

# CATCHing



# Signs of Trauma

## North Carolina Program Connects Homeless Children to Mental Health Services

by Mari Rich

Like most nine-year-olds, Monteece is a ball of energy, bouncing from school to soccer practice to acting class. And like most nine-year-olds, he sometimes procrastinates at homework time. “All I have to do, though, is remind him what a good time he had at engineering camp over the summer and how much he learned,” his mother, DeAnna (her name has been changed for this article), says, “and I emphasize that he has to keep his grades up if he wants to go back this year.”

DeAnna explains that Monteece’s impressive list of extracurricular activities and newfound ambition to become an engineer seemed highly unlikely not too long ago. “I was in an abusive relationship for several years,” the North Carolina resident recalls. “I finally left with Monteece and my two other children, Shone and DeNadya, and we ended up [spending] three months at a domestic violence shelter in Wake County. It turned out to be one of the places affiliated with the CATCH program, so suddenly I had access to resources and services I might never have known about before and certainly could not have afforded in any case.”

Project CATCH (Community Action Targeting Children Who Are Homeless) is a Raleigh, North Carolina-based program whose mission is to ensure that families experiencing homelessness in Wake County have access to a coordinated system of care that nurtures the health, well-being, and success of their children. “Often, when families enter the shelter system, their number-one priority is employment and housing,” says Jennifer Tisdale, the coordinator of Project CATCH. “Obviously that is a pressing concern, but there are so many other issues impacting them. Prior to CATCH, we found that because of a combination of the drive to place the entire family in safe, stable housing and low

Project CATCH nurtures the health, well-being, and success of children experiencing homelessness. One of the parenting programs Project CATCH offers, Raising a Thinking Child, is focused on nurturing a child’s problem-solving abilities—an essential skill for all children.



Project CATCH works closely with children who enter shelter to identify any developmental delays and connect them to services such as therapy.

staffing resources, the mental health and developmental needs of the youngest children—who had often suffered repeated upheaval and trauma—were not being effectively addressed.”

**Recognizing the Problem**

CATCH had its genesis eight years ago when frontline personnel at the Salvation Army of Wake County realized that the children in their shelter were experiencing noticeable difficulties; many were exhibiting age-inappropriate behaviors, an inability to focus, feelings of frustration and anger, and other such problems. The organization hired a case manager to conduct assessments and discovered, as they had suspected, that the social-emotional adjustment and development of their youngest residents was cause for concern. They subsequently approached the Young Child Mental Health Collaborative (YCMHC), a group of local professionals from various sectors. During a series of monthly meetings between shelter personnel and YCMHC members, they concluded that although a wealth of childhood resources and experts existed in Wake County, homeless families rarely benefited from them for a variety of reasons. Oftentimes, shelter staff did not access community resources because they had not

been trained to recognize the sometimes-subtle signs of trauma or developmental delay. Even when they became aware of a child in need of services, there was no comprehensive, shared source of accurate information related to what was available in the region. Adding to the problem, there was little commitment among the available family- and child-serving agencies to prioritize those experiencing homelessness—often because personnel were entirely unaware of the scope of the problem right in their own communities. (In Wake County alone there are an estimated 5,000 children under the age of 18 experiencing homelessness.) It was obvious that a comprehensive, all-hands-on-deck plan to address the general well-being of homeless children in Wake County was desperately needed, and thus the idea for CATCH was born.

**Implementing the Solution**

Project CATCH was spearheaded by the Salvation Army, the YCMHC, the child-advocacy group Wake County SmartStart, and the philanthropic John Rex Endowment. Almost a dozen Wake County shelters, many school social workers, and more than 20 community providers now refer people to CATCH and deliver services to CATCH clients. CATCH offers case management and referrals to services that address the specific needs of the children in their care. Since its inception, more than 1,700 referrals and connections to Wake County’s existing services have been provided to children and their parents. (CATCH receives, on average, 40 referrals from partners a month.)

