

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

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### **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 child to learn. We provided structured, interactive childcare on Sundays, Mondays and Fridays this semester. Before each week, we came up with a theme to base that week's activities off of that would be age appropriate. In order to make this project sustainable, we created a guide book for future childcare volunteers. This book has all of the crafts, games, and activities that we found successful during our time at the Steadfast Home. This book contains 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 is with UNCA students or other volunteer members of the community.

**Key Words:** Early Childhood Development, Domestic Abuse and Violence, Homeless, Childcare, Asheville.

## Origins of the Project

Asheville Buncombe Community Christian Ministry (ABCCM) builds opportunities for area churches and congregations to serve the critical needs of the people in the surrounding region. ABCCM is a partnership between local churches to help respond to the emergency needs in the Asheville and Buncombe county area to those in poverty, the homeless, incarcerated, or uninsured. Founded in 1969 by 8 Buncombe County churches, ABCCM now encompasses 277 congregations and over 4600 volunteers responding to the needs of this community through different caring ministries.

The Steadfast Home, where my partner Emma Parrish and I conducted this project, is ABCCM's women and children's transitional housing facility. The Steadfast Home can hold up to 29 women including 7 mothers at a time where they can get a fresh start and recover from past experiences. They try to provide personal skill building for women, an education and training that equip women for employment and sustainable housing, and provide reintegration skills and opportunities that lead to greater self-determination. The women who live in the Steadfast Home can stay there for up to a year, with most women living there for an average of three months.

It was first brought to our attention that the Steadfast Home would be a good place for Emma and me to partner with for our project when Emma volunteered there during our Resident Assistant training weeks at the beginning of the school year. She noted that there was a lack of structured childcare available and that providing that service would be something we are both passionate about and comfortable with, since we both have extensive babysitting and nanny experience. When we asked Judith Walter, our site supervisor, if we could set up a consistent, structured childcare program at the Steadfast Home, her response was a resounding yes! In order to maintain residency in the house, one must attend classes, bible studies, complete chores, and other odd jobs which leaves little time to be alone without having to deal with children as well. Those were important times that we needed to be available to provide childcare to ensure the mothers could complete all the tasks they are assigned.

This organization is so important to these mothers because it allows for some to escape their abusers. "The children of battered women often suffer serious physical, emotional, and social ailments that result from their life in an abusive household...these children may experience cognitive or language problems, developmental delays, stress-related physical ailments, and hearing or speech problems" (Tosh). With that being said, it was very important for me and Emma to incorporate activities during our time there to combat these ailments. This is a great opportunity for these women to change their future for not only themselves, but also their family. During this process, however, it can be hard for the mothers to get a break from their children and have a moment alone. This is another way we helped the mothers in addition to watching their children; because these women do so much to ensure that their kids will have a bright future, they sometimes forget to take time to themselves to recharge and relax.

## Methods and Work Undertaken

The first step in orchestrating this project was contacting the volunteer coordinator at the Steadfast Home, Judith Walter, who is our site supervisor. It took about a week of emailing back and forth before we nailed down what Emma and I would be doing exactly; it was decided that for a few hours multiple days a week, we would provide childcare and give these mothers the break that they desperately needed and deserved. Also, it gave us the opportunity to shower some attention on the kids who obviously weren't used to having people focus completely on them. Studies have shown that "with the growing number of young children participating in child care services, it is imperative to provide a safe environment which nurtures their development...training in behavior management has the highest priority" (Rusby). Our goal at Steadfast was to provide that safe environment where the moms felt comfortable leaving us in charge of their children.

Before we began our childcare services, we did extensive research on different childcare methods, activities to do with the children, and how we should discipline the children if they were acting out. It is astounding how much of an impact childcare has on a child's early development; "the interactions young children have with adults and other children are among the most important external determinants of their social, emotional, and cognitive development. And there is little doubt that the development of young children influences their subsequent outcomes as adults" (Blau). We were given a great example of this from one mother, Tiffany, who told us of her time in a shelter here in Asheville before coming to the Steadfast Home. She said they did not have childcare resources, in addition to the shelter not being geared towards mothers, which led her four year old daughter, London, to become introverted and nervous. However, since coming to the Steadfast Home three months ago, London has become a bubbly and loud little girl who loves to play with the other children in the Home. Knowing this information, Emma and I took it upon ourselves to be models of good behavior and provide activities that would promote healthy development.

