

Drawing offers solutions for teens surviving tragedies

Art therapy program allows children to put their trauma on paper

To some, a picture is worth 1,000 words. But in one innovative treatment program used by Eagle Village counselors, pictures are worth much more than words – they provide healing for abused children. Four years ago, Rebecca Rasmussen, family counselor at the Assessment Center, became certified in the Trauma Intervention Program created by William Steele, MA, MSW, PsyD, director and founder of The National Institute for Trauma and Loss in Children*, Grosse Pointe Woods, MI. What she has learned is that the program – commonly referred to as art therapy – allows the counselor to serve as a witness to the trauma. “You can be an audience where the child can talk about these terrible and horrific things in a safe and secure environment,” Rasmussen said. Best of all, it gives power to the abused child. “They are able to draw it and contain it on this eight and a half by eleven inch piece of paper,” Rasmussen said. As a counselor, she believes “we’re going to miss pieces” using just talk therapy. Sometimes what she witnesses on paper can be pictures of very disturbing drawings. For example, a 7-year-old boy recreating himself sitting at the dinner table with his two siblings, witnessing his abusive, alcoholic father shoot his mother. For Ashmun House Family Counselor Carrie Forshee, the program has been emotionally challenging for her personally and yet very successful, especially with one child. “Some of these drawings challenge my own composure. I have a mother’s heart for these kids,” the mother of two explained. “I worried about re-traumatizing him,” Forshee admitted. The boy had been adopted at a very young age. His trauma had occurred when he was a young child while he was actually receiving treatment at another facility. He had never talked about it until he arrived at Eagle Village. He had experienced a very violent, abusive ordeal. Forshee began the eight-week art therapy program with the boy who was now a teen. She brought out the paper and asked him to draw. “It took him a half hour to begin drawing. It was hard for him,” Forshee said. When he arrived at Eagle Village, roughly a year ago, he had already been to a lot of different treatment facilities. Constantly on the defensive, he held on to his need for control. When new children arrived at Eagle Village, he displayed this ‘macho’ behavior, which got him into trouble. Drawing the trauma took this child from being a victim to becoming a survivor. His defensiveness decreased and his need for control lessened. He began to work hard at his treatment program and actually wanted to do art therapy. His first drawings were pictures of himself and his tears. “His drawings allowed him to share the trauma with me. It creates an emotional release,” Forshee said. Not long ago, this young man returned to his supportive adoptive home. For years, he had gone from one treatment facility to the next. Now, he finally realized that he belonged at home. In a note he wrote to her, he called Forshee his “second mom” and thanked her for her love and support. His mom said her son showed more progress at Eagle Village than at anywhere else. “I would not have come home without the treatment team at Ashmun,” he shared. Art therapy allowed him to draw – and conquer – the appalling trauma that had controlled his life, and behavior, for years.

** To learn more about The National Institute for Trauma and Loss in Children, visit their website at: www.tlcinst.org*

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