

A Familiar Face

Kav L'Noar is more than a central address for English-speaking immigrant families in crisis. It's a place to pick up the 'rule book' for how to make it in Israel

By Gavriel Meir

For most immigrants from English-speaking countries, the toughest problem is not finding work or housing. It's being treated as strangers.

"Everything is different and overwhelming," says Dr. Ronald Wachtel, founding director of Kav L'Noar, which serves as a central address for immigrant families in crisis. "No one understands who these immigrants were in the communities they came from, how they were once major contributors. Here they are made to feel like strangers because of language and cultural differences."

Though most immigrants learn how to deal with the runaround at the health fund or the bank or government offices, one thing they never adjust to is their frustration at being unable to help their children overcome difficulties in school.

"When their children are treated as strangers in school, that's really hard on them," says Miriam Rebibo, who supervises Kav L'Noar's mentoring program. "Parents feel they can't take care of their children the way they could in the United States. They feel their kids aren't being understood, aren't being helped to make the transition. That's the most painful thing."

Kav L'Noar, established last September, provides what Mrs.

Rebibo calls "an open door and an open ear." It's one place the families don't feel like strangers.

"People feel like they're coming home when they walk into our office," she says. "It's a place where they can speak to someone who really gets it, who understands who they were and what they're going through. We direct them to professionals who can help them, and we stay in touch with them to make sure they're getting results."

Wachtel made aliya himself in August 2002, after working for more than 30 years as a school psychologist. An incurable idealist who gets misty-eyed when he talks about the needs of these families and the importance of helping them, he created Kav L'Noar in response to the pleas of local Rabbis, educators, mental-health professionals and doctors who saw that too many young people were falling through the cracks.

"They shared their frustration that they had no time to be able to take on new clients, no time to research what resources there are out there, no time to even refer people," he says.

Kav L'Noar is unique in that it treats the troubled youngster, aged 11 to 18, within his family. It opened its doors in September and is already serving 45 families from more than a dozen Anglo communities in the Jerusalem area.

The first step is a comprehen-

sive intake assessment. A member of Kav L'Noar's staff interviews the parents and the child separately to learn the history of the problem, the child's past performance in school, the way the family works, past efforts at solving the problem and why they aren't working now. After assembling all this information, the staff works out a plan.

"The child is the primary concern," says Wachtel. "But the parents also need help and support."

Kav L'Noar has carefully screened and trained 20 young married men and women who are paid to meet regularly with youngsters as big brothers or big sisters. They meet twice a week with their mentees, for an hour and a half each time. During this time they may play board games, do ceramics, sewing projects, learn together, play ball - the list is endless. The most important thing is that each meeting is meant to be a positive experience to help build a relationship between the mentor and the mentee. The mentors also meet twice a month with a supervisor for guidance and feedback.

"We have a family in which the mother is chronically ill," says Mrs. Rebibo. "They have no extended family here, so the father has to spend much of his time taking care of her and the children."

"Recently, there was a deterioration in her health, and the kids have had to fend for themselves.

The mentor makes a commitment to be there for their troubled youngster twice a week, to give him some attention and be a sounding board. He understands the aliya process and has been trained to be sensitive to the boy's needs."

These mentors are lifelines for at-risk youngsters who feel disconnected from home and school. They can sometimes accomplish more by casually shmoozing during a Monopoly game than a teacher can in the classroom. The key to the relationship is consistency: The mentor is there, rain or shine, twice a week for an hour and a half.

But despite the mentors' best efforts, the youngsters, because of what they've been through, are often cautious and have trouble building trust.

One mentor tells a story of how he thought he wasn't succeeding. His mentee was a moody teenager who acted as if he didn't care one way or another if he showed up. Then one day, the mentor missed his bus and took the one that followed. By the time he arrived at his mentee's stop, his bus had caught up with the one he missed. He was in time to see the youngster watching hopefully to see if he was getting off the first bus, and then he saw the disappointment on his mentee's face when the boy realized he wasn't on it.

Many immigrant families, hap-

py as they are to be in Israel, experience a sense of bereavement. They've moved away from loving family and friends. Even though they gradually form new support groups, they must deal with the sense of loss they feel when they are unable to attend the weddings of siblings' children and other *simchas*.

Kav L'Noar, which works closely with its halachic adviser, Harav Zev Leff, refers clients - parents as well as children - to therapists and educational consultants it has screened. It also provides free supervised therapy offered by the Family Institute at Neveh Yerushalayim, as well as crisis intervention.

Most important, for the parents and the children, is follow-up. A Kav L'Noar staffer is on the phone with every client on a regular basis to see how the youngster and the family are doing.

Kav L'Noar doesn't charge families for its services and is completely self-supporting.

"Our families joke that there's a rule book for how to make it in Israel but most of us never get it," says Mrs. Rebibo. "At Kav L'Noar, we know the immigrants and know the system. And we can help immigrants navigate successfully, with G-d's help."

For further information, please contact: Dr. Ronald Wachtel, 054-300-7431, kavlnoar@netvision.net.il