

East Harlem's 'Grandmothers' Aid 2 Generations

On weekday mornings, Kim Jones takes her 8-month-old son, Christopher, to a room on East 116th Street and leaves him in the loving arms of his grandmother.

His grandmother, Carmen Gomez, is a woman that Miss Jones, who is 23 years old, met only recently.

Mrs. Gomez is a member of the Grandmothers Group, a program that matches older women from East Harlem with young mothers who themselves may need support. The grandmothers "adopt" a family and visit several times a week, helping with housework and baby-sitting as well as providing companionship and emotional support for the younger women.

The group was formed in East Harlem in 1977 by the Family Health Service, which is operated by the Little Sisters of the Assumption, a Roman Catholic order.

Playroom for Younger Children

The eight older women in the program also run a playroom five mornings a week for the children under 3 years old. In a large room scattered with toys and books, in a room rented on East 116th Street, the women teach

the alphabet, sing songs, wipe away tears and give hugs.

Miss Jones, whose son attends the play group, said having someone to confide in and to help care for her son means a chance at a better life. "She comes to see me and helps me when I'm feeling down and out," Miss Jones said. "Before, I didn't know where I was going, and now I can see a future for me and my son. I'm making progress."

Miss Jones finished a high school equivalency class at the Family Health Service's headquarters on East 119th Street and is now looking for a job.

Some Funds From City

The older women are required to take a six-month training course and meet every week with Gale Gordon, an early childhood specialist and coordinator of the Grandmothers Group. They are paid about \$75 a week.

The Family Health Service receives a quarter of its funds, about \$90,000, from Special Services for Children, a city office. The Health Service depends mainly on donations.

The Little Sisters of the Assumption

are seeking to sell their headquarters, a four-story building at 81st Street and Lexington Avenue, to raise money for its programs around the country. Preservationists have urged the city's Landmarks Preservation Commission to declare the building a landmark. The religious order has argued that designating the building a landmark would significantly reduce its price and therefore limit the amount of money available for the order's work among the poor.

The staff of 15 nuns and 15 lay employees work out of a three-story brownstone on East 119th Street, where the young mothers can go for counseling. A painted message on the door reads: "Bringing sunlight and warmth to another's life nurtures growth in both. To this we are pledged."

Last year the Family Health Service worked with more than 300 families, and assigned a grandmother to more than 40. For other families, the service might arrange for welfare checks and food stamps.

"Over a period of time, the women are able to establish relationships," Mrs. Gordon said. "The first thing is to parent the mothers. Many say 'it's

very hard for me to hug my child. I need to be hugged too.'"

At a get-together recently, Jessie Dallas held her 1-year-old daughter, Precious, one of seven children, and talked about Lucille Freeman, 61, the older woman who has visited her family every day for the last two years.

"When God gave me all these children," said Mrs. Dallas, who is 32. "I didn't know he'd give me help, too. Sometimes after she takes the three little ones to the playroom I can sit down for a while and get a coffee. That time is valuable. My family's blessed. When I pick up the kids at the playroom, I'm ready for them."

The mothers in the program are required to join at least one class at the Family Health Service. Classes include lessons in sewing, arts and crafts, child development, and high school equivalency. All classes are free.

Ruby Cox, 62, plans to stay with the Grandmothers Group for a long time.

"It keeps us active after the children are gone," she said. "It's better for us than staying home and rotting in our rockers."