



JESSICA GOODMAN, right, and her son, Joshua, 4, enjoy their time together while being supervised by Clariese Lyons this week at Safe Havens, a service of The Nurturing Center. Jessica's mother has custody of Joshua; the visitation center facilitates the only contact between Goodman and her son. "This is a chance for them to be a family and strengthen the bond," said Lyons during the visit.

By LYNNETTE HINTZE  
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## Safe & supportive

### Supervised visitation center gets a place of its own

In a perfect world, families stay together and live happily ever after. In reality, they don't.

The reasons why families splinter are wide-ranging, but Save Havens stands ready to help with a safe and supportive supervised visitation and exchange center.

A service of The Nurturing Center in Kalispell, Save Havens offers a comfortable environment for children and parents to visit when one parent may be absent from the child's life. Nurturing Center Director Susan Christofferson said. The program recently expanded into its own facility in Kalispell.

For Jessica Goodman of Kalispell, the visitation center provides her only contact with her 4-year-old son, Joshua.

"I love going there every Thursday," Goodman said. "We play games together. Last month we had his fourth birthday party there."

Goodman, 27, brought her son to Kalispell from Missouri "to get stable and provide a better life," she said. Because of a restraining order against Goodman, her son is living with Goodman's mother until she is able to get an apartment and provide a stable environment for her son. She's currently staying at a local motel but said she's on the verge of renting a small house with a fenced backyard where her son could safely play.

For one hour a week, she's able to put her own struggles aside and focus exclusively on her son. Last Thursday, they read a book,

played a game of concentration and played hand puppets. At one point, Goodman lovingly scooped up her son, smothering him with kisses and tickling him from head to toe.

Visitation monitor Clariese Lyons watched the exchange, taking notes.

"This is an opportunity for them to be a family and to strengthen the bond," Lyons said.

Lyons works six days a week monitoring visitations, including many evening sessions and long days on Saturdays to accommodate busy family schedules. She and Christofferson share the visitation case load.

WITH GRANT assistance from the Office on Violence Against Women in the U.S. Department of Justice, The Nurturing Center is able to lease a small home for Save Havens. It's a two-year renewable grant, and Christofferson hopes to find ways of sustaining the program if grant money runs out.

Court-ordered use of the visita-

tion and exchange center often focuses on such problems as a history of domestic violence, substance abuse, mental-health problems or abduction concerns. Sometimes, no contact between parents is desired by one or both parents. If a lengthy separation of children and parents has occurred, meeting within the Save Havens environment can help re-establish the relationship.

Save Havens serves a different clientele than Family Concepts, a similar visitation program that works with Child Protective Services. In those cases, temporary investigative authority is typically sought from the court to remove a child from a home.

"We don't have anything to do with Child Protective Services," Christofferson said. "We complement each other; we don't duplicate services. There's a need for both of us."

Before the Safe Havens program expanded, Christofferson was doing all of the visitations herself, an exhausting task that was con-

suming evenings and weekends. Visits previously were conducted at The Nurturing Center.

With the addition of a separate facility came the addition of staff. Lyons was hired to shoulder part of the visitation load, and Christofferson hopes eventually to hire a third staffer.

Surveillance cameras both inside and outside the home and an alarm system make the new facility much safer. Mothers and fathers have separate entrances. Every session is videotaped, and there's a panic button to alert police if the need arises.

"We wanted to tighten the security protocol," she said. "It feels like we're keeping families much safer."

The federal government began allocating more grant money for safer visitation programs after an upswing in violence at such centers nationwide. Christofferson said.

Although Save Havens focuses on court-appointed visitations and exchanges, Christofferson said she wouldn't rule out serving families without court orders. The goal is to strengthen families.

"We don't operate in a vacuum," she said. "We have to be clear on our control; we're a neutral third party."

However, if parents ask for help, the staff stands ready to connect families with a number of Nurturing Center support services.

"It's really gratifying seeing them go from supervised visits to safe exchanges," she said. "And children do better when they have contact with their biological parents."

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