

PRESCHOOLERS

# It takes a family to go to preschool

By *Melanie Romero*

**A COOPERATIVE PRESCHOOL** is the ultimate manifestation of parent involvement in a child's early education and socialization.

At a cooperative preschool, parents are allowed, encouraged and even required to participate in one or more ways that will benefit both the children and the program. Being part of a cooperative preschool can also mean fundraising, policy-making, cleaning toilets or being bitten by someone else's child! Fortunately, the benefits far outweigh the drawbacks.

Requirements vary for each program. Parents at Creative Bridges Cooperative Preschool in Phoenix must participate as a teacher's assistants once a month, according to director Pam Watts. They are required to attend one cleaning day per year and a Parent Orientation Night in the fall.

At Paradise Valley Cooperative School (PVCS), parents have an option to participate once, twice, or not at all in the morning program, with tuition based on the level chosen. Parents who are unable to work in the morning program are expected to participate in other ways that will benefit the program.

When parents assist in the classroom, they also get an education. Observing the techniques and listening to the words and phrases teachers use to move children through transitions and gain their cooperation can inspire new and effective parenting strategies to use at home. Many co-ops also offer parenting classes, educational workshops or



PHOTO BY DANIEL FRIEDMAN

Preschoolers Connor Smith, Aminah Smith and co-op mom Cara Denby on the playground at Paradise Valley Cooperative School.

monthly meetings with teachers.

As parents get to know the abilities, habits and interests of all the other children in the class, fears they may have about their own child's development are eased. "It's incredibly reassuring to observe that the range of normalcy is wide!" says PVCS parent Marcy Christner.

The initial decision to choose a cooperative preschool is often made so that parents are able to "keep their fingers on the pulse of their young children's lives," says Alison Steier, Ph.D., who chose a co-op for her daughter Chase. She appreciates the fact that being an active participant in Chase's preschool experience allows her family to "have rich conversations about her experience, well beyond the usual 'how was your day?'" and give her daughter "a feeling of school as a community where people come to really know and care about each other."

"The co-op acts as a kind of bridge," says PVCS parent Molly Meyer. "Parents and teachers work together to help children confidently cross from home life into a bigger social setting...a winning arrangement for all involved. Children, parents and teachers each give and receive the support they need to grow and learn." **RAK**

*Melanie Romero is the owner and director of Paradise Valley Cooperative School and the mother of Cody (17), Carissa (11) and Cyrina (3).*

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A list of the Valley's cooperative preschools.

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