idea corner

New Kids on the Block

"Mark, how do you get up and down steps in your wheelchair?" "Mark, if you can't walk, how can you swim, get into bed, take a bath?" "Will you be able to drive a car?" "Mark, if you have your tonsils out, will you be able to talk O.K. then?" "Ellen Jane, how does it feel to be retarded?" "How did you get retarded?" "Ellen Jane, do kids tease you and call you names?" "Renaldo, how do you know where the food is on your plate?" "How do you know what clothes you are putting on?" "Renaldo, when you are blind, what sports can you play?"

These are typical questions elementary school children ask during an educational program "Meet the New Kids on the Block," being presented throughout Colorado, by the Colorado State University Cooperative Extension Service.

During 1981-82, over 35,000 individuals saw the presentation.

This exciting, successful, highly visible educational program provides accurate information about various handicapping conditions, helps individuals become more sensitive to and accepting of their peers with disabilities. It also helps develop positive attitudes toward the disabled population and assists positively with the mainstreaming process of handicapped youth into 4-H Clubs, other Extension-sponsored programs, and schools.

Seven large puppets, about the size of three-year-old children, do the teaching. Five of the seven puppets are disabled. Renaldo Rodriguez is *blind,* wears glasses, uses a white cane, and has a Braille watch. Mark Reilly has *cerebral palsy.* His speech is slightly impaired and he gets around in a wheelchair he calls his "Cruiser." Mandy Puccini is *deaf* and teaches simple signing.

Ellen Jane Peterson is *mentally retarded* and works at an animal hospital. Jennifer Hauser has a *learning disability.* Two very good friends of the disabled puppets are Brenda Dubrowski and Melody James, both of whom have "minor" handicaps— one wears glasses and the other is overweight.

A typical program lasts 50 minutes, and usually 5 of a possible 14 skits are presented. At the end of each skit, the children in the audience have a chance to ask the puppets questions.

Because the puppets are large, and because they wear children's clothes (size 2) and children's shoes (size 5), they are very life-like, and children relate well to them and feel comfortable asking them questions.

Response to the educational program has been tremendous:

- "Absolutely the best program I have seen in teaching students about people with handicaps." (principal)

New Kids on the Block puppets.

- "The people involved, the presentation, the content, the response to difficult questions, as well as the presenters' sensitivity, was superior-outstanding. I would encourage every elementary school to have their presentation." (teacher)
- "I learned that handicaps can have as much fun as we can. I learned that they can play ball, work at lots of places. I enjoyed it with all my heart." (an elementary student)
- "If I ever get to be able to have a bussinuss [sic] of my own, I will hier [sic] handicaps." (an elementary student)

The program requires two puppeteers. Pauline Odegard-Johnson, 4-H handicapped programs coordinator, operates the handicapped puppets and Colorado State University students operate the nonhand-icapped puppets and receive academic credit for their participation.

The educational program is copyrighted and can be purchased from the creator: Barbara Aiello, "Kids on the Block," 3509 M Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20007. Funding to purchase CSU puppets was made possible by CSU students who raised the purchase price ($2,660) during an Easter Seal Dance-A-Thon held on campus. The program is presented free of charge in Colorado; however, many schools/groups make a donation toward travel expenses.

It has been a fun and exciting year for the puppeteers and puppets in Colorado and we're all looking forward to the potential benefits another year can bring.

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