

Grant to help United Way focus on mental health issues

Andrea Ball: Philanthropy

Published: 7:10 p.m. Saturday, March 26, 2011

Two years ago, Kassahun Cuddeback was having a hard time in day care.

The Austin boy, who is now 6, had just been adopted from Ethiopia and was adjusting to a new life in a new country whose language he didn't understand. And his frustrations came out at Trinity Child Development Center.

"He needed to learn English but also needed to learn social skills," said Jennifer Cuddeback, Kassahun's mother. "He really needed to learn how to control his body — don't hit; don't grab. It was a struggle for him."

For more than four years, United Way Capital Area's Success By Six program has worked with nonprofits, day cares and schools to help children deal with mental health and social problems. The nonprofit group recently got a four-year, \$800,000 matching grant from the Austin-based Buena Vista Foundation. The foundation also pledged to the United Way \$200,000 that does not require matching money.

The grants will be used to continue providing services such as support groups, mental health assessments, training for child care teachers, and parent education programs. Kassahun has benefited from that work, Cuddeback said. Staffers from Austin Child Guidance Center routinely came to Trinity to help him learn how to control his anger, express his feelings and get along with other children.

That kind of attention is crucial for many young children, said Aletha Huston, a professor of child development at the University of Texas. All children need to learn how to control their behavior, she said. But some have a harder time than others and many teachers don't know how to deal with it. Consequently, prekindergarten students are expelled at a rate more than three times greater than of students in K-12 grades, according to the National Institute for Early Education Research.

It doesn't have to be like that, Huston said.

"Children don't come pre-wired how to get along with other children," said Huston, who volunteers on the Success By Six leadership council. "They have to learn it, just like you have to learn how to read and write."

Kassahun came to day care with some atypical baggage. The little boy came from "a difficult environment" in Ethiopia, Cuddeback said. The fact that he couldn't speak English made things worse.

A therapist from Austin Child Guidance Center — which provides mental health services to youth and families— came to Trinity to work with Kassahun and other children dealing with emotional problems.

Cuddeback also spoke with the therapist regularly to talk about ways to help her son.

Over the years, Kassahun improved, she said. He is now in kindergarten.

"He has had play dates; he's got friends," Cuddeback said. "He's learning to read and write. He's doing really well at school, and I credit a lot of that from the help we got through Trinity and Austin Child Guidance Center."

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