

THE PILOT PARENT PROGRAM:

HELPING HANDICAPPED CHILDREN THROUGH THEIR PARENTS

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The problems of parents who discover that their newborn child is mentally retarded or otherwise handicapped are many and heavy. For many parents, the news that their child is handicapped is extremely upsetting and difficult for them to accept. Often, such parents react in pathological ways--by denial, anger, guilt, or depression--none of which is useful in helping them to make the necessary adjustment to their child's condition. It is in this initial state of shock that many parents have institutionalized their handicapped child, a decision they would probably not have made were they properly counselled in the early days and months of dealing with their child's handicap. Essentially, though, to keep and raise their child effectively, the parents must adjust in two ways: they must accept their child's projected limitations as a fact, and they must begin to discover the ways by which his medical and educational needs can be met. But because parents can seldom make this ideal adjustment by themselves, the method and purpose of counselling parents of handicapped children becomes crucial.

Since the early 1950's, the subject of parental response to a retarded child has been given a fair amount of attention in research and psychiatric journals. Much of these writings, however, reflected the prevailing tendency of psychiatrists to disparage the mentally retarded, and to intellectualize (and see as pathological) the parental confusion and doubt that were a normal by-product of their helplessness and ignorance of what the diagnosis of mental retardation really meant. Beddie and Osmond equated the birth of a handicapped child to a "child loss," that is, the death of the hoped-for normal child; hence, parental grief had to be overcome with "grief work."<sup>1</sup> Solnit and Stark followed suit by calling the parental attitude one of "chronic mourning" for the "object loss" of a normal child.<sup>2</sup> Because the family configurations of parents and retarded child was viewed as "abnormal" in these constructs, the