

TO YOUR HEALTH | ALISON MORRIS

Latest approach in fighting child abuse is working

Social workers: Less adversarial tack has yielded positive results

Social workers in Catawba County believe a new approach to dealing with child abuse and neglect cases is one of the primary reasons for a 15.3 percent decrease in substantiated reports last year.

The drop in cases came from the one-year period between July 2002 and June 2003 and the same period in 2003-04.

Cyndy Benson, children services program manager at Catawba County Department of Social Services, has been employed at DSS for 18 years. She said this is the first decrease seen by the county in about the last 10 years.

The Multiple Response System, which DSS has implemented over a two-year period culminating in July, involves a friendlier, less adversarial way of addressing problems with families.

The MRS approach is used in neglect cases where there are safety issues but not those that involve serious injury or criminal behavior on the part of the parent or caretaker.

In MRS neglect cases, the social worker visits the family, talks with parents and children together about the incident and works with them to correct problems.

Benson said that for example, the No. 1 reported case of child neglect is unsupervised or poorly supervised children. In such a case, the social worker would discuss with the parent or caretaker what prevents them from properly supervising the child.

The social worker would talk about the potential dangers to a child and would help the family come up with solutions such as subsidized day care, getting help from neighbors or after-school programs. "We help problem-solve and move into solutions," Benson said.

Benson said the MRS approach has helped DSS refocus on families. "Our direction prior to that was much more investigative -- looking at specific instances and if it happened one time, the parent was found neglectful.

"With MRS, we are looking more at patterns and trends of how parents are dealing with their children. A one-time instance (unless very serious, such as sexual abuse or

physically harming a child) may not necessarily constitute a finding of abuse or neglect," she said.

Another MRS approach is called the child and family team meetings. At the meetings, parents, relatives, neighbors, schoolteachers or anyone involved in the life of the child can talk about their concerns and help the family develop solutions.

Benson attributes the decrease in child abuse and neglect not only to hard work on the part of DSS but also many other agencies that help families and support them in their efforts to raise their children safely.

Those who need help for themselves or help in dealing with their children should call DSS, which can refer families to a range of services.

But prevention also starts at home with the parents, Benson said. Parents who are stressed should reach out for help.

Here are some places to call for help: Catawba County Social Services hot line, 24 hours a day, seven days a week, at (828) 324-9111. Other prevention providers are the Children's Advocacy Center of Catawba County at (828) 465-9296; Catawba County Social Services -- Prevention Unit at (828) 695-4418; or the Parenting Network at (828) 465-9295.

People who encounter or witness a situation that might involve child abuse or neglect or who are aware of a situation that could present imminent harm to a child are legally required to make a report to Child Protective Services by calling (828) 324-9111. Reports can be made anonymously.

Reach To Your Health by mail at P.O. Box 2464, Hickory, 28603; by fax at (828) 327-3480; or by e-mail at: hickory@charlotteobserver.com.

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