

FOCUS

ON

Healthy Families



Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service • Oklahoma State University
SPECIAL EDITION

Neuroscience research has recently confirmed what child development specialists and early childhood educators have known for a long time; the first three years of life are critical to a child's development. Media attention over research findings that the brain goes through many changes during the first years of life has generated interest among policymakers and citizens alike. This public attention on brain development during the first years of life has helped emphasize the importance of programs designed to promote healthy infant and child development, including brain development. It is finally becoming common knowledge that without a stimulating environment during the first years of life a child's brain will suffer. All parents need the parenting knowledge and skills to assure their children have every opportunity to maximize their potential. The first years of life are so important and the child so vulnerable because development is so rapid. The very physical structure of the brain is changing due to electrical activity of brain cells.

Cooperative Extension is actively involved in parent education through the development and implementation of the Healthy Families Oklahoma program. This program is designed to give parents a jump start in promoting healthy development and learning during their child's early years. Extension's Healthy Families home visitation program helps parents understand their developing infant and shows them appropriate ways to engage children in active learning.

We now know there is a careful balance between nature and nurture, and the first years of life provide a small and a precious window of opportunity to provide our children with the best environment possible.

This issue of Focus describes Extension's Healthy Families Oklahoma program and how it is working in some counties across the state.

Your questions and suggestions for improving the quality of life for Oklahomans through Cooperative Extension family and consumer education programs are always welcome.

– **Lynda Harriman**

Associate Dean/Assistant Director,
Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service

In This Issue –

- Why is the Oklahoma Healthy Families Program Needed?
- Healthy Families County Highlights



Why Is the Healthy Families Oklahoma Program Needed?

What Is Healthy Families Oklahoma?

The social, economic and health problems facing families today are serious. Economic stress, lack of affordable housing, inadequate child care, and limited access to social supports are challenging Oklahoma's families. For some parents, the problems can become overwhelming!

Healthy Families Oklahoma (HFO), a collaborative effort by Oklahoma State University Cooperative Extension Service; Oklahoma Committee to Prevent Child Abuse; Oklahoma Department of Health, Office of Child Abuse Prevention; and other organizations is a parent education/parent support program for first time overburdened parents. Program goals are to:

- Systematically identify overburdened parents in need of support.
- Enhance family functioning.
- Promote positive parent-child relationship.
- Promote healthy childhood growth and development.

Recent research on early brain development emphasizes the importance of positive early experience between parents and babies.

The Healthy Families vision is to establish a universal, voluntary home visitor system for all new parents to help their children get off to a healthy start.

This program recognizes that parenting is a time-consuming, difficult, challenging role that sometimes cannot be performed alone. Parents enroll voluntarily during pregnancy or shortly after the birth of their baby and are offered education and support which meet their needs as new parents.

The Challenge of Healthy Families

According to the *Oklahoma Kids Count Fact Book*, (1997) nearly a quarter of a million Oklahoma children live in poverty. Poor

Currently Oklahoma State University has Healthy Families programs in nine counties. These are:

- Alfalfa, Beaver, Canadian, Delaware, Johnston, McIntosh, Murray, Muskogee, and Pottawatomie Counties

There are five other Healthy Families programs statewide. These sites are:

- Exchange Club Center for Prevention of Child Abuse, Oklahoma City
- McCurtain County Healthy Department
- Washington County Healthy Department
- Pittsburg County Health Department
- Great Plains Youth and Family Service

Oklahoma State University has five First Steps programs which offer support, education, and resources. First Steps is a program model developed by the Georgia Council on Child Abuse and has been implemented in cooperation with the Oklahoma Committee to Prevent Child Abuse. First Steps programs using trained volunteer home visitors have been established in five rural counties in Oklahoma. These programs are located in Adair, Blaine, Cotton, Greer, and Okfuskee Counties.

children are more likely to eat an inadequate diet, stay cold in the winter, receive little health care, drop out of school, and die during their childhood. Each year more than 3,100 Oklahoma babies are born too small, resulting in serious health and developmental problems. Early and regular prenatal care could uncover manageable health conditions in the mother or baby and could increase the likelihood that the mother and her newborn have good health outcomes.

