

DEVELOPMENTAL CHALLENGE | CHANGING VIEWS ON WHO CAN RAISE CHILDREN



John Starks of Yonkers holds his son, Jeremiah, as he talks about the parenting classes at Westchester Arc. With the support of Arc, Starks and his wife, Bonnie, who is also developmentally disabled, were awarded custody of their son. Photos by Dave Kennedy/The Journal News

Learning to be good parents

Program for disabled covers topics from diapers to discipline

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YONKERS
One day after delivery, Bonnie Starks did not find herself at home cuddling her newborn son, Jeremiah, but standing in front of a judge, pleading to be a mother. "I told the judge, 'I want my child to come home,'" she said softly. "I learned how to be a good parent."
Starks had four of her children taken from her in 2003 and placed in foster care, in part, she said, because she was not equipped with the parenting skills to raise them. The 30-year-old has developmental disabilities and, until recently, was devoid of a support system to help her rear her children.
But with a new marriage and Westchester Arc backing her, Starks and her husband, John, were—that same day in court—granted custody of their son.
"This is my first child and my first wife," said John Starks, 45, as 18-month-old Jeremiah slept soundly in his lap. Both father and son suffer from developmental delays.
The Yonkers couple participate in Westchester Arc's parenting group, a program launched in 2002 that teach-

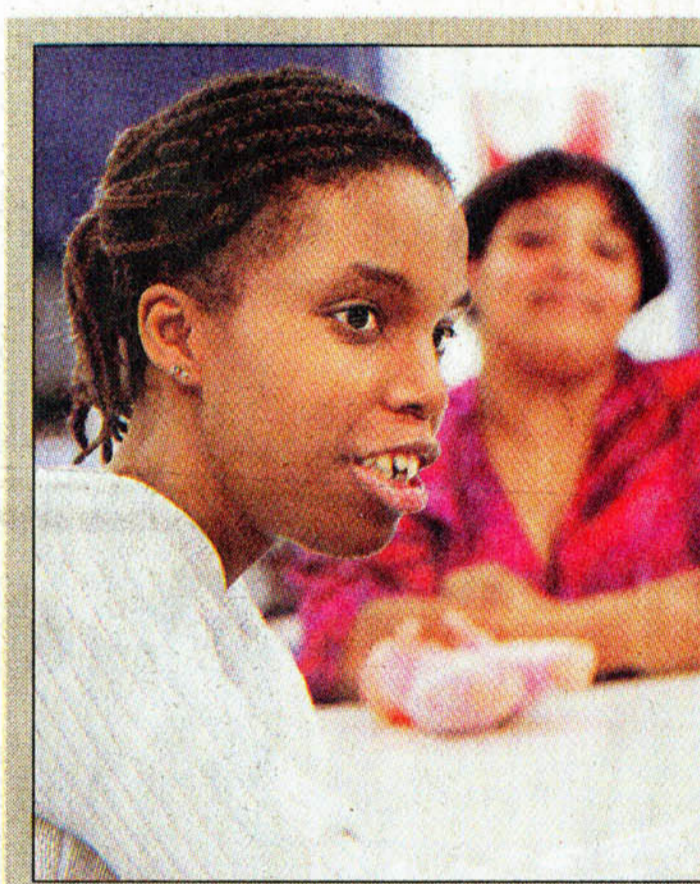
es mothers and fathers with mild to moderate developmental disabilities skills that range from changing diapers to child-proofing a home to disciplining their children.

"We've seen tremendous growth in the parents," said Barbara Powell, a senior social worker at Westchester Arc. "Only one mother's child was placed in foster care and not because of her developmental disabilities but because of (the parent's) mood disorders and domestic violence issues."

Currently, 10 mothers and four fathers participate in the bimonthly program that meets in the agency's Yonkers offices. Separate sessions are held for the men and women. Along with parenting lessons, the participants are taught how to budget their money and maintain healthy relationships, among other life skills. The program, funded by the state Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities, is free to participants and cab fare is included.

"I enjoy coming because I learn a lot of stuff I don't know about," said Toni Carter-Perkins, 30, of Yonkers. "If it wasn't for this program, I'd be lost."

Carter-Perkins has five children between the ages of 1 and 11. She joined the parenting group when her last daughter, Deaja, was born. Four of her children have varying levels of developmental disabilities and one has not been classified. With the help of the program, Deaja is now benefiting



FYI

For more information on Westchester Arc's parenting program, call Sharisse Hunter at 914-428-8330, Ext. 3141, or visit its Web site at www.westchesterarc.org

Bonnie Starks, left, of Yonkers talks about the parenting classes she attends. Because of those classes, she says, "I learned how to be a good parent."

from early intervention education, she said.

"I would have none of this for my daughter," Carter-Perkins said, as Deaja playfully ran around the room. "She didn't talk before and now she says all kinds of words."

