



Mike McCollum

Detective Russ Orlandos and Watsonville Police Chief Terry Medina talk in the new children's interview room.

Child victims get their own room

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Watsonville police this morning unveiled a special room at the station filled with stuffed toys, coloring books and cartoon videos: a room where police can question children who have been victims of sexual assault in a calm and secure environment.

The room has been in use since January, according to Detective Russ Orlandos, who heads the sexual and children assaults investigative unit. He said it is the only such room in the area, and he has already used it for about 15 interviews.

The room's setting has made a big impact on the interviews he has conducted.

He said another room that used at the station before was "very cold and not very person-

able." The new room, which is painted in soft, pastel colors, has stuffed toys on shelves along the walls and two toys chests filled with teddy bears, and children can sit on the plush carpet and watch cartoon videos or color books, Orlandos said.

"It makes them feel a lot more relaxed," he said.

The idea came to Sgt. Kim Austin several months ago. Austin, who had been the head the sexual assault unit, remembers talking to children in one of the interviewing rooms used for adults. She said the children, already frightened, were reluctant to talk and were easily distracted, often refusing to speak.

As a way to calm the children, she would often take them to a public park or a fast-food res-

taurant.

Austin said the police department has a great need for such a room. She said in the United States one out of three girls are sexually abused before they are 18 and one out of seven boys are assaulted before they are 18.

The Watsonville chapter of the Omega Nu, a women's organization, donated \$10,000 for the project. An interior design company from Santa Cruz donated its services.

Omega Nu chapter president, Kristin Smith, said the organization, with 13 chapters in the state, is focusing its efforts to help gifted and abused children.

Orlandos said the room is also being used to interview adults who have been directly or indirectly victimized in a violent crime.