

A few hours in the afternoon can make a big difference

Amari Robinson is 8 years old, and her favorite thing at Youth Safe Haven is to go outside and play.

"And read and do art. And we do homework together."

For Brian Dyer and Kevin Costa, Providence police officers, the best part might be the chance to ease down and cover a different kind of beat. Both are mentors in the program.

"Whatever the mentee wants to do — go to the game room, go outside," says Costa. "We're not always in uniform. We might be here on a day off. There's understanding. They realize we actually are human."

On weekday afternoons, the Thomas J. Anton Community Center at the Hartford Park project in Providence is a place to make some connections. The Providence Housing Authority welcomes 50 kids from 6 to 12 to come on in to eat, study, have fun and see how some one-on-one time with a caring grownup can do wonders for a report card.

There are board games, pool tables, computers and books — and Costa and Dyer



Bob Kerr

and other mentors who work reading and math into the afternoon mix.

And there is time — four hours to be in a place where old worries can be put aside and new possibilities embraced.

Max Castillo is another 8-year-old. He says he's doing better in school. His reading has improved. And at Youth Safe Haven, he's even gotten to do a little planting outside the community center, which is something he probably wouldn't have done anywhere else.

"And sometimes, we just talk," says Max.

Just talking can be a different kind of experience for a city kid these days.

Youth Safe Haven is funded by the Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation. It's about

kids and about numbers, about school grades and crime statistics and the value of a few hours in a safe and secure place.

For Dyer and Costa, it means they are sometimes called by their first names. It can also mean that they become more approachable, easier to talk to. Crimes that weren't reported before to the police might be reported to the guys known as Kevin and Brian. That's the idea. It's a tough thing to measure.

Kids are recruited for the program by age and family interest. Parents sign on after learning about the program, and the Providence School Department tracks the grades of each child. While most of the kids are from the Hartford Park project, it is not restricted to that project.

"For me, in the three years I've been there, we've really started to build relationships with parents," says Angela Ferrara, one of two youth advocates from the Providence Housing Authority who oversee the program. "They know me. They talk to me. I might take a daughter's



THE PROVIDENCE JOURNAL / BOB THAYER

Mentor Rosa M. Hill helps Manuel Yabdiel, 7, with his math homework at the Anton Community Center in Providence Thursday as part of the Youth Safe Haven program.

report card and tell the parents she needs to read more."

Ferrara is setting up a library in the community center. Some of the kids in the program have brought in books.

In the fall, she is planning to get fathers more involved.

"When we go to the families, it's mostly the mothers," she says. "We want to let the fathers know they are welcome."

Perhaps the biggest problem right now is finding more mentors. They are the heart of Youth Safe Haven. They are that rare source of

undivided attention that can be very hard for a kid to find.

It's a few hours a week — math and reading and other things that can move a kid. Call (401) 709-6402 if you're interested.