In order to come up with activities for the children to participate in while we were there, Emma and I enlisted the help of the website *Pinterest*, which has a plethora of ideas on how to keep kids entertained in fun and healthy ways. We also looked at several blogs by stay-at-home mothers who had excellent tips on activities to play indoors once it got too cold to play outside. We decided to have a theme for each week and plan our activities around that theme to have some consistency, and to also expose the children to new things. Since we knew that "nearly half of homeless children experience at least one developmental delay and many have difficulty with language skills, fine/gross motor coordination, and/or social and personal development," our activities that we planned had to combat these problems (Hicks-Coolick). We did not include games or activities that would be competitive or have a losing side, because we wanted to encourage positive behaviors and cooperation among the children. We also tried to keep the activities gender neutral so that all the kids could play as a whole and not be separated or left out in any way. While the boys could be a bit rowdy sometimes, Emma and I always encouraged the children to be nice to each other and share no matter who they were playing with—boy, girl, black, white, or Hispanic.

The ages for these children ranged from 10 months old to 7 years old, so the activities we prepared for them had to be applicable to all ages. That being said, we were able to play outside on the playground when it was nice outside, and then inside we read books, played with toys, and did fun interactive crafts with the children. Some of the crafts that we did were coloring on a big sheet of butcher paper so the children learned to share and interact with the other children, creating a wreath out of fall leaves to hang on their doors in the Home, making dinosaurs out of paper plates and glitter glue, and hand-drawn cards for the mothers.

During our time at the Steadfast Home, Emma and I would take the time to interview several of the mothers to get their opinions on how we were doing, what childcare service was like in the past, and also got to hear their stories of how they came to live at the Steadfast Home. Tiffany, who was mentioned previously, is 26 years old, a mother of two children under the age of five, homeless, and running away from her abuser. While living at Steadfast, she said there are many people who volunteer to do childcare, but it is usually a one-time thing, and it is hard for her children to adjust to seeing so many new faces. Of the childcare volunteers who are consistent, Tiffany said that she really only trusts two other people to watch her children beside me and Emma. This is because most people just watch the kids play, rarely interacting with them, and raise their voices at the children in a disrespectful way. Another mother, Jenee, who is 27 years old and has an 11 month old named Bradley completely agrees with Tiffany. She does not like the fact that the mothers are required to attend mandatory classes and are forced to leave their child with a complete stranger. All of the mothers that we interviewed agreed that we were some of the best childcare volunteers Steadfast has had in a while; they liked that we got on the child's level when we talked to them, we didn't let the children walk all over us, and we always have something fun planned for the kids to do.

Being responsible for multiple children, anywhere from two to seven at a time, is a hard job to accomplish. Not only do you have to keep them entertained, but you also have to resolve any fights and be a good example yourself. David Blau, a labor and population economist with research interests in aging and children, states that "A child care arrangement is deemed to be of high quality if the interactions, environment, and so forth are rated relatively high on scales of 'developmental appropriateness'... [Such as] how sensitive they are to children, whether they encourage children to be engaged in activities, use positive guidance techniques, and encourage independence" (Blau). This is the kind of childcare service Emma and I have strived to provide, and we would like to see it continue. We thought it would be a good idea to create a book containing all of the crafts and activities that we did this semester so that anyone providing childcare in the future can use our book to help them ensure the children receive the best childcare they can. A copy of this book will be left at the Steadfast Home, and another will be left on campus at UNCA in the Key Center for future students to use if they are doing a similar project or wish to volunteer at the Steadfast Home as well.

## **Ties to Academia**

This project connects well with my major of International Studies because the goal of my major is "to provide students with a deeper knowledge of and appreciation for the diverse cultures, economies and politics of the world" (Anderson). Addressing the needs of homeless mothers is

indeed a completely different culture from what I have ever known. Hearing these mothers' stories, all of them have said they never expected to end up in their situations and it just took a few wrong moves for them to end up in the Steadfast Home. I have learned about a completely new group of people that is surprisingly prominent in Asheville, North Carolina, with homeless women with children making up 16% of the homeless population (Tippett).

Another way this project correlates with academia is because this is the kind of work I wish to do in the future. I have always had a passion for helping others, whether that is through local volunteering or on an international service trip to Ethiopia. The International Studies program will provide me "an excellent background for those interested in working for government agencies, non-governmental organizations such as the United Nations, and private voluntary and humanitarian organizations" (Anderson). I am glad for any and all experiences I can get by working with different organizations, so that I can better understand what area I wish to work in after I graduate. This project has also given me the opportunity to connect UNC Asheville with the Steadfast Home, and to build that relationship for future projects to be done there.

