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Call it the Center of attention

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Gereitha Tilley spends most of the day up to her ankles in building blocks, wooden puzzles, plastic cars and rubber balls.

Toys strewn across the floor of the tiny nursery of Northwest Christian Church of Arlington are more a welcomed sight than a problem for Tilley, who provides day care for homeless children.

"I don't think these kids have many toys," said Tilley, 19. "When they come here all they want to do is play with the toys, but I try to teach them something they can take with them."

What Tilley, a single mother of twins, gives the children - as well as their parents - is time. Under her supervision, toddlers play with toys and get a chance to burn up excess energy by climbing over and crawling under wooden slides. Meanwhile, their parents are free to search for jobs.

Mission Arlington's day care center for homeless children opened in response to the needs of parents who could not find work because they had no one to watch their children, said Tillie Burgin, mission director.

In some ways Tilley was the non-profit organization's first success story.

Her daughters were only 8 months old and she had no one to care for the infants while she looked for employment.

"When I came to Arlington I had a job but then I lost it and found myself in a real bind," she said. "Mission Arlington was here for me. I've been real lucky."

For Tilley the Mission Arlington child care program is an ideal solution to her child care dilemma. She has an income and her twins, now a year old, spend the day with her. The experience also has Tilley, a Plano High School graduate, thinking about a career in child development.

Burgin said the program, which is funded through a \$16,000 state grant to aid the homeless, is designed to help parents such as Tilley who want to work.

"The only thing we ask is that they have proof that they're looking for work," Burgin said. "There's not one reason that this program shouldn't work well, unless the jobs are just not out there."

Since August, the program has worked for 148 children and their parents, most of them from the city's three shelters. Children can stay free in the program until their parents find work and get their first paycheck. After that parents must make their own child care arrangements.

For 20-month Christina and her mother Mary Amoli, the program has worked beautifully. While Christina was busy stacking blocks and playing with puzzles, her mother was looking for a job as a receptionist or secretary.

Within two days, Amoli found employment - and day care for her daughter.

"She was just thrilled when she came to pick up her little girl," Tilley said.

Although the center is only open Tuesday through Thursday, that's usually enough time for parents to launch a job search, said Debbie Musgrave, Mission Arlington assistant director.

By playing and talking with the children, Tilley had gained insight into the youngster's fears. Most kids shows signs that life without a home has taken its toll, she said.

"Almost all of them come in tired," she said. "They act as if they don't get much rest when they're away from here."

Burgin said she would like to help more children but getting the word out has not be easy. Most children in the program have lived in the night shelter or women's shelter and heard about it that way, she said.

PHOTO

Ricky Moon

Gereitha Tilley waits for homeless children to join her

twins, Jasmine and Janee, at the day care center she operates.

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