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## Parent Child Connections

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Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service • Oklahoma State University  
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Oklahoma's youngest citizens face a number of continued threats:

- On average each year, more than 13,000 incidents of child abuse and neglect are substantiated in Oklahoma. Over half of these children are under age six (OK Dept. of Human Services).
- About 40 Oklahoma children die due to maltreatment annually, more than 70% of which did not live to their second birthday.
- The majority (85%) of abuse and neglect occurs in the hands of a child's own parents.
- Neglect is most prevalent, indicated in 85% of the confirmed cases.
- About 7,000 babies are born annually to teens under the age of 20. More than 40% of all live births in the state are to unmarried women (OK State Dept. of Health).
- More than 21% of Oklahoma families with children under age five live below poverty level (U.S. Census Bureau).

To prevent and reduce the potential adverse effects associated with these concerns, Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service began offering parent education home visitation programs in 1991 and currently has four *Parent Child Connections* programs serving seven counties: Canadian, Delaware, Texas, Cotton, Jefferson, Comanche, and Stephens counties. These programs serve expectant and new parents with children from birth to six with several important goals:

- To enhance family functioning by building trusting relationships, teaching problem-solving skills, and improving the family's support system.
- To promote positive parent-child interaction.
- To enhance healthy childhood growth and development.

A recent report estimates annual costs in the U.S. as a direct or indirect result of child abuse and neglect total \$103.8 billion (Prevent Child Abuse America, 2007). This amounts to more than \$284 million per day, and thus impacts every individual and family in some manner. A growing body of research indicates that home visitation, parenting education, and support services around the time of a baby's birth through early childhood can reduce the risk of child abuse, and contribute to positive, healthy childrearing practices, and family functioning. Studies also suggest that prevention programs reduce the costs for intervention or remedial services such as health and mental health care, foster care, child welfare, juvenile facilities, and special education.

It takes a wide variety of community services and programs to reach families who may be isolated and lack resources, information, and skills. Programs such as *Parent Child Connections* 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.



Glenn Muske  
Interim Assistant Director  
Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service



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# Parent Child Connections: Prevention through Parent Education and Support

**Debbie Richardson**

Parenting Assistant Extension Specialist

The Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service *Parent Child Connections* (PCC) programs, previously known as *Healthy Families*, are dedicated to ensure safe, healthy, and nurturing family environments for young children.

PCC serves expectant parents and parents with children from birth to age six. Enrollment in home visitation services may begin during pregnancy up until a baby's first birthday. Emphasis is placed on identifying families who are overburdened with various risks, stresses, and needs. Participation is voluntary.

Services include comprehensive parent education and support via home visits, group sessions and activities, screening and assessment, and referrals to other community resources. PCC works to reduce risk factors linked to child abuse and neglect as well as other concerns by helping parents prepare for a healthy birth, provide a safe home environment, gain a better understanding of their child's development, obtain access to health care and other services, develop support systems, use positive forms of discipline, and nurture the bond with their child. The program offers services to families based on their needs, strengths and personalized goals and focuses on the whole family by encouraging participation of fathers, grandparents, other family members or close friends that may be caring for the mother or baby.

Each PCC program is composed of 3 to 5 staff members including a Program Supervisor and a team of Family Assessment Workers and Support Workers. Hired from the local community, most staff members have or are working on college degrees and have prior experience working with families and children. Efforts are made to select individuals who reflect the diversity of the community

and have the ability to establish trusting relationships with families. They receive intensive, ongoing training in family assessment, home visitation, parent education curriculum, and topics such as cultural competency, child development, parent-child interaction, identifying and reporting child abuse and neglect, substance abuse, domestic violence, and community services. All staff members receive structured weekly supervision.

Referrals are received through community outreach and collaboration with hospitals, health clinics, county health departments, schools, churches, and other programs or agencies. "Word-of-mouth" referrals have grown significantly as program participants now commonly recommend their friends and family to the programs.

The assessment 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 curricula, other information, and activities are used and modeled with the parents on various topics including childhood growth and development, nutrition, household management, and goal setting. Regular child development screenings are conducted to help parents understand their child's growth and to detect any concerns as early as possible. Home visits start out weekly and decrease to bi-monthly, monthly, then quarterly for up to six years depending

on the family's situation. The support workers build strong relationships with the families over time.

Parent education and support groups are regularly provided to allow opportunities for parents to meet other parents. In addition to those receiving home visitation services, other families with children under 6 in the community are invited to participate as well. Topics for the sessions include child development, parenting, life skills, discipline, communication, relationships, nutrition, and financial budgeting. Parent-child interaction activities are also incorporated. About twice a year, family support events such as holiday parties, picnics, or 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.





Collaboration with many local community organizations has enhanced program support, utilization of scarce resources, and linking a comprehensive array of services to effectively meet families' needs.

