



Community mentoring program for children builds hope and trust

“Mrs. Doubtfire” program promotes well-being of residential children and inspires volunteers



St. Catherine's Center for Children's Mrs. Doubtfire program pairs adult volunteer mentors with children. The volunteers visit residential children at bedtime, and may read, play games, or engage in other activities with the child.

St. Catherine's Center for Children, an Albany-based human services provider serving children and families, was founded in 1886. Through its long history, St. Catherine's has evolved and adapted its programs and services to meet the changing needs of the communities it serves. From its early days as a home for sick orphans through the early 21st century, St. Catherine's has grown to become a leading Capital Region provider of human services. From homeless and special education services to foster care and community-based prevention programs, St. Catherine's has expanded its range of programs and responded to the unique needs of the children and families it serves. *That's how the Mrs. Doubtfire mentoring program came into being.*

Complex trauma

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 679,000 children nationwide were identified as victims of abuse and/or neglect in 2013. In the same year, 402,000 children were in the care of a human services provider—living in foster homes or residential facilities.

A child may be removed from the care of his or her parent or guardian for any number of reasons, but most of these

children share a common trait—they are trauma survivors. The source of their trauma may have been physical or sexual abuse, emotional neglect, witnessing domestic violence, or any other disruptive life experience. While some children are resilient and able to function with little observable impact on day-to-day activities and relationships, others are not so lucky.

Some children, particularly those who have been exposed to multiple traumas for a prolonged period—sometimes described as “complex trauma”—may suffer from an impaired ability to regulate emotions and behaviors. They may find it difficult or impossible to establish relationships that promote positive growth and development. Survivors of complex trauma may suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety, or any number of other diagnosed mental health conditions that can lead to an inability to forge relationships.

Human service professionals are skilled at working with traumatized children, but even with the best-trained staff implementing proven, evidence-based treatment methods, children in care may still struggle to overcome unmet needs. One way to address those needs is to connect children with caring, non-parental adults—or mentors—who can provide one-on-one time and attention.

Searching for Solutions

The Mrs. Doubtfire mentoring program is the brainchild of St. Catherine's Executive Director William T. Gettman, Jr. Gettman became St. Catherine's chief executive in 2011 after more than 25 years of public and private sector experience in the child welfare system. Gettman took the helm of an agency whose history and culture matched his own experience and instincts. Efficient organizations—particularly those engaged in human services—are always assessing programs and services, are nimble and quick to respond to the needs of clients, and are never afraid to embrace new and innovative approaches.

In St. Catherine's Copson House—a group residential



This article was developed from research gathered by Elisa M. Martin, Ph.D., Visiting Assistant Professor of Social Work at Siena College, and Kristen Lancto, a student at Siena College.



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facility which is home to 24 boys and girls between the ages of 5 and 13—Gettman saw an opportunity to take a routine activity and turn it into a treatment opportunity for children. The routine activity? Bedtime.

Enter Mrs. Doubtfire

A bedtime routine, and a peaceful night's sleep, play a critical role in a child's emotional development. Researchers have linked sleep disturbances to a wide range of problems, from mood and anxiety disorders to disruptive behavior and academic underachievement. Moreover, children with a history of trauma are more likely to suffer from sleep disturbance.

The transition to bedtime can be a difficult time for children in residential care—especially for those in large facilities such as St. Catherine's Copson House. At the end of a long day of structured activities, 24 children getting ready for bed can seem chaotic. For some children, a hectic bedtime transition is an invitation to a poor night's sleep, inviting sleep disturbance that may only exacerbate the child's daily struggles.

Gettman's vision was simple. To develop a protocol or program that would help children in residential care make an easier transition at bedtime. While Copson House is fully staffed with child care workers whose job it is to help children at bedtime, those staff members cannot always give a child the kind of one-on-one attention the child deserves.

The answer, Gettman decided, was to recruit a group of volunteers from the community who could help.

That led Gettman to a secondary, but also important, goal for his proposed program. Human service organizations are always looking for a meaningful way to engage potential volunteers from the community. Engaging those volunteers in direct work with children can be particularly challenging, but a successful effort offers the possibility of a huge return.

For a child in residential care, the opportunity for one-on-one attention offers real therapeutic value. For the volun-

teer, the opportunity to make a positive impact on a child's life can be a life-altering and rewarding experience.