Professor Mary Haskett, who teaches psychology at North Carolina State University in Raleigh and directs the school’s Family Studies Research Team, is an advisory board member of Project CATCH who has been involved in the program since the beginning. She explains that the program seeks to intervene holistically. “Children develop within families,” she says. “Those families are embedded in shelters, and the shelters are part of communities. We want to operate on all of those levels in order to achieve the best possible results.”

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From the start, one of CATCH’s priorities has been to screen young shelter residents to assess their developmental functioning and make referrals to appropriate services. When a partner refers a family to CATCH, an intake worker asks parents for permission to screen the children. If the parents agree, a CATCH case manager schedules a psychosocial interview, followed by a Brigance Early Childhood Screen, a widely used test that assesses development and identifies delays. Additionally, parents



are asked to complete questionnaires about their children's social and emotional behaviors, and CATCH workers also collect medical and school records, when available. Based on the overall findings, they make recommendations for educational and mental-health interventions, such as academic remediation or therapy, and even provide transportation to therapeutic appointments. Jennifer Santitoro, the associate director of InterAct, a Wake County agency that provides support services to survivors of domestic violence and rape or sexual assault, praises the speed and responsiveness of the CATCH team. "Within 24 to 48 hours of our call, a case manager visits," she says. "That is especially important because clients stay at our residential shelter for just eight weeks, and we need to do as much for them in that relatively short period of time as possible."

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***—Mary Haskett,  
advisory board member of Project CATCH***

In a recent study conducted by Haskett, Tisdale, and their colleagues, almost one-quarter of the children screened were found to be in need of mental-health services. Haskett explains that while many of the children experiencing homelessness are remarkably resilient, by the age of 12, more than 80 percent of them have been exposed to at least one serious violent incident, and almost one-quarter have—like Monteece, Shone, and DeNadya—witnessed instances of domestic abuse. Others have been parented by those suffering from addictions or depression, and some have been the target of maltreatment or neglect. Entering a shelter is no guarantee that a child will lead a stress-free existence, either. Lack of privacy, precious belongings placed in storage (and often lost completely due to an inability to pay the storage fees), friends left behind, and families occasionally torn apart due to restrictions regarding males in the shelter—all of these factors create anxiety and impede positive family interactions. "Isolated from their former social circles and with their routines disrupted, children in shelters are at undeniably greater risk for developmental delays and mental health issues," Haskett says.

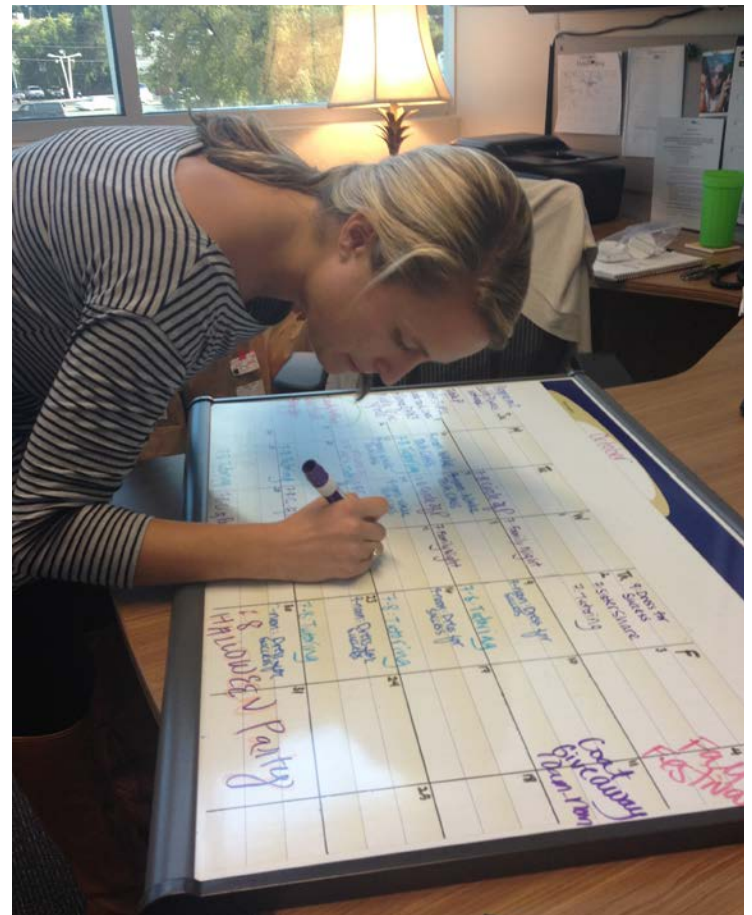
In addition to the screenings, CATCH helps meet the mental-health needs of shelter residents by training personnel in "trauma-informed" practices. Traumatic experiences, as neuroscientists have shown, can adversely affect the developing brain of a child by altering the formation of important neural pathways, leading to attachment disorders, decreased cognitive

