

Kids Helping Kids

Program serves 55 at Hebron, Ky.

RUTH P. Thomas didn't need a new job. But the changes she saw taking place at an Osprey, Fla., drug abuse program, she said, were too compelling to ignore.

Ms. Thomas, now the director of Kids Helping Kids in Hebron, Ky., visited the Osprey program, called Life, in March. A colleague had recommended her to head the new Hebron program, an outgrowth of Life.

She left a job at the University of Alabama to join Kids Helping Kids, she said, "because I was so impressed with the (Life) program. I've never seen a drug treatment that was this effective—overwhelmingly effective."

Life was started a year and a half ago, partly by parents and staff members who had been involved in Straight Inc. Both programs, along with the three-month-old Kids Helping Kids, are new programs to fight teenage drug abuse.

Deborah Huntley, a clinical psychologist and assistant director of Life, said only two of the 65 young people who have "graduated" from the program

have gone back to drugs. Eighty-seven percent of the youths who enter the program complete it, she said, and about half of the dropouts are referred to other programs.

BECAUSE Life is fairly new, statistics can only measure the experience of graduates who have been out of the program for periods ranging from a few weeks to a year, Ms. Huntley said. Kids Helping Kids, which started this summer, is too new to have "graduates."

As in Alcoholics Anonymous, the program teaches that teenage drug users must recognize that they are powerless over the chemicals they abuse.

The program revolves around group discussions designed to teach the teenagers to understand themselves and their problems. They are taught to set goals, make amends for their errors and abandon "twisted thinking," Ms. Thomas said.

"The dynamic force is the peer pressure," she said. And because the staff includes many former drug abusers, the teenagers often pay more attention

to them than they would to most adults, she said.

As in Straight, the youths are placed in a foster home during the first phase of treatment. They are not permitted to hear the stereo or radio or read magazines or books during the early part of the program. Those rights gradually are earned back as the youth progresses through five phases.

TAKING teenagers out of their environment temporarily, Ms. Thomas said, is aimed at getting them "away from all the button-pushers" which elicit the behavior they are trying to eliminate and at getting them to concentrate on their problems.

When Ms. Thomas, a social worker, is not working, one of two consulting psychologists is on duty at Kids Helping Kids. A nurse works about 25 hours weekly and a doctor visits one day each week.

The program now is serving about 55 young people, but is expected eventually to take in up to 100 or 125 young people, said Ms. Thomas.

Life's Ms. Huntley said the differences between Kids Helping Kids and Straight are hard to describe because they are, in part, simply a reflection of the variety of personalities running the programs.

ONE local youth who has been in both programs said he feels the atmosphere at Kids Helping Kids is less pressured than at Straight. "I more or less got straight by fear down there (in Straight), but here I feel a lot more comfortable," he said.

In the Sarasota area, where both Life and Straight operate, one police official who asked not to be identified said Straight appeared to be the more regimented program.

Both programs, he said, have been highly successful. "We would be lost without them."

Whatever the philosophical differences, Ms. Thomas said, the drug problem is so widespread that there is plenty of room for other treatment programs here.

"There's just a huge drug problem out there," she said. "The more, the merrier."



Photographer PATRICK REDDY

Jeff wipes a tear from his eye during a "rap session" at Kids Helping Kids, a Hebron, Ky., group therapy program where young people with drug dependencies discuss their mutual problems.