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Not to be judgmental, but help keep children out of the county's courtrooms

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For years they roamed the halls of the Multnomah County Courthouse, making noise, making trouble.

Court employees said they "disrupt the workplace by running, yelling, crying, sitting on counters." They "climb on furniture, fall and are injured."

"It drives me crazy," said another.

Well, what did they expect? That's how children behave.

And all too often, children were in the halls and the courtrooms, getting bored and making trouble while their parents were testifying, getting divorced or standing trial.

Maybe they couldn't find day care. Maybe they couldn't afford it. So the kids came along for the ride.

It wasn't a pleasant ride for anyone. Kids flipped courtroom light switches on and off. Kids wandered away and fell down the marble staircases.

And they weren't just physically hurt. They saw and heard things no child should be exposed to: Mom giving testimony about what a bad man Dad is. Mom or Dad being led away in handcuffs. Mom's boyfriend screaming at Mom.

In 1997 the local courts commissioned a study, which was done by the Sociology Department at Portland State University. "They found a shockingly high number of children (about 80) under age 13 were (in the courthouse) every day," says Susan Marmaduke, a local attorney. "So it was decided we needed to have a safe haven for those children, right in the courthouse."

Space is hard to come by in the old building, but finally a small jury room became a drop-in daycare center for small children. This year will mark its sixth anniversary.

It was a great idea.

The room is beige, but everything else in it seems to be a primary color. There are books, blocks, Legos, cars, trucks and a multitude of other toys. And a mountain of stuffed animals.

Less entertaining but necessary is the closet filled with children's clothing and diapers, and the double doors with the secure locks, "in case something happens and a parent tries to run off with the child," says Cynthean Swanson, program coordinator of CourtCare.

The children who find refuge in this small room are dropped off by parents heading for criminal or divorce trials, eviction proceedings, drug program check-ins, bankruptcy court. Most, organizers say, are dealing with domestic violence or restraining orders.

So the children already are traumatized. The last thing they need is to sit in court. "It's just piling one trauma on the next," says Susan. "It also makes it difficult for the parents to say what they have to say."

Cynthean is used to seeing children under stress. "They don't know how to deal with it," she says. "Either

they're very quiet or they're very angry. . . . We try to redirect them, give them activities to do."

CourtCare can't help all the children who need minding. Only six can be accommodated in the tiny room. And the licensed caregivers can watch only children from 6 weeks to 5 years old. Older children are turned away, "but we do offer crayons and books to take with them to give them something to do," Cynthean says.

Lots of children have been helped. Since the doors opened in 2001, workers have welcomed more than 5,000 children.

The service is free to all parents. But somebody has to pay the bills. Some money to run the program, which is administered by Volunteers of America Oregon, comes from the state, the county and the federal courts. But most comes from private contributions. The Multnomah County Bar Association raises funds each year; this year they hope to take in \$100,000. (To donate, go to www.mbabar.org, then click on "CourtCare.")

The money provides a lot more than free day care for children who are hurting. The center also provides information for parents about where to get help with rent money, how to get food or medical care, how to find shelter or a domestic violence protective program. "A lot of times the parents are coming from a low-income background and don't have access to the Internet," Cynthean says. "They don't know what programs are available."

Susan, who is chairing this year's fundraising efforts, is moved every time she visits the CourtCare room.

"You see these very young mothers going through the worst crises of their lives. They've been assaulted, or they're being evicted. They're absolutely at the edge and they come in with these children who are afraid and crying and sometimes hungry. And they walk into this room filled with artwork and (toys) and very loving caregivers and you see the child settle down and start drawing, or playing with stuffed animals."

She hopes the program will spread to courthouses across the state. "It's just about as good a situation as you can get, in terms of making a concrete difference in the moment-to-moment lives of these children."

Margie Boule: 503-221-8450; marboule@aol.com

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