

THE HELP GROUP STARTED SMALL BUT NOW SERVES THOUSANDS ON AUTISM SPECTRUM IN SAN FERNANDO VALLEY AND BEYOND

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The Help Group, founded in 1975, is the largest nonprofit organization of its kind in the United States serving children with special needs related to Autism Spectrum Disorder, learning disabilities, ADHD, mental retardation, abuse and emotional problems.

It runs nine specialized day schools that are certified by the California Department of Education and offers preschool through high school programs for more than 1,300 students. It has a variety of mental health and therapy services, child abuse and residential programs and it reaches more than 6,000 children and their families each year. About 850 students are on the autism spectrum. The schools are located on four campuses, three in the San Fernando Valley and one in Culver City.

"Our educational programs are one of the largest and most comprehensive in the United States," said Tom Komp, senior vice president of The Help Group. "People have come to us from all over the world."

The group began with two small classrooms to serve students with communication disabilities, Komp said. Now, it serves students on behalf of 50 school districts in Los Angeles and Ventura counties. Some of the funding for these programs is provided from the districts as well as



state agencies. Private donators and fundraisers also help pay for children to attend these schools.

"All students are guaranteed the right to a free education," Komp said.

While some of the students do return to mainstream schools to continue their education, others stay with the program until they graduate from high school. Of the students who attend its Village Glen program, about 85 percent will attempt some type of higher education.

It also provides outpatient therapy,

home counseling, and two residential programs that support families with children who are having troubles in their homes, Komp said. At any given time, between 14 and 24 students ranging from 13- to 18-years old are housed at its Village Glen Commons facility in its Project Six program.

The six-month-old program offers an intensive therapeutic plan that includes individual and group counseling, family therapy as well as heavy emphasis on social skills training, Komp said. The students are assessed and a specialized reading and



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educational curriculum is designed to meet their needs.

"This is in response to the increasing need and explosion of autism," Komp said.

Help's goals include a commitment to early detection and education.

Dr. Sara McCracken, director of the Help Group's young learners preschool and early education programs, said it works with children between 3- and 5- years old and helps them focus on their learning skills, both cognitive and social.

Teachers assess each child to identify specific goals, which includes floor time activities, she said. Each student receives an applied behavior analysis, and as the child grows or changes, the program is redesigned to meet their needs.

"It makes such a difference for them to be in a structured environment," McCracken said. "It's time to lay those foundation skills. That's when you can make the most progress."

The organization also runs several camps throughout the summer, including the Help Group Kids Like Me camp, McCracken said. This is a unique program where kids between 3- and 18-years old with moderate to severe autism spend the day having fun learning social and team building skills. Counselors use activities to teach children how to read body language and listen for voice inflections as well as teach them skills on how to make friends and say goodbye.

They attribute some of its success to training each employee with its own special methodology and continued commitment to research, Komp said. Working with the University of California, Los Angeles, this alliance conducts studies in improving language development, decreasing social anxiety and improving friendship quality and social skills for teens and young adults on the spectrum.

"We're experts on what we do," he said. "We have been doing this a long time and have a tremendous amount of experience."

For more information about The Help Group,
visit www.thehelpgroup.org

The Help Group has several specialized day schools that offer children from preschool to high school with diagnostic teaching, prescriptive teaching, individualized curriculum, counseling, speech, language and occupational therapy and adaptive physical education classes.

Here is a list of those schools in the San Fernando Valley and Culver City:

Village Glen School: Serves children with social and communicative disabilities, including Asperger's Disorder. It offers individualized education with emphasis on social skills. For more information, visit www.villageglen.org.

Young Learners Preschool for Autism: Designed for children on the autism spectrum and for those with other social communication and developmental delays. It assesses each child and implements early development through interdisciplinary approaches. For more information, visit www.younglearnerspreschool.org.

Bridgeport School: Integrates an academic curriculum with hands-on life skills training and vocational services for students with mild cognitive delays and social communication or language development challenges. The Bridgeport Transition Program targets those who are 18- to 21-years old to help them transition from school into adulthood and independent living.

Sunrise School for Autism and Developmental Disabilities: Promotes communicative, behavioral, social, academic, motor, adaptive and independent living skills. For more information, visit www.sunriseschool.net.

Summit View School: Teaches children with specific learning disabilities. Students learn to build their academic skills while experiencing a school environment. For more information, visit www.summitschool.org.

Coldwater Canyon Prep: Offers a comprehensive academic and therapeutic curriculum in a specialized day-school setting for students with learning disabilities and social-emotional needs. For more information, visit www.coldwatercanyonprep.org.

Harbor School West: Focuses on students' strengths and accomplishments by tapping into their individual needs, interests and goals. For more information, visit www.harborschoolwest.org.

Pacific Schools: An educational and therapeutic day school. The Pacific Ridge Program at these schools addresses educational, emotional and behavioral needs.