

MARY MITCHELL

marym@suntimes.com



When stressed parents need help in a hurry

Nursery's quality care better than any port in a storm

Whatever a parent is going through, a child goes through.

But it doesn't have to be that way.

Three years ago, Maryville Academy opened the Maryville Crisis Nursery, a facility that can take children free of charge for up to 72 hours.

"Our hope is to provide this resource for those who need them, so children don't suffer," explained Sister Catherine M. Ryan, Maryville Academy's executive director during a tour last week.

"The families that come here, they really care."

A crisis could stem from domestic violence, illness, homelessness, substance abuse or could simply be a period when a parent feels he or she can't cope.

For instance, Monica, 24, had a premature baby who suffered from colic.

"It was to the point that she cried all day and all night," the mother told me.

"I'm a single parent. I had never been around small kids. The crying nearly drove me crazy," she said.

The baby's pediatrician told Monica about the Maryville Crisis Nursery.

After a tour of the facility, and conversations with some of the child-care providers, the new mother felt comfortable leaving her baby.

"My baby will be 10 months old next month. Sometimes I utilize the facility when I need to get away from the stress," she said.

The Maryville Crisis Nursery is located at the end of a winding road at the intersection of Irving Park and Oak Park Avenue.

Besides a cheery nursery and themed bedrooms for youngsters, there is also a large gym/playroom where Big Wheels and Princess trikes are parked.

Here, staffers turned a blank wall into a safari where giraffes and lions romp in harmony.

There's also a bathroom with kid-sized toilets and sinks. A closet is crammed with new clothes donated by Maryville supporters.

Every child goes home with a book.

Sharon Hoglind, a former Chicago Public School teacher, volunteers at the center on Thursdays.

She had to go through a background check, get a physical and complete a training class before being allowed to work with the children.

Hoglind sat at the small wooden table pretending to feed a baby doll under the watchful eyes of a 7-year-old girl.

"I love the kids. Last week, [the center] really didn't need me," she said. "I was so disappointed. I really look forward to being here."

The center, which accepts kids up to age 6 but will allow older ones with young siblings, has space for 15 children. On the day of my visit, only eight children were being served.

"We need to educate the community," said Joanne Deuter, the crisis center's assistant program director.

"This is a prevention program. People aren't aware of what that means."

She rattled off the responses of a typical parent who hears about the program:

"You want to take care of our children for free? This is not going to be counted against me? You're not going to report it to DCFS?"

Parents who bring their children to the Maryville Crisis Center are not abandoning them.

In fact, in some instances, these parents may have saved their children's lives.

Because too often, when single mothers are going through a crisis, they turn to dubious caregivers.

For example, in fiscal year 2008, there were 1,200 substantiated cases of child abuse. About 1,000 of those cases were perpetrated by the mothers' boyfriends.

"We've actually put out a brochure: How well do you know your lover?" said Kendall Marlowe.

"This is no small issue."

Those who do turn to the crisis center, shouldn't expect a baby-sitting service, however.

Nina Aliprandi, director of program services for Maryville Academy, pointed out that parents are expected to work with counselors to address the issues that are negatively impacting their lives.

"We try to build a trusting relationship, and you can tell if somebody is maybe not being upfront with you," Aliprandi said.

Funding for the crisis center is primarily provided by the Maryville Academy, although the facility has some grants.

Here's how you can help:

You can make a monetary donation through the Illinois Department of Revenue Schedule G. Donations collected through this method are distributed among the six crisis centers in the state.

If you are in crisis and feel you need a safe haven for your children, call the Maryville Crisis Center Hot Line at (773) 205-3637.

Every child deserves a happy childhood.

Comment at suntimes.com.



Pat Hemmer plays with Sean, 2, Monday at the Maryville Crisis Nursery.

JEAN LACHAT-SUN-TIMES