

Family Resource Center Responds to Community Needs

BY RHODA WEISS

There is no job tougher—or more important—than that of a parent. But no child ever arrived with an instruction manual. If family or friends are not available, where does one turn for advice and support?

In South Orange County, CA, one option is the 3,000-square-foot Family Resource Center in the Mission Viejo Mall. Opened in October 1996, the center is a partnership of Mission Hospital Medical Center, its Children's Hospital Unit, and the local child abuse prevention council, Junior League, and community services program. The Family Resource Center is funded in part through federal government grants.

"The goal is to assist children to become caring and productive adults through working to strengthen families and communities," says Becky Barney-Villano, director of Marketing and Physician Services at Mission Hospital. "We want to affirm basic parenting skills and help families find connections in the community."

ASSESSING THE NEED

The decision to create the Family Resource Center was the result of an extensive community health assessment, which the hospital used to determine which initiatives would create a healthier community and establish collaborative relationships that would have a positive, lasting impact on community health. The assessment included a telephone survey of 400 households, discussions with focus groups, and interviews with key community leaders. The hospital also analyzed existing assessments, reports, and other studies by social service agencies, school districts, and other organizations to determine any significant trends in health and quality of life.

"The results of our survey indicated that access to healthcare was not a problem for the vast majority of residents," states Villano. "However, almost half of the respondents had some experience with major psychological or behavioral problems." Respondents most often cited a lack of



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parenting skills (98 percent), a lack of family values (96 percent), drug and alcohol abuse (96 percent), domestic violence (96 percent), and teenage pregnancy (74 percent) as the causes of problems among families experiencing difficulties.

Following the survey, the hospital conducted focus groups with teens, young adults, and parents. Both teens and young adults pointed out the prevalence of sexual activity and drug and alcohol abuse. They also revealed that parents were often substance abusers. Participants in the parents' focus groups cited a variety of problems that adversely affect their quality of life, including long commutes in heavy traffic, pressure to acquire material goods, and lack of quality time with their families. As a result, parents felt out of touch with their children. There was interest in parental education and other resources, as well as general agreement that parents could benefit from learning more about the environment that their children live in today.

HELPING FAMILIES

The result is the Family Resource Center, a relaxed, casual place where parents and their children can drop in to ask questions, peruse the resource library, or attend classes. There is a play area for children to allow parents time to explore

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The toddler talk class at the South Orange County Family Resource Center.

RESOURCE CENTER

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current parenting books, magazines, and audiovisual materials.

A "warm line" staff, directed by a licensed clinical worker, provides confidential telephone advice on questions ranging from common child-rearing challenges to complex issues such as substance abuse, discipline, and anger management.

Although the center is staffed by professionals experienced in all areas of family life, the focus is on children from infancy through age 18. Plans call for expansion into other family issues encompassing a wider range of ages.

The center offers parenting classes and workshops; topics range from setting a baby's sleeping patterns and taming tantrums to managing family stress and


teaching job skills. Other classes address divorce, choosing child care, buying toys, infant massage, toilet training, gangs, and fathering skills. Teen and children's education focuses on life skills and group interactions plus activities such as singing, guitar playing, cartooning, and babysitting. At monthly Family Fun Night, parents and their children share classes and activities.

Publicity for the center has included articles and advertisements in local newspapers, magazines, and on television. A monthly community education newsletter also lists classes and activities. The city of Mission Viejo distributed more than 8,000 center refrigerator magnets and staff members often speak to community groups. Local school dis-

tricts also distribute information on the center's activities.

Community response has been enthusiastic, including professionals offering to conduct workshops; families coming to participate; and volunteers willing to teach classes, market the program, and staff the information desk.

In 1997 more than 7,000 people participated in a center program or used a center service; 35 professionals presented programs at the center; 15 agencies and organizations offered activities; volunteers contributed 1,500 hours, and staff members did numerous community presentations. □

 For more information, contact Becky Barney-Villano at 714-365-2211.

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