

Lifestyle.

Respite house gives parents a breather

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For many working couples today, arranging for child care that is safe, reliable and convenient is the first order of business. In a family where two incomes are needed, finding a care giver has become a necessity, not a luxury.

Even most mothers and fathers who work inside the home want some time off from the daily rigors of child rearing.

Sometimes all a parent needs is a break from parenting.

And for a couple with a mentally retarded or developmentally disabled child, that need is often greater.

The Staten Island branch of the Association for the Help of Retarded Children is aiming to meet that need.

The organization is sponsoring the Island's first overnight respite house for retarded persons ages 8 and older for stays of one to 14 days.

The home, which is being leased by the group, is a duplex on Houston Street in Graniteville. It is the first of its kind in the borough, and only the second citywide, according to its organizers. (The other is in Queens.)

The benefits of the respite program are twofold.

"Not only are some parents in need of a surrogate parenting situation," explained Herman Hman, a member of the board directors of AHRC, "but it will allow the child to interact with his peers."

"Staten Island's attitude has always been that we take care of our own," he continued. "This is for our neighbors who have a member of the family who is handicapped. It will be a welcome opportunity (for parents) for a little breathing space in the care of their son or daughter, day in and day out."

It will also help to develop a much-needed transition period for parents and children who, one day, will be separated.

"I've had so many calls from parents in their late 60s, who have a retarded child in their 40s," related Fishman. "Of course, the child is no longer a child. The person has been provided for in the most comfortable and protective situation possible . . . And then the parent finds he has a life-threatening illness, and he suddenly realizes the child must be provided for."

However, not every mentally

retarded person will be eligible to stay in the respite house, according to Margaret DelBagno, borough director of AHRC.

"A screening process has been set up . . . There must be an adherence to certain standards," she explained.

For example, the house can accommodate three guests, no younger than 8-years-old, for overnight stays of up to two weeks. Stays must be reserved in

advance; it is not an emergency respite. Guests must be in a school, a day program, a workshop or working. They must be ambulatory, toilet regulated and have no severe medical or behavioral problems.

In addition, parents must provide a reliable emergency backup person the respite can contact if they will be out of town during the period their child is in the home.

Fees are modest and are based