In addition, the PCC programs are an important source of education raising the general public's awareness of child abuse prevention, parenting, and Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service. They regularly offer resources through such avenues as local newspaper articles, literature displays, newsletters, health and safety fair booths, and presentations to community groups, agencies, or professional workshops.

### **Child Abuse Prevention Funds Support Parent Child Connections**

Primary funding over the years has been from the Oklahoma State Department of Health, Office of Child Abuse Prevention. Last year, the four PCC programs were again approved for five years of funding from July 1, 2007 through June 30, 2012.

Currently, combined annual funding for the four contracts is \$588,765. Funds are dependent on annual appropriations by the state legislature.

### **Evaluation and Impact**

The *Parent Child Connections* programs participate in a standardized program evaluation protocol in conjunction with the Oklahoma State Department of Health (OSDH). A variety of data are collected to document service compliance, fidelity and quality, and program effectiveness. Recent evaluations by the OSDH of 22 programs statewide including the PCC programs indicate 94.7% of children were up-

to-date on their immunizations according to parent self-report and only 1% of all families served by home visitation were reported for possible child abuse and neglect. Participant surveys have consistently indicated high levels of satisfaction with the helpfulness and service quality of the programs with nearly 90% reporting it was "very true" that they felt better prepared to care for their children, and that the health and well-being of their children was improved.

Previous evaluations of the Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service home visitation programs suggest that parents made significant increases in parenting knowledge, child development knowledge, and home safety practices and reduced subsequent pregnancies. Studies of similar programs in other states have demonstrated reduced substantiated reports of child maltreatment, improved health of family members, higher immunization rates, better birth outcomes, more conducive home environments for early childhood learning, enhanced parent-child interaction, improved child development scores, and improved educational and socioeconomic conditions.

### **Who is Served**

- In FY 2008, 211 families were enrolled and served with 2,453 home visits. Also, 564 child development screenings were recorded.
- Across programs, 1/2 to 2/3 of the enrolled parents are single or divorced and 35% are under age 20.
- The programs have successfully served culturally diverse and isolated families in rural areas. Caseloads include substantial numbers of Native American and Hispanic families. This challenge has been met by hiring bi-lingual staff in Canadian, Texas, and the Southwest counties, becoming familiar with the differing cultures, utilizing and translating materials and programs in Spanish, and conducting some activities in both Spanish and English.
- Outreach to fathers has successfully enhanced their involvement in home visits, groups, and special events for fathers and their children such as cookouts, fishing, and dad's days.

#### **Parent Child Connections**

##### **Locations and Contacts:**

PCC programs are based in county Cooperative Extension offices.

Canadian County - (405) 262-0155

Delaware County - (918) 253-6667

Texas County - (580) 468-8687

Southwest serving Cotton\*, Jefferson\*, Comanche, and Stephens Counties - 580-875-3136 or 580-228-2332 (\*program offices)

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# How *Parent Child Connections* Makes a Difference

## It's about Information, Education, and Support

### Bertha Espinosa

Texas County Program Supervisor

The U.S. Census Bureau (2006) estimated that 39% of the Texas County population is Hispanic, many of whom speak little or no English. Approximately 2/3 of the *Parent Child Connections* (PCC) caseload reflects this population. One Guatemalan family has been involved with the program for four years, since August 2004.

The father of the family explains that life in Guatemala is very different than Guymon, Oklahoma. He stated that before he was involved with PCC he really did not know, much less understand, how parent child interaction could improve his child's self esteem. Now he makes an effort to play with the children and read stories to them.

We helped the family become aware of other resources in the community, how to use them, and they have gained more confidence. Last year, the father contacted the school on his own regarding their child's enrollment. The mother also stated that the children are not as shy as they used to be. She and the children have learned a few new words from their family support worker. Also, the mother and father have learned alternatives to spanking which was the method they would have used with their children prior to their participation in PCC.

Recently, I saw a mother formerly involved in the program at a restaurant where she is employed. She ran out of the kitchen area to thank me for the services provided to her. She reported that her child is now in pre-kindergarten and he really likes it! She is certain that the program helped her child transition into school.

## It's about Collaboration

### Sherry Wells

Southwest Program Supervisor

In 2002-2003, Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service was awarded a contract to start a new program in Cotton and Jefferson Counties. Disappointment occurred when the state experienced significant budget cuts and the program was discontinued. In fall 2006, the OK State Department of Health approached and contracted with OCES to reinstate the program and expand it to include Comanche and Stephens counties. That November, the new four-county "Southwest" program started from scratch with a new staff. Within 8 months, the program enrolled 34 families spanning all four counties. During the past full year of operation from July 1, 2007 through June 30, 2008, an additional 77 families were enrolled and we served a total of 90 families with 1,010 home visits. We also administered 222 child development screenings, and provided educational group meetings for program families and the general public.

