

# Orlando Sentinel

## On this road to recovery, downward slide just fine

A transitional-housing facility run by the Coalition for the Homeless debuts a playground and learning lab.

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James Sims' round, brown eyes popped wide as he slipped down the mini-slide.

"It means excitement, it means exploration, it means developing," Jennifer Gibson said, grinning as her 11-month-old son tried to climb a set of yellow stairs for another turn.

The slide is part of a new \$27,500 playground donated by the Junior League of Greater Orlando that, along with a learning lab, was dedicated Saturday at the Women's Residential and Counseling Center on Hillcrest Street in Orlando.

The center is a transitional-housing facility run by the Coalition for the Homeless of Central Florida.

Each night, the Coalition houses nearly 200 homeless children -- whose average age is 8 -- said chief executive officer Brent Trotter. About 50 kids -- average age 6 -- live at the Hillcrest center.

Gibson, a recovering addict, and James arrived here in October.

"This is a great place," said Gibson, 39. "Living in a community with different women has been a learning lesson for me to become more humble and more poised."

Cassandra, who did not give a last name, said the center also has helped her and her 6-year-old son, who is speech-impaired.

"It's very hard for him in school, so anything extra . . . having to do with education is very good for him," she said.

Cassandra said her son spends much of his time in the brightly colored learning lab, where number and letter games line the walls. Kids' journals sit on one table, filled with reasons to like the learning lab, where tutoring sessions occur every other Thursday.

"I like to sit criss cross applesauce" states one. In another, a child has scrawled "I like to be here becus they have other kids and I like to be here becus I can read here."

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**GRAPHIC: PHOTO:** Jennifer Gibson lends a helping hand to her 11-month-old son Saturday at the newly dedicated playground.