

# Programs show positive reinforcement opens minds

BY WILLA PLANK  
DAILY RECORD

Bernadette Smith of Mount Olive always has sought out what she believed was the best education for her twins, both diagnosed with autism.

When Smith's now-9-year-old daughters were 3, her local school district suggested sending them to a school outside the district. Smith fought for an in-home program.

Eventually, one daughter, Hannagh, who has high-functioning autism, attended a half-day private school in Chester for two years and, later, a public school program. Her other daughter, Aine, was taught at home until age 5, when she also began a public school program.



Megan Porter, 7, gets a high-five from her teacher, Margaret Alliparo, at the Allegro School for children with autism in the Cedar Knolls section of Hanover.

DANIELLE AUSTEN  
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Most recently, Hannagh attends Celebrate the Children, a new school designed specifically for children with autism, which opened in Byram in January 2004.

Parents must carefully explore their child's needs to find the right educational fit. "You need to stay strong for

your child," Smith said. "Don't give up."

The Smith twins are among the ever-increasing number of children diagnosed with autism nationwide — all of whom require educational programs tailored to their special needs.

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## Autism

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According to the state Department of Education, the number of those ages 3 to 21 classified as autistic has increased from 4,624 in 2002 to 6,388 at the end of 2004.

### 384 in Morris

In Morris County, 384 children were classified as autistic in December 2004, an increase from 311 in 2002.

According to Deborah Lewinson, executive director and CEO of the Allegro School in Hanover, a private school for children with autism, education is the only proven treatment.

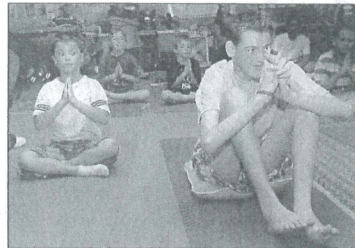
The Allegro School offers positive reinforcement for children — such as high-fives — to get them on task and interested in learning. The school also teaches parents to continue lessons at home.

"Once we can get them into a mode of learning, they can be excellent students," Lewinson said.

"As the families learn some of the things that we're doing, they can incorporate them."

C.J. Rosado, 10, front left, and Thomas McDermott, front right, finish a yoga class at the Celebrate the Children school for autistic youngsters in Byram.

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### MORE INFORMATION

■ Celebrate the Children  
55 Lackawanna Drive  
Byram, N.J. 07874  
[www.celebratethechildren.org](http://www.celebratethechildren.org)

■ Allegro School  
125 Ridgedale Ave.  
Cedar Knolls, N.J. 07927  
(973) 267-8060

Allegro and Celebrate the Children are part of a growing trend toward private programs targeting children with autism. But, Lewinson said, public school districts also are rising to meet the increased need for such programs.

"It's the wave of the future," Lewinson said.

Children may be evaluated for autism and other disorders by their local school districts at age 3, said Carol Kaufman, manager of public policy for the Office of Special Education of the state Department of Education. Before that, children can be helped by early intervention measures such as speech and occupational therapy.

After a child is deemed eligible, an individual education plan team — which includes

parents, teachers and the district's child study team — decide the best placement for the youngster — whether inside or outside the district.

### Neurological disorder

Autism spectrum disorder, in its most severe cases, is diagnosed when a person does not acknowledge others through visible communication and may be mute, said Dr. Rosario Trifiletti, division chief of child neurology at the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey. At the other end of the spectrum, children with autism can be clumsy and socially awkward.

Autism is a neurological disorder that affects behavior and social interactions, said Paul Potito, executive director of the New Jersey Center for Outreach and Services for the Autism Community.

Some typical symptoms include communication problems, including lack of eye contact and the inability to relate.

Smith knew her twins were different by the time they were 18 months old. They did not speak words or even point to objects to communicate.

"They would not respond to my voice," Smith said.

After checking the twins' hearing, which was normal, Smith was sent to a speech therapist, who referred her to a neurologist in 1998, when both children were 2. The neurologist diagnosed autism.

"That was a French word to me," Smith said.

### Still an infant

Another mother, Natalie Kitts of Great Meadows, said she knew her child was different when he was still an infant.

Josh's speech was delayed and he had gross motor issues, she said.

By the time he attended school, Josh, now 12, performed well in class, and the school did not notice his other problems until third grade, when the teacher asked to evaluate him.

Kitts brought her son to a neurologist, who diagnosed Asperger syndrome, a type of autism spectrum disorder, and was classified by the district as "otherwise health-impaired." He remained in the public school system.

However, Josh needed a lot of space around him, and he made repetitive sounds, Kitts

said. By fifth grade, the strict middle school environment did not suit Josh.

"The more they tried to discipline him, the more frustrated he got," Kitts said.

### Called frequently

Kitts was called to the school frequently, where she spoke to Josh's teachers about reactions he had in class.

"It was very hard for the school system to meet those needs," Kitts said.

By sixth grade, Josh's vice principal and teacher helped the Kitts family find a new school. Josh began attending Celebrate the Children in Janu-

ary and he received an award as the most improved student.

"He is a totally different kid," she said. "Within a month, he started really functioning."

According to Lewinson, the goal in educating children with autism is to help students become integrated in a typical classroom.

"More and more districts are developing programs, but many still don't have their own," Lewinson said.

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