During the last year the number of confirmed child abuse and neglect rates have continued to rise. There were 11,700 cases of confirmed child abuse and neglect in Oklahoma in 1995, and 40 percent of these victims were children four years of age and younger.

Outcomes

Research over the last two decades has consistently confirmed that providing parent education and support services to parents about the time of their baby's birth significantly reduces the risk of poor child outcomes and contributes to positive, healthy child-rearing practices. Families receiving Healthy Families services are more likely than nonparticipating families to:

- Immunize their children in a timely manner.
- Smoke less.
- Show greater involvement in their child's school program.
- Complete or further their education.
- Provide regular well-baby care for their child.
- Decrease subsequent unplanned pregnancies and increase timing between pregnancies.
- Increase their use of community resources and services.
- Increase their support system.
- Have higher employment rates.
- Have children who are more likely to enter school with a greater readiness to learn.

Economic Impact

Parent education and support programs have been shown to be cost effective. For every \$3 spent on prevention, at least \$6 might have been spent on child welfare services, such as special education services, medical care, foster care, counseling, and housing juvenile offenders.

Contact:

Arlene Fulton, Ph.D.
Child Development Specialist
237 HES
Oklahoma State University
Stillwater, OK 74078
405-744-6231
amfulto@okway.okstate.edu

Jo Robertson, Ph.D.
Human & Family Development Specialist
233 HES
Oklahoma State University
Stillwater, OK 74078
405-744-9929
Jrobe@okway.okstate.edu

1996 Healthy Families County Highlights

Okfuskee County First Steps Program

Peggy Allen, First Steps Program Supervisor Okfuskee County

First Steps is an educational program designed to help parents take their "first steps" as new parents. The program in Okfuskee County offers home visits conducted by trained volunteers.

New parents are full of questions about caring for their new baby. First Step volunteers share information such as:

- Parenting and child development stages;
- Taking care of yourself after going home from the hospital;
- Managing the baby blues;
- Father involvement and feelings;
- Arranging time away from the baby.

Families enrolled in the free program receive a developmental calendar, a parenting booklet, home contacts, emotional support, educational leaflets and information on community resources.

Local hospitals, high schools, the Department of Human Resources, Okfuskee County Health Department as well as other parents already enrolled in the program make referrals. There currently are 14 trained First Steps volunteers and 21 First Steps families enrolled in the program. The volunteers have logged in more than 100 hours and nearly 500 miles in order to provide support to these new parents.

In addition to families receiving much-needed support, the First Steps program also received a technology grant that allowed the Okfuskee County Cooperative Extension Service office to purchase two computers with software to access the World Wide Web. This project offers direct access to the Internet to anyone in Okfuskee County.

One computer is housed at the Okfuskee County Extension office and the other is located at the Okemah Chamber of Commerce. Both computers are offered to county residents to use at anytime during regular business hours or by special appointment.

The availability of this project has supplied the county not only with educational support, but also with technology that otherwise would not have been available.

A coalition comprised of community

leaders, professors, vo-tech professionals, nurses, teachers and lay people serve as an advisory and public relations committee to the First Steps program. They also provide support to the program in assisting with the focus and direction of the project.

The Okfuskee County First Steps program is supported through a special grant from the United States Department of Agriculture.

Healthy Families Pottawatomie County

Laura Grutz, Program Supervisor Healthy Families Pottawatomie County

At one point, Tamara did not know where to turn for answers concerning Charly, her baby boy who was born premature.

But thanks to the collaborative efforts of the Pottawatomie County Extension Service and other local agencies, Tamara now is better able to care for her son and has a resource of information available to her.

Tamara, who is a single parent, is just one of the many success stories that have come about due to the Healthy Families Pottawatomie County (HFPC) program. She was referred to the program through Mission Hill Memorial Hospital. The hospital is just one of several organizations that has a formal agreement to support HFPC.

Like Tamara, many single parents do not know where to turn for help for a variety of needs. Through HFPC, Tamara was directed to the Department of Human Services where she was assisted in applying for food stamps as well as Aid to Families with Dependent Children.