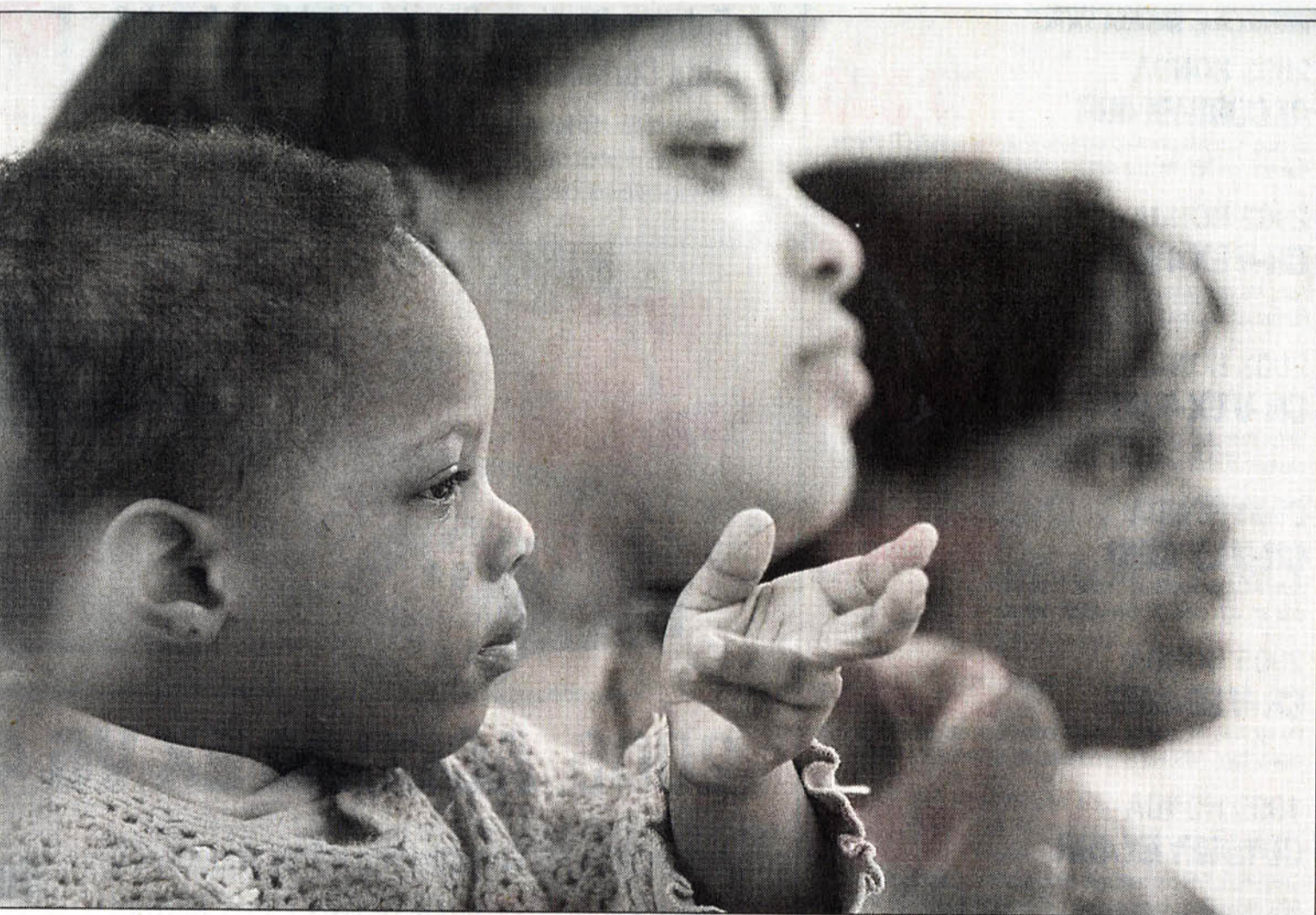
The parenting group was born out of a growing need in the community,

Powell said, and specifically after she encountered a mother with autism.

"It was an unidentified need," she said. "The trend now is to see more parents with developmental disabilities."

The subject of parents with intel-

Please see PARENTS, 13A



Toni Carter-Perkins holds her daughter Deaja at a parenting class at Westchester Arc offices in Yonkers. Carter-Perkins, who is developmentally disabled, attends classes to help cope with the stress of being a parent. Deaja is benefiting from early intervention education, her mother says. Photos by Dave Kennedy/The Journal News

Programs help disabled be parents

PARENTS, from 1A

lectual impairments having and raising children has long been shrouded in controversy.

In the early 20th century, proponents of the eugenics movement argued that to improve on the human race, only healthy and able people should bear children. The institutionalization of people with mental retardation and other impediments further served to encourage segregation and sterilization among this population, experts say.

But with the move away from institutions, more developmentally disabled people are assimilating into society by working, going to school, and expecting the same individual rights as anyone else, ad-

vocates say.

"They are living in a normal social environment and carrying on the same relationships as anyone else," said Rick Swierat, Westchester Arc's executive director. "The expectations are a lot different today."

Authorities in the field of developmental disabilities are recognizing the rise in these special-needs parents.

Agencies throughout the country are working toward providing more education and guidance for them and, in the process, identifying other family needs.

Children of these parents are sometimes born with cognitive delays. But because their parents are getting assistance, their children, as a result, are being

screened early and provided with proper therapies, Powell said. There is no conclusive evidence that the offspring of challenged parents are more likely than not to inherit their parents' delays, officials said.

In the parenting program, there are also typically developing children, Powell said.

"People are starting to take a closer look and realize, yes, these parents can do this," said Sharisse Hunter, senior service coordinator with Westchester Arc. "To me, as long as they have help and support, they can be good parents."

Of course, problems are expected.

At Westchester Arc, parents may call the organization's 24-

hour crisis hotline for help, and most have caseworkers. Starks, who joined the group when she was five months' pregnant with Jeremiah, was appointed a home-health aide through the courts.

But because of her progress in the parenting program, the round-the-clock aide's work time has been shortened to eight hours a day, she said. Her other children remain in foster care.

"They have every right to have kids," Powell said. "The most important part to being a parent is love and they can express that even if they have developmental delays."

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