abilities, oppositional behavior, and emotional issues. According to the National Council for Behavioral Health, trauma-informed providers must recognize that trauma of any type "can have broad and penetrating effects on a client's personhood" and should strive to create soothing physical environments and to convey attitudes of dignity, respect, and personal empowerment. (Because shelter personnel are apt to experience their own stress and compassion fatigue—a type of emotional exhaustion brought on by the rigors of caring on a constant basis for those in need—CATCH managers encourage them to practice self-care strategies such as yoga and meditation.)

### The Importance of Play and Interaction

It takes more than healthy, well-developed neural networks to ensure that a child will thrive, and the CATCH program rigorously addresses another important factor: the parent-child relationship. DeAnna, who works full time at the Xerox Corporation and is currently studying for an undergraduate degree in accounting, has taken part in many of the parenting classes offered through CATCH. "I have picked up good strategies for initiating discussions with my kids, which is very important considering all they have been through, and I have

Taylor Ward, Project CATCH's outreach case manager, schedules the weekly activities and programs that emphasize positive parent-child relationships.



also learned about the importance of play and interaction,” she says. “I know that I am a stronger, more effective parent now.”

Among the programs open at various times to CATCH participants are Raising a Thinking Child, a six- to eight-week course designed to help parents communicate in a way that nurtures a child’s interpersonal, cognitive problem-solving skills; the Triple P—Positive Parenting Program, designed to prevent and treat behavioral and emotional problems in children and to equip parents with the skills they need to manage family issues independently; Physical and Emotional Awareness for Children Who Are Homeless (PEACH), a 16-session curriculum that teaches young children about good nutrition, physical activity, and how to deal with the emotional stress of being homeless; Theraplay, an intervention based on natural patterns of playful, healthy interaction between parents and children; and Circle of Parents, a self-help support group.

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**—DeAnna,  
Project CATCH participant**

Jennifer Tisdale and her colleagues have seen firsthand the power of parenting classes. “During the first session of one program we ran, many of the participants arrived late and were visibly reluctant, and there was just one mother really interacting with her toddler,” a case manager recalls. “Other toddlers were leaving their own mothers to go over to her to play and cuddle. It was not that the other women were bad mothers; it is just that most had never been played with or cuddled themselves as youngsters, so they simply did not realize what they should be doing. During the program they learned games they could play with their children, stories they could tell, and other ways to engage, and by the end, it was a pleasure to watch the improved relationship between each mother and child pair.”

### Bringing Partners to the Table

The children of Wake County have a plethora of enrichment activities available to them—from museums to sports programming to special-interest camps—and the founders of the CATCH program saw no reason that children experiencing homelessness should not enjoy those very same things. “We wanted to bring good people from throughout the community to the table,” Haskett says. “And generally, it was just a matter of asking. Once people are made aware of the need, they want to help.”