I noticed a link also between the mothers at the Steadfast Home, who are majority survivors of domestic violence and abuse, and women in other cultures I have learned about in different classes who are also survivors of abuse. Most recently, my class "Gender and Development in South Asia" has talked about domestic violence in Pakistan, and how it is the biggest threat to a Pakistani woman's security, health, and wellbeing. "Many of the victims of domestic violence had thought through the consequences, and their decision not to leave their husbands was based on the realization that the strong social stigma associated with divorce could lead to minimal social support from their own families" (Khan and Hussain). The mothers from the Steadfast Home are very brave to have left their abusers, because they were leaving a home for their children and also financial stability. But they did the right thing by getting away from their abusive relationships, and I'm so thankful for places like the Steadfast Home to provide a place for the women to stay until they can be on their own again.

## **Challenges Faced and Responses to those Challenges**

The first challenge Emma and I ran into while doing this project was trying to resolve scheduling conflicts. We both have very full schedules between classes, work as Resident Assistants, extracurricular activities, and the Community Engaged Scholar program this semester. We also had to factor in when would be the best time for us to come for the mothers and Steadfast Home as well. They needed the most childcare typically from 6:30-8:00 pm on the weekdays because that is when the mothers have their mandatory classes and bible study. Emma and I responded to this challenge by making volunteering at the Steadfast Home a top priority on our schedules, and that allowed us to go at least two or three times a week to provide childcare.

Another challenge that we had to overcome during our time at the Steadfast Home was finding activities to do with the children that were age appropriate. As previously stated, the age ranges of the children were from ten months to seven years old, which is quite an age gap. Through trial and error, and also asking the mothers' opinions, we figured out what activities we were and

were not able to do. We found that reading books was a great activity because the younger children liked to listen to the words and look at the pictures, while the older children enjoyed reading the books out loud to the group. When coloring, we realized that crayons were the least messy utensils the children could use to draw with, and that separate coloring sheets were better than one big piece of paper for the whole group to share. Also, whenever the weather was nice Emma and I took the children out to the playground where everyone could have fun—including the babies who had their own swing! We are encouraging the children to be healthy and get outdoors because “low levels of physical activity are an important contributing factor in the development and maintenance of childhood obesity” (Rice and Trost). This provided a great way for them to exercise and get out all of their crazy energy, so that they would be ready for bed when their moms picked them up.

The final and biggest challenge that I think we faced was deciding on how Emma and I were going to discipline the children if they misbehaved. We are not their mothers, so we had to be careful when approaching this sensitive subject. Research shows that “discipline provides children with the security of clearly enforced rules to help them learn self-control and social standards” (Campbell). We decided on a strategy of firmly saying ‘no’ if the children asked for something they could not have, and asking the children to apologize if they were mean or rude to another child. Those were the most common ways we had to discipline the children, and were complimented by the mothers on how we handled ourselves in those situations. A mother, Nicole, who is 36 and has two children ages 1 and 5, said she loved how we got down on their level when we were disciplining the kids, and also that we didn’t raise our voices at them like some of the people providing childcare would. It was very reassuring when we got positive feedback on how we performed our childcare duties.

## **Results**

The biggest result of this service-learning project is the creation of the activity book for future childcare providers to use while they volunteer at the Steadfast Home. This will ensure that the children are receiving consistent, healthy, and positive care while staying in the Home. It will also cut down on the work that the Steadfast Home will have to do to guarantee they are providing the best possible child care for the mothers. It is not a given right that there should be childcare, but a perk for the mothers in the Home. But I would like for this to be something that the mothers are happy about, knowing that their child is being left in capable hands. With the creation of our book, I'm sure this will be the case in the future.

Another result of this project is the relationship that was formed with Asheville Buncombe Community Christian Ministry, the Steadfast Home, the mothers, and their children. This project definitely forced me out of my comfort zone by interacting with people who I would not have ever crossed paths with if not for this opportunity. We have now linked UNC Asheville with the Steadfast Home which can be a great resource for the mothers in the future and the Home as well. Building a relationship with the mothers has been very eye opening; they were always very open with me and Emma, never afraid to tell us their stories which often broke our hearts for them. These women are amazing for how strong they are for not only themselves, but also their young children by never giving up. Nicole, who has been in the Home for almost a year now

came up to us last week so excited to tell us that she purchased a trailer for her family to move into, and that she would surprise the kids on Christmas Eve! This goes to show that the Steadfast Home is good at its job—getting women back into the workforce and into sustainable housing.

