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A Hand in Bringing Up Baby and Mother, Too

By Megan Merrill
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It's a familiar story: A teenage girl falls in love, gets pregnant and her scared boyfriend takes off. Maybe her friends and parents reject her as well, leaving her alone with a baby she doesn't know how to care for and with few options to support the child.

But in at least one Moscow district, young mothers have somewhere to turn. The Miramed Institute runs a program in Tsaritsyno that provides single mothers with money, baby necessities and a supportive, family environment to learn how to raise their children.

"We don't just give money and vitamins," said Natalya Novikova, who has managed the motherhood program since it began in August. "We teach them how to interact with their children."

One of Novikova's duties is to run a daily support group for young mothers in the Miramed Institute's small office, tucked away in the corner of a government social center. Last Friday, seven moms, all under age 22, discussed child-rearing issues at a kid-sized table while their babies napped or played inside a toy house.

After announcing the group would celebrate one little boy's second birthday on Monday with cake and fruit salad, Novikova introduced the topic of the day: punishment.

"Is it necessary to punish children?" she asked.

"Of course, it's necessary," Lena Kolbasina and Sveta Suchkova chimed at the same time.

"When should you punish a child?" Novikova asked.

"When the child acts like a hooligan," answered Suchkova, who was annoyed because her 18-month-old daughter, Alexandra, kept opening a cabinet and throwing clothes onto the floor. Each time Suchkova would tell the toddler not to open the cabinet, but it made no difference.

"The more you forbid it, the more she'll do it," Zoya Ivanova yelled from the back room, where she was feeding Kolbasina's 6-month-old baby, Danila. Ivanova, a pensioner, comes to help Novikova and the young mothers when she can.

Novikova gives each mother a book on child rearing to take home and instructs them to come back with questions or topics for discussion.

The young mothers also get a bag of donated vitamins every month for them and their children. They can take home toys or other baby necessities, use the computers in the office or take classes ranging from prenatal care to art and exercise with their children.

Kolbasina, 21, has been coming to the support group since she was eight months pregnant and said she



Vladimir Filonov / MT
Natalya Novikova with three of the young single mothers at a support group Friday.

likes the "presents." The 300 ruble monthly stipend doesn't hurt either, she said.

"We don't have to buy anything. If I need a high chair, I can take the high chair," she said, pointing to the seat her son was strapped into.

Kolbasina learned about Miramed's support program from the polyclinic where she received prenatal care. Other mothers in the group, such as 19-year-old Kristina Bodanova, found out when Novikova called them. The Tsaritsyno polyclinic and social center give Novikova the names of young single mothers, whom she invites individually to participate.

"Single mothers have many problems: with their children, with their parents," she said. "Each person has his own fate, but the children can't become like their parents."

The more or less 40 mothers Novikova helps are 16 to 23 years old and usually poor. Some are from broken homes, like Kolbasina, who dropped out of school at age 13 when her parents divorced.

Some are unemployed, some are students and some are alcoholics or drug addicts. Some are orphans, who are often ill-equipped to deal with life outside the orphanage.

"Some girls think, 'I grew up in an orphanage, they fed me, they clothed me. And now I have a child, but how will I feed it? I have no money. I'll put the child in an orphanage and everything will be fine.' It's a cycle of abandonment," she said.

In addition to the support group for young women with infants, the Miramed Institute's five staff members provide psychological consultations, teach pregnant girls about prenatal care and run physical and creative programs for toddlers and older children -- all free of charge.

While proudly showing pictures of children learning to paint, Novikova stressed that the classes are as much for the mothers as the children. "At home the mothers don't play with them like this because they don't know they have to," she said.

The girls come back to the center not only for the free classes and handouts but because it offers them a rare opportunity to socialize, Novikova said, pointing to the walls covered with snapshots of holiday parties and celebrations of the mothers' and children's birthdays.

"Here, they understand each other. If there is something wrong, they come and cry," she said. "The girls also call and say, 'Thank you, my daughter is already better.'"

For more information about the Miramed Institute's programs or to find out how you can help, call 915-4374 or visit www.miramedinstitute.org/howyou.htm.