So now, for example, the North Carolina State College of Engineering welcomes CATCH kids like DeAnna’s son Monteece to week-long camp programs during which they design extreme waterslides, solar-powered cities, heart valves, and more. The Marbles Kids Museum, a popular Raleigh institution, offers CATCH families free annual memberships, enabling children to participate in fun and educational experiences they may not otherwise have, and hosts regular parent workshops that all are encouraged to attend. Michelle Mozingo, the district’s McKinney-Vento liaison, who is charged with ensuring that homeless students enroll in school and have full and equal opportunity to succeed in school, has helped organize workshops at the museum. She says, “We are able to speak with families regarding preparing their child for school, discuss any concerns a parent may have for a child already in school, and provide materials to educate parents on how they can be more involved in their child’s education. It allows me to reach more families and be a more effective liaison.”

“All of the groups that work with us are aware of our clients’ issues and are willing to address them in creative ways,” Haskett says. “The number of partnerships we have forged has



Project CATCH has made impressive strides—especially considering that only two paid employees, Jennifer Tisdale and Taylor Ward, run the program.



grown steadily, and fostering those connections can make a tremendous impact on the lives of the children.”

Susan D’Amico, who oversees the engineering camp at North Carolina State, believes that the program not only made a tremendous impact on Monteece, who took to the curriculum like “a fish to water,” but that his participation will, in turn, allow him to impact the world. “It is great when engineering catches the imagination of kids that young,” she says. “Engineers work to solve important problems, like ensuring access to clean water or developing ways to generate green energy. They help make the world better, and now Monteece realizes he can contribute to that.”

### Going Well Beyond Housing

Some of CATCH’s impact can be measured by the numbers. Since mid-2015 CATCH has completed more than 500 psychosocial, developmental, and socio-emotional screenings (54 percent of all children referred); provided more than 650 clothing vouchers and almost as many food vouchers; given out almost 100 furniture vouchers; made more than 70 referrals to a partner agency that provides diapers to low-income Wake County families; connected 50 kids to after-school programs and an equal number to child care services; helped almost 200 obtain health care and mental-health services; provided 76 housing referrals and resources to families; and contributed to 10 families being permanently housed through a new community collaboration led by CATCH that targets families who have been placed in hotels as a stopgap measure.

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A.J. Fletcher Foundation***

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Those numbers are even more impressive when you consider that the CATCH program is run by just two paid employees, Tisdale and Outreach Case Manager Taylor Ward. “It is a matter of marshaling the resources already in place,” Haskett says. “You just have to get together at a grassroots level, see which elements are missing, and then reach out to someone who can provide



Project CATCH offers parenting classes that emphasize the importance of play and interaction between parents and children.

those elements. It is a model that could be easily replicated anywhere in the country, and we are happy to advise anyone ready to do that.”

There may soon be organizations lined up for that advice, as word of CATCH spreads. The project recently won the 2016 Beyond Housing award from the Institute for Children, Poverty, and Homelessness, which honors people and organizations whose work exemplifies the idea that homelessness is much more than a housing issue. Damon Circosta, the executive director and vice president of the A.J. Fletcher Foundation, which has provided funding for CATCH, nominated the project for the honor. “CATCH is a unique program that accomplishes a lot with a little,” he says. “Without CATCH, children would be at risk of falling through the cracks, the community would be unaware of the issue of family homelessness, and children’s needs would be largely ignored or unidentified. CATCH clearly goes well beyond housing.”

DeAnna concurs. “I consider everyone involved in the program to be a blessing, and I will never stop being grateful to them,” she says. “They very literally changed our lives and created a future for my children. We are out of the shelter and in an apartment now. Shone is thriving because of counseling he received through CATCH. Monteece has so much confidence because of his acting classes and a new career goal because of his engineering camp. Who knows where any of us would be without CATCH?” ■