

BuddyBreak program meets special needs

By SHELLY OLATOYAN CORRESPONDENT

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Compassion, fun and one-on-one play are the cornerstones of Venice Presbyterian Church's new program for children with special needs. The program, called "BuddyBreak," provides parents with a three-hour break to do things they want to do.



CORRESPONDENT PHOTO / SHELLY OLATOYAN Lead pastor Chris Romig and BuddyBreak coordinators Vicki Peel and Ardith Pinner.

"It's such a great thing to see what it means to the parents. For those three hours, the parents can take a stroll down Venice Avenue, get a pedicure or just hang out at the library. They really appreciate just a little break," said Ardith Pinner, one of the five BuddyBreak coordinators (Jean McAdam and Judy Edmunds are also coordinators).

The free monthly program, part of the Nathaniel's Hope organization, is open to children 3-16 who are medically fragile, have a chronic illness or have a physical, cognitive or medical disability.

Throughout the morning, the children can take part in a range of activities that include music, games and crafts. There is a room called "The Caring Place" that is staffed with two nurses at all times.

"It's all child-directed. From 10:30-11:30, we have a variety of activities going on. If they want to stay with one activity or in one room, they are welcome to it and the Buddy goes along with the child," said Vicki Peel, another BuddyBreak coordinator. "They also bring their own lunch and are free to eat it whenever they want."

A Buddy is a trained and screened volunteer who is assigned to each child to provide one-on-one attention throughout each session. After a three-hour training program, Buddies are equipped with the skills to spend a fun-filled morning with their special-needs child.

Nathaniel's Hope began after Marie and Tim Kuck lost their special-needs child, Nathaniel, when he was 4 years old.

Chris Romig, lead pastor and coordinator of BuddyBreak, who has an autistic son, went to a children's ministry where the Kucks gave a presentation on special-needs ministries.

"The Kucks were given the opportunity to see what families with special needs have to deal with and thought "What can we do to make a positive difference?" Romig said.

Nathaniel's Hope was started in 2002 at the Kucks' church in Orlando and began spreading. BuddyBreak programs exist in churches in Florida, Maryland and Tennessee.

The next BuddyBreak is Sept. 13. Parents are required to sign up and go through an orientation.

"They'll bring the child in for the first program and we invite them to observe and get a tour of the program. We go over the safety procedures as well give them the opportunity to get to know one another or exchange phone numbers," Romig said. Siblings are also welcome.