

■ Court nursery protects kids from courtrooms — and vice-versa

Child care helps trials be less trying

By NEVILL ESCHEN
The Tribune

A lot of people say they want their day in court, but, in fact, it can be nasty business. Testimony in criminal or family law cases can include the most hurtful of accusations or a detailed recounting of abuse.

And, in many cases, children are there to hear it. They hear their estranged parents' recriminations, or they see a parent in handcuffs.

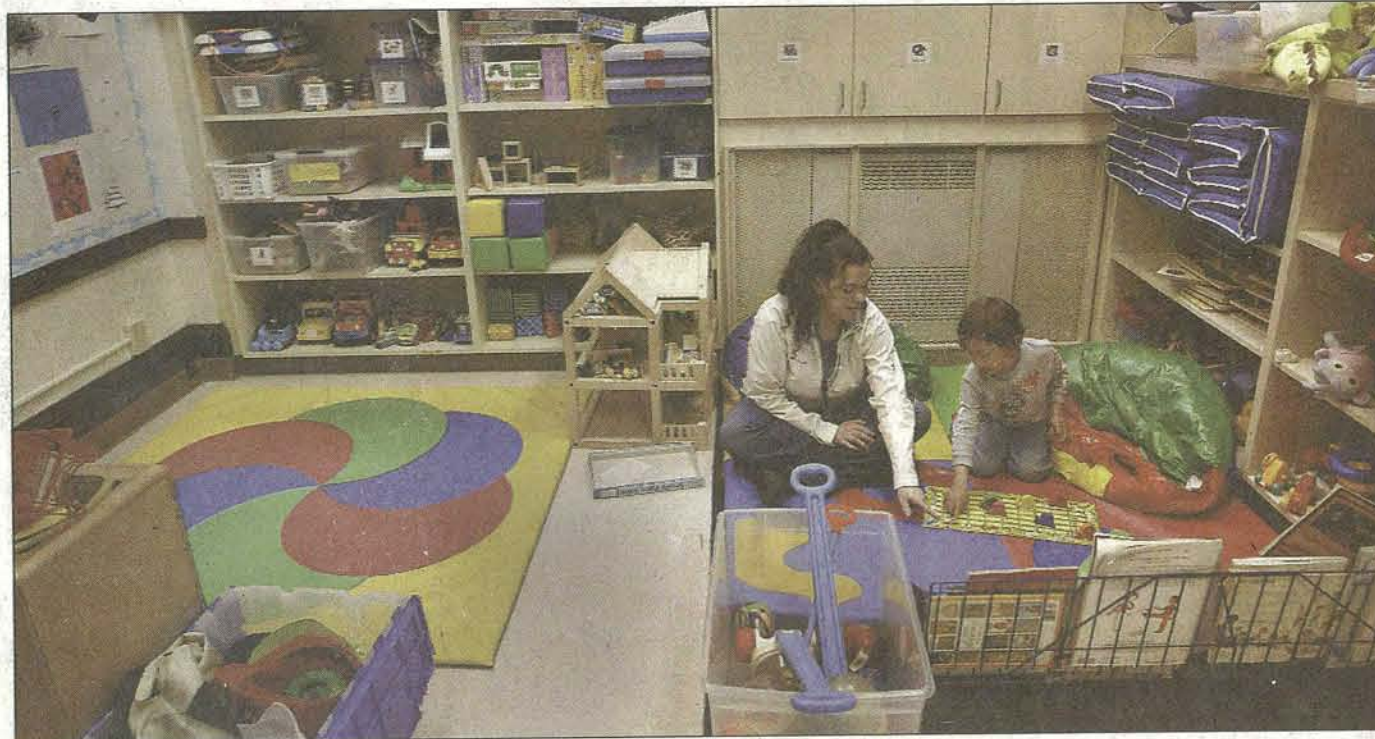
"They hear many, many things that they ought not be exposed to. Or they hear events described that they've already been exposed to, and it doesn't help them to relive the experience," said Multnomah County Circuit Judge Katherine Tennyson.

Having children either in the courtroom or biding time in the hallway waiting for their parents troubled the judges and lawyers in the Multnomah County Courthouse. They responded by setting up — and supporting financially — an in-courthouse day care called CourtCare, where parents due for court hearings can safely drop off their children. It's apparently the only one of its kind in Oregon.

