



“Our dedicated, experienced Good Shepherd Shelter staff and volunteers work as a team to break generational cycles of violence. Los Angeles Child Guidance Clinic’s onsite staff are a key part of our team effort to create a place of healing and hope for mothers and children.”

— Sr. Eileen Robinson, Sisters of the Good Shepherd



# Healthy, Happy Families

Geselle Jimenez and Patricia Salmeron make a great team on behalf of newborns, toddlers, and their parents. Together, the therapist and home interventionist for the Los Angeles Child Guidance Clinic's First Steps Program have a shared goal: to help build healthier, happier families from the start.

The team carries a playful set of tools to clients' homes—everything from dollhouses to puzzles, modeling clay, books, activity gyms, and sensory blankets—all designed to inspire interaction. “We focus on strengthening the bond between caregiver and child,” says Ms. Jimenez.

Often, parents are emotionally fragile at a time when they're called upon to be the most emotionally available—especially if they're struggling with such issues as poverty, violence, mental health, and substance dependency.

The First Steps Program, part of the Clinic's overall initiative in early invention and community wellness, uses a structured home-based model to reach out to children from birth to 3 years old and their caregivers. Each treatment plan is as individual as the people it serves.

The First Steps Program aims to short-circuit the need for more intensive services whenever possible. “The first three years are so critical,” notes Ms. Salmeron. “The earlier you start promoting and enhancing positive relationships, the greater the chances a family won't need a higher level of services later.”

Going on home visits allows the Clinic therapists to better understand family dynamics. Much of the work takes place in “floor time”—eye-to-eye encounters and play between parent and child, which helps form healthy attachments. “We try to create moments of engagement, attunement, and joy,” says Ms. Jimenez.

In 2010, the Clinic took its First Steps Program to the Good Shepherd Shelter for Battered Women & Children, a safe haven for families run by the Sisters of the Good Shepherd.

Families impacted by domestic violence suffer from “a form of post-traumatic stress syndrome,” says Blanca Quintera, mental health coordinator for Good Shepherd Shelter. That can manifest itself in each family member as anxiety, depression, disassociation, and nightmares, among other symptoms.

Often, children begin acting out in the shelter because they now feel safe to do so. Or they may not speak at all or regress in age, as normal development lags behind—until receiving therapy, often in the form of play, that is. “We've seen a positive



*Geselle Jimenez and Patricia Salmeron*

difference for the children who've participated in the Clinic services,” says Ms. Quintera.

Studies show that living in a violent home can even alter the neurological pathways in an infant's brain. For these children, effective early intervention can last a lifetime.

Another Clinic program—California Work Opportunity and Responsibility to Kids (CalWORKs)—also fortifies families by giving parents who face mental health challenges the support to overcome barriers to employment. Among its services are individual and group treatment, job search skills, and links to community resources.



**“We need to make sure every victim of domestic violence knows that they are not alone. And we need to ensure that if a victim of abuse reaches out for help, we are there to lend a hand.”**

**— President Barack Obama**