

Sunday, Feb. 26, 1995

Families in crisis

A safe haven for children and a resource for parents

By DAVID PERLIS
Evening Sun Reporter

Everything about the Lehman Center's crisis nursery for children in downtown York suggests it is a nice place to be.

The first thing visitors see in the nursery's lobby is an oversized painting of smiling, happy children on a playground.

In the carpeted hallway leading to the second floor is a colorful mural of building blocks and stylized children holding balloons.

But the building's cheerful interior stands in sharp contrast to the seriousness of the center's mission. The staff of the Lehman Center has the task of providing counseling and support to families in crisis.

"We're trying to help families in crisis experiencing different types of stress, to help keep the family together and healthy," said Lori L. Hoffmaster, director of the center.

"We're trying to help families in crisis experiencing different types of stress, to help keep the family together and healthy."

Lori Hoffmaster
Center Director

"Through ongoing support of the family and by helping shelter the children, we're keeping the children safe and helping the parents learn better coping skills, better parenting skills, better personal skills."

The Lehman Center is a subsidiary of Children's Aid Society, a non-profit organization operated by the Southern Pennsylvania District, Church of the Brethren.

The center provides counseling and parent support services, a 24-hour hot line and the only 24-hour crisis nursery in the state. The CAS also operates a center in New Oxford and one in Chambersburg.

The people served by the Lehman Center's staff range from single mothers and fathers to parents and grandparents who need help handling the task of primary care-giver, Hoffmaster said.

"The parents aren't bad people," she said. "A lot of the parents that we serve unfortunately have not had the best models growing up or haven't had any training in being a parent. So we're helping parents learn the skills that people assume you know automatically."

The crisis nursery provides shelter for children from birth to age 6 who are at high risk for abuse or neglect.

"They are not abused," Hoffmaster said. "This is a child abuse prevention program. They're at his risk because of factors in the home."

In addition to the nursery and family



Lori L. Hoffmaster (right), director of the Lehman Center in York, stands in the lobby of the center's 24-hour crisis nursery for children who are potential victims of abuse or neglect. Karen Stabley (above) is the center's art therapist.



Evening Sun Photo By David Perlis

therapist. Along with evaluating the children sheltered in the nursery, Stabley provides long-term therapy to children from the community who are victims or suspected victims of abuse or neglect.

"She works for the children in a therapeutic way to try to get them to express their feelings in art and play," Hoffmaster said.

"She's trying to build some good defense mechanisms, build some good coping skills, and just basically have them enter into a trusting relationship with an adult. A lot of the kids Karen sees don't have a trusting, safe relationship with an adult."

The center also runs a parenting support group called Parents Helping Parents. It currently operates three support groups, two in York City and one in Hanover. Each group is lead by a parent and is assisted by one or two trained facilitators.

"The goal of the group is for everybody to feel supported, that they're not alone. And to find new ways of parenting better, through the group process of talking about some alternatives."

Hoffmaster gives a lot of credit to the people who seek the center's help in becoming better parents.

"It takes a lot of courage, a lot of insight, wanting something different for themselves and their kids," Hoffmaster

over a period of weeks, months and sometimes years.

This allows her to see what is going on in the child's life that the child is unable to express or talk about.

"The whole theory behind art therapy is that art can be healing, art can help you grow and heal hurts," Stabley said.

"My bottom line is, I'm creating a safe place for the children to be able to say what they need and what they're feeling."

There are two schools of thought in art therapy, she said. The first holds that the processing of creating art can be healing.

The second theory says that art has symbolism and that the symbols can be analyzed to determine the artist's emotional state.

"The way I work is a combination of both theories," Stabley said. "I believe you have to be able to look at the artwork to understand why you're creating them. I also believe you can feel better just by doing art. That art, in and of itself, has healing qualities."

Stabley's job is threefold. First, she holds one session with each child being sheltered in the crisis nursery who is age 2 or older.

"I'm looking for their developmental level or developmental lags so I can refer them to another service that might help them. And the other thing I'm looking for are indicators of abuse or warning signs that the child is in need of therapy."

Stabley also carries a caseload of 20 to 25 children referred by the community, attorneys or York County Children and Youth Services. sees them on a weekly basis for a year or more.

"I tend to work more long-term with children than most therapists," she said.

"The way I work is more child-centered, so I wait till the issues come up in the artwork. The children choose what they want to do each week. I don't have a preplanned notion."

Finally, Stabley conducts diagnostic evaluations of children referred to her by attorneys and case workers with Children and Youth. The evaluations consist of four sessions with each child.

"I have a standard list of about 17 drawings that the child will do," she said. "And based on the drawings, I write up a report. It's just basically focusing on the child and where the child is emotionally."

One child Stabley saw was a 6-year-old who was having behavioral problems with other children at school. The mother, who felt overwhelmed, brought the child to the shelter.

"I just saw a lot of indicators that the child was just not feeling safe at home," she said. "The child didn't feel comfortable with the mother's boyfriend. There were indicators in the artwork that this child was just fearful of the boyfriend. And he was abusive, but not toward the child, he hit the mother."

Stabley worked with the child while case workers counseled the mother, she said. Eventually, the child was able to tell the mother how fearful he was of the boyfriend.

"The child was able to identify where some of the fear was coming from, and was able to verbalize it to his mother. Whereas before he was out of control and acting out and unable to understand why he was angry and out of control," Stabley said.

Art gets to the heart of what's bothering kids

By DAVID PERLIS
Evening Sun Reporter

Karen Stabley's office at the Lehman Center in York is a child's dream of paradise.

The large, airy room is filled with toys and games. There are two doll houses, board games, a toy dish set, play fruit, stuffed animals.

Stabley also has an assortment of crayons, markers and colored pencils. A group of child's drawings hangs from a clothes line strung across one wall.

But Stabley's job is more than fun and games. A state-licensed art therapist, she evaluates and provides therapy to children at risk of abuse or neglect, as well as victims or suspected victims of abuse or neglect.

Stabley's clients include children staying in the center's 24-hour crisis nursery, as well as children from the community who are referred by their