Circuit Court Judge Dale Koch recalls the days before CourtCare, such as when a boy of 4 or 5 years ran circles around the courtroom while the child's mother struggled to corral the youngster and simultaneously deal with her case.

Yet finding a distraction for children didn't always work. Koch cites another incident, when "a mother had left a child back in the gallery, and the child was flicking the lights on and off." Koch can chuckle about it now. It was, however, one of the incidents that he says compelled him to join others to search for a day care solution.

Circuit Judge Janice Wilson had another perspective on the situation. Youngsters were outside her courtroom, "running up and down marble hallways,"



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CourtCare program coordinator Melissa Gritz plays a game with a child while his mother is in court. "We take our cues from the child, Gritz says, "to make this as comfortable as possible."

Wilson said. "I thought, wow, there's a tremendous need for those kids to be somewhere."

Relieving the stress factor

Lawyers, too, have seen the strain of balancing courthouse business and watching over children. Robin Selig recalls seeing a rattled mom who'd been seeking a restraining order scold a child for disrupting her court session. Another time, a new mom nursed a baby during a hearing.

"It was like, 'I've done it all now,'" Selig said.

The court staff also found that some potential jury members were declining to serve because they didn't have child care.

In response, lawyers, judges, sheriff's deputies and advocates formed the Multnomah CourtCare Advisory Committee in the mid-1990s, which commissioned Portland State University's Sociology Department to study the

comings and goings of children in the courthouse. The committee's 1997 report recommended that a group proceed with setting up day care and securing money to run it. Wilson and a lawyer observed a Boston courthouse child-care facility that was the model for the project here.

Since it opened its doors in December 2001, toys, games and stuffed animals have warmed the ambience of a former jury room that houses CourtCare. The facility also has a supply of diapers and clean clothes in case of accidents. Its staff, ready with child development associate's degrees and a way with children, create a

refuge for youngsters whose world has become chaotic.

Children 6 months to 6 years old can play, listen to a story, or curl up in a staffer's lap. Program coordinator Melissa Gritz said they don't ask the child what's going on.

"We don't dwell — it's not positive for the child. We take our cues from the child ... to make this as comfortable as possible," she said.

A third child-care provider was hired recently; that extra staffing allows a colleague to take a sick day without forcing the service to close until the required minimum of two people are back on duty.

CourtCare can't accommo-

date youngsters older than 6, but it can supply those older children with coloring supplies to help occupy them while they wait for hearings to finish. Volunteers of America handles the operational logistics, including the staffing. When appropriate, staff members refer parents to various social services, including other VOA programs.

The judges say it's helped restore courtroom decorum.

Timothy Travis, the Oregon Judicial Department's staff counsel for court improvement in Salem, informally surveyed court administrators statewide recently to find out if service could be found elsewhere.

"No one has a dedicated child-care. Some have child-friendly areas in court facilitators' offices," Travis said.

Relying on private donations

Attorneys across Portland

take up the common goal of keeping CourtCare going. They're participating in the effort's major fund drive for the year, which continues through May 5. Those who organize the fundraising for CourtCare deftly tap into their colleagues' competitive drive to be the law firm that contributes the most money.

Most of CourtCare's funding comes from private donations, including those from individuals, the Multnomah Bar Association and Oregon Women Lawyers Foundation. The Oregon Judicial Department and Multnomah County pay \$25,000 each toward CourtCare's budget, estimated to come to \$142,000 this year.

It's a tenuous balance. "It means nobody's burden is huge, and yet if anybody pulled out, the rest of it would be endangered," said lawyer Mary Louise McClintock.

The goal for the spring campaign and other fundraisers is \$100,000, about \$8,000 more than last year's sum, to create something of a rainy-day fund. But fundraising campaign co-chair Susan Marmaduke concedes this could be a tough year for private donations, with lots of other large projects in the works and the toll taken by donations following Hurricane Katrina and other disasters.

They also know that continued government funding is uncertain, noting that Multnomah County, for example, is losing the cushion provided by its temporary I-tax. But Multnomah County trial court administrator Doug Bray, a longtime CourtCare supporter, said support from the county commissioners has pulled it through some iffy years.

"There have been dire straits, but this program has always been viewed to be so important that the contribution to keep it going has been justified," Bray said.

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trial court administrator