

Time in for good behavior

Fueled by faith, Ann Brazil's childhood development DVD teaches kids to be on their best behavior.

By **Brenda Rees**

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Picking a kindergarten for your child these days is a highly competitive, nerve-wrecking, nail-biting experience. Ask any parent. There's testing and worries about academic performance, not to mention deciding how certain elementary schools will feed into the more prestigious middle and high schools. Parents are warned: a preschool decision today could affect junior's standing in college years from now.

But something is often missing among the ABCs and 1-2-3s: *How to get along with others.*

"Parents are now more concerned about academic, rather than focusing on what is really needed at this time in their child's life --- which is social skills," says Ann Brazil, a Sts. Felicitas and Perpetua (San Marino) parishioner creator of a new DVD series aimed to teach little children the importance of working and playing with others.

"I think social skills is another subject, just like math or science," continues Brazil. "They are taught and learned through our upbringing, role models, church. Parents need to dedicate the same energy to the social skill subject as they would any subject."

Through clever songs and with the guide of a squirrel puppet Tot, the DVD uses live action demonstrations of children



misbehaving --- whining, throwing a tantrum, pushing or biting. Tot then contrasts this by showing children making better choices. The goal is to have young viewers realize that misbehaving is unproductive and they can choose how to behave.

"The DVD can help children draw a clearer line between what is acceptable and unacceptable behavior," says Brazil.

Challenges of her own

While the DVD may be the first one of its kind to hit the child development

shelves, to Brazil, the project has been driven by her Catholic faith as a way to touch people's lives in a positive manner --- remarkable, given some of the personal family challenges with which she has coped.

Her mother, she says, introduced her to faith in action. When Brazil was a senior at Mayfield Senior School in Pasadena, her mother was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis and for the next 11 years spent most of her time, as Brazil says, "parenting from bed. In fact, my younger brother only knew her in bed. Yet, because of her faith, I never heard her complain. She was truly an inspiration of 'picking up her cross' and doing what needed to be done."

Believing that God works in often-mysterious ways, Brazil discovered that her first born child, Brian, was mildly retarded --- a fact that first shook her world. She quit her job at a marketing company to take care of her son, and to learn more about how children learn --- and how often parents often don't recognize social growth.

When Brian was young, "It was a very lonely time," admits Brazil. "But when I look back it became clear to me that God wanted me to learn early childhood development. I met with specialists, professionals, doctors, you name it. But I think the biggest eye-opening

experience came from watching other parents fret and worry about academics and getting caught up in things that aren't that important. I could have easily been sucked into that world."

Calling her son Brian "the best teacher," Brazil started a Sunday school program at Sts. Felicitas and Perpetua. For six years, she took what she was learning about childhood development and created a program that emphasized how each child needs to recognize their own talents and gifts.

Brazil and her husband had two more children, with the youngest also presenting new challenges. At age three, he developed leukemia and the family "basically lived at City of Hope for three-and-a-half years" while he received chemotherapy treatments. "It's times like these where your faith kicks into high gear," says Brazil. "Sometimes the situations can just drain you, but you never give up."

From need, an opportunity

Life went on for the Brazils and this year Brian graduates from San Marino High School. But his disability means that he will need constant care for the rest of his life, so recently, Brazil and husband checked out group homes. "They were nightmares," she says. "I needed something else. I started praying

for ways to earn more money to be able to create a new kind of group home for adults.”

Last year, Brazil was causally talking with her brother about creating some kind of video program that would reinforce childhood social skills. “He told me, ‘I think you’re on to something,’” recalls Brazil who had a background in video marketing.

As it happened, Brazil was speaking at career day at school and she bumped into a Disney producer who was fascinated with Brazil’s simple message. She introduced Brazil to a Jim Henson puppeteer who would eventually create the Tot puppet, and the ball was officially rolling.

“All of a sudden, things were falling into place,” relates Brazil whose neighbor down the street --- a patent attorney --- helped her with legal issues. Music was created and the project was green lighted last year with the DVD released this February.

In addition to the DVD, Brazil has created preschool “classes” utilizing Tot that are presented in Los Angeles area schools and libraries. Children watch and learn from the half-hour show, while in another room parents are guided on how to help and encourage social skills with their preschoolers.

“The whole process is like looking in a mirror and seeing what you look like when you whine, are rude, angry or hurtful,” says Brazil. “Kids realize they can choose how to act. Tot tells them, ‘You’re all good kids. They are many ways to express yourself. Use your words. You can tell your parents when you’re angry or upset. It’s OK.’”

“Parents are groping for solutions on discipline,” continues Brazil. “The problems I see [with children] is often are self-esteems that are out of control. We parents have to set up boundaries and present issues in black and white terms. We think we shouldn’t be too tough on them, but we should. We should expect them to act and behave appropriately. It’s good for the parent. It’s good for the child.”

Time Out With Tot is available at Vroman’s Bookstore in Pasadena, San Marino Toy and Books and from www.timeouttot.com. The website also offers information about upcoming Time Out Tot preschool presentations and classes.