Art for Therapy’s Sake
HELPING CHILDREN DEAL WITH TRAUMATIC EVENTS

David is a fifth-grader with a lot on his mind. Small for his age, he is often bullied by peers and gets into trouble when he fights back. He stutters. He’s growing up around gangs, and his dad has been in and out of jail for gang-related crimes.

For the past four years, David (not his real name) has been talking about his problems in a “Share and Care” art therapy program at a Los Angeles elementary school. In weekly, one-hour sessions, the program provides a safe place for troubled children to express their feelings as they draw and discuss their artwork.

David has become increasingly open—and has nearly lost his stutter—over the past four years, said Share and Care counselor Ossie Mair. “He talks about being chased and beaten up by other kids, but he’s so resilient,” Mair said. “He’s hanging in there—he hasn’t joined a gang.”

**Powerful Emotional Statements**

The Psychological Trauma Center, a non-profit based at Cedars-Sinai, offers Share and Care in 16 elementary schools, two middle schools and two high schools in the Los Angeles area. The center helps people of all ages cope with traumatic events.

Teachers refer children to Share and Care, usually because they’re having academic, behavior or social problems.
problems. Children in the program are dealing with traumas including loss of a loved one, divorce, gang and domestic violence, and homelessness. Many of their drawings make powerful emotional statements.

“Children can express feelings through art that they can’t express any other way,” said Suzanne Silverstein, MA, president of the Psychological Trauma Center.

A Continuum of Support

One of the key goals of the Share and Care program is to offer a continuum of support from elementary through high school. For example, children at Arlington Heights and Cienega Elementary schools have the opportunity to continue with art therapy when they move on to Johnnie Cochran Middle School and then Los Angeles High School. The same is true for West Athens Elementary School students who stay with the program when they enter Clay Middle School and Washington Prep High School.

Silverstein is working to establish the program in more middle schools and high schools so that children in other parts of the Los Angeles Unified School District will also have access to ongoing support from Share and Care counselors. She explained: “We see significant improvement in how well kids handle the stress in their lives and how they do in school as a result of this program. Now we want to give more kids a chance to receive this kind of support throughout their school years.”

Traci Calhoun, principal of Carthay Center Elementary School, noted that the program fills a crucial need because state budget cutbacks have nearly eliminated funding for school counseling services.

“Share and Care makes a real difference in our students’ lives,” she said. “This program helps us fulfill our mission—to develop a positive sense of self in children as they grow academically.”

Children in the Share and Care art therapy program are encouraged to talk about their artwork among a small group of peers. They often end up sharing the feelings they have expressed in their drawings.

BY THE NUMBERS

October 2009 and January 2010 for seniors and other high-risk individuals. Nearly 2,000 people received vaccinations at sites around Los Angeles, including the 88th Street Temple Church, Park La Brea and the People Coordinated Service Multipurpose Senior Center in the Crenshaw area.

Cedars-Sinai held 14 flu and pneumococcal clinics between

COACH for Kids and Their Families® provided 4,856 medical visits for low-income children in fiscal year 2009.

Cedars-Sinai’s fully-equipped mobile medical vans, staffed by healthcare professionals from the hospital, deliver a wide range of services at no cost. Two vans make regular stops at schools, homeless shelters and other community sites in areas including Downtown/Skid Row, Pico-Union/Central Los Angeles, South Los Angeles, Inglewood, Lennox, Crenshaw/Mid-City and Hollywood/West Hollywood.

A dedicated group of seniors gather in an indoor shopping mall three mornings a week to walk for fitness. In fiscal year 2009, the 242 participants in Center Strutters—including people in their 80s and 90s—collectively walked 24,743 miles.

Cedars-Sinai’s Healthy Habits for Kids program teaches elementary school children how to make healthy food choices and encourages them to exercise. Each month, the program reaches 1,340 second-graders at seven elementary schools in low-income neighborhoods, mainly in Mid-City and Koreatown.
Dee Aldahl was shocked when her doctor at Cedars-Sinai Medical Group told her she had "prediabetes."

"I thought of diabetes as a disease that affects only elderly, sedentary people, and it doesn’t run in my family. I would never have guessed it would be in my vocabulary," explained the 58-year-old Los Angeles resident.

At the time of that visit with Alice Cruz, MD, two years ago, Aldahl’s fasting blood glucose was 125 mg/dl. She was told this put her at risk for developing type 2 diabetes, which accounts for 90 to 95 percent of all cases of adult diabetes.

