

**Our Semester at Steadfast Home:
Providing the Childcare Every Kid Wants, and Every Mother Deserves**

Mariah Ingram and Emma Parrish
University of North Carolina at Asheville
Health and Wellness Promotion

Faculty Advisor: Kathleen Garbe
Community Advisor: Judith Walter, Asheville Buncombe Community Christian
Ministries: Steadfast Home For Women and Children

Abstract

The Steadfast Home provides transitional housing for homeless women and children in Asheville. In addition to housing, the Steadfast home offers night classes that focus on personal and vocational skill building. These classes teach the women how to take the next step in their education, encourage them to find employment and eventually leave the Steadfast Home and live independently. In order to keep providing these services, the Steadfast home is in constant need of evening childcare. In the interest of assessing the childcare needs, the mothers were asked what their ideal childcare looked like and what early childhood development skills they would prefer their children to learn. We will be providing structured, interactive childcare on Sundays, Mondays and Fridays this semester. At the beginning of each week, we will choose an age-appropriate theme for that week's activities. In order to make this project sustainable, we will create a guide book for future childcare volunteers. This book will collect all of the crafts, games, and activities that we have found successful during our time at the Steadfast Home. This book will also contain the directions and materials needed for each activity, making childcare a simpler process in the future. A copy of the book will be left at the Steadfast Home, and a copy will be left here on campus at the Key Center as a resource for future UNCA volunteers who want to complete service learning at the Steadfast Home. Our goal is to provide the Steadfast Home with a sustainable childcare system, whether it involves UNCA students or other volunteer members from the community.

Key Words: homeless, women, children, domestic violence, Steadfast Home, Asheville, childcare, childhood development, resource, sustainable, community, volunteers

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Origins of the Project

Asheville Buncombe Community Christian Ministry (ABCCM) is one of the biggest non-profit organizations with a focus on addressing poverty, hunger, homelessness, and access to health care for any persons in need in Buncombe County. Founded in 1969 by a group of small churches assisting those in need in the community, ABCCM is now supported by 227 congregations of all faiths and denominations. In 2013, ABCCM served over 50,000 individuals in need. ABCCM is made up of seven groups that each focus on different underserved individuals. For our service-learning project, Mariah and I worked closely with the Steadfast Home which serves homeless women and children. Majority of the women and children living in at the Steadfast Home are escaping domestic violence, which is one of the biggest reasons as to why they become homeless. Through interviews with the mothers, Mariah and I learned that some of the children had either witnessed domestic violence or been subject to it before becoming homeless. The Steadfast Home runs almost entirely on donations from the community in forms of money, clothing, toiletries, food, and time. The biggest need the Steadfast Home faces every year is evening childcare every night of the week. Our service-learning project arose around the need for quality, safe and engaging evening childcare. The other primary objective for this project was to make this childcare program as sustainable as possible for the future childcare volunteers.

In the recent years, the number of homeless women and children has risen dramatically. It is estimated by the National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth, that approximately 1.6 million children have been forced into homelessness since 2012 (NAEHCY, 2012). In Asheville and Buncombe County alone, approximately 2,000 people experience homelessness each year. Anyone who becomes homeless is faced with numerous challenges, but homelessness is particularly devastating for children. It affects every aspect of their lives and development, from their physical health, academic performance, and social/emotional wellbeing (Losinski, Katsiyannis, Ryan, 2013). The ages of the children who are living at the Steadfast Home range from ten months old to eight years old. At this young age, an enormous amount of development occurs and children who are growing up in shelters rarely have access to structured and personalized childcare to further their mental development.

Evening childcare is a growing need for several reasons. The primary reason is all of the women living at the Steadfast Home are required to attend night classes at the shelter. These night classes range from business classes, to workplace etiquette classes, to resume building classes. The Steadfast Home strives to give each women the skills and knowledge they need for the future to live independent lives. While the mothers attend these classes, the children need to be supervised. Other reasons why childcare is so desperately needed all revolve around the same issue: These mothers rarely get a break from busy days and they need time to do their chores, homework for school and night classes, or just time to relax.

In the past, volunteers would sporadically come to the shelter to provide childcare. However, after interviewing the mothers and asking them about previous childcare programs, Mariah and I learned that there had never been a structured, engaging or stimulating childcare system. Meeting with our site supervisor, Judith Walter, and interviewing the mothers gave Mariah and I a clear understanding of what kind of childcare there was a need for. Fun, safe and attentive care was the desirable bases for these children.

