

May 25, 1997

Day Care: What Works, What's Needed

By NANCY POLK

IS Calvin Hill (a) the name of a former Dallas Cowboy running back (b) the father of Grant Hill of the Detroit Pistons basketball team or (c) the name of a 26-year-old day care center at Yale University in New Haven?

The answer is all of the above.

Calvin Hill, the father of the basketball player, lent his name to the child care establishment years ago when his Yale classmate Kurt Schmoke, now Mayor of Baltimore, asked him to.

And alumni of all ages remain a loyal constituency.

Katie Halleck, 8 years old and now a third grader at Beecher Road School in Woodbridge, reminisced: "When I was younger I went to Calvin Hill every morning. I used to go to the corner to see my friend Adam. We liked the monkey bars best and meeting time." Meeting, when the children at the center may discuss whatever is on their minds, continues to be a favorite time for the youngsters.

Carla Horwitz, director of the center for more than 20 years, said, "We believe in solving problems. We help them find their own voice, negotiate and solve problems without violence. The way to do that is to model that behavior for children and help them when they feel overwhelmed. Words are the thing you want them to begin to use and make work for them because words are very powerful."

She recalled that during the Persian Gulf war the children were worried they might not be safe. During meeting time one 5-year-old asked, "Why don't they use their words?"

Calvin Hill has a complex mission: to provide intellectual, social and emotional care and make it all fun. "We want our school to serve as a bridge between home and school. We feel like family," Ms. Horwitz said. "Kids learn to take care of each other." They learn cooperation, not competition.

"We listen to the kids, pay attention to their wishes and design the curriculum based on their interests and what they already know," she said. "We believe in doing what's best for the children, which may not always be best for the parents" -- or the staff, for that matter.

For example, Calvin Hill's program runs from 8 A.M. to 5 P.M. or, with special arrangements, a bit later. "I feel a little bit like a dinosaur," said Ms. Horwitz, "Society makes so many demands on parents. It used to be unusual for a child to be here from 8 until 5 P.M. Now all over the country that is the norm. Parents are asking for us to remain open later than that or earlier than that or more time than that. People used to leave at 3 or 3:30 P.M. or whenever they could get away."

Parents are enthusiastic in their praise of the center.

Melanie Ginter, a psychotherapist who lives six blocks away and is expecting a baby in June, sometime joins her daughter, Natalie, for lunch. "I feel very welcome," she said. "We love it. There is support here for parents."

Ms. Horwitz, like many professionals in her field, is deeply concerned about what she sees as a

two-tiered day care system. "There are those who can afford quality day care and those who cannot, who receive abysmal care," she said. She is especially troubled by some for-profit care. "It can look okay on the surface but when you look deeper you find high staff turnover and untrained people." At Calvin Hill, she sets salary and benefits high enough to keep staff members, and treats them like professionals, not baby sitters, she said.

"There is so much bad child care that when I see a place like Calvin Hill I rejoice," said Prof. Edward F. Zigler, Sterling professor of psychology and a founder of the Head Start program during the Nixon Administration. "I like their economic and ethnic diversity, their sensitivity to a developmentally advanced curriculum," he said.

Dr. Zigler also suggested that the measure of a successful day care center would be a child's reluctance to leave at the end of the day. "They love being there so much they are too busy to go home," he said.

Calvin Hill houses programs for 3- and 4-year-olds as well as the Kitty Lustman-Findling Kindergarten. The two programs share an old brick firehouse donated and renovated by Yale, which pays the center's utilities. The Yale Child Study Center also recently gave Calvin Hill a grant to support the creation of a formal internship program.

The Calvin Hill center began as a student effort to support striking Yale employees who could not find affordable day care for their children. Today 75 percent of the center's children come from Yale families with the rest drawn from the city. Families are charged on a sliding scale, ranging from \$1,280 a year up to \$9,224.

John Cafferty, a teacher there for 23 years, says one secret to Calvin Hill's success has been the intense involvement of parents. It is not unusual to find a Yale-New Haven Hospital neurosurgeon scrubbing little toilets next to a Korean graduate student. Parent architects planned the renovation from firehouse to school. Another parent group designed and constructed the playground.

"This is the most rewarding job. When the kids smile it makes my day," Mr. Cafferty said. In return, teachers never talk down to the children, but treat them as just people.

Mr. Cafferty, who said he briefly considered following the family tradition of working on the railroad, expressed fondness for his co-workers. "The staff does a lot for each other. Everyone brings a different strength." He also appreciates the team teaching approach, high degree of teacher autonomy and the opportunity for staff development.

The walls are covered with artwork and projects and photographs of busy youngsters at play. They dress up in firefighter's boots and hats or long shiny dresses and feather boas for dramatic plays and create fanciful stories. They earnestly tap maple trees across the street to make syrup. They draw and paint and mess around with clay. They choose vegetables to make natural dyes, dye yarn and learn simple weaving techniques. They take field trips to a museum, a pumpkin field, a weaver's studio. They chat with Cocoa and Piggy Pig, the upstairs and downstairs gerbils. They learn to count and sing the alphabet and some even begin to read. They also nap to recharge their batteries for more activities. "I like nap best," said 5-year-old Bailey Hanum of New Haven much to the astonishment of her teachers.

Libby Rinder, also 5, of Guilford, adores the recycling truck that picks up paper, plastic and metal. The driver always beeps hello to the children.

A 4-year-old from Israel named Noam spends his time with his buddies, Earl, David and Nick. His observations on his parents' employment stand out on a large wall poster: "My Mom works with neighbors. She's got a new job now. She talks. My Dad works with mice."

"Everything they learn is as important as everything else. Reading is not the only thing," explained Ms. Horwitz. Children, she said, must have "opportunities to explore an their own level."

Thus, neither mindless worksheets or teacher-directed drills ever happen at Calvin Hill. She feels preschool is a place where children begin to make sense of their world and begin to form friendships and learn to become a part of the larger community outside their own families.