



As executive director of the Yolo Crisis Nursery, Heather Sleuter leads a team of nine staff members with special training in trauma-informed caregiving.

Photo credit: Jennifer Ditty

Special skills help Nursery staff deal with traumatized kids

By Karen Adams
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The 18-month-old wore a helmet at the Yolo Crisis Nursery. Not to ride a tiny bike, and not because she refused to take it off, the way some kids won't take off a princess dress or superhero suit.

The girl wore a helmet to prevent further trauma to her injured brain.

"It was heart-breaking," says Lisa Young, family services coordinator at the Nursery. "But she is doing much better now. She's being weaned off her anti-seizure meds. She gets speech therapy and physical therapy here (from specialists who visit the nursery.) She's talking and much stronger."

This little girl is an extreme case, but challenging circumstances surround every child who arrives at the nursery. I'm writing about them today to answer the question, "With so many worthy nonprofits to support on May 3's regional Big Day of Giving 2016, why support the Yolo Crisis Nursery?"

For me, the answer lies in the special Nursery staff and their ability to help Yolo County children who are experiencing a rocky start to life. Executive Director Heather Sleuter, Lisa Young and their co-workers all have extensive training in what's called trauma-informed caregiving. They know how to recognize the signs of trauma in young children and, more significantly, how to deal with it.

"Most important, this job demands developing special bonds," Young says. "Children stay here for varying lengths of time, but we work very hard to earn their trust while they are with us. And we work very hard communicating with their parents or guardians to ensure that we're all on the same page. It goes way beyond a 9-to-5 job."

Jennifer Hungerford, also a key caregiver at the Nursery, says she sometimes feels frustrated because she can't make the children's problems magically go away. "I have to

focus on doing the best I can with them in the moment,” she says. “Just giving them the best I have to offer in our moments together can make a difference in a troubled kid’s life.”

Research tells us that young children often feel great fear in response to trauma. They haven’t developed the ability to know where they can find security, so their fears spill out in all directions. At the nursery, the staff watches carefully to learn the children’s needs, temperaments and stress triggers, Young says.

Even putting the children down for naps can be a special challenge, Young says.

“A lot of our kids feel like someone is not going to be here when they wake up,” she says. “They get agitated instead of sleepy. Today it took me an hour to get one little girl to sleep. I just sat beside her with my hand resting on her back.”

As family service coordinator, Young works closely with the parents and guardians to help them achieve family stability. She’s proud when children “graduate” from the nursery, but many can reappear. A child may move into in a Head Start program, for instance, but return to the nursery if Head Start proves too big and bustling for his or her sensitive state.

“This is the most rewarding job I’ve ever had,” Young says. “I’ve worked in public before-and-after school programs, in more typical childcare settings. Here, I can tell you the kids are different. It takes a lot of patience. The staff here have a big heart. No matter how hard the work is, they keep at it. They never give up.”

Yolo County families are the richer for having this facility and this dedicated staff. Without them, parents experiencing crises and children suffering trauma would have fewer options for help and healing. Hats off to Sleuter, Young, Hungerford, Connie Cordero, Oscar Lopez, Heather Turner, Khris Ramirez and on-call staff members Diego Escobar, Denise Sanchez-Hume and Bonnie Fee.

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A few final words about the third annual Big Day of Giving on May 3. Beginning at midnight on and continuing until 11:59 p.m., the public can make gifts to their favorite participating nonprofits at <https://bigdayofgiving.org>. The Sacramento Regional Community Foundation and its affiliates have signed up 570 local nonprofits, contracted with a robust online donation platform and begun extensive marketing for this special day, nicknamed Big Dog.

The regional goal is \$6 million in donations, which seems doable given that \$5.6 was collected last year on the second annual event. Yolo Crisis Nursery’s goal is to raise \$20,000. Davisville Management Co. has offered to match donations dollar-for-dollar up to \$10,000.

On May 3, the Yolo Crisis Nursery board hopes community members will donate \$50 to provide one day of care for one child at the Nursery. The campaign, “One Child, One Day... One Big Day,” replaces the nursery’s annual direct-mail campaign in April.

“This is easy and should be fun,” said J.D. Denton, president of the nursery board. “The Big Dog website will have up-to-the-moment results all day, so you can see how your favorite nonprofits are faring. With luck the Crisis Nursery will end up on the leaderboard with \$10,000 or more (matching gifts are offline.) The children and families of Yolo County will be the real winners.”