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## SPECIAL POPULATIONS

# Nitzan Horim

Israel's educational and social centers for learning-disabled families

• By MIRIAM KRESH

Imagine a first-grader who always arrives late to school. Day after day, his schoolbag may have five pairs of clean underwear in it but no food. The teacher calls the mother up to straighten the situation out, but the mother sounds confused. She doesn't come to parent-teacher meetings, or if she does, she sits in the back and doesn't talk. Her child misses out on school trips because he never returns the medical form. The mother seems okay, not disturbed or disabled. So what's wrong?

The mother, and perhaps the father, may have cognitive or functional disabilities. These challenges involve hidden difficulties in memory, reading, problem-solving, understanding math, visual comprehension and attention. Possibly the parent has difficulty communicating verbally. For the person with functional disabilities, filling out forms, sticking to a schedule and absorbing new information are bewildering, impossible tasks. This becomes an obstacle to getting and keeping a job. Social and emotional problems arise. At home, ordinary family conflicts don't get resolved. Boundaries like regular mealtimes and bedtimes don't exist.

When a normal child grows up in a dysfunctional home, it's more than likely that his or her own future in society will be dysfunctional as well. As the Nitzan Horim website says, "Without assistance, the children of these special-needs parents are at risk of developing emotional and social problems, developmental lags and adjustment problems in school and in life in general." And there are hundreds of special-needs parents in Israel.

Until 10 years ago, there was nowhere for such parents to get guidance. Many parenting courses existed, but none addressed the needs of special-needs parents. Tova Segol, who has a learning-disabled daughter, changed all that.

Segol's daughter, Maya, attended school, served in the army and married, but she always had the support of a highly involved family with the economic power to enlist all available aid. When Maya and her husband decided to have a child, Segol threw herself into a search for parenting classes to guide the young couple. She came up with nothing. She then formed Nitzan Horim, exactly the sort of parent education center that special-needs parents need. Once the project was under way, Segol handed the development over to professionals in the field. Segol's role today is raising funds.

Nitzan's model is now Israel's nationally standardized academic and psychological assessment tool for evaluation of learning-disabled individuals. There are Nitzan parents' centers in Herzliya, Karmiel and Rishon Lezion, with others in Ashdod, Yeroham, Beersheba, Modi'in and Ra'anana in planning stages.

Metro visited the center in Herzliya. "Above all, we want the families to feel that this is a home," explained center director Shelly Magber, "a safe place for parents and children." She turned to welcome a family; the mother handed her a baby to hold while she went to investigate something, and Magber walked around with the baby on her hip until the mother came back.

Several tables were set up in the center of the room. Children and volunteers were absorbed in making masks and decorative streamers. Farther off, small kids bounced around noisily in a protected play area, supervised by a young male student.

When I asked the age limit for children at the centers, Magber smiled. "We're growing with the children," she said. "Right now, our oldest is eight. He'll keep coming, and we'll keep growing to suit his needs."

The posted schedule of activities showed there were activities for mothers only, a cooking and nutrition class for couples, an activity called "B'yahad" where the entire family participates and learns better interaction, psycho-drama, Feldenkrais, storytelling time, art therapy, occupational therapy and more. What particularly caught my eye were workshops for elementary-school children with learning disabilities. A child might need to be taught how to participate and behave in class, how to organize time and study for tests, how to overcome nervousness and fear.

Magber led me through the facility, which looks modest but has rich resources. There's a computer corner where parents in need of jobs get help composing a CV; model "baby room" where young parents learn about safety, proper heating and ventilation, feeding and clothing for the infant; a well-stocked library with hundreds of books, DVDs and a television; a playroom full of toys and games; and an art therapy room. Outside, there is a therapeutic garden and a pet corner.

Nitzan Horim national director Revital Aloni-Gantz talked about the project's vision and how it runs. Like Magber, she emphasized that the centers are places where learning-disabled parents and kids can learn and develop in a safe, friendly atmosphere.

"It's important to address the issues of social isolation and loneliness that afflict so many of our special-needs people," she said.

How do the projects manage financially?

"We run mostly on donations," Gantz revealed. "The National Insurance Institute helps to provide suitable housing for the facilities. Parents pay a nominal fee. But mostly we depend on donations and on voluntary work. Apart from the branch directors and coordinators, all our workers work voluntarily. We have clinical psychologists, social workers, special-needs teachers, educational counselors and other professionals in related fields - all volun-



Helping children of special-needs parents flourish: Working with plants at Nitzan Horim's original center in Herzliya. (Courtesy)

teers. The young women who sit with the children and help the staff are mostly students, although we occasionally get a girl doing her national service."

How do needy parents become aware of Nitzan? Are they mostly referred?

"We work through the community," explained Gantz. "When we open a center, we contact kindergarten teachers and Tipat Halav [family health center] nurses. It's very important to find the parents in early stages, even in pregnancy. Learning-disabled parents go through a crisis when they bring the baby home. The mother may not get support nursing, may not even understand how to make formula. She might feel terribly alone and without resources to raise this helpless baby. These parents need to start learning parenting skills when the children are still very small or even before birth.

"It's not easy," she continued. "Some disadvantaged mothers never get to Tipat Halav. We talk with social workers, managers of baby-care centers, any organization involved in childhood development. We bring these sources to the centers, so they can see our concept. We also aim to show teachers and managers that with these special-needs parents, it's not that they don't want to provide for the kids' needs; they don't know how to. We educate teachers to look for the signs of dysfunctional parents and not to get angry with the child but to get the parents to Nitzan Horim. There's also word of mouth; some parents have read about us in magazines, too."

Parents go through a process where the director learns about their background, education, number of children and any special treatments they've had. Domestic violence, drugs and alcohol are not in Nitzan's scope. When families with those issues turn up, they're referred to appropriate programs.

Some parents find it hard to participate in the workshops and activities at first. They're invited to just observe for a while, until they're comfortable joining in. Or a mother might approach Nitzan without her partner. There are fewer fathers in the

program, but the numbers are growing. Aloni-Gantz was delighted to tell me of a husband who participated in a couples' cooking workshop and now does all the cooking at home.

While the adults are taking workshops or classes, the children are playing with the young volunteers or getting help with their homework. Often the parents bring dinner and they all eat there. The kids bond with the volunteers as they visit the pet corner or garden, getting plenty of individual attention while playing games or making projects together. The center is the place where they celebrate birthdays and get ready for holidays, for at home it doesn't happen.

Children of learning-disabled parents bloom under the attention and guidance they receive at Nitzan Horim. They gain improved ability to interact with others normally. As a result, their self-esteem grows. As their parents' ability to communicate and interact grows, too, the family dynamic shifts to a better balance. New friends come over. Family members feel free to share their experiences, playing games and read together. With better communication, the relationship between spouses improves.

Nitzan Horim offers outside activities as well, some for families and some only for parents. These excursions aren't only for fun; they help parents and children gain confidence and learn correct behavior in public situations. For those who have always felt out of place and awkward among other people, it's a triumph to return from a positive social experience.

Nitzan has an adult job-training program and a residential rehabilitation program in branches throughout the country. Participants who have found employment are offered six months of group support. The organization also offers a 10-course program at Tel Aviv University to parents of learning-disabled children.

"Our goal," says Magber, "is to educate special-needs parents and prevent a second dysfunctional generation."

More information: [www.nitzan-israel.org.il](http://www.nitzan-israel.org.il), or call Revital Aloni-Gantz at 052-229-1998.