

Saturday's Children

'We Hit A Live Nerve'

WESTPORT, Conn.—According to an old rhyme, "Friday's child is loving and giving," while "Saturday's child has to work for its living. . . ." But in this wealthy suburb, where weekend tedium can be a way of adolescent life, the citizens have to work hard to entertain Saturday's children.

But the task has been eased considerably since the town came up with a new recreation-education program popularly known as The Saturday Thing. Now, instead of drifting downtown and hanging around each Saturday—a custom that upsets parents and unnerves merchants — many of Westport's young people go to school.

The program offers—as one mother described it—"a smorgasbord of unstructured activities." A Saturday child can participate in the expected recreational activities such as basketball and crafts; but he also can do things more educational, such as puttering around the science lab, creating in art and drama, or listening to music.

The "smorgasbords" are available at seven Westport schools, including the high school, and are attracting more than 1,000 children each week. Westport's total public-school enrollment is about 7,000.

The program is sponsored by the town's recreation commission at an annual cost of \$20,000. Since it is relatively inexpensive and can be organized with a minimum of fuss, it might serve as a rough model for other communities worried about their Saturday children.

The concept of utilizing school buildings on weekends is neither original with nor unique to Westport, a town of about 28,000 population. Many communities open one or more of their public schools for athletic and other recreational activities, and some private schools also have weekend programs.

But the Westport public-school program is somewhat different in two important respects: It ventures beyond recreation into educational areas, and it involves paid professional teachers (each receives about \$7 an hour). "I can think of no other town," says Daniel Christian, principal of Coleytown Junior High School, "which gives so generous a choice of activities to youngsters on Saturdays."

The schools in Westport stood locked and idle on weekends until about three years ago, when a group of Coleytown parents decided to unlock the doors. "Some of the kids had been breaking into the school on weekends to play basketball," Jay Strausser, one of the organizers of the "open school" project, recalled on a recent Saturday. "We parents felt that rather than discipline them, we ought to take their hint."

Vivien Meyers, another member of the Parent-Teacher Association who helped open the doors, said she had been worried about the scene on Main Street. The kids would hang around and spend money and sometimes get into trouble. They needed a safe place to go.



"Puttering around the science lab" is one of the "usual" activities offered at the Saturday Thing.

The parents and children organized a rock concert which raised \$700; and they have the money to launch The Saturday Thing. "When we saw the mobs of children that first Saturday," notes Mrs. Meyers, "we knew we had hit a live nerve."

The Coleytown experiment eventually spread to other schools, and the town consented to pick up the tab. "It's become a significant part of our program," says Bruce Corriegan, of the Recreation Commission. "I don't know how we survived so long without it."

One apparent reason for the program's popularity is its pleasant casualness and informality. "The kids can come and go as they please," observed Edward Bludnicki, a Coleytown science teacher who helps supervise. "They don't have to sign in or sign out. And they don't have to worry about grades, which means they're not afraid to make mistakes."

Another apparent reason is the need the young people have for a place to go—aside from downtown away from their parents. On a recent Saturday a visitor found Mr. Bludnicki in the science room, overseeing the varied activities of a dozen students. The predominant mood seemed one of cheerful concentration. "You see," said Mr. Bludnicki, explaining the children's diligence, "they're doing the things they

in the schools of Westport, Conn. The "Saturday Thing" is popular in this suburb where weekend tedium can be a way of adolescent life.

There's no discipline problem here, only a "live nerve" situation." The visitor wandered into the huge gymnasium, where about 100 children, mostly boys, were playing basketball. In the center of the swirling crowd were two teachers, James Welsh and Peter Van Hagen. "We really get to know the kids on Saturdays," said Mr. Welsh. "They begin to realize we're real persons and not just machines in suits and ties." Mr. Welsh was wearing a sweatshirt and jeans.

Upstairs, off the main lobby, some youngsters were playing Ping-Pong; others were playing chess and listening to rock. A group of P.T.A. mothers were conducting yet another fund-raiser, a bake sale.

The visitor bought a cupcake. Then he slipped into a telephone booth and called Klein's, a large store on Main Street which sells books, records, cameras and toys. Did Mr. Klein notice fewer children in his store on Saturday?

"You bet I have," he said. "This school program is wonderful. I have nothing against kids — I've three of them myself—but Saturday is the only time some adults can do their shopping, and the kids get in the way. Any program that keeps them stimulated and entertained gets my support."

—RICHARD J. MARGOLIS

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