The relationship that was built between us and the children is another amazing bonus of participating in the Community Engaged Scholar program. The children know our names and are so happy to see us every time we walk through the door. They always want to know what craft, game, or activity we are doing next; it's wonderful to see them so eager to take part in what we have planned.

The final result of this project has been learning more about the prevalence of homelessness in Asheville, something I had never thought much about before. “Approximately 2,000 people experience homelessness in Asheville and Buncombe County at some time during the course of each year. Thousands more live doubled-up in the homes of family and friends—or they are at imminent risk of homelessness, living in substandard or overcrowded housing they cannot afford” (Asheville and Buncombe County). I had no idea that homelessness was such a common occurrence in the Asheville area; the one thing most mothers told us is that they never imagined themselves in this situation. In their cases, it was either they stayed with their abuser or save themselves and their kids and be homeless; they were very brave for choosing the tougher option.

## **Sustainability**

One way Emma and I are hoping our project will be sustainable is through the activity book that we created. One copy of the book will be at the Steadfast Home and another copy will be left at the Key Center on campus to be used by other students or members of the community. With the use of this activity book, childcare volunteers at the Steadfast Home will have a step-by-step guideline of activities, games, books, and crafts to do with the children that will ensure a structured childcare experience is provided. Students who wish to participate in the Community Engaged Scholar Program in the future can use our book as an example to implement at another organization, or continue to further adding to the book themselves.

Another way our project will be sustainable is by encouraging the faculty of service-learning designated courses to consider adding the Steadfast Home to their list of places to volunteer at during the semester. A great way for the Home to get more volunteers is by spreading the word about the wonderful work that the Steadfast Home does; I feel like if more people knew about this organization, they would certainly dedicate some time there. The reason I think not many people know about it right now is because they can't advertise the location of the house on the internet since most women who live there are hiding from their abusers. With that being taken into consideration, I know that many people from the surrounding Asheville/Buncombe area would see volunteering their time there as a valuable experience.

I want to keep this program sustainable by continuing to volunteer at the Steadfast Home myself, and I know that Emma wants to do the same. We have put in so much time, effort, energy, and heart into this organization, these mothers, and their children that we can't possibly let them go so easily. Several of the mothers have encouraged us to keep coming even after our time is up at the end of the semester because their children love us so much. Jenee told us during her interview that Bradley has liked us the most, and behaved the best for us; out of all the other childcare volunteers, she couldn't agree more that we were the favorites among the mothers. These children have taken a piece of my heart and I could not imagine just not seeing them anymore after this project is completed.

## **Conclusion**

Interviewing the mothers we interacted with was one of the best decisions Emma and I made during our time at the Steadfast Home. We got to hear their stories of how they ended up at Steadfast, ask them their opinion of our childcare services, and most importantly asked what was lacking from the childcare that they were receiving. Some answers that we got about what was lacking was accessibility to better food for their children because they weren't receiving the healthiest options. Another area that they are lacking in is consistent childcare; it's not the same person every day, and often they have one-time volunteers and that isn't healthy for the children to experience either. Tiffany requested that a larger group of volunteers come so that some can focus solely on the infants, and the others can concentrate on keeping the older children entertained.

The Steadfast Home is so important for the homeless women in this community. They can provide for this specific part of our community's population in a way that is proven to work by rehabilitating them and promising to move them into permanent housing and helping the women return to the workforce. "Because service providers work daily with the homeless, they have direct knowledge of characteristics and needs of the people they serve. This knowledge places them in a powerful position to affect community response to homelessness...professional providers establish a preeminent position within the care-providing system by framing the 'homeless problem' and influencing the public's picture of homelessness" (Robertson). I am so thankful for the opportunities that the Steadfast Home provides for these women who have not experienced a lot of kindness in their lives up until they came to live in the Home.

These women deserve to have the best childcare for their children, especially since they have sacrificed everything in order to provide for their families. Sometimes shelters only focus on the mothers and rehabilitating them, while forgetting all about the children who have to deal with the same situation at a much more delicate age. Steadfast Home provides the means for childcare to the mothers, and Emma and I have taken it a step further to ensure that these children are getting the love and attention that they deserve. Through the help of the book that we leave behind, future childcare volunteers can continue in our footsteps to provide fun and healthy childcare.

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