

# FOCUS

ON

## Healthy Families

Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service • Oklahoma State University  
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According to the Oklahoma Department of Human Services, in fiscal year 2001 over 13,000 children were confirmed as victims of abuse and neglect. Fifty percent of these children were under six years old. Thirty-eight children died due to maltreatment, of which over 68% did not live to their second birthday.

Neglect is by far the most prevalent form of child maltreatment, more so than physical abuse. Most people would never guess that babies are the most likely age group to die from abuse and neglect. Also, three out of four children who died were not known to child protection services. Therefore, it takes a wide variety of community services and programs to reach families who may be isolated and lack resources, information, and skills.

Furthermore, over 2,600 babies were born to school-age teens during 2000 and one-third of all Oklahoma births were to unmarried women. More than 210,000 Oklahoma children live in poverty.

To address these concerns, the Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service implemented parent education home visitation programs in 1988 and developed the state's first Healthy Families America site in 1995. Healthy Families programs serve expectant and new parents with children from birth to five and have three equally important goals:

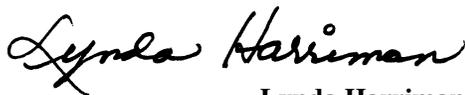
- To promote positive parenting,
- To enhance child health and development, and
- To prevent child abuse and neglect.

Cooperative Extension currently has four Healthy Families programs serving Canadian, Delaware, Cotton and Jefferson, and Texas counties. Delaware and Texas counties are also adding new Parents As Teachers components that will reach more families with parent education and child development information.

A 2001 report released by Prevent Child Abuse America estimates that the U.S. spends \$258 million per day as a direct or indirect result of child abuse and neglect. The annual costs are equivalent to nearly \$1500 per U.S. family. Research suggests that for every dollar spent on prevention, two dollars or more are saved on services such as health and mental health care, foster care, child welfare, juvenile facilities, and special education.

There is encouraging news. For the first time in five years, the number of deaths due to child abuse and neglect decreased in Oklahoma from 48 in 2000 to 38 in 2001. Likewise, the number of children confirmed as victims of abuse and neglect has declined the past three years.

The Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service believes that Healthy Families programs are critical to ensuring that more children grow up healthy and safe. The earliest years of a child's life lay the foundation for the future.



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OKLAHOMA COOPERATIVE  
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# Healthy Families: Prevention Through Parent Education and Support

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Research over the last 30 years indicates that home visiting and parent education and support services to parents around the time of a baby's birth and in early childhood reduces the risk of child abuse, and contributes to positive, healthy child rearing practices and family functioning.

Launched by Prevent Child Abuse America in 1992, Healthy Families America is an innovative initiative to support and educate new parents with comprehensive home visiting services. There are now over 450 sites in North America.

Healthy Families helps parents to prepare for a healthy birth, provide a safe and supportive home environment, gain a better understanding of their child's development, obtain access to health care and other supportive services, use positive forms of discipline, and nurture the bond with their child, reducing the risk factors linked to child maltreatment. The program offers services to families based on their needs, strengths and personalized goals. In this way, families proactively take the necessary steps to create and maintain a stable and nurturing home for their child.

Participation is voluntary. Families may enroll while expecting a baby until three months after their baby's birth, and may continue until the child is age five (first time mothers may enroll after the 28<sup>th</sup> week of pregnancy and anytime during subsequent pregnancies). The programs focus on the whole family and encourage participation of fathers, grandparents or other close friends and family that may be caring for the mother or baby.

Hired from the local community, most staff members have college degrees and other experience working with families and children. They receive intensive, ongoing training in a wide variety of topics and structured weekly supervision.

Referrals are received through collaboration with a variety of community services including hospitals, health clinics, county health departments, schools, churches, and other programs or agencies as well as "word-of-mouth."

A worker first meets with a family to assess their strengths, needs and identify what services would be most helpful. If home visitation is determined to be useful, a support worker is assigned and begins visiting the family. Research-based information is presented and discussed with the parents on various topics including childhood growth and development, nutrition, money management and goal setting. Home visits start out weekly and are spread out to bi-monthly, monthly and quarterly for up to five years depending on the family's need.