Of course, Gettman realized he needed more than the average volunteer. He needed someone willing to make a personal commitment to a child. He needed someone willing to work with a child *and* bond with that child. They would be more than volunteers. They would be mentors. And while there are many mentoring programs, there were none that focused on bedtime activities.

As he worked with senior staff to develop the outlines of a new program, Gettman—inspired by the Robin Williams film that demonstrated how a caring adult can have a positive impact on the life of a child—informally dubbed the program *Mrs. Doubtfire*. The name stuck.

Program Launch

Gettman and his staff developed a volunteer mentoring program that would last six weeks—long enough for a child and adult mentor to establish a relationship, but short enough to review the program's strengths and weaknesses.

During the program, mentors would be matched with a designated child at Copson and would commit to visiting one night a week for 30 to 60 minutes. Since it would be impossible to find a mentor for every child—especially during the program's trial run—St. Catherine's staff would select children deemed to be in the greatest need of an adult mentor. Children who had little involvement with family members were given a high priority, as were children who require more one-on-one attention.

Because mentors would be critical to the success of the program. Mrs. Doubtfire volunteers faced careful screening.

“For the start of our program, I personally recruited and selected volunteers,” said Gettman. “Some of our volunteers have significant experience in the child welfare system, and are familiar with the issues our children struggle with every day. Others simply wanted to help a child.

“Whatever their level of experience and expectations, we offered each volunteer an honest assessment of our children, and our reasons for launching this program. We shared our fears, and our hopes. We wanted program volunteers to go in with open eyes and a clear understanding of our goals.”

Because of the nature of their work—working directly with children—volunteers submitted to background checks. They learned about St. Catherine's, its population, and the struggles a typical residential child has faced in his or her life. The goal, according to Gettman, was to introduce them to everything they might see during their evening visits. Volunteers were also asked to commit for the entire six-week period of the program's trial run.

The commitment was especially vital. “Our children see a lot of people come and go in their lives,” said Brian Perrotto,

Director of Out of Home Services for St. Catherine's. "We don't want to introduce them to someone with whom they might form an attachment, and risk the possibility of that person suddenly dropping out of their lives."

After a background check and an agency orientation, mentors were assigned to an individual child. They learned about the child's likes and dislikes, and received enough information about the child's background to know what words or actions might trigger a negative reaction from a child.

Finally, mentors were allowed to select a night to visit each week, depending on their schedule, and were given the freedom to select an activity—reading, games, crafts, or simple conversation—based on their interactions with the child.

In September of 2014, St. Catherine's formally launched the Mrs. Doubtfire program at Copson House. The trial was deemed so successful—by children, volunteers, and staff—that a second six-week program was held during the winter. In the spring of 2015, St. Catherine's teamed up with Siena College to complete an evaluation of the program through Siena's Social Work Department. The evaluation was completed by Elisa M. Martin, Ph.D. with the help of social work student Kristen Lancto.

Benefits for Children

For children in the Doubtfire program, evaluators were hoping to see improvements in three areas: the child's emotional state, including the child's ability to control behavior; the child's self-esteem; and the child's relationships with adults. Ultimately, staff noted improvements in all three areas.

Improved behavior was noted by many staff members, particularly on days when a child expected a visit. Every child has routines to complete each day, and staff observed that children were more likely to complete their tasks on time, without being prompted, when they knew their reader was coming for a visit. Some children even seemed eager to complete tasks in anticipation of a mentor's visit.

There were also reports of more transformational behavioral changes. For one child in the Doubtfire program with a one-on-one aide—support usually reserved for children with the greatest behavioral issues—behavior improved to the point that the aide was no longer required for the child to complete daily routines. While the child's improvement could not be linked *solely* to her participation in the program, staff believed it played a vital role in her progress.

Another child was described as very shy and non-communicative. Her mentor confirmed the child was quiet and "slow to come out of her shell." But the mentor worked with the child for 12 weeks, gaining her confidence and making her more comfortable.

"Reluctant to even meet with me at first," the mentor said, "the child now expresses herself much more openly,

readily engages in conversations, and looks forward to our weekly time together."

Self-esteem was another area in which Doubtfire children began to show marked improvement. The value of a caring adult in a child's life—and the special attention that adult brings—cannot be overestimated. One child's story demonstrates how positive attention can promote self-confidence. When this child arrived at St. Catherine's, her speaking skills were limited. Then she established a strong relationship with her Doubtfire mentor. One day, her mentor arrived at Copson House with her church group to cook for the children. The child had not only gained enough self-confidence to welcome her mentor's church group, but she also felt comfortable enough to take the adults on a tour of the house.

