

# Child sex assault victims get a Safe Space to tell of attack

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Staff Writer

LAWRENCE — Young victims of sexual assault in Mercer County will no longer have to give a detailed statement of their attack in the fluorescent atmosphere of a noisy police station.

Instead, they will give their testimony in a thickly carpeted playroom, equipped with stuffed animals, books and anatomically correct dolls.

And as the young victims sit for their interview at a child-sized play table, a video camera behind a two-way mirror will record their account of exactly what it was that happened to them.

The second of its kind in the state, "Safe Space," a room designed specifically for police interviews of sexually assaulted children, was officially opened yesterday by Mercer County Freeholder Robert Prunetti and Prosecutor Paul T. Koenig.

"This room will allow the child to recount a frightening and traumatic experience in a comfortable environment, rather than having to go through an additionally frightening experience in a

police station," said Koenig. "And not only that, this way they only have to tell it once, rather than first tell it to a police officer on the beat, then to a detective, then to the someone from the prosecutor's office, and so on down the line."

The "consistent" evidence provided by the videotape will also make it "easier to prosecute the perpetrators," said Prunetti, chairman of the county Commission on Child Abuse and Missing Children.

The commission helped find grant money from the State Law Enforcement Planning Agency for the \$11,000 interview room, in addition to "getting all the parties together to work out the details and get this thing launched," Prunetti said yesterday.

Most of the children who will pass through the panelled walls of Safe Space are likely to be under 10 years old, according to Evelyn Gill, executive director of Prevention Education Inc., a three-year-old, non-profit corporation which helped launch Safe Space.

Of the 55 cases her group handled last year, "the youngest was 2½, and well over 65 percent were under 10," said Gill. "And

those were the substantiated cases, so you can imagine that the police will be using it a lot more than that."

Prevention Education Inc., whose offices are located just above the new interview room on Princeton Avenue, acts as a voluntary crisis intervention service for substantiated cases of sexually assaulted children.

"We fill in the gap between the original investigation and the long-term treatment," said Gill. That gap is filled by Program Director Michel Madiou, who counsels assaulted children and their families until long-term care can be provided, sometimes for as long as four months.

The group also directs seminars at local law enforcement agencies on how best to interview assaulted children, teaches assault prevention techniques in schools and provides other community services.

The new room will be used by both the state Division of Youth and Family Services and all local law enforcement agencies for the statement-taking phase of investigations, Gill said.

It's a tool that officers in Union County, who have used their



Photo by Ken Wadja

Officials on hand for opening of interview center for child sex abuse victims include, from left, Marilyn Williams, regional director of the Child Assault Program; Michele Madiou, director of the center; Mercer Prosecutor Paul T. Koenig Jr.; Mercer Freeholder Robert Prunetti; Evelyn Gill and Charles Daves, Prevention Education Inc. directors; and Trenton Detective Tom Hoffman.

"Land of Secrets" child's interview room for the past six years, say has really paid off.

The videotaped accounts have resulted in a "significant" increase in guilty pleas by suspects

and a corresponding decrease in the number of cases that have to go all the way to trial, according to Sgt. Michael Bussiculo of the Union County prosecutor's office.

"Instead of having a 3- or 5-year

old giving us a statement, they can demonstrate the attack in this room," Bussiculo said. "Later, the suspect can see the videotape. That has a tremendous effect on the suspect."

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