Parent education and support groups are regularly provided to allow opportunities for parents to meet other parents. Topics include child development, parenting, life skills, discipline, communication, relationships, nutrition, and financial budgeting. Childcare is offered to facilitate parents' involvement. Parent-child interaction and playgroups are also provided and fun support events such as holiday parties, picnics, clothing exchanges are hosted. Local churches, schools and libraries offer space for the various group activities, other agencies and professionals serve as speakers, and various businesses and civic groups have provided assistance with refreshments or other resources.

Healthy Families is grounded in a framework of twelve research-based "critical elements" that represent quality standards and ensure the program's adherence to best practices of home visitation. This framework allows for flexibility to best meet each community's unique needs.

Participant surveys indicate a high level of satisfaction with the helpfulness, service quality, and increased knowledge received from the program. Previous research conducted on the Cooperative Extension Parent Education Home Visitation programs suggests that first-time parents made significant increases in parenting knowledge, child development knowledge, and home safety practices, and the rate of second pregnancies for adolescent parents was 5% compared to the national rate of 25%. Studies of other Healthy Families programs across the country suggest that enrolled families are 1/3 to 1/2 as likely to maltreat their children as comparable families not enrolled. Other positive outcomes have included better utilization of health care, higher immunization rates, and

early developmental screenings, enhanced parent-child interaction, and improved parental employment and self-sufficiency.

## Child Abuse Prevention Funding Awarded

The Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service has been awarded four contracts in fiscal year 2003 totaling \$442,337 in support of the Healthy Families programs. The programs have been approved for funding through FY 2007, dependent on state appropriations.

Funding is through the Office of Child Abuse Prevention, Oklahoma State Department of Health, established in 1984 by state law. There are 25 funded community-based family resource and support programs that provide services in 40 counties. Other providers include youth and family service agencies, parent-child centers, county health departments, public schools, and other private non-profit agencies.

Collaboration with other local community organizations is emphasized to better utilize scarce resources, avoid duplication, and provide a comprehensive array of services to effectively meet families' needs. All programs must provide at least 10% matching funds.

The fiscal year 2003 state appropriation is \$2.98 million. However, it is possible this amount may be reduced due to the current state budget shortfalls. This would, in turn, reduce Healthy Families program services.

## A Snapshot of Who is Served

Cooperative Extension Healthy Families programs served the following in FY 2002:

- 3,089 home visits were provided to 194 families with 255 children.
- 178 parent education and support group sessions were provided to 205 parents.
- Participants were 15% Hispanic, 11% African-American, 22% Native American, and 49% Caucasian.
- 55% of the parents were single, divorced, or separated.
- 47% of the parents were under age 19.
- About 100 fathers participated.

## Diverse Areas Reached

Cooperative Extension Healthy Families programs are currently provided in:

- Canadian County
- Cotton and Jefferson Counties
- Delaware County
- Texas County

Each of these programs serves many culturally diverse and isolated families in highly rural areas. Neither Cotton or Jefferson counties has a hospital that delivers babies. The new Healthy Families program will provide important outreach to this area with sparse resources. The Texas County population is about 30% Hispanic with many individuals speaking little or no English. The Healthy Families program has met this challenge by hiring bi-lingual staff, becoming familiar with the differing cultures, and utilizing and translating materials in Spanish. The Delaware County Healthy Families program serves many Native American families. In partnership with an alternative school, Canadian County Healthy Families reaches numerous pregnant and parenting teens.

## Parents Find Healthy Families Makes a Big Difference

Following are just a few examples of the impact the Healthy Families programs have had in the lives of parents and their children:

- A mother that was very detached from her baby when they first started with the program began interacting and providing emotional support to the child. The child has begun to call her “mommy” which he had not previously done.
- A special needs child began to crawl through the efforts of her mother using activities taught in Healthy Families home visits.