Children with a history of complex trauma can have a difficult time viewing adults as safe and trustworthy. A child's ability to develop strong and trusting relationships with adults was another area of the Doubtfire program that was evaluated. The program succeeded at this level as well.

"Some of these kids really never learned how to build meaningful relationships with adults," one staff member said. "Trust isn't there anymore, so having a visitor come in regularly, someone they can get to know and learn to trust, has really been beneficial."

Added another staff member: "The readers (staff and



Bedtime can be difficult for many children. The Mrs. Doubtfire program can help make the transition easier, and can provide longer-term social benefits for the child.



According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 679,000 children nationally were identified as victims of abuse and/or neglect in 2013. In the same year, 402,000 lived in foster homes or residential facilities.

For volunteers, the Doubtfire program was a broad educational experience that offered firsthand insights and knowledge with children in the child welfare system—even those who are already familiar with it.

“I've worked in the child welfare administration for 30 years,” one mentor observed, “but I haven't worked face to face with an abused child in years. For me, this experience reaffirmed the reasons I went into this field. When I consider child welfare policy, I now have an individual child to think about. I realized once again that every day a child is in foster care matters in his or her development.”

Some volunteers genuinely feel they derived as much from the program as the children themselves. One even described the experience as a life-changing opportunity, while another felt the experience working with traumatized children helped put their own problems into perspective.

“I am more sensitive about how I interact with someone, particularly a child who has experienced trauma,” another volunteer offered. “I have also been reminded that abuse touches people from all walks of life and all cultural backgrounds.”

Volunteers reported that they were motivated by their experience to share it with families and friends. They are proud of the work they are doing, have expressed their wish that they could do even more for the child they work with, and encourage others to get involved.

One sign of the program's success: after the Siena evaluation, St. Catherine's extended the program for two more six-week periods. Since its inception, the program has run for 24 weeks, and most of the volunteers have stuck continued with the program, strengthening bonds with children and establishing relationships that some hope will last far into the future.

For both agency and staff, there have been some obvious benefits, as well. Copson House staff indicated that mentors are a positive presence in the life of children, and they help staff motivate a child to achieve all of his or her goals. And—although it was not a stated goal of the program—the presence of mentors throughout the week allows staff to spend more energy and time on children without mentors.

Executive Director Bill Gettman views the program as a tremendous plus for the entire agency. “Any new initiative has to work at every levels,” he said. “Mrs. Doubtfire is achieving that. Our staff receives much-needed help, and we are engaging a group of volunteers who are fulfilled and are developing a deep appreciation for the work we do. Doubtfire friends are friends for life. And of course, our children are benefiting most of all. That was our goal!”

children often referred to the mentors as readers, since this was the predominant activity they engaged in) have demonstrated they will come back, week after week, no matter what happens. That allows a child to establish a level of trust with their reader. That trust can eventually extend to other adults they come into contact with.”

“The trusting relationships these kids develop with adults can really help them heal and grow and develop,” another staff member noted. “This mentoring program is just another way these kids develop positive relationships.”

The overall consensus among staff members was that children benefited from the program at several levels. While the quantitative data generated from behavioral tracking sheets did not demonstrate any significant changes, according to Siena's evaluation, qualitative data told a different story. Staff and mentors observed improved behaviors, self-esteem, and the ability to engage with adults. While improvement could be attributed to other factors—i.e. counseling and other support systems for children—staff were confident that Mrs. Doubtfire played a role in the positive changes noted in children.

Benefits for mentors, staff, and agency

While the aim of the Doubtfire program is to help children, both volunteers reported positive experiences for themselves as well as the children.

The Mrs. Doubtfire program is made possible thanks to the generosity of friends of St. Catherine's. Funding for the program was supported by a generous gift of Mr. Charles A. Crisafulli. Community volunteers have spent countless hours mentoring our children. Siena College graciously agreed to evaluate the program. Elisa M. Martin, Ph.D., Visiting Assistant Professor of Social Work at Siena College, and Kristen Lancto, a Siena student of social work, researched and wrote a program evaluation. We extend our gratitude to everyone who supported the program, every step along the way.