

# Increasing Parenting Knowledge and Strengthening Parent-Child Relationships During Well-Child Visits

## Partnering for Healthy Parenting Program - Children's Home Society

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### Summary

The Foundation for a Healthy High Point provided funding to the Children's Home Society of North Carolina to support parent educators to assist parents of children ages 3-5 visiting the pediatrician in two High Point health clinics. The Partnering for Healthy Parenting (PHP) program connects parents with parent educators during regularly scheduled well-child visits at their pediatrician's office to discuss developmentally appropriate topics and make referrals to existing resources. The program was designed to improve parent-child relationships and reduce parental stress, a leading cause of child abuse and neglect. The program has been implemented at two Wake Forest Health Network Pediatrics offices in High Point.

### Highlights

- Partnering for Healthy Parenting parent educators served 961 families at the clinics in High Point between July 2017 and December 2020.
- All participating parents were confident they'd be able to use the information shared to help with their parenting and would likely seek parent education support in the future.
- 80% of physicians and staff reported that parent educators enhanced their patients' educational experience and positively impacted their ability to meet patients' medical needs.

### Funding

The Foundation for a Healthy High Point was the sole funder of the Partnering for Healthy Parenting program from July 2017 through December 2021. The Children's Home Society of North Carolina received grants from the Foundation totaling \$274,000 and provided in-kind support of \$53,000 from general contributions and donations. Wake Forest Health Network Pediatrics also provided in-kind support of approximately \$35,000 in pediatric staff time and office space. CHS did not seek continued funding after 2021 due to a staff vacancy and plans to re-evaluate this program.



*The Foundation for a Healthy High Point encourages, supports, influences, and invests in efforts that improve the long-term health and wellness throughout Greater High Point. We accomplish this by examining health issues and identifying and investing in evidence-based practices.*

# Background

Children’s Home Society (CHS) of North Carolina provides comprehensive child and family support programs statewide. CHS was founded in the early 1900s as an adoption agency and focuses on preventing child neglect and family separation, in addition to providing foster care and adoption services. The organization believes early intervention provides parents with the knowledge, skills, and resources needed to build healthy families. In High Point, CHS provides adoption and foster care services, teen pregnancy prevention programs, and parent education services.



## Need

Poverty is the root of many problems families face in impoverished areas of Greater High Point. Poverty is linked with lower educational attainment, lower quality housing, food insecurity, and other social determinants of health. Together, these factors contribute to high stress levels for some High Point families, which can lead to child neglect and, in some cases, result in family separation. Racial and ethnic disparities related to poverty, the child welfare system, and other systemic issues result in African American children being overrepresented in the foster care system.

Dr. Jennifer Kimbrough, CHS Director of Strategic Initiatives, explained, “It isn’t that families don’t nurture their children. It’s that they sometimes don’t have the resources or knowledge or support. If we can support families early enough, then children don’t have to experience the trauma of separation.” CHS provides interventions to strengthen and support families to prevent children from being neglected and entering the foster care system.

The COVID-19 pandemic increased family stress, including challenges related to learning and working from home, along with exacerbating existing issues such as domestic violence, food insecurity, and mental and behavioral health concerns. CHS staff identified the need for additional parental support during the pandemic, including families facing grief and loss, along with increased needs for referrals to speech and occupational therapy, developmental and socioemotional evaluations, and behavior support that is typically provided at school.

## Project Description

CHS developed the Partnering for Healthy Parenting program in 2017 as an extension of the evidence-based Healthy Steps program. Healthy Steps educates parents of children from birth to age three, while PHP is for families with children ages three and up. Parents who participate in Healthy Steps can continue to receive support as their child ages through Partnering for Healthy Parenting.

PHP provides one-on-one education to parents accompanying their children to well-child visits at Wake Forest Health Network Pediatrics clinics in High Point. Parents are referred to certified parent educators by their pediatricians in the clinic for in-depth discussions about developmentally appropriate topics of concern. Additionally, the parent educators refer parents to existing community resources to address family needs.

Partnering for Healthy Parenting strives to:

- Improve parent-child relationships by increasing parent knowledge of child development,
- Connect parents with community resources,
- Reduce parent stress leading to a reduction in child maltreatment.

Embedding parent educators in a pediatric clinic creates opportunities to provide parents with just-in-time access to support and resources. A pediatric office is a natural place to engage with families as most parents take young children to the pediatrician for well-child visits and trust resources provided by their doctors. Additionally, clinicians appreciate having parent educators in the office who have the time to answer parents' questions in depth. Doctors have limited time to spend with parents, yet parents have many questions on child development that need deeper conversation. As pediatrician Dr. Cherece Grier stated, "Most parents have questions about development and resources to help their kids. Having parent educators discuss these issues has made my time as a pediatrician easier. It makes the overall visit better for me, and the parents appreciate the input that they've had. Some even ask for the parent educators as they've developed a relationship with them. They [parent educators] have become part of our integrated visit."

In March 2020, parent educators were no longer allowed to meet patients in person due to restrictions related to the COVID-19 pandemic. The workflow for the program needed to change. Instead of providing immediate, in-person support, the clinic providers sent referrals to the parent educators to follow up by phone or text. While ideally, the program is delivered in-person, CHS staff reported that many parents need parent educator support even more extensively during the pandemic and appreciate being able to connect by phone, text, or video chat.

## Results

The short-term goals of the project are 1) to improve parents' knowledge of child development, child behavior management, or their child's specific needs and 2) to increase parents' confidence and skills in meeting their child's developmental or behavioral needs. Outcomes are measured by a client feedback card left with parents after they visit with the parent educators, and physicians and staff are surveyed twice annually.

Between July 2017 and December 2020, PHP served 961 families at the clinics in High Point. 785 families were served before March 2020, and 208 were served after the start of the pandemic. The

average family had 1.5 visits, with most families having only one visit and others having as many as five visits with the PHP educator.

The most recent evaluation, conducted during the pandemic when parents and educators were meeting remotely, found that:

- 90% of parents reported learning information that facilitated a better understanding of their child,
- 100% of parents reported having the confidence to be able to use the information shared to help with their parenting,
- 100% of parents indicated that they will likely seek parent education support in the future.

PHP surveys of physicians and staff found:

- 80% of physicians and staff reported an enhanced patient educational experience when working with a parent educator,
- 80% reported that parent educators positively impacted their ability to meet patients' medical needs.

In sum, PHP found that parents learned from the program and valued the support of parent educators. Additionally, providers "loved it and don't want it to go away," according to evaluation findings cited by Dr. Kimbrough. As one parent educator shared, "Allowing parents to take the initiative and reach out when it is convenient for them has proven to be successful. Parents will reach out via text or call to receive assistance for their needs. These parents already have a positive view of the parent educator due to the hand-off from the provider."

To illustrate how the program is meeting the needs of families during the pandemic, CHS staff shared a story about how a parent educator helped a mother to address her child's separation anxiety. The parent educator received a referral from a provider. The mother was concerned about separation anxiety as her child transitioned into kindergarten. There have been examples of the child having separation anxiety dating back to the parent's first attempt to enroll the child into Pre-K. The child was homeschooled with the mother during the pandemic, and the mother was worried about the next year's transition into kindergarten. The child had also had some fear surrounding death and the possibility that mom would not return home.

The parent educator and parent discussed the initial trigger of these fears. The educator gave