Stuller Place helps young victims open up

Editor's note: April is National Child Abuse Prevention month. Each Sunday this month, The Daily Advertiser looked at some of the local issues surrounding child abuse. Today's final installment explains how reports of child abuse are investigated and how to report a suspected case of child abuse.

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LAFAYETTE — When the child finally tells, when the secret is too dark and terrible to keep inside, Juanita Prudhomme makes sure there are plenty of teddy bears nearby. No child leaves Stuller Place without a bear to hug and no bear leaves without a nametag of its own.

"I tell each of the children that they get to pick their own bear to love and they have to tell me its name before they leave," said Prudhomme, the office manager of Stuller Place, an advocacy center for children. "These children have just gone through the most horrible process and in a lot of cases, they have just told someone. They need to know there is still love."

A child who has been abused, especially one with sexual abuse, has been traumatized. But to take criminal or legal action against parents, caregivers or other offenders, the child has to be able to tell what happened. In some cases of severe abuse or neglect, the child tells the story. Most of the time, however, the child has to tell what happened.

"You can see from their faces that for so many of them this is the worst part of the process," Prudhomme said. "With a lot of abusers, the child is actually threatened that if you tell anyone, the police will come and get you. So the child is terrified to suddenly be dealing with police.

"We had to find a better way, a more child-friendly way, to help these children be able to tell what happened to them."

Last year, the Louisiana Department of Social Services substantiated 14,274 reports of abuse involving more than 11,000 children. But child abuse experts believe our children are being neglected, beaten, molested, raped and emotionally battered at rates that obviate any official accounting. One national study estimates as many as 1-in-4 children may be victims of sexual abuse before turning 18.

And in Louisiana, which consistently ranks at the bottom of national child well-being studies, those who work with victims of child abuse, their families and the abusers struggle to handle a rapidly increasing caseload as reporting rates increase — all the while knowing there are thousands of other children who may never come to their attention.

"I think we've done a good job of teaching our children about good touches and bad touches. I think we've done a good job of encouraging our children to tell someone," said Lucinda Luce, district supervisor of the Lafayette Office of Community Service. Reporting is more acceptable now and society is trying to be more responsible to our children.

Juanita Prudhomme, office manager of Stuller Place, sits in the child-friendly lobby of the child advocacy center located in Lafayette. The center goes to great lengths to get young abuse victims to open up, including giving away teddy bears, providing child-sized furniture and creating an environment where children feel comfortable.

What we're really trying to deal with now is how to handle the child and the accusations once a disclosure has been made or a suspicion has been voiced."

The key to handling a case of suspected child abuse is handling the child. An abused child is frightened, has very low self-esteem and doesn't trust. How then do officials encourage a child to open up and tell the most horrible secrets?

The Stuller Place is one option in Acadiana. The non-profit child advocacy center operates as the hub in a multi-disciplinary approach between the Lafayette District Attorney's Office, local law enforcement, medical and psychological personnel and counselors and OCS. Before Stuller Place opened about two years ago, a child may have undergone as many as 22 different interviews by 22 different law enforcement officials, therapists and lawyers.

At Stuller Place, a child is interviewed by a trained social worker in a cozy, friendly room filled with plants, pictures, stuffed animals, books and crayons. A tiny hidden camera films the interview for evidence while another camera plays soothing music. A volunteer provides comfort and lets the child know that the adult is there to help.

The interview is taped and labeled for evidence. A child may choose to be interviewed alone or with family members present. A child may opt to be interviewed in a different room.

For more information, call the Lafayette District Attorney's Office, 334-231-9000, or the Lafayette Office of Community Service, 334-262-4000.
Stuller

Stuller's entire encounter and is shown on closed-circuit television to a room full of the other officials who need to hear the child's story. Using a hand-held microphone, police officials can talk to the interviewer—through an unobtrusive earpiece—to ask specific questions. The videotaped interview is court-admissible and oftentimes, can save the child from having to make an accusation in a courtroom.

Mock courtroom sessions

However, if that can't be helped, the Stuller Place has the facilities and personnel to run mock courtroom sessions to familiarize a child with the process. Therapy sessions with the child and the family can also be held in Stuller Place, which is stonewalled with colorful hand-painted murals, indoor-outdoor tables and chairs and vivid handprints in the walls to honor those who have contributed to the facility.

A child is first brought to Stuller Place at the beginning of the investigation process by a law enforcement official or social worker. Usually within 24 hours of a case being opened, the child is brought in for the first interview. If the child is unable to open up enough to talk, the social worker can spend time simply encouraging a comfortable relationship with the child in an art therapy room or calming sunroom.

Between April and December of last year, 167 children between the ages of 2 and 17 were brought to Stuller Place. According to Frudhomme, each one established enough rapport with the Stuller Place interviewer to tell their stories.

Approaching the child

"We've had such solid success with Stuller Place," said assistant district attorney Floyd Johnson. "We're able to approach the child in non-traditional ways so the child feels comfortable enough. You're often talking about children at such a tender age who have gone through the most horrible experiences. In a child-friendly environment, we're able to better interview the child to get what we need, as well as be able to get what we need to help the child."

Investigations into child abuse allegations are also handled by the Office of Community Services, which averages 60 new cases a