



54°



**BendBroadband
Phone**



**\$33.00 per mo.
for 6 months plus
FREE INSTALLATION**
SOME RESTRICTIONS APPLY

REPRO

How MountainStar Family Relief Nursery deters child abuse

Walk into the small building that houses MountainStar Family Relief Nursery and it looks, sounds and feels like any other small day care or preschool. The place is noisy with the sounds of young children, and adults are attentive to their charges. It's only when you learn about what MountainStar does that what you see comes into a different sort of focus.

Yes, its staff takes good and loving care of the kids in their charge each day, and yes, they play the usual preschool games, give the usual bottles to infants, change diapers and kiss boo boos. More important, they work with whole families to prevent child abuse and neglect; in fact, that's the one and only reason for the nursery's existence.

Relief nurseries, at least the nine in Oregon, are not - as I mistakenly thought - places super-stressed parents can drop off kids when they feel their self-control slipping. Rather, MountainStar and its cousins strive to prevent child abuse and child neglect, both by giving young kids a safe haven and by giving their parents the tools to rear their children in a safe and healthy environment. Currently the nursery has 42 youngsters between the ages of 6 weeks and 4 years old enrolled and another 50 on a waiting list to get in, says Tim Rusk, the nursery's executive director.

All have been referred from any one of a variety of agencies in the community. Pediatricians, Child Protective Services and the Central Oregon Battering and Rape Alliance are among those who make referrals to the program, and once that's happened families are approached by the nursery's outreach program workers.

Assuming the family is willing, and most are, Rusk says, an outreach worker visits. Families are admitted to the program based on an initial assessment of their qualifications and the current openings in the program. The nursery weighs a series of risk factors when assessing families, everything from income level to domestic violence, substance abuse, mental health issues and so on. On average, Rusk says, families in the program face 16 serious risks to their well-being.

Continuing outreach may be enough for some families, Rusk says, and if that's the case a staff member will visit for up to an hour and a half a month, make regular telephone calls and otherwise provide as much assistance as possible.

Families admitted to the program find themselves given help they may never have had before. If Mom is having trouble negotiating her way through the social services available to her, the nursery staff is there to help. There are parenting classes and more social events with parents and children together. Staff helps parents set goals and then meet them, and supplements their all-too-thin incomes with a monthly food box. Their youngsters spend up to six hours a week at the nursery in two sessions, and each session begins and ends with a carefully balanced meal. With a 3-to-1 staff to child ratio, kids get plenty of attention, and staff focuses on filling their unmet needs, reading, playing, simply paying attention to them. For some kids, it's a respite into a safe, predictable environment that they may not find at home and that, experts say, they need if their brains are to develop correctly.

One short column cannot do justice to the work of the nursery. It's a busy place, filling a need many of us may not recognize or may think has no place in a "nice" community like Bend. But, like Grandma's House and Bethlehem Inn, MountainStar is there because the need is here, one driven in no small part by poverty.

Rusk notes that virtually every family in the nursery's program or receiving outreach services is considered low income, and 80 percent of those fall below the federal poverty level. About half are headed by single parents, often moms whose ability to get a living-wage job can be hampered by lack of education, transportation and a variety of other problems. Yet, while they're part of MountainStar, fully 93 percent of families stay free of neglect or abuse, a strong statement about the value of a helping hand to those in need.

As for funding, MountainStar receives about a third of its budget from government, another third from foundations and business, and the final third from the community at large. Its single largest fundraising effort, the Children's Expedition fundraising luncheon, is scheduled for next week, and the money raised there will go to help assure that the nursery remains open to those who need it most.

Janet Stevens is deputy editor of The Bulletin.