

The First 50 Years Serving Columbia County

Part 8: Families with New Babies get Support

By Leanne Murray, Community Action Team, Human Investment Department

Community Action Team (CAT) has been reaching out to the community in powerful and meaningful ways for 50 years. One program with a particularly long-lasting impact has been in effect for about 20 years: Healthy Families. As part of the Child and Family Development Department at CAT, it focuses on providing extra support and information to pre-natal and new-birth families.

At each visit parents receive support and coaching to cultivate and strengthen a nurturing, positive relationship with their baby so s/he is safe, healthy and learning. This includes information on topics like child development, infant care, parenting skills, and what is going on in the community to support new families. Research shows that the quality of the relationship between a parent and their child is critical for the health, well-being, and later life success.

There are many situations that make a family eligible to receive Healthy Family services. Generally they include circumstances that stretch parents and families too thin: unstable housing, unemployment, rocky relationships, multiple children under five years old, a child with special needs, involvement with the child welfare system, depression, substance abuse, and the lack of natural support systems like extended family or caring neighbors.

CAT's program is part of Healthy Families Oregon, Oregon's largest child abuse and neglect prevention program. The evidence-based home visiting model has shown reductions in child maltreatment and increases in children's readiness for school. Children are most vulnerable to physical abuse and neglect in the first few years of their life, so this is critical. As with most supportive programs at CAT, reaching out sooner is better. Ideally, Healthy Families staff would like to connect with a family during pregnancy, even if it's not the first baby. After the birth of a child, home visitors must start building their relationship with the family within the first 90 days. Typically potential participants are referred to the program by the hospitals, doctors, other CAT programs and community partner agencies like DHS.

Currently there is not a waiting list in Columbia County because CAT recently got a boost in funding through Healthy Families Oregon/America and the Department of Education. The additional resources gave CAT the ability to expand services by hiring two additional home visitors, tripling the amount of staff members in the community. Home visitors have backgrounds in early childhood education with an endorsement in mental health. Additional training is undertaken through a rigorous 120 hour program led by the state. Families answer a new baby questionnaire to give staff an accurate assessment of the strengths the family already has, as well as identifying areas where they have unmet needs. In addition, home visitors make

referrals to other CAT programs and community partners for needs that aren't addressed through Health Families resources.

Kathy Appel has been a home visitor with the program for a dozen years and has many success stories to share. One she thought was particularly representative involves a young Columbia County couple that participated with Healthy Families for the full three years. Not every Healthy Families family has nearly this many struggles, but this one also has a great outcome. Their child was about two weeks old on the first visit. Mom and dad were both unemployed and as a result they were at risk of losing their apartment. They had both already conquered addiction, but Mom had a long history of severe depression and was struggling even though she was taking anti-depressants. Dad had a felony conviction that made housing and employment extra challenging. They did not have much in the way of support from family and friends either.

Early on, Appel referred the family to programs at CAT to stabilize their housing until dad found work in Portland. For the first six months the visits were weekly and sometimes mom was too depressed to keep the meeting. From there the meetings were twice a month until the child was two years old. The last year's visits were monthly. They were naturally good parents, but they were hungry for help in learning more about the appropriate activities and play for their child's development. Mom was nursing the baby, but was grateful for assistance in making that a better experience. They began making weekly trips to the library for the children's reading program. Realizing that a significant part of her depression stemmed from childhood trauma, mom connected to a counseling program that helped her heal old wounds. When she was ready to take on more, she began volunteering at a local non-profit organization. The managers liked her so much they hired her and her confidence and connections soared.

The last time Appel saw this family they were in their same home, both were working, mom's mood was stable and she was off all medications, their child is enrolled at Head Start, and they were proactively gaining on their goal of healthy living with plenty of outdoor time and exercise. Their family goal plan even includes planting a garden. Of the mother, Kathy says, "I see a light in her that wasn't there when we started."

The feedback CAT receives from participating families also points to the power of the program. A local mom of an 18-month son and one-month old daughter wrote a letter saying, "My home visitor gave me the guidance that I needed and then let me make my own decisions. Never once has anyone in the program judged me for my decisions. They also have given me information on stress and how to care for myself in order to make me a better mother.

The agency and program recipients appreciate community support for this vital program, so please consider donating baby wipes and diapers of all sizes.

In addition to the Healthy Families program, CAT's Child and Family Development programs include Parent Education and Support and Head Start. Parent Education and Support provides a variety of parent training and support in group settings that foster parent-to-parent

interactions. Topics include things like Making Parenting a Pleasure, Divorce Education, and Strengthening Families.

Head Start is a federal program that promotes the school readiness of children from birth to age five in low-income families by enhancing their cognitive, social, and emotional development. Head Start, like Healthy Families, emphasizes the role of parents as their child's first and most important teacher. In Columbia County there are Head Start centers in St. Helens and Vernonia, and one center that serves both Clatskanie and Rainier.

Safe Kids is a program led by CAT's Head Start, which provides support and resources to assist in adults in keeping kids safe. Based on the needs of the community, this coalition implements evidence-based programs such as car-seat checkups, safety workshops and sports clinics to help parents and caregivers prevent childhood injuries.

Community Action Team is ready to help Columbia County children thrive. To get more information about Healthy Families, please contact Program Manager Sunday Kampii at 503-366-6556 or 800-404-3511. For Head Start, Safe Kids, and Parent Education and Support programs, direct your questions to 503-556-3736.

To find out more about how Community Action Team might be able to help with other services, please call 503-397-3511 or visit www.cat-team.org. Office hours at 125 N. 17th Street in St. Helens are 8:30 am – 5:00 pm, Monday through Friday.