

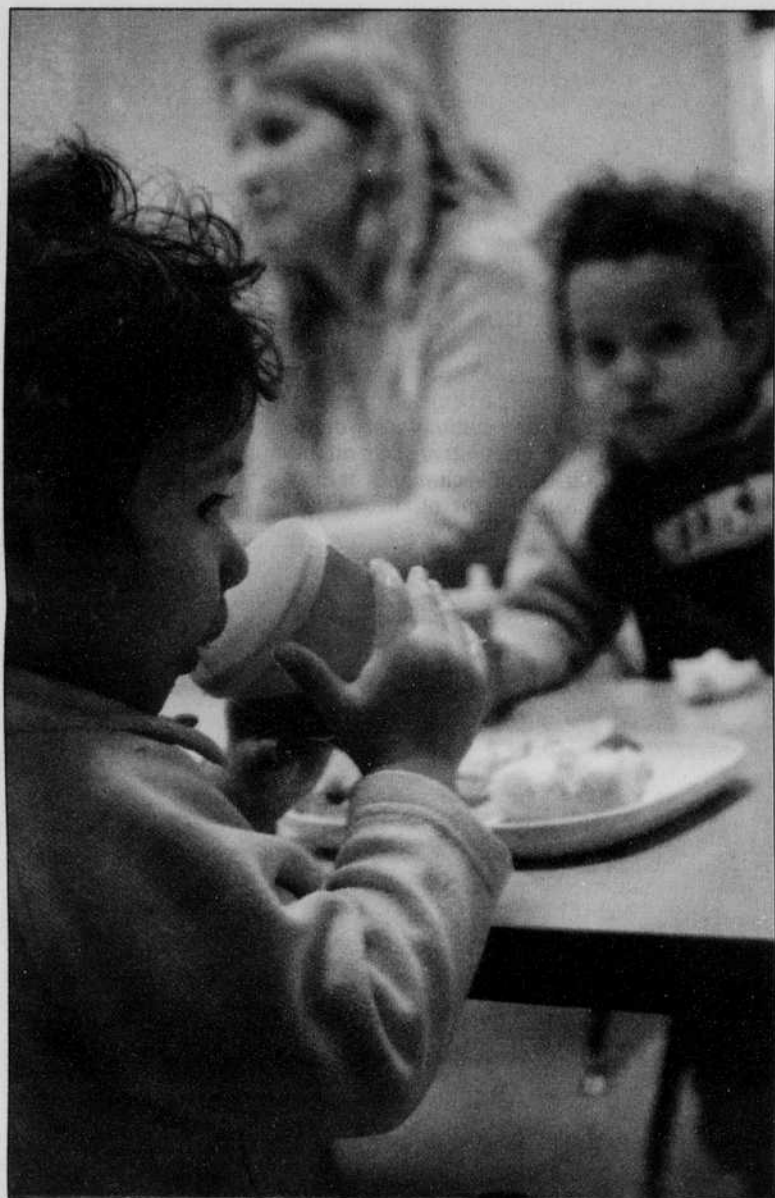
"I've seen kids come in who will just be hitting and screaming and crying. By the end of the term, they're able to use their words and relate their feelings."

LEANNE KIEL | Relief Nursery volunteer

Gives the season

PART TWO

HOW TO HELP



A refuge from the family storm

The Relief Nursery uses a therapeutic approach to help children from high-risk homes develop mental health

BY MORIAH BALINGIT | NEWS REPORTER

A classroom at the Relief Nursery is a preschooler's paradise. Miniature multi-colored plastic chairs line small tables, and a tot-sized couch sits next to a bean bag. The carpet is scattered with a bevy of bright-colored toys, and laughing children scamper about.

But these children's stories are often not so happy. The children at the Relief Nursery come from high-risk homes, which means that many deal with domestic violence, a parent with a substance abuse problem or other challenges.

"These are strong, courageous little kids," University senior and Relief Nursery volunteer Leanne Kiel said. "They're definitely exposed to a lot more than the average kid."

Programs Coordinator Joanna Byford said problems also arise because parents in high-risk homes often have difficulty communicating with their children.

"(The parents) don't bond with their children as easily," Byford said. "They're not able to show the child that they're loved and secured."

