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The Baltimore Sun

May 24, 2001 Thursday FINAL EDITION

SECTION: LOCAL, Pg. 3B

LENGTH: 289 words

HEADLINE: Children's art brightens up court area;
Pictures in family division are to make it less scary

BYLINE: Sarah Koenig

SOURCE: SUN STAFF

BODY:

These are the walls that lead to the rooms where your parents get divorced, where they fight over who should pay for your food, where they figure out who your real father is.

At best, the family division of Baltimore Circuit Court is no fun for children. At worst, it's terrifying.

Yesterday evening, though, the elementary school pupils, who crowded into the family division waiting area, were giggling and beaming as judges officially unveiled an exhibit of their work.

Now, as children and their parents walk past the formerly stark white walls leading to the courtrooms, they will pass 32 framed pictures in crayon, watercolor, sparkly paper and feathers.

In the waiting room, they will see a huge mural that includes a house made of pizza and flying, peach-colored washing machines.

The idea, conceived by judges and executed with help from mentors at the Maryland Institute, College of Art, was to make the space less scary.

"When they come here, they sense their parents' turmoil," said Judge Marcella A. Holland, chief of the family division. "Sometimes they've lived through it. We wanted them to be uplifted, to make it a safe haven for them."

Baltimore's family division, started about four years ago, is the busiest in the state. About 70 percent of the people whose cases land there defend themselves, which means it also can be an intimidating place for adults, said Administrative Judge Ellen M. Heller.

Among the youngest artists was Dominic Shaw, 7, a second-grader at Eutaw Marshburn Elementary School in West Baltimore, who drew his siblings.

Asked if he had ever been to the courthouse before, Dominic said no. His mother, Felicia Shaw added quickly, "And don't come here again for nothing else."

LOAD-DATE: May 24, 2001