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A soup kitchen is no place for kids Agape Table has solution -- but it needs you

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Lindor Reynolds

A soup kitchen is no place for a baby.

But still they come to Agape Table, hungry and desperate to be fed. The wee ones arrive with an adult. Slightly older kids, some barely school age, come alone.

The children know the Broadway soup kitchen is one place they can get a guaranteed hot meal and temporary shelter from the world. No one asks questions.

What matters is that the soup pot is always full at Agape Table.

Two years ago, board chairwoman Suzi Bonk was shocked to see three young children alone at the annual Thanksgiving dinner. The kids sat huddled among the other patrons.

A few gentle questions revealed they had a mom, but she was at home sleeping. The siblings ate, were given leftovers and set off for home. Something changed inside Suzi Bonk that day.

"For me, it was startling that you'd have these children who would stand in line, alone, and wait for a meal," she says. "I realized the number of children we're seeing just keeps increasing."

Agape Table serves soup, toast and coffee to an average of 250 people every morning. Bonk says about 50 children under the age of six come each week. There are many more between the ages of six and 12.

"Most of us would rather our kids not eat in a soup kitchen," Bonk says with heartbreaking understatement. "If you're dealing with people who are schizophrenic or not on their meds"

She pauses.

"We do have people (at Agape Table) who are under a lot of stress or dealing with addictions."

It's no place for children. The board decided to launch Agape Table For Kids, a program that feeds pre-schoolers, teaches their parents about nutrition and provides a bit of socialization both for children and adults. It was an immediate success.

That quickly became a problem. There's only enough money in the non-profit organization's budget for 30 children. There's always a waiting list. Admission has to be limited to the youngest ones.

"Who gets to eat? That's what it comes down to," Bonk says.

When children hit nursery school, Agape hopes an in-school meal program can feed them at least one meal a day. If a toddler has an older sibling, the family can only be given enough food for the younger child.

The Solomon-like decisions are a financial necessity. Agape Table, which has an annual budget of \$150,000, now spends \$1,250 a week just on milk for the children's program.

Breastfeeding mothers are also given dairy products.

The program supplies fruit, vegetables, protein and grains, along with cooking tips and nutritional counselling. Parents are given enough food to provide a full week's worth of healthy and nutritious meals for their young child.

Agape organizers know they're seeing kids at a critical point in their development.

"I think we all want to live in a community where children are fed," Bonk says. "I think every Manitoba child deserves to have the proper nutrition that other children have."

Tammy Spence is a somewhat unwilling graduate of the program.

Her son, Collin, is now four and no longer qualifies for food and milk. Spence is on social assistance, has a 11-year-old at home and says Agape Table made a real difference.

"It meant I always had milk for him and he was eating good food."

Spence says she knew she was lucky to take part in the program.

Participants play games like "nutrition bingo," to win prizes like blocks of cheese or, on rare days, meat. Spence says she was often a winner.

Most of Agape Table's funding comes from individuals, although it does get some support from foundations. The organization is openly looking for help.

Donations can be sent to: Agape Table, Inc., P.O. Box 26111, Winnipeg, R3R 3R3. You'll get a tax receipt for your generosity. I have no other way to say this: Please help.

A soup kitchen is no place for a baby. But as long as they have to come to one to be fed, let's make sure the milk keeps flowing.

This is how it happens. They need you. If you care about nothing else this holiday season, care about this.

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