeffery Bossory have become best friends in the Play Center. One section of the room is walled with floor-to-ceiling windows.



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Play Center helps parents ease back into OCC classes

By LORAIN McCLISH

Follow the child-sized footprints on the brick floor in Oakland Community College (OCC) Orchard Ridge Campus J Building to get to the Play Center.

It's a spacious room with floor-to-ceiling windows where Sandy Brown and Nancy Vanderbeke welcome up to 45 children in any one given hour while the tots' parents are in class.

Meanwhile, parent-students at the school are periodically signing in or signing out their little ones in a schedule devised so activities continue un-

interrupted through the 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. day.

Holding sway over the school's Play Center, with all of its comings and goings, is a great deal different from heading a class where everyone is in their seats for Mrs. Brown, who is a former elementary school teacher.

But the West Bloomfield resident says she is enjoying the "freedom, the openness and even sometimes the loudness of it all."

THE PLAY CENTER is not supported by the college. It is an arm of the school's Student Activities, maintained to encourage parents to continue their education by providing more than baby sitting for their tots at the lowest possible cost.

"The whole idea is to make it as easy as possible for parents to get back to school again with an easy mind that isn't concerned about whether the baby sitter is going to show up," Mrs. Brown said.

"The parents can also be assured that the time their children spend here is going to be an enriching one and a happy one."

"We work on getting the child ready for kindergarten, whether the child is with us for one school hour or a whole day. I like to think that we've met their social, emotional, motor skill and cognitive needs so they can make that kindergarten adjustment with ease."

"That's what I'm working for," she said.

MRS. BROWN stressed that the Play Center is not a drop-in center.

"There are a million good reasons why a student would need or want to drop a child off here for a day or an afternoon, but we don't provide that kind of service," she said.

"The parents of all of these children are registered for a full term, whether full or part time. These children make friends with those who come regularly

the same time they do. They know me and one another and the rules here," she said.

"If we allowed drop-ins, we would be running a baby-sitting service, and we could not continue with any kind of pre-kindergarten education for the registered ones."

Cost for the student-parent is a one time \$20 fee, payable with registration into OCC classes, regardless of the number of hours the parent will spend in class and regardless of the number of children the parent has who will use the center.

The children range from 2½ to 6 years of age.

Mail-in registration begins on campus the first week in August. The next semester begins the day after Labor Day.

MRS. BROWN and Ms. Vanderbeke are assisted by two OCC students, who are hired to work in the Play Center, and periodically, students who are working towards one degree or another that deals with children.

"And it's a popular place for the photography students," Mrs. Brown said. "Very often they will show up here asking to sit in just because children are such good pictorial subjects."

Mrs. Brown stressed that the Play Center was not confined to the well-equipped indoor room.

"We take walks along the nature trail. We have our own outdoor playground, we climb up and run down the hill, we find turtles and frogs in our pond."

"The whole campus is our play center."



Amy Vanooni lets her friends know she's had a birthday with a sign which is a tradition at Play Center.



Jeff Swan, age 3, takes to the craft tables during free time to devise his own craft projects.



Camera-shy Takaho Noda, age 3, hides behind big brother Motoho on a piece of the modern-designed play equipment, all furnished by the school's Student Activities.



Six-year-old Dory O'Brian makes up some of her own exercises and tricks on the play bars, where children are periodically steered for a physical workout designed to develop motor skills.