

HEALTHY FAMILIES ALEXANDRIA

WGCA's first gift was given to Healthy Families Alexandria (HFA) in July of 2005. As a result, 10 more Alexandria families are being provided services that will help assure their children's success.

Identifying Families for Services

Each family that is offered Healthy Families home visiting services has first been visited by the Healthy Families Alexandria Family Resource Specialist (FRS). During a structured but free-flowing conversation, the FRS asks mom and dad for information on a variety of topics, such as what their own childhoods were like, what they know about child development, what kind of support they have (housing, finances, friends/family, etc.), and how they plan to discipline their children.

Research has shown that some of the factors that contribute to child abuse or neglect are lack of social supports, inappropriate expectations of children due to lack of knowledge of typical child development, and the parents' own childhood history. Research has also shown that it is the presence of a variety of risk factors that interact with each other, more than one single factor, that contributes to child abuse or neglect.

Each answer is given a score, and the scores are totaled. Those parents who score 25 or above (on a scale of 0-100) are offered home visiting services. Prenatal families are visited every other week until the baby is born, at which point they begin to receive weekly home visits. The Family Support Worker's goal is to foster positive bonding and attachment between parent and child, so that the child develops resilience to cope with life's challenges.

Typical Healthy Family Participants

Teen Parents

A typical teen participant in Healthy Families Alexandria was born in Central America and was raised by friends or relatives (usually a grandmother or aunt) after her parents moved to the US. The parents work long, hard hours to earn enough money to send back home to support the children left there, and in the process they establish new lives here. Often they have more children who are born here and who are strangers to the ones left behind.

Eventually the parents send for their children and the children arrive eager and excited to see the parents that they have dreamed about. But instead of the loving family they anticipated, they find adults whom they don't know, and who don't know them. These adults work long hours and their limited time at home is spent taking care of the younger children who were born here. Many times they have sent for their older children with the expectation that these children will either work to support the family or help cook and care for the younger siblings. The teenagers become disillusioned with this role and look for love and affection elsewhere. When they become pregnant, their parents are disappointed—not only have they lost the potential worker or housekeeper, but they also have another mouth to feed.

It is at this point that the Family Support Worker (FSW) typically becomes involved. Her role is to nurture and encourage the teen mom to keep prenatal care appointments, eat healthy, learn about her baby's development, form a strong bond with the baby, etc. But she also needs to establish a good relationship with the teen's mother, because without her approval the FSW will not be allowed in the home. Typically she brings information, shares videos, brings activities for the teen to do with her baby, and listens to her struggles and joys. Her focus is on the relationship between the teen and her baby, but she also addresses family concerns by offering information and referrals to other agencies or programs.

Adult Parents

There are a wide variety of adult participants in Healthy Families Alexandria. Some are immigrant families, while others were born here. Most are low-income families who struggle to make ends meet every month. They live in apartments and often share living space with other families to help with the rent.

Very few have college degrees and many have not completed high school, so they are unable to earn the higher salaries of high school or college graduates. Many of the fathers work in landscaping or construction. Many of the mothers clean houses or work in retail stores.

What most of these families have in common is a history of abuse or harsh discipline as children—many were beaten with sticks, belts, or shoes and were left with bruises, marks, or broken bones. Consequently, while they know they don't want to do the same thing to their children, they have no role models and no ideas of alternatives. These families also tend to share a lack of social supports. Often other family members are miles or continents away, leaving no one to help during times of crisis and no one to learn from once the babies come home.

A Family Service Worker builds a trusting relationship that these families know they can count on. Healthy Family services provides these families with

- information on child development and positive discipline;
- activities that support the growing attachment between parent and baby;
- information on common American health needs and immunizations;
- social supports by offering playgroups or introducing families to one another at picnics and parties and
- information about other services in the community.