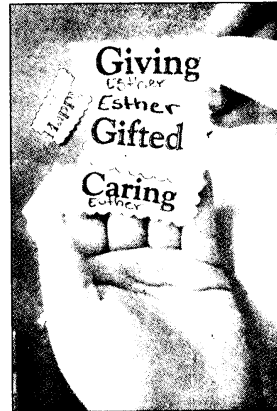


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# HOPE THROUGH SHARING



Young people are encouraged to express their feelings as part of the scrapbook project at the Children's Advocacy Center.

*Weekly gatherings at the Children's Advocacy Center help abused children heal by focusing on simple activities and routines*

By SARAH LEMON  
Mail Tribune

**W**hen a 12-year-old Medford girl was compelled to testify against the man who sexually abused her at school, her courage faltered.

So during their weekly gathering at the Children's Advocacy Center she voiced her fears to other girls who know the same pain. This mentoring group promotes "normal" activities for seven middle-schoolers — all victims of sexual or physical abuse. By sharing life's trials, they're starting to heal.

"They made me feel confident about myself," the 12-year-old said of her peers. "They told me that I'll get through it and, don't worry, that he'll be punished for what he did."

The girl and her family are now waiting to hear Luis Armando Mesta's sentence. An employee of the school-based clinic Kids Health Connection, Mesta was found guilty March 16 of groping the girl and three younger students at Jackson Elementary School. He faces a minimum prison term of six years and three months. No sentencing date is set.

While the girl's parents wait to confront Mesta in court, the mentoring group restores childhood's simple pleasures like scrapbooking and playing dress-up. Unlike therapy, the group's meetings do not focus on reliving abuse. Instead, adult volunteers foster self-esteem and serve as positive role models while helping the girls with homework and cooking them dinner.

"So many of these kids have never had anybody sit down and do anything with them," said Marlene Mish, executive director of the Medford-based counseling and treatment center.

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Mail Tribune photos / Bob Pennell

Marlene Mish, executive director of the Children's Advocacy Center, talks with a youngster during a scrapbook project, just one of the activities during weekly gatherings at the center to help abused kids share simple routines together.

**"They made me feel confident about myself."**

Medford 12-year-old talking about how her mentoring group at the Children's Advocacy Center has helped her cope