Cruz referred her to Diane McWhorter, MSN, a nurse practitioner and certified diabetes educator who offers classes and one-on-one counseling for patients of Cedars-Sinai Medical Group and Cedars-Sinai Health Associates.

### Making Lifestyle Changes

Working closely with dietician Rachele Dependahl, RD, McWhorter helps patients manage all types of diabetes. She trains people with type 1 diabetes to use insulin pumps and also offers individual counseling for those newly diagnosed with type 2 diabetes. She also teaches a class on prediabetes for patients like Aldahl.

"Our doctors are very aggressive about educating patients who are at risk for type 2 diabetes because if you make lifestyle changes soon enough, you may be able to stop it before it starts," McWhorter said.

Aldahl took McWhorter’s prediabetes class at the end of 2008. "I learned so much about how to eat right and the importance of exercise," she said. She started eating smaller portions, making dinner her lightest meal of the day, eating more fruits and vegetables and taking regular walks.

She also acquired an easy-to-use blood-glucose monitor. Checking her own blood-sugar level a few times a week helped her maintain a healthy diet because she could see the impact of poor food choices.

### Getting Back on Track

Although she is still working toward her weight-loss goal, Aldahl said: "I feel so much better now than I did two years ago. I don’t have that sluggish feeling. I’ve been able to reduce my glucose level and keep it under 100."

She is encouraged by these results, but acknowledged that it hasn’t been easy to maintain her diet and exercise regimen. She went through a few stressful months during which she put on weight and decided to take McWhorter’s class again last November.

"It got me back on track," she said.

### WHEN ENTHUSIASM WANES, IT’S TIME TO RE-EDUCATE

For people with prediabetes, “exercising and eating right is more effective than taking medication,” said Michael Harris, MD, a Cedars-Sinai Medical Group physician who is board certified in internal medicine and endocrinology.

The challenge, he added, is that “it’s hard to get people to change behavior patterns.”

This is where Diane McWhorter comes in. Harris and many other doctors in the Medical Group and Cedars-Sinai Health Associates rely on her to educate patients—and re-educate them if they fall back into unhealthy habits.

"People start out following a healthy program but enthusiasm wanes, so we have to follow up and keep them motivated," Harris explained.

"I like to empower people," said McWhorter, MSN, a certified diabetes educator. "I’ve seen people do miraculous things with lifestyle changes."

She said she’s seen blood-glucose levels drop dramatically in just a couple of months as a result of diet and exercise. In her classes for people diagnosed with prediabetes, she explains how this disease can lead to other serious health issues such as kidney disease, nerve damage and blindness.

Diabetes, which affects nearly 24 million Americans, never goes away; even if it’s under control, it has to be monitored to prevent complications, Harris stressed.

That’s all the more reason to focus on prevention. "Education is paramount for everyone who has or is at risk for diabetes, because we can do a lot with behavior modification," McWhorter said.
To Stay Safe, Slow Down
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Cedars-Sinai collaborates with a number of community organizations on injury prevention efforts that include the following programs:

- **Safe Kids LA**: Cedars-Sinai partners with this organization at events where child protective seats are installed and inspected. Children are also taught how to avoid hazards as they walk to school.

- **Every 15 Minutes**: This event occurs every other year and involves Cedars-Sinai, emergency responders, police, the municipal court and local businesses working with Beverly Hills High School to stage a mock drunk driving accident to discourage teens from drinking and driving.

- **Fall Prevention Awareness Event**: Cedars-Sinai hosts this event every September. Activities include Tai Chi demonstrations, balance and medication assessments, and educational lectures.

If Piastrelli could offer one suggestion to keep people safe, it would be this: slow down. "Take the extra minute to go to the crosswalk."

"Prevention is about taking your time and being alert," Hotz added. "It’s also about doing the right thing. If there’s a law requiring you to wear a seatbelt or use your cell phone hands-free, it’s there for a reason."

The Gift of Playtime

Normal life doesn’t exist for the homeless mothers and children who have found temporary shelter on the fourth floor of the Union Rescue Mission on Skid Row in downtown Los Angeles. Every day is a struggle. But on Wednesdays at 3 p.m., it’s playtime for the children—and the moms get a break.

COACH for Kids and Their Families®, a Cedars-Sinai program that sends mobile medical units to low-income areas, has organized Play Pals Children’s Groups to give homeless children a chance to play games, create artwork and simply have fun. The groups are offered at Gramercy Place Shelter in central Los Angeles as well as the Union Rescue Mission.