Littlest victims: Program helps children testify

It's a frightening experience going to court to testify against someone who hurt you.

Imagine if you were only 4 years old. Not only would you have to deal with some very adult emotions, but when you're asked to "take the stand," your feet don't touch the floor and you can't see over the witness box.

The person who hurt you may be in the room and you remember all the horrible threats . . . and one of the lawyers is yelling . . . and boy, you must have done something really bad to make him so mad.

Family Court School

Enter HAVEN's Family Court School, a United Way funded program. The program consists of four sessions that focus on diminishing the fear abused children have about testifying, and teaches parents how to support their children during this oftentimes intimidating process.

Children and parents learn about the rules of court, the importance of telling the truth, testifying, courtroom behavior, how the judge/jury decides the verdict, communication skills and stress management, communications director Joyce Wright said. All this is accomplished in a non-threatening environment with dolls, puppets and a small wooden model courtroom.

"A child's case is never discussed, and we never tell them what to say. Our job is to help children become familiar with the courtroom and its players. We do this by setting up mock trials, such as a purse-snatching case, where the child gets a chance to act out each role," advocate coordinator Kimberly Martin said.

"The first graduates have gone to trial," Martin said. "These children, who range from age 5 to 12 years old, were able to articulate clearly while on the witness stand. They responded to questions from the court appropriately by answering truthfully when possible and stating 'I don't know' when necessary."

More than 2,680 child sexual abuse cases were reported in Michigan in 1990, 210 of them in Oakland County. Traditionally, many of those cases would not have made it to trial because the evidence collected was never strong enough to prosecute.

"The problem in many sexual abuse cases is the lack of physical evidence, such as the bruises or broken limbs often found in other abuse cases. It's the child's word against the offender's," said Lori Johns, coordinator at CARE House. "Without the vocabulary, it is very difficult for a child to explain what happened."

CARE House is a safe, non-threatening place where representatives from the prosecutor's office, the police department, the Department of Social Services and other local human service agencies gather together to hear a young abuse victim's story.

Prior to the program, a victim would sit through 10 to 14 interviews, reliving personal pain over and over again. CARE House reduces the interviews and the added trauma young victims experience each time they tell their story. It also increases the rate of successful prosecutions for such crimes; the security a child feels allows him to help not hinder the case, said Meg Mitzel, the agency's executive director.

Interview rooms provide a comfortable setting with furniture, toys and surroundings appropriate for three different age groups.

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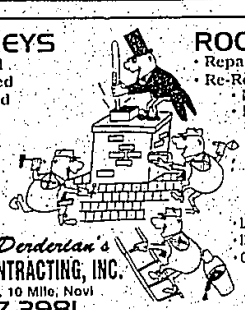

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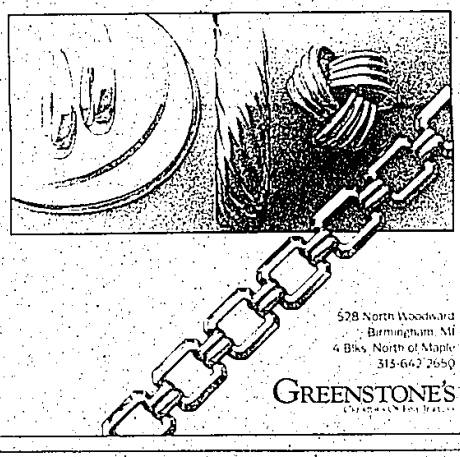

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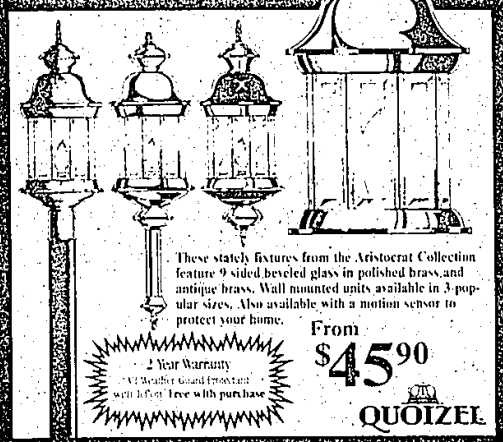

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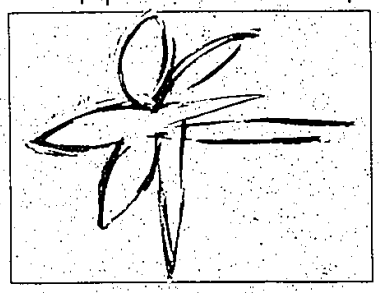

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