



Presenting the Evidence for Healthy Families Florida: a proven early childhood intervention

The Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University recently published “A Science-Based Framework for Early Childhood Policy” that identifies the necessary components for effective early childhood policies and practices and provides a brief cost-benefit argument stressing the importance of public investments in young children and their families.¹ Neuroscience and child development research support the demand for prevention and early-intervention programs, explaining that early childhood experiences create the foundation for later learning, behavior and health outcomes.² When a child’s early experience is “impoverished, neglectful or abusive, the result can be a lifetime of increased risk.”³ Healthy Families Florida is a proven, voluntary home visiting program that prevents child abuse and neglect in high-risk families by providing quality services that are intensive, comprehensive, long-term, flexible and culturally appropriate.^{4,5}

According to the Harvard study, to be considered a viable strategy for enhancing positive childhood outcomes, programs should include key “effectiveness factors.” These factors are listed below with a brief explanation of how Healthy Families Florida has achieved its success by incorporating these elements into the program.

- **Early and intensive support by skilled home visitors**

Healthy Families Florida initiates services during pregnancy or soon after the birth of a baby. Highly trained family support workers provide frequent, intensive services to families in their homes for up to five years with intensity decreasing over time according to the needs of the family and their progress toward establishing a stable and nurturing home environment.⁶ Services follow a detailed curriculum that uses a strength-based approach to introduce topics intended to support parent-child relationships, including basic care, cues and communication, social and emotional development, play and stimulation, and brain development.⁷ In addition, family support workers teach problem-solving skills, conduct screening for developmental delays, provide social support, connect parents and children to a medical home and make referrals to other family support services as needed.⁸ This collaboration with community partners such as Healthy Start, domestic violence shelters, child care centers, community-based care agencies and others links families to the services they need beyond home visiting without duplication of effort. By increasing the knowledge and skills of new parents, Healthy Families empowers parents to accept personal responsibility for their future and the future of their families.

- **Intensive services matched to the problems they are designed to address**

Healthy Families Florida serves first time mothers as well as mothers with other children, as research shows a significant relationship between child abuse and neglect and families with more than one child under the age of five.⁹ Healthy Families Florida determines program eligibility through a conversational, family-focused assessment process using a validated tool that identifies a combination of factors associated with increased risk of child maltreatment.¹⁰

These factors include but are not limited to social isolation, substance use, family violence, poor mental health, maternal depression, family history of abuse and limited knowledge of parenting skills. This unique assessment process enables Healthy Families Florida to identify services a family may need in addition to home visiting. Family support workers are trained to identify issues related to family violence, substance abuse and poor mental health and to refer them to the appropriate services in the community for help and/or treatment.^{11,12,13} Family Support workers develop a strong bond and trusting relationship with their families which helps families recognize problems and accept outside services.¹⁴

- **Access to basic medical care for pregnant women and children**
Healthy Families Florida works to ensure program participants not only have access to basic medical care in their community, but that they also receive that care. This helps prevent threats to healthy development and provide early diagnosis and appropriate management when problems emerge.¹⁵ Participants learn the importance of preventive health care, well baby checks, childhood immunizations and baby spacing. In addition, family support workers conduct regular developmental screenings with families to identify infants and young children who may need further evaluation and treatment for developmental delays before missing the window of opportunity for early intervention.^{16,17}
- **Participation in high quality, center based, early education programs for children**
Healthy Families Florida links participants with identified local resources that provide high quality, center based, early education services in each community. Further, a module on choosing appropriate child caregivers is a part of the parenting curriculum delivered by family support workers on home visits.¹⁸ This not only educates families on the importance of high quality, early education programs but also helps families to access these services in their community.
- **Work-based income supplements for working parents**
While Healthy Families Florida does not provide income supplements to families, it does work to locate community organizations that do provide various resources to families. More importantly, the program improves the participant's ability to achieve self-sufficiency in other ways. Family support workers help participants set and achieve goals for themselves and their families, which often include furthering their education, participating in skill training, improving their language skills by taking ESL courses and acquiring stable employment.¹⁹
- **Policies that reduce the level of environmental toxins**
Healthy Families Florida is committed to raising awareness and reducing the risks of environmental toxins and hazards in homes and communities, especially those that pose significant threats to pregnant women and children. Family support workers routinely use a home safety tool developed by Healthy Families Florida that identifies potential hazards and educates families on the importance of maintaining a safe environment for their children.²⁰ Some toxins routinely addressed include lead, carbon monoxide, pesticides and other hazardous products. Family support workers also educate parents on safety in and around water, vehicles, and electrical appliances with the intent of preventing unintentional injury. Healthy Families Florida recently joined forces with local community partners to improve identification of environmental health risks and increase referrals to local health and housing agencies that can help families address identified risks.

