

CHAT ROOM



Silva Shonmugastundaram

Social niceties get tedious for harried mom

It was one more of those stuck at the airport stories on July 6. We were to take off at 4 p.m. but we were not in the air until 9:15 p.m. When we reached our destination it was close to midnight. I opened my eyes and found my 3-year-old fast asleep next to me. I was feeling very groggy and tired. Somehow, I managed to get on my feet and picked up my little one. When I looked up I saw the long line of passengers to exit the airplane. Both my husband and my son were already in the line. This gentleman right behind them realized that I belonged with them and was kind enough to make space for me to join the line. I managed a smile and said, "Thank you." I looked around. Everyone looked tired and worn out. Some of us didn't even want to acknowledge that there were people around us. The rest were following the social norms and were secretly managing a smile.

According to Webster's New World Dictionary, the word "norm" means "A standard of conduct that should or must be followed. A way of behaving typical of a certain group." Social norms? Why? What are they?

I walked hurriedly into the library and towards the copying machine one day. I had to leave within the next three minutes for I wanted to be on

Please See CHAT ROOM, B3

Computer therapy gives voice to kids

■ A Farmington Hills youth with cerebral palsy has found a new way to communicate and it has opened his world.

BY KATHIE O'DONOHUE
SPECIAL WRITER

Imagine being a parent of a young child who is unable to communicate through traditional means and suddenly finding a way.

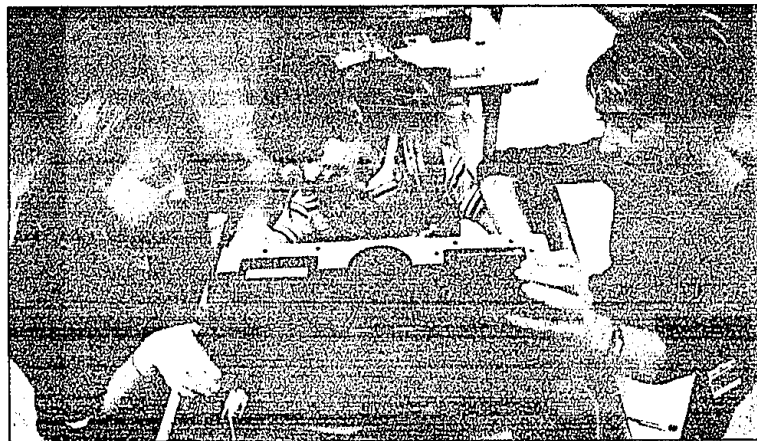
This has been the experience for Dana and Steve Ross of Farmington Hills and their 10-year-old son, Bradley, highly impaired as a result of cerebral palsy. Through a new computer technology called "Compuplay," Bradley is able to communicate his needs to his parents and caregivers.

In the past, Dana Ross describes using a technique to communicate with Bradley where she would determine his needs through a "give me five" process of elimination that could be cumbersome. Compuplay is offered at the Detroit Institute for Children in Detroit (DIC).

According to Monica Chelek, publicist for DIC, "Compuplay is a cutting-edge therapy affording the children (the chance) to learn and to play in a way they couldn't otherwise. In many ways it is a great equalizer where they can't participate in the classroom and playground, they can match their skills with a computer."

A nationally accredited program, Compuplay is part of the Augmentative and Alternative Communication program of the Speech and Language Department at DIC. Certified teachers assess children 2-18 years of age to determine individual needs for computer access and programs which promote self-esteem, social interaction, communication and play and leisure skills.

A variety of software programs and adaptive equipment are tailored to the individual's needs, according to Chelek,



Hard at work: Bradley Ross gets help from (left) lead therapist Pat Nizio and Amy Goodman, both speech and language pathologists at the Detroit Institute for Children. Compuplay, a new computer technology, allows Bradley, who has cerebral palsy, to communicate with others.

such as "an adapted joystick or a voice-activated keypad with pictures."

There are many alternative methods to "hold" a tool, she explains. "Many children have restrictive movements, and sometimes in therapy the feet or the head are used on switches. Sometimes even eye movement can be used thereby enabling children with all levels of disability to use the computer. Children and caregivers learn together through Compuplay sessions, and a software lending library is also available.

Through Compuplay, Bradley uses a specialized tool called a liberator which involves learning a whole language based on icons.

For example, there is a picture of an apple he could choose, or an array of nouns and verbs symbolizing concrete or abstract concepts. Bradley has a liberator at home for use as well, and the Rosses have been able to rent and try out equipment before purchasing it.

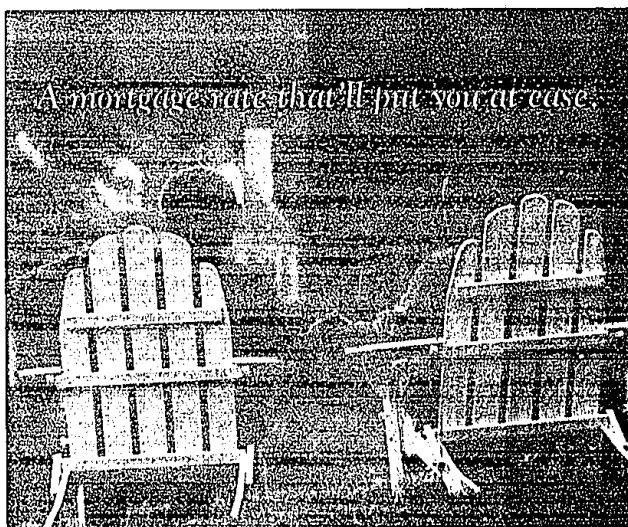
For Compuplay services at DIC a doctor's recommendation is needed.

Chelek states, "Half the funding comes from insurance reimbursement, but most Medicaid returns are very low. Insurance companies often do not want to cover services for chronic conditions. For many families, technology has opened a whole new world, but

computers are costly. Sometimes families can only afford to come (for in-clinic treatment) but cannot afford a computer at home."

Dana Ross describes Compuplay as "a very unique computer class children with special needs can explore what will work best with them. Bradley started with a tracking ball, and advanced to a joystick. (Through the center) one can see what things will work best before you go to buy them." Chelek describes the DIC as "the best kept secret in Detroit." Formerly known

Please See COMPUTER, B2



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