She also has received job training and has successfully been in the workforce for about a year. Because she was holding down a job, Tamara was in need of quality child care for Charly. With the help of her HFPC family support worker, she was able to find quality care.



In addition, Charly has been referred to the Pottawatomie County Health Department for services such as immunizations and well-baby check ups.

Tamara also used the city housing authority as a resource and was able to locate an apartment for herself and her son.

She attends monthly parenting meetings that are directed by HFPC staff. Through these meetings Tamara has met other mothers with whom she is able to network.

Healthy Families Delaware County

Kathy Bergman, Program Supervisor Healthy Families Delaware County

It is not at all unusual for new parents to have many questions concerning their baby. Delaware County is proud to offer a parent education program to assist new families and help answer their questions.

Healthy Families Delaware County is a home visitation program and currently has 28 families enrolled. Professional home visitors have come across a wide variety of questions and concerns from new parents.

Bathing an infant can be a scary experience. One young mother who was referred to the program by a local physician, had never given her baby a complete bath, despite the

1996 Healthy Families County Highlights (continued)

fact the baby was nearly three months old. With the support of her home visitor, the young mother was guided through the bathing process. Bathtime now has become a fun and learning experience for both mother and baby.

Feeding a newborn is another concern many new parents face. One mother who was experiencing a feeding problem with her seven month old daughter received some helpful advice on mixing baby cereal. The home visitor also gave the mother tips on feeding the baby with a spoon. The mother was thankful for the information and the home visitor

presented it in a manner that did not make the mother feel incompetent or threatened.

Another mother was in danger of being suspended from college because she had missed so much school when her infant was ill. A home visitor "went to bat" for the young mother by talking to the mother's instructors and explaining the situation. The mother was allowed to continue her education.

Because education is so important, helping parents find ways to complete their education is one of the many priorities of the Healthy Families program. In fact, three mothers enrolled in the program recently obtained their GED.

Healthy Families Delaware County has offered six group meeting for all first-time

parents living in the county. Collaborating agencies, businesses as well as a local author have provided support for the meetings. The author spoke to parents about the value of parents and realizing their potential as parents. She also presented each family with an autographed copy of her book.

Home visitors have administered more than 25 Denver II child development screenings. These screenings provide parents with the opportunity to learn more about child growth and development.

Collaboration Is The Key to Success

Collaboration is the key to making the Healthy Families Oklahoma programs a success. There are multiple levels of collaboration that focus on the overburdened families that enroll in Healthy Families programs. These are, first, local Program Advisory Committees composed of local agencies and organizations that provide guidance and resources to the Healthy Families programs. Second, Healthy Families Oklahoma collaborative partners, such as the Oklahoma Committee to Prevent Child Abuse, Oklahoma Department of Health, and Oklahoma State University Cooperative Extension Service, bring state-wide resources and insights through the Oklahoma Child Abuse Prevention Coalition. This

coalition, initiated and facilitated by the Oklahoma Committee to Prevent Child Abuse in cooperation with the Oklahoma Institute for Child Advocacy, provides educational information to governmental officials and agencies, informing them of the impact of Healthy Families. Successful collaboration is critical to meeting the needs of the diverse families served by the programs. These Cooperative Extension parent education programs are funded by the Oklahoma Department of Health Office of Child Abuse Prevention, Department of Human Services, Family Preservation and Support, United States Department of Agriculture, and the Kellogg Foundation.

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 topics 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.

Lynda Harriman

Lynda Harriman, Associate Dean/Assistant Director

Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service does not discriminate because of race, color, national origin, religion, sex, age, or handicap and is an equal opportunity employer. Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Samuel E. Curl, Director of Cooperative Extension Service, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma. This publication is printed and issued by Oklahoma State University as authorized by the Dean of the Division of Agriculture and has been prepared and distributed at a cost of \$201.20 for 525 copies. 0498

COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SERVICE
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
OKLAHOMA STATE UNIVERSITY
STILLWATER, OK 74078

OFFICIAL BUSINESS
Penalty for Private Use, \$300

**BULK RATE
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID**
Stillwater, OK
Permit No. 191

ADDRESS CORRECTION REQUESTED