- **Quality standards and monitoring of service delivery on a routine basis**

Healthy Families Florida is committed to continuous program improvement. The program adheres to a set of research-based critical elements field-tested for effective home visitation.²¹ Healthy Families Florida requires projects to enter participant and service data into a Web-based information management system. This data is used to track program progress towards goals and participant achievement of measurable outcomes. Projects receive ongoing technical assistance visits and annual quality assurance visits to evaluate the quality of services provided to families, help sites overcome challenges they may be facing in their service community and determine if those services meet the accreditation standards of the Healthy Families America model. When problems are identified, Healthy Families Florida convenes Quality Improvement groups to find the best possible solutions by engaging direct service staff with management. The data system allows prompt access to reports that are useful for monitoring project and staff performance. All of the information gathered through site visits, QI groups and the data system is used to continually improve the way services are provided. Healthy Families Florida also conducts an annual participant satisfaction survey to determine the value of services to parents and where improvements are needed.²² In addition, Healthy Families Florida participates in an objective, external review process and is accredited by Healthy Families America.²³ This accreditation demonstrates Healthy Families Florida is committed to and is following research-based best practice, and providing quality services.

There are a number of proven ways to promote healthy development of young children. While Healthy Families Florida is part of a larger continuum of services dedicated to improving early childhood outcomes, it is Florida's only statewide child abuse and neglect prevention program. Independent evaluators conducted a rigorous five-year study of Healthy Families Florida to determine whether the program makes a difference. The five-year evaluation concluded that the program has a significant impact on preventing child abuse and neglect in Florida's high-risk families.²⁴

- HFF participants receiving intensive home visiting services had 58 percent less child abuse and neglect at 24 months compared to the comparison group who had little or no services.
- HFF participants, regardless of the time spent in the program, had 20 percent less child abuse and neglect than all families in their target service areas, in spite of the fact that participants are at significantly higher risk for child maltreatment than the overall population.

In addition to preventing child abuse, the five-year evaluation results show the program has a positive impact on maternal and child health, parent-child interaction and family self-sufficiency.²⁵

- 93 percent of children in Healthy Families Florida were fully immunized by age two.
- 92 percent of mothers participating in Healthy Families Florida did not have a subsequent pregnancy within two years, which decreases the risk that mothers will experience medical complications or give birth to low-birth-weight or premature babies.
- Mothers who participated in Healthy Families Florida for three or more years were significantly more likely to read to their children. Parent-child interaction, stimulation

and reading are important for healthy child development and future success in school and in life.

- 81 percent of participants who completed the program improved their education level, received job training or became gainfully employed while enrolled in the program.

Healthy Families Florida allows for flexibility in service implementation necessary for efficient integration into a wide range of communities. Healthy Families Florida relies heavily on the strong relationships it has with its partners in the community. These partners, whether they be community-based care or faith-based organizations, United Ways, businesses, Children's Services Councils, substance abuse and mental health providers, domestic violence shelters, child care centers, Healthy Start, Early Steps or other child service agencies, help by providing the additional services the families may need beyond the home visiting that Healthy Families Florida provides. In fiscal year 2007-08, community partners provided over \$12 million of cash and in-kind contributions signifying their investment and support for Healthy Families Florida.²⁶

The value of public investments in young children and their families becomes apparent when looking at the long term societal benefits. According to the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, "the empirical data from cost-benefit studies presents a compelling case for early public investments targeted towards children who are at greatest risk for failure in school, in the workplace, and in society at large."²⁷ The evidence presented here demonstrates why Healthy Families Florida is one such investment.

Research shows that children who suffer from abuse and neglect are more likely to need special education, drop out of school, become substance abusers, become teen parents, be involved in the juvenile and criminal justice systems, and become reliant on long-term government assistance. Today's investments in effective early childhood initiatives that prevent child abuse and neglect and promote healthy child development will result in substantial returns in the form of increased academic achievement, economic productivity, responsible citizenship and successful parenting.^{28,29} Thus, the long term benefits of Healthy Families Florida are not only helping break the generational cycle of child abuse and neglect, but are vital investments in the economic viability of Florida's future generations.

For further information, please contact Carol McNally at (850) 488.1752 or visit Healthy Families Florida online at <http://www.healthyfamiliesfla.org/>

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