

Cradling parents and their infants

Program offers classes, services and support to families who have babies; County program has given 2,750 families a helping hand with their newborns by offering classes, services and support

By Karen Nitkin

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On a recent weekday morning, the spacious, toy-filled basement of Lori Skillman's house has been taken over by toddlers. Seven have arrived, and more are on the way. They pull books off shelves, clamber into a plastic car and practice their newfound walking skills as their moms watch and chat.

The children, all about 18 months old, are in a play group formed by women who attended a free support class offered by Healthy Families Howard County, a five-year-old program that is run by Howard County General Hospital and funded by the hospital and Family and Children's Services of Central Maryland.

In the class, the women learned about nutrition for their babies; met a professional child-proofer, who gave them tips on making their houses safe; and collected coupons for local kid-friendly venues such as My Gym.

But they also got to know each other, and after the eight-week class ended, they decided to keep the connection going with a weekly get-together.

The support class is one of many services available free through Healthy Families Howard County to first-time parents whose children are born at Howard County General Hospital.

"What we do is we contact first-time parents in the hospital and we tell them all about the program," said Kathy Plasse, the program manager. "We kind of see what needs they have, and we offer services to go with it."

About 70 percent of parents say yes to at least one service, she said. The program has served about 2,750 families since it started in November 2001. Funding comes from the Howard County Local Children's Board, the Freddie Mac Foundation, county Community Service Partnerships and the Columbia Foundation.

Services can be as simple as a referral to a day care center or a class for new mothers, or as involved as home visits and help with finding jobs or housing. A quarterly newsletter and a printed resource guide also are offered, along with referrals to other agencies.

At-home visits are provided by family support workers through Family and Children's Services. The local program is part of the national Healthy Families America initiative, Plasse said. Sixteen Maryland jurisdictions offer similar programs.

One Howard County mother who benefited from the at-home visits was Erin Welch, a member of the play group. She was still in the hospital after the birth of her son, Brayden, when she learned that he had a condition called congenital hypothyroidism.

"I was totally freaking out," she recalled. She opted to have a child-development specialist visit her home once a week to help her learn about the illness - now under control with medication - and to cope with her feelings and concerns.

"It was pretty much support for me," she said. "Being a new mom, and having that news sort of thrown at you, it was so scary."

Healthy Families has no particular agenda, Plasse said. It works with parents to help them develop goals and achieve them, she said. One mother, she said, wanted to help her daughter learn table manners, so the support worker suggested a dinner party for the youngster.

Farhat Dean, who delivered her daughter, Anusha, at Howard General in 2003, was far from her native Pakistan. Her goal was to establish herself in Howard County - moving out of her husband's house, finding a place of her own and getting a job.

Judy Templeton, who was her family-support worker before becoming supervisor of the program, helped Dean find an apartment and get a job at a day care center so her children (Dean also had a son, Ishan, in 2004) could attend. Dean is taking classes and hopes to become a nurse.

One more goal has been realized. "I wanted to be a U.S. citizen," said Dean, sitting in a room at the Healthy Families offices in the Wilde Lake Village Center.

As she spoke, she pulled a citizenship certificate out of a folder. "I got it just yesterday," she said, beaming. Templeton said clients such as Dean are wonderful because they work hard to improve their lives. "We would just give her the information," she said. "She would take it and run. ... She's done a lot of brave things."

Dean said the program has turned her life around.

"At first, I was isolated," she said. "Now, if I see someone who has needs, I recommend Family and Children's Services. I always tell everybody how proud I am to be part of the program because they are the ones that changed my life. I was very confused, having no family here. I didn't know which direction to go."

Many mothers who take advantage of the service want help making friends and figuring out the contours of a life that no longer involves a hard-charging career.

Allison Mayberry, a member of the play group, had been working full time before her son, Wilson, now 18 months old, was born. "I didn't have any friends who were stay-at-home moms," she said.

Now, thanks to Healthy Families, she has found a group of women who have young children. "In our particular group, we were fortunate," she said. "We all really liked each other."

Another play group member is Liz Hagen, who had moved to Howard County from Colorado about six months before she became pregnant with Taylor, now 18 months. "I really hadn't built up a network of friends yet," she said. She has one now, and so does her daughter.

"It's been so much fun to watch them grow up," Hagen said, while watching the toddlers play.

Family and Children's Services of Central Maryland is a private, nonprofit, nonsectarian agency. We support individuals and families throughout their lifespan through programs that address issues including family violence, sexual abuse, parent/child issues, teen pregnancy prevention, single or teen parenthood and elder care.

Healthy Families Howard County is one of 11 programs offered by FCS for families, children and individuals. Each is designed to guide families, enhance quality of life and strengthen community ties.

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