

Parenting with a net



MARY LANEFELD

The Respite Center provides 24-hour crisis childcare — and can give flagging parents a break, too

By Paula Zelony

Shannon Heft has seen her share of difficult times. A 28-year-old single mother, she clearly delights in her two sons, Austin, 6, and Dominic, 2. But “When Austin was 3, he was a real stress in my life. He needed constant attention,” says Heft. “I locked myself in the bedroom and called the Respite Center. They said to bring him in. When I came back to get him a few hours later, I was so happy to see him!”

“One of the world’s toughest jobs is being a parent,” maintains the staff at Madison’s Respite Center. For the last 25 years, Dane County families in crisis have been able to count on the Respite Center as a safe place for kids to stay while parents cope with difficult times. Open 24 hours a day, seven days a week, the center provides childcare for children from birth to age 14 as well as counseling and referrals to other social service agencies.

Since last December, the Respite Center has a new facility to welcome families. Situated in the brand-new Family Centers building on Madison’s east side, it shares space with several other organizations dedicated to strengthening families (see sidebar).

Like many parents, Heft reports that her kids love going to the Respite Center — and it’s easy to see why. The spacious day room is stocked with everything from highchairs and playhouses to a pool table and electronic games. A kitchen at the far end of the room serves three meals a day plus snacks. There’s a full bathroom where children can bathe before bedtime and three bedrooms decorated with colorful quilts and curtains. Pocket doors separating the bedrooms can be retracted so that large families can sleep together.

The new building was the product of a \$2.5 million capital campaign. Local philanthropist and community benefactor Dale Labovitz donated \$2 million through

her Purple Moon foundation, with other large contributions coming from the Madison Community Foundation and the China Mutual Foundation.

Most parents make their initial contact with the Respite Center by phone. “We don’t do drop-in — we might be full,” explains director Meg Miller. Over 400 families request time each year.

Parents speak first with a staff social worker (referred to as a family service worker) and make an appointment to discuss childcare needs. A big part of the family service worker’s job is to connect families with other community resources — over 75 different agencies dealing with child welfare, mental health, employment, housing, legal services and other needs. If the center is at capacity, the service worker will help the parent find alternative care.

“Some parents have specific agendas,” explains family service worker Sheila Baker. “They have doctor appointments, meetings with other social service agencies or job interviews. Others are just overwhelmed.” Bailey observes that most families who reach out to the Respite Center are coping with “multiple stressors” — financial and medical problems, spousal abuse, divorce and substance abuse, to name a few.

Shannon Heft’s younger son has serious health problems. Born with a rare, bone marrow disease called black fan anemia, he has undergone numerous blood transfusions and several bone marrow transplants. Lack of money and parenting support continues to affect Heft. “I don’t know what I would have done without the Respite Center. When I need a break, I call them. Sometimes it’s just to get the house clean — otherwise I’m doing it in the middle of the night.”

“Everyone understands the need for a break from care-giving, but not everyone has the resources to get it,” says Meg Miller.

While most of the center’s clients are living at or below the poverty level, some of its clients have adequate or even comfortable incomes but may have one or more children with special needs. “It is extremely difficult to find qualified childcare for special-needs children,” Sheila Bailey observes. Center staff have cared for kids in wheelchairs, autistic children, and kids suffering from everything from ADHD to cancer.

The Respite Center also serves as an emergency placement facility for the county or for families in an explosive, chaotic or disorganized situation. Children come to the center immediately following the arrest of a parent or when domestic violence or homelessness puts them at risk.

Unlike many childcare facilities with high worker turnover, the center has some staffers who have been there for 15 to 20 years. As director for the last 22 years, Miller credits flexibility as the key to staff retention.

Workers at the center have an exceptionally demanding job — not only do they perform the usual tasks done in most daycare centers, they carry out these tasks with children who are usually in crisis. When a child comes to the center, staffers make sure he is warm, dry, and not hungry or thirsty. Next, they focus on emotional needs, reassuring him that he is safe. Children have games, art projects and other activities that they can do by themselves or with a staff member. Each childcare specialist receives a minimum of 80 hours of on-site education, which includes topics like crisis intervention, managing threatening conditions, grief and loss, and pediatric psychiatric medications.

Respite Center volunteers also play a crucial role in making a child’s stay at the center rewarding. Childcare volunteers can make the difference between accommodating additional children in an emergency or turning them away because the center is full. They also give one-on-one attention while the professional staff focuses on more recent arrivals who are still reacting to their family crisis.

Volunteers receive 10 hours of training and work one four-hour shift per week or every other week. While the center asks that volunteers promise to work for at least one year, most have been at it much longer. Staff and volunteers must be sympathetic to both parents and their children. “We’re here for the parents as well as the kids, and we see people who are not at their best,” says Miller.

Staffers provide some counseling to help parents have realistic expectations for their children and understand where their frustrations are coming from. In this way, the Respite Center serves as a force to keep families together and make them stronger.*

The Big Four

Four agencies committed to strengthening families by preventing and treating child abuse and neglect are located in the Family Centers at 2120 Fortem Ave. Call any of the numbers below for help or to volunteer.

Respite Center

244-5730
24-hour crisis childcare, short-term respite care and parent support.

Family Enhancement Program

261-5150
Parent education and support at various locations in Dane County.

Prevention of Child Abuse

261-3434
Home-based programs providing families with intensive support, parenting education, and links to additional resources and advocacy support.

Parental Stress Center

261-4889
Three programs: Families United Network provides support groups to strengthen parenting skills; Oasis Program provides group therapy to people affected by incest and child sexual abuse; Parent Stressline is a hotline available 18 hours a day, seven days a week for parents and caregivers who are experiencing stress or just need someone to listen.

Shannon Heft with sons Dominic and Austin: “I don’t know what I would have done without the Respite Center.”