

# Mental health for children and youth receives timely attention at CAFCO on Osgoode Street

**Betsy Mann**

It’s hard to miss the yard full of laughing children at the corner of Blackburn and Osgoode that signal the presence of Bettye Hyde Early Learning Centre. But have you ever noticed the door at the end of the driveway on the Osgoode side of the converted carriage house? Beside the door, a sign tells you that this is the Child, Adolescent, and Family Centre of Ottawa, *le Centre de l’enfant, de l’adolescent et de la famille d’Ottawa*.

Co-founded by clinical psychologists Dr. Caroline Sullivan and Dr. Julie Desjardins, CAFCO opened in January 2014 in what had been the upstairs bedrooms of the former family home. A multidisciplinary team of dedicated professionals now offers counselling and assessment services in French and English for children, youth and families, services that are increasingly in demand. “There was a mental health crisis before the pandemic,” Caroline Sullivan says, “but the needs have become even greater in the last two years. In fact, right now, we have had to make the difficult decision to temporarily close our wait list. We feel it is unethical to put people’s names on a list when we know we won’t be able to provide any services for many, many months.”

A desire to provide timely help prompted CAFCO to put in place a system to meet families’ needs as quickly as possible. “We know that when people call us, it’s problematic to be told they’re being put on a waiting list,” Julie Desjardins explains. “So when we re-open our lists—probably before September—we will once again start taking appointments for an initial consultation with a senior clinical psychologist, sort of like triage at the emergency department. It gives us a chance to get a clinical impression: what are the family’s needs, which of our professionals is the best match, are there other services in the community that might be helpful.” At the same time, it’s an opportunity to give parents practical, tangible resources they can put in place right away while they wait for an available appointment. “We are really trying to empower parents,” continues Julie Desjardins. They have evidence the system achieves its goals. “The data we collected on these appointments last year show that the level of family distress goes down after just this one appointment,” Caroline Sullivan adds. “It makes a real difference.”

This approach, centred on client needs, arises out of CAFCO’s central *raison d’être*: a deep concern for the well-being of children and their families. Currently, the centre’s team provides counselling—in person or virtually—for individual children and youth, and for their families. In addition, parents looking for assessments for their children can make an appointment with one of the centre’s psychometric specialists who work in tandem with clinical psychologists. CAFCO also delivers mental health services through group programs, both for young people and for their parents. These programs bring together clients with similar concerns, meaning the centre can bring services to more people with less waiting time, especially during the time



*The leaves on this Family Tree are thumbprints left by the dedicated professional associates, interns and practicum students who over the years have provided mental health services at the Child, Adolescent and Family Centre of Ottawa, situated at the corner of Blackburn and Somerset. The mural symbolizes CAFCO’s multidisciplinary team with its many branches, all rooted in a common goal to offer warm and compassionate support to families.*

when no new individual clients are being accepted. And while you are waiting for an appointment—or even if you never intend to seek counselling—you can benefit from CAFCO’s expertise by checking out the documents on its website, including COVID-specific guidance for parents: [cafco-ceafo.ca/resources/](https://cafco-ceafo.ca/resources/).

Reaching underserved families has been part of the organization’s values from the beginning. “We have worked hard to create connections, for instance with child welfare agencies and Indigenous groups,” Caroline Sullivan states. “For example, our team has gone into communities to do assessments of children and give training about the effects of factors like intergenerational trauma on learning and cognition. We want to move knowledge gained through research into the hands of people who can use it.” Cost can present an obstacle for vulnerable groups; to lower that barrier, CAFCO has secured contracts with third-party payors. In addition, the centre has both PhD student interns and practicum trainees who can offer services at reduced fees, under the supervision of a licensed psychologist.

CAFCO is one of the most sought-after placements for students completing the training requirements for their doctorate in clinical psychology—a testimony to the success of the centre’s model. “This part of our program has grown tremen-

dously over the years,” Julie Desjardins observes. The two co-founders have also been recognized for their contribution with awards from both the Ontario and the Canadian Psychological Association, among other bodies. Modestly, Julie Desjardins insists on putting the emphasis on what she calls “our exceptional team.” She elaborates: “Our strength is in the level of care and compassion that all the professional associates put into each client. And that goes for our administrative staff as well. Our Practice Manager, Paige Watts, and our Administrative Assistant, Elif Ibrahim, are ready to listen with support and empathy when people call.”

A warm first impression helps put people at their ease, an important consideration since seeking mental health care for the first time can be intimidating, especially for children and youth. The carriage house setting allows CAFCO to provide a comfortable, non-institutional space with a homey feel. Clients who push that black door at the end of the driveway find a sunny waiting room at the top of the stairs, with Elif at her desk to greet them. As announced in the most recent issue of IMAGE, the current owners of the building are looking for a new buyer, but CAFCO’s lease extends for a few more years. We certainly hope that this neighbourhood treasure will be with us for much longer.