

Steady counsel: Psychiatrist reflects on 4 decades of helping families

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His office may contain a doll house, wooden blocks, bins of toys and a pink toy convertible, but Dr. Simon Epstein is entrusted with a serious mission: to help young people improve their emotional health by discovering ways to help themselves.

As the associate medical director at the Child Guidance Center of Southern Connecticut Inc., Epstein, a psychiatrist, has spent the past 42 years sharing his expertise with the families that have used the community mental health agency, which serves about 2,100 children and teenagers each year in the greater Stamford area.

"You'd love to have (success) 100 percent of the time, but you're not always going to get it," he says, recently, from his office at the center's West Broad Street location in Stamford. The nonprofit mental health resource also has offices in Greenwich, Darien and New Canaan.

Each week, Epstein takes time away from his private practice in Stamford, and spends a day at the center administering to the children and families who either find the center on their own, or are referred by other organizations, agencies and institutions, such as schools.

"Sometimes you have to be your own cheerleader," he says. "It's nice if they appreciate the help. It makes you feel good, but you also have to know yourself if something works."

The center serves young people who evidence a range of mental health issues, from those who are suicidal or exhibit violent behavior to those who are reacting to a trauma or crisis in their life. Emergency care is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Clients also include young people who are dealing with substance abuse or who have been neglected or sexually abused. Families pay based on a sliding scale and grants allow for fees to occasionally be waived.

Privacy considerations keep the center's staff and its community partners from talking about particular cases or revealing the names of clients, but Greenwich Police Sgt. Jim Marr says that the center has provided an invaluable resource when it comes to dealing with sexual assault cases.

If police suspect a child may have been sexually abused, the center's staff is called in to interview the potential victims, Marr says. From there, police can assess whether they should proceed with a criminal investigation.

"They provide a great service," he says of the center's staff, which, along with police and other law enforcement officials, are part of the lower Fairfield County Child Sexual Abuse Response Team that serves Stamford, Greenwich and Darien.

"There is no way you can interview 4-, 5- or 6-year-olds without the proper training," he says. "You don't want to subject the children to additional stress."

When Epstein started working at the center, he had recently moved to Stamford with his family and was on the staff at Weill Cornell Medical College in White Plains, N.Y., where he had served his residency.

He says he saw it as a chance to become a part of something new, as there were major changes beginning to reverberate in the field of child psychiatry.

"It was not too long before that that people had recognized that children were not little adults ... they could have anxiety and worries of their own," he says, noting that problems such as bullying, body image and peer pressure could affect children differently than they did adults.

New medications and therapies and a greater understanding of how the entire family needed to be part of the treatment were changing the way children were responding to therapy.

"Lots of people did not think children could become depressed," he says.

Even as the community's needs were changing, so, too, was the center, which was creating innovative treatment plans and an interdisciplinary approach. This state-licensed outpatient psychiatric clinic has a staff that includes social workers, marriage and family therapists, psychiatrists and psychologists, who come together to determine the most effective treatment for each client.

In addition, the staff conducts education and training programs for area teachers, law enforcement officials, community leaders, families and other medical professionals, among others. It also provides 24-hour emergency care.

Larry Rosenberg is a psychologist who has worked with the Child Guidance Center of Southern Connecticut Inc. for the past 21 years.

As to Epstein's influence on the team, Rosenberg says, "He's sensitive. He's thoughtful. "I think that he has the ability to put people at ease and he instills confidence in people.

"Not only does he help them to get better, but he helps them to help themselves," Rosenberg says, echoing the center's mission and one of Epstein's ultimate goals.

Epstein says there is more to therapy than providing a patient with a pill. "You just don't come here and get medication. You have to be in therapy."

As to the changes over the years, he says he has seen more disturbed children pass through his door. He says depression and anxiety remain major problems.

Sometimes they are the result of outside influences. "A lot of families are ridden with substance abuse, which makes it hard to deal with the children."

Asked why he is seeing more disturbed children, he says there are many reasons, not the least of which is a greater sophistication in the community about mental illness and the need for treatment. However, even with that awareness, times are stressful, he says, citing the war in Iraq as one example.

The toys in his office serve as way for him to make connections with some of his littlest patients. "It is an effort to get to their inner thoughts," he says. "You get to the nonverbal evidence of the things going on in their mind and can talk it out."

As to how long he might continue to bridge those connections or to find rewards in giving young people the tools they need to reach their potential, he thinks he has at least a few more years left. He still lives in Stamford with Patricia, his wife of 50 years, and has two grown daughters who live in the area, Sharon and Joanne. "Change is kind of exciting and it keeps you going."

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The Child Guidance Center of Southern Connecticut Inc., which was established more than 50 years ago, features an interdisciplinary staff of professionals who work to address the mental health needs of young people with psychological, behavioral, developmental, social or family problems and their families in lower Fairfield County.

In 2007:

- * Twenty-three percent of the children helped by the center had attempted suicide or had considered suicide before seeking treatment.
- * Twenty-eight percent were sexually or physically abused or neglected.
- * Thirty-six percent had problems with schoolwork.
- * Thirty-five percent had reported a conflict with a parent.

- Source: The Child Guidance Center of Southern Connecticut Inc. 2007 Annual Report.