As a result, the children frequently have social and emotional difficulties. The preschool helps the children cope by taking a therapeutic approach.

"What is important is (the nursery's) focus on mental and emotional health," Chrystal Kellerman, a senior in the University's Family and Human Services program and nursery volunteer said. "That's really essential for any child, but especially for these children."

The nursery works to foster the children's emotional health by teaching them how to identify and appropriately express their emotions.

"We teach them that it's okay to feel all of their emotions and that it's not necessarily wrong or bad if they feel scared or mad," Early Interventionist preschool teacher Kelli Wiley said.

In addition, many of the children come from Spanish-speaking-only households and will enter public schools that won't fully accommodate them, Byford said. The preschool is bilingual, so in addition to teaching English to Spanish-speakers, English-speakers also learn Spanish. In one classroom for example, teachers played music in both English and Spanish.

Teachers also work to improve children's communication skills, Wiley said.

"We teach them to use their words," she said. "We model conflict resolution on their age-appropriate level."

Kiel said she has seen drastic

improvements in children she's worked with for a while.

"I've seen kids come in who will just be hitting and screaming and crying," she said. "By the end of the term, they're able to use their words and relate their feelings."

The preschool is only a part of the services the Relief Nursery provides. Byford said the nursery also has a parent support program in which employees make home visits to "help families respond to the challenges that they're facing." They also provide parenting classes, mental health services for children and parents and an addiction recovery program.

Byford said the Relief Nursery takes a more "holistic" approach in helping families.

"A family will come and they'll have a variety of challenges," she said. "We try to help them meet those challenges and empower them to do what they need to do."

Wiley said she likes the Relief Nursery's comprehensive approach.

"I like ... that they focus on the whole family, not just the student," she said.

During the 2002-03 fiscal year, the Relief Nursery helped 855 families and nearly 1,000 children ages one to five. Nearly all of the families served were low income, and the most common risk factors included poverty, unemployment, high stress and substance abuse.

To ensure that children receive the attention they need, the Relief Nursery maintains a one-to-three child-to-adult ratio. While the Nursery maintains a paid staff, they also rely on a core of volunteers. Volunteers are most often students from Lane Community College and from the University. Kiel, for example, is receiving field study credit for her special education minor.

Wiley said though she loves being with the children, working at the nursery can be challenging.

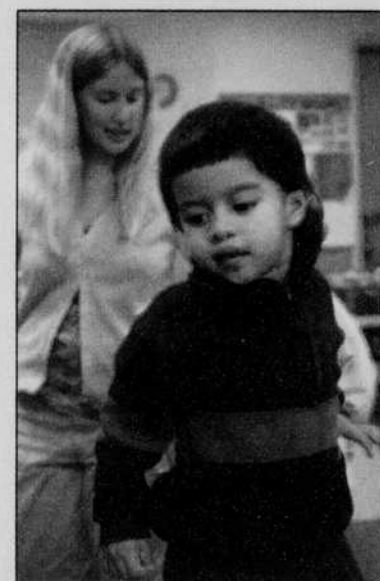
"It's difficult if you're dealing with a family where there's suspected abuse," she said. "It's difficult to see."

Wiley added that many of the staff members have had to submit reports for suspected child abuse or neglect.

But Kellerman said one of the greatest benefits of working at the center is learning from the children themselves.

"They show me the importance of slowing down, and I think that's the most important lesson for us all," she said.

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To donate or volunteer call 343-9706. For a list of volunteer opportunities, visit: www.reliefnursery.org/volunteering.as



For more information about the Domestic Violence Clinic at Lane County Legal Aid Service, call 232-1246 or visit lanecountylegalservices.org/dv.html



For more information about the Springfield/Eugene Habitat for Humanity call 741-1707 or visit SEhabitat.org.



BRET FURTWANGLER | GRAPHIC ARTIST

The University still has to raise more than \$240,000 to meet its goal for the Charitable Fund Drive this year.



NICOLE BARKER | PHOTOGRAPHER

Analarua, top, drinks milk during lunch time at the Relief Nursery. Kelli Wiley, a teacher at the Relief Nursery, bottom, helps Dylan clean up after lunch.