- A non-English speaking mother in Texas County was referred to the program with concern that she showed no interest in her infant and they were not bonding. She had no husband, very little social support, no job, no transportation, and could communicate with almost no one. After intense work with the Healthy Families program, the mother personally made an appointment, arranged transportation, and kept the appointment at the county health department for WIC services.
- One mother attended CareerTech diesel mechanic courses and is now employed with a trucking company making \$16 per hour. Not only has she pulled herself off of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), she is succeeding in a line of work traditionally held by men.
- A baby’s father who was not involved with the family and was skeptical of the Healthy Families program has now become part of the family and welcomes the program into the household.
- A family expressed that through the dependability and concern shown by the Healthy Families staff for the family’s well-being, they have learned to trust people.
- Andrea expressed gaining confidence through participating in the Healthy Families program, saying, “This program will make me a better mom because I’ll know what to expect and when to expect it and it will also make Matthew a healthier baby. When I first found out I was pregnant, I was more than a little scared because I didn’t know what to expect. Through the Healthy Families program they have helped me know what to expect.”
- Healthy Families performs Denver II developmental screenings to examine where a child’s development is compared to children of the same age, inform the parents about their child’s abilities, and help identify potential concerns. This test changed Kristal’s outlook on raising her son, Zyler. “The Denver II test was very beneficial. We knew that Zyler was born with nerve damage in his arm and that he was developmentally behind for the first six months,”

said Kristal. “The program helps families learn activities that can help a child develop. Within six months Zyler was caught up. Without running the test again I would have continued to hinder his development by thinking he was not ready for certain activities.”



- Judy and Rod have four children ranging from 9-years-old to 6- months old. Both Rod and Judy have Cerebral Palsy. “This program has helped us overcome the stereotypes of people with disabilities having children and how we conduct ourselves,” said Judy. “The program has given us more confidence and provided information.”

“I needed this information and support when the other three were this young. I didn’t have a clue what to do as a new dad,” said Rod. “Having been involved in this program then would have made the transition into parenting not as new and scary.”

- Leanne a program participant for nearly three years, accomplished some of the goals she set for herself such as obtaining a house. Leanne’s future goal is to rejoin the work force. “The program has helped me realize the importance of taking time for myself. It is hard to part from my children, but I have learned I need to take time for myself to relieve stress,” said Leanne. “This is important if you want to be a good parent.”

The program has also helped fostered a closer family bond between she and her husband and their children. “This program has helped me understand their needs and become a better listener. This is a very helpful program.”

FOCUS is a publication designed to direct attention to innovative Cooperative Extension Family and Consumer Sciences programs and to share program philosophy and updates of new and changing program directions. Your comments and suggestions for future issues are welcomed and appreciated. Please send all correspondence to FOCUS, Family and Consumer Sciences Cooperative Extension, 104 HES, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, OK 74078. FOCUS is published three times yearly by the Family and Consumer Sciences Cooperative Extension program.

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## Parents As Teachers

New Parents As Teachers programs are being added in Delaware County and Texas County. Cooperative Extension has received subcontracts in collaboration with Grove Public Schools and Guymon Public Schools (representing a consortium of seven school districts in Texas County) totaling \$34,500 through grants received from the Oklahoma State Department of Education.

The Parents As Teachers program was established by the legislature in 1991 and there are now over 130 programs serving

approximately 190 school districts. The program is a nationally-validated model serving families with children from birth to three. It is designed to foster early partnerships between home and school and help parents learn to stimulate their children's language, social-emotional, cognitive, and physical development, as well as minimize developmental delays that interfere with the child's learning.

Families are offered personal visits, usually on a monthly basis in the home, parent group meetings, annual developmental

screening, and linkages with other community services. Evaluations of Oklahoma Parents As Teachers programs show gains in cognitive and motor development for participating children, in parent knowledge of child health, development, and safety, and positive perceptions of their local schools.

The new subcontracts will allow Delaware County and Texas County Cooperative Extension to hire new part-time Parent Educators for serving at least 40 children in Texas County and 25 children in Delaware County.