Methods and Work Undertaken

Mariah and I started this project by first contacting and meeting with our site adviser, Judith Walter. We knew the Steadfast Home's biggest need was evening childcare from previously volunteering with ABCCM and we already had planned out what our childcare programs would entail. We met with Judith to discuss dates and times and to have her approve our plan. During our meeting, Judith informed us of how many kids would be participating in the childcare and what ages each kid was so we could prepare the activities and games accordingly. Each week, we gave Judith an outline of what activities and themes we were doing with the kids and how we would adjust each activity to fit every child's age so they could all participate.

To have the childcare program planned in advance, Mariah and I would brainstorm and research games, activities and crafts that were mentally stimulating and engaging. We wanted to make sure we included developmental skills in each activity because not only are these children in such a crucial developmental stage in their lives, they have been subject to violence at a young age. Children who are exposed to domestic violence at young age are prone to having trouble with behavior and emotional development. In a study addressing mothers and children escaping domestic violence, authors Gill Hague and Ellen Malos found that "many women reported that their children's health or mental well-being had been seriously affected by the violence which they had experienced or witnessed, and being without a home had then compounded their difficulties" (Vostanis, p.72). We picked out a theme for each week starting to base our activities around. These themes were all kid friendly such as dinosaur themed, knights and castle themed and outer space themed. We picked crafts and games that incorporated developmental skills into them such as fine motor movement skills, communication, sharing, color identification, and word association. The

youngest children enrolled in the childcare were ten months old, and the oldest child was eight years old. Given the large age distribution, we had to make sure the activities we were doing could be adjusted so each age group could participate. For the youngest kids, this was less of a concern considering they could not participate regardless of how the activities were altered.

Starting in September, Mariah and I spent approximately two hours every Monday and Friday evening and every Sunday afternoon providing childcare at the Steadfast Home. If we were unable to attend childcare on a designated day due to school or work obligations, we would go to Steadfast Home on the Wednesday of that week. This was greatly needed because the mothers have a mandatory business class on Wednesday nights and are in need of childcare. We arrived at the Steadfast Home at 6:45 in the evening and stayed until 8:30 on Mondays and until 9 o'clock on Fridays. We had to go later in the evening because all of the residents at the Steadfast Home are required to be present for roll call at 6 o'clock and then promptly eat dinner. On Sundays we went during the afternoon at 12 o'clock and stay until 2 o'clock. There are bible study classes on Monday nights that several of the mothers attend. If they chose not to attend bible study, they are usually doing their mandatory chores around the home or completing homework for other night classes. Mariah and I conducted most of our activities in the downstairs section of the building and outside on the playground at the Steadfast Home. The backyard and the playground were ideal for playing with the children and we spent majority of the days in September and October doing childcare outside. The kids loved playing games such as hide and seek, freeze tag, follow the leader and more. The facilities had a few bikes for the older kids to ride around on and the playground had a full swing set which was perfect for entertaining multiple kids at once. It was apparent these children had not experienced engaging childcare from previous volunteers because most of them were surprised when Mariah and I suggested we play games and play with them on the swing set. For inside activities, Mariah and I would plan to bring the necessary materials for crafts. Since we mainly had children ages ten months old, two years old, four years old and five years old, we had to do trial runs of what the children were capable of doing themselves. The crafts we did went along with the theme for that week. For example, during dinosaur week we made different types of dinosaurs out of paper plates and colored construction paper. This craft is included in our activity book. We learned quickly that it was best to have every part of the craft cut out, glued down, and stapled together instead of having the children try to conduct those parts. The kids mainly assembled the crafts which lead to a high productivity rate and an easier time giving instructions. This was also a more resourceful way to conduct the crafts because Mariah and I often felt overwhelmed by being outnumbered by the children. This was easier for us to focus on the whole group and provide individual attention when needed.

Since the primary objective of this project was to create a sustainable childcare system for the Steadfast Home, Mariah and I took all of the successful games, activities and crafts and compiled them into a book to leave behind for the future volunteers. The book includes a

description of each activity, the materials required, and ways to modify it according to the ages present. From now on future childcare providers can have a lesson plan already taken care of with games and activities that will benefit the children's social, mental, and physical development. Another copy of our book will be kept in the Key Center of UNC Asheville to help create a relationship between student volunteers and the Steadfast Home. This book will hopefully encourage student volunteers to work with the Steadfast Home to provide day time and evening childcare.