The staff has devoted considerable time and effort building collaborative relationships in the four counties with area agencies, hospitals, food banks, pregnancy resource centers, county health and human services departments, tribes, businesses, Fort Sill, Cooperative Extension's Community Nutrition Education Program, and many more. Our efforts have paid off as we are receiving numerous referrals on a regular basis and we often refer families for needed assistance. We are fortunate to have such good collaboration among area agencies. We are all working together to help educate families and to help them establish a healthy, happy home for themselves and their children.

One such example is the first Annual Winter Festival we conducted as a family support event in December 2007. The festival took place at the Walters United Methodist Church. More than 60 parents and children from all four counties attended. The outpouring of community support for this event was significant and very much appreciated. Toys for Tots, firefighters, businesses and individuals contributed time, supplies, toys and money. We were able to provide a lasagna dinner, three arts and crafts projects, pictures with a bilingual Santa, and a sack of toys to all our program families. The hard work in preparation and clean up was worth it as the children and parents all wore very big smiles.

## It's about Relationships

### Kathie Bergmann

Delaware County Program Supervisor

Along with all the skills, education and training required, each staff member has personal characteristics such as compassion, trust, caring, being non-judgmental, patience, open-mindedness, acceptance, and flexibility in order to work with over-burdened families. This is best told by the families themselves (initials are used to protect the privacy of the families).

Excerpts from a letter by a mother of "J", a 3-year old boy:

*I would like to let you know how helpful my family support worker (A) is to me and J. A has helped by giving us activities to do together each week. She brings blocks and magnet letters and number games and books for us to read. We both really look forward to her weekly visits. J waits on the front porch on Tuesday mornings waiting for A to*



come. When she drives up, he squeals with excitement and screams, "She's here! She's here!" Before, J was very shy and would not talk to other people.

A has made a difference in my life and my son's life. I know he will be ready for school because of all the things she has taught us to do. He is now holding a pencil and crayons, knows some of his letters, and knows gobs of colors. I know that if A hadn't come and showed me how to do this that he wouldn't know these things, because I didn't know how to do it. And really, I didn't want to do things with him before she started coming each week. But now I do. We laugh and play and read. We didn't do this before.

A has always shown me respect and been professional when she comes to my house. I have never felt judged, only accepted. A has always encouraged me to work with what I have to benefit my son. She has helped me set goals. She has made a difference in our lives.

This mother has now completed two semesters of college thanks to the continued help from the program and J graduated from the local Pre-Kindergarten program, showing excellent progress.

Excerpts from a letter by a grandmother:

*My daughter, K, had her first baby and she was really struggling with the baby blues. She was emotional and just so unsure of what she was doing, if it was right or not. K's husband and I both work and she just needed someone who could reassure her. The family support worker encouraged her and helped her along, gave ideas and positive comments until K got enough confidence in herself that she became comfortable with her new role as a mother.*

*I don't know how your agency came in contact with my daughter, all I know is it was just when she*

*needed it most. I can't say enough good things about your program but if it has helped even one person as much as it has my daughter you are doing a great service for our community.*

### **It's about What the Babies and Parents Need**

#### **Leava Major**

Canadian County Program Supervisor

As I always say, it's about the babies. One of the most important components of a home visit is recognizing the parents' needs, whether they are verbal or demonstrated, and appropriately providing resource information and support. Following are a few examples.

When provided with thorough education on toilet training, two families in our program now realize they were toilet training children who were not yet ready. They are now waiting for more readiness signals. Since this issue often triggers spankings or other strong responses when parents are frustrated, this was a great gain.

Another family was allowing two children under age three to feed themselves while wandering through the

house after grabbing bags of whatever they wanted. With the information and support provided by their PCC family support worker, the family now has a lock on the pantry door, is using a card table and chairs for meals, and the mother is cooking more and offering healthier food.

We are conscientious in completing child development screenings and they are much appreciated by the parents. The family support workers enjoy them because it provides an opportunity to encourage parent/child bonding and give tips on coaching their babies in developing new skills. We encourage both parents to participate as it is a great platform for discussion of parental perceptions and values.

### **ParentChildConnections/Healthy Families has been Recognized**

- Oklahoma's "Outstanding Child Abuse Prevention Program" by the State Interagency Child Abuse Prevention Task Force was awarded to the Delaware County program in 2000 and to the Texas County program in 2005.
- Received the "Honor Award for Outstanding Faculty and Field Staff" presented by the Family & Consumer Sciences Ambassadors, November 2006.
- Received the "Outstanding Group Award/Team Leader for Outstanding Educational Program" presented at the Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service Annual Conference, January 2008.
- The Delaware County staff was invited to present workshops of their creative and effective approaches at the Oklahoma Child Abuse & Neglect/Healthy Families Oklahoma Conference in September 2003 and at the Prevent Child Abuse America Conference, May 2004, in Orlando, FL.

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, 135 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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