



**LACDMH SCHOOL-BASED SERVICES:
OPENING NEW HORIZONS OF HOPE FOR KIDS**

School can be the best way to reach a troubled child. Many parents may see a child struggling, but not know what to do or be resistant to taking their son or daughter to a mental health facility. Or a parent may be absorbed in his or her own issues and not realize what a child is going through. But if a school-based program is available, a perceptive teacher can refer a child to empathetic professionals who can make a big difference in a boy or girl's life.

We call them our kids. They have things ranging from chronic exposure to domestic violence from the verbal to physical and very violent physical violence...to long histories of just neglect...Parents don't set out to neglect their children or to abuse their children. I think that when they hurt their children in that manner, it's because of lack of knowledge or resources or both. – Maribel Murillo, Psychiatric Social Worker



One such LACDMH program is with Montebello Unified Schools, an “extremely savvy” school district where all 30 campuses are connected to a mental health agency. La Merced Intermediate School is affiliated with the Roybal Family Mental Health Center and maintains an onsite office with four DMH staff, who manage caseloads of 26-30 children and work with the school psychologist and counselors.

The children they see are often withdrawn and isolated, lacking social skills, perhaps due to exposure to trauma, perhaps just because the family is struggling economically and the child feels the need to stay close to home or to work to help the family. Some have never been more than 4 or 5 blocks from home. Others live in fear of a violent or abusive parent. Their fears and anxieties make it hard for them to concentrate at school and to learn the skills that might help them build a better life as adults.

We see a lot of pain here. It's suffering that children should never have to go through. -- Crystal Morales, Psychiatric Social Worker

I'm thinking of this one little guy, fifteen years old, [who] has had a chronic exposure to domestic violence, where dad was the perpetrator and he saw everything. He presented as very depressed, very flat, very poor social skills, doesn't know how to relate to his peers, very worried, very anxious, having flashbacks [and] nightmares. Just no emotion, like someone just turned off the light inside of him. – Maribel Murillo

If the parents are willing, the team also works with them to help improve communication and coping skills. Not all parents will make the time or effort but, when they do, the change in the family environment can be remarkable.

We've seen a drastic change in the behavior of the client when the parent was coming out here for group. The parent would go home and actually implement what we were teaching and we didn't even have to work with the client. The client learned from the parent...Having that family involvement really helps. – Crystal Morales



Developing social skills – learning to interact with other children and finding out that many have the same problems, that the young boy or girl is not alone in his or her struggles – is a major focus of the School-Based programs. On weekends and during the summer, the staff takes the kids to the beach, to ball games and museums like the California Science Center.

Getting on the LA County van for a field trip



A visit to the California Science Center

We do this to help them develop social skills, to connect with other kids with similar stories and to realize that there's a brighter world out there and seeing is believing. You have to be there rather than just reading it in a book....

But for me, the excitement, too, is I see these children come back. They've never been to the beach, they've never been to a museum...and they come back just excited and talking, and you can see the imagination on their faces. – Steve Hendrikson, Program Head, Roybal Family Mental Health Center