



## How Are the Children Doing?

Kay Ruhstaller does it all for the kids

by **PATRICIA KUTZA**

POWERFUL WORDS are like vitamins for the influential people in our community; the great words fortify their spirits. When Kay Ruhstaller, who runs one of San Joaquin County's largest non-profits, the Family Resource and Referral Center (FRCC), needs a boost, she considers these words of economist James Heckman: "By age five, it is possible to predict with depressing accuracy, who will graduate from high school and who will not."

It's this kind of no-nonsense message that gets Ruhstaller, Executive Director of the FRCC, up every morning armed with a mission.

"I really show up to work because I want to have an impact in the county, so life will be better for all kids, not just for my kids," says Ruhstaller.

The Family Resource and Referral Center is a non-profit agency that administers childcare and nutritional resource services for families throughout San Joaquin County. It also conducts workshops that train childcare providers and parents in effective child rearing, and offers specialized services for providers of children with special needs.

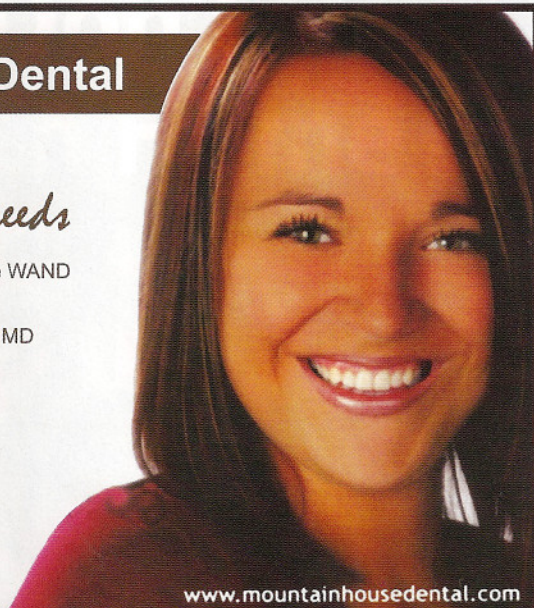
"Our agency influences children in the most critical time, those first five years of life," says Ruhstaller. "We know so much more now than we did in the past, when it was common for many parents to think of kids that age as 'just babies.' We now know that making an investment at the earliest opportunity in parental education—encouraging literacy, breastfeeding, bonding—these practices really impact children's brain development and well-being." »

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## Community > local action

This summer, Ruhstaller's mission was sorely tested when the California legislature struggled to adopt the 2009 state budget. "We have an important job to do around advocacy," she says. "Our center holds the contracts for 2,300 of San Joaquin's childcare providers. When state funding was held up while the legislature was at an impasse with the budget, 6,500 children were literally at risk. Some childcare providers had to close because they had no reserve accounts to pay their staff and operating expenses until the budget was passed, nor could they secure financing."

Over time, powerful words have done much to shape Ruhstaller's career. "I started out in Omaha's public school system, working in nutrition services," she says. "Later I relocated to Stockton to work as a corporate dietician for a food distribution company, and eventually became the Director of the Women, Infants, and Children program at Stockton's non-profit Delta Health Care. It was at Delta that I was privileged to hear the stories of immigrants from Cambodia, Vietnam, and Laos. That sealed the deal. From that time on, I wanted to serve their communities, and gladly accepted my current position at the Family Resource and Referral Center."

As dedicated as she is to the Center, Ruhstaller says she struggles with balancing her career and family responsibilities. "I have two beautiful children and a loving husband who is a very competent father as well as a competent businessman," she says. "Still, the tension is there, not to shortchange my personal health and my relationship to my family."

Ruhstaller continues. "What makes our challenges at the Center easier is that we have an amazing staff. There are 125 of us now on board, and they all care about kids. Our Board of Directors has this saying: 'How are the children doing?' Our staff knows that the future of Stockton is tied to the state of our youth. If the children are doing well, then this city and our county have the chance of doing well too."

**For more information:** Family Resource and Referral Center, 509 W. Weber Ave., Ste. 101, Stockton, (209) 948-1553, [www.frrcsj.org](http://www.frrcsj.org)