

WNMU's Family Counseling Center Rated "Best Practice" by National Quality Services Review Team

"You saved this child's life. This is what best practice in children's services looks like." This was the response of a national Quality Service Review (QSR) team leader after studying the case of a four-year-old boy who has been enrolled in the Child Development Center's comprehensive play-based child and family services for the past two years. WNMU's Family Counseling Center received the highest rating in each service category reviewed by the team. The review process utilizes a "deep slice" view of case records and evaluations, on-site observations, and interviews with parents, teachers, counselors, and outside therapeutic specialists to determine the child's current status, and recent progress. QSR focuses on the outcomes achieved and the adequacy of services provided.

Unlike most early care and education programs throughout the nation, WNMU's six Early Childhood Programs include a Family Counseling Center, staffed by licensed counselors who are also registered play therapists, developmental specialists, and infant mental health specialists. Counseling and family support services are available free of charge to any enrolled child or parent. These specialized therapists conduct a full battery of formal assessments and observations on each of the 130 children enrolled. Children range in age from six weeks to five years of age. Other assessment components include home visits by teachers, well child check-ups, and dental screenings. In the belief that the social and emotion domain is the key to cognitive and other development, the focus is always on the child and the relationship.

Based on assessment information, counselors determine whether there is a need for special services, which can range from play therapy with the child to individual or marital therapy with parents. Parenting classes and other family support services are also available. Counselors also work with teachers, instructing them in play therapy techniques and helping to develop individualized classroom management strategies. When indicated, counselors also draw upon the specialized on-site services of outside agencies, such as Life Quest Early Intervention and the Special Education services of the public schools. With this team approach, counselors, teachers, and parents develop a consistent approach to intervention strategies.

Rudy (not the child's real name) was selected for study, not because his case was a unique success, but because it was a good example of the range of services and collaboration with parents, teachers, counselors, and outside agencies that is a routine part of service in WNMU's Early Childhood Programs. At two, Rudy presented as a real challenge in the classroom. He had significant speech delays and sensory and auditory processing issues. He resisted potty training. He avoided eye contact and any form of touch, pulling violently away, even from parents. He enjoyed pushing other children, throwing toys and knocking them off the

shelf. His frequent, violent “meltdowns” were difficult to calm. He had difficulty participating in group activities, yet showed an extraordinary gift for doing puzzles and identifying shapes.

His assigned counselor began intensive play therapy work with Rudy, his teachers, and his parents. Specialists from Life Quest were called in to provide occupational therapy, and Rudy later received speech therapy from the Silver Schools. One of his teachers received instruction in play therapy and began additional weekly individual play sessions with Rudy. As his relationship skills improved, Rudy was able to bond to this teacher, and his classroom behavior improved. By the time the Quality Service Review Team visited his classroom, Rudy still had some difficulty with transitions, but his behavior no longer stood out in a group of his peers.

The Quality Service Review Project, sponsored by the New Mexico Children’s Behavioral Health Authority, selected Silver City as one of two pilot sites for an in-depth review of cases involving services for children and families. Rudy’s was one of seven cases they reviewed in Silver City. The project is one aspect of a major statewide effort to examine and improve behavioral health services for children.