Ties to Academia

This service-learning project has been tied to my academics in several different ways. I am currently perusing a major in Health and Wellness Promotion and minoring in Sociology. By providing engaging and stimulating childcare to young, homeless children, I can easily link this project to my studies in wellness. My knowledge gained from classes such as Society, Culture and Poverty, the Sociology of Illness, Mental and Emotional health, and Health Theory and Practice has more than prepared me for creating a childcare system for low-income mothers and their children. For example, from my Health Theory and Practice class, which was a service learning designated class, I have learned how to interact and promote wellness in low-income communities. From this class, I gained knowledge on implementing programs starting with reaching out to the community, assessing their biggest needs, drawing out a realistic plan, and setting an attainable goal. I was reminded during this service-learning project with the Steadfast Home how critical those steps are because without a solid base, the plan cannot be executed to its highest potential and the goal cannot be reached.

From my Mental and Emotional Health class, I have learned that living in high-stress environments greatly hinders the development of a young child being raised in a low-income family. Mothers and children who are homeless or move from shelter to shelter are living in an extremely high-stress environment and basic survival becomes a high priority than focusing on the child's mental and social development. In a cognitive development study published in the American Journal of Public Health, author Norbert Schady writes "A recent review estimates that in developing countries, more than 200 million children younger than 5 years fail to reach their potential in cognitive development because of poverty, inadequate nutrition, and insufficient stimulation (Schady, 2011, p. 2299). With this knowledge, I was able to research the proper activities to do with the kids and the appropriate developmental skills I needed to incorporate into them. By conducting the activities and the crafts with the kids, I was able to see this development in action. I was able to see the color and word association and fine motor skills that were at work through the crafts and the major motor skills, social, and communication skills were present during the games we played on the playground.

My studies in Sociology have proven to be most helpful during this project because they have related to the issues I addressed at the Steadfast Home. In *Society, Culture and Poverty*, I learned about the feminization of poverty and why more women and children were slipping into poverty and becoming homeless. In this class, I learned that being in poverty means an individual is lacking necessary resources to survive, but “poverty can also be categorized in terms of age, where the youth are worse affected by poverty than the older group” (Khumalo, 2013, p.5646). Like the mothers and children at the Steadfast Home, many other women living in abusive homes and are faced with the decision of staying financially safe but encounter domestic violence every day, or to leave only to become homeless. Mariah and I had the privilege of interviewing some of the mothers in the shelter and heard their stories of living with an abuser and having no other choice but to remove themselves and their children from the violence and turn to the streets or homeless shelters. From the article *Protecting Women Against Domestic Violence*, authors Egharevba, Chiazor, and Suleiman state “Research statistics shows that at least 1 million children are abused physically each year, and die as a result, and it is estimated that more than 2 million women are victims of domestic violence each year in America and other civilized societies” (Egharevba, Chiazor, Suleiman, 2013, p.5658). One mother at the Steadfast Home disclosed to us her story of living with an abuser and losing a child due to domestic violence. Besides being physically harming, exposure to domestic abuse can deeply hinder a child’s social, emotional and cognitive development (Hester et al 1998). *Society, Culture and Poverty* made me aware of the possibilities that women and children in domestic violence situations are faced with, but spending this semester working with the Steadfast Home has taught me more about the feminization of poverty than a class ever could have.

Challenges Faced and Responses to those Challenges

Unfortunately, the biggest challenge throughout this whole process was something Mariah and I had no control over and that was the age differences between all of the children. There is a clear and evident mental development gap between a two year old and a five year old and the crafts and games a five year old is able to do are far more advanced than what a two year old can do. Finding games and activities that all the age groups could participate in and enjoy was difficult. The games were a bit easier to modify than the crafts were. As long as the younger kids were able to run around and follow simple instructions, they could be included. The only problem that still remained was attending to the babies. The two ten month olds that regularly participated in childcare could not walk and needed constant attention. Since Mariah and I were the only two people providing childcare, we were always in communication with each other when we were holding the babies. Fortunately, there was a swing for infants on the playground where one baby could be situated. If we had both babies, Mariah and I would take turns holding him. Other than having to keep a constant watch on the infants, playing games like hide and seek and tag were easy to modify for the toddlers and still fun and engaging for the older children.

As far as modifying the crafts and other activities went, this was a bigger challenge. Activities such as coloring weren't a problem but we had to make sure the two year olds were not using markers because they could not use them without being too messy. Other crafts that required gluing or taping or some type of assembling was trickier and in the end, we would just have to assemble those crafts for the two year olds. They were still involved because many of the crafts had a decorating process, which they could easily perform themselves. All of the older children in childcare were enrolled in elementary school and were either starting to do crafts in school or had been doing crafts for a while. For the ones that were just starting to use their creative skills, it was a challenge to get them excited about the crafts we were doing and to keep them interested. Mariah and I quickly learned that we needed to introduce the theme as enthusiastically as possible so their excitement towards the activity would increase. We also had to be very engaged and do the craft with them to encourage their interest and make sure they were all gaining the desired developmental skills.

Other small challenges that Mariah and I faced were time conflicts in regards to our busy academic schedules. Both Mariah and I are involved with club sports, are Residential Assistants, have additional jobs, and are full time students with heavy course loads. Thankfully, Judith was very flexible with scheduling us and only required a week in advance notice for schedule changes. There were a few Monday nights that we could not attend because of RA duties and a few Sundays that were occupied with club sports, but we were able to come in on additional nights to ensure that we were at Steadfast Home at least three times a week. This challenge was a stressful one to deal with, but we were able to make sure childcare would be provided for the children and the mothers each week.

Results

The short term results of our service learning project are the children have a fun and safe evening childcare program and the mothers are able to attend classes, finish any projects or work they have, and have a little personal time to recharge. The long term results of our service-learning project include creating a sustainable and substantial childcare system for the current and future children at the Steadfast home. We have found out that the short term results are immediately valuable and apparent through interviews with the mothers. Several of them have told us how appreciative they are of the free time we provide them with and how much their children enjoy the childcare we offer.

The long term results of this project will continue to show as our book of activities helps contribute to substantial childcare with a focus on interactive activities and increasing the children's social, mental and physical development. Our hope is future community volunteers who take on the role as childcare supervisors and providers will use our book for activity ideas and be able to carry out the games and crafts. Another goal we have is to build a stronger relationship between ABCCM and UNC Asheville. We want to spread the word about the great volunteer and service-learning opportunities available at the Steadfast Home and with the copy

of the activity book being left at the Key Center, the first steps in creating that connection are being made.

Sustainability

The childcare system and activity book Mariah and I have created for the Steadfast Home and the Key Center are tangible, sustainable products. The childcare system is sustainable because we have built relationships and connections with the directors at the Steadfast Home, and they now have clear expectations of future childcare volunteers. They also have a book of lesson plans which help communicate these standards to new staff members and volunteers. If any future volunteer has an activity or game to add to the book, they can do so for future reference. If the Steadfast Home ever has to move to another location or the childcare area gets moved to another part of the building, the book can be easily transported.

All of the games, crafts, and activities included in the book have modifications for age differences and have been researched to ensure social, mental and physical developmental skills are included in the criteria. It can be used for years to come, adding to its sustainability.

Ultimately, this project has created a sustainable relationship between UNC Asheville and ABCCM. As UNC Asheville incorporates more service-learning classes into its curriculum, there will be a stronger need for designated service-learning sites and opportunities. The Steadfast Home will be made more appealing with the activity book because it will show the success we had working with them and it will make the service learning a stress-free experience.

Conclusion

Our project has been successful in several ways. Firstly, we were able to explore the greater Asheville community and meet people who we would have never met otherwise. Playing with these kids and talking to these mothers are experiences I would have never been able to obtain had I not done this service-learning project at the Steadfast Home. I am so grateful for the stories they shared and the feedback on past and present childcare they provided. Secondly, we were able to create positive change in the community. By playing with these kids, we were not only helping their social, mental and physical development, we were giving them role models to look up to. Seeing the children's faces light up when Mariah and I arrived each afternoon and evening proved that not only were we helping the mothers and the Steadfast Home, but we had made a positive impact on their lives. Lastly, we paved the way to a strong relationship between UNC Asheville and the Steadfast Home. Before this project, I had never heard of ABCCM and it is one of the biggest non-profits in Western North Carolina. Our activity book in the Key Center will hopefully inspire future student volunteers and our book at the Steadfast Home will help the community volunteers provide a successful childcare program to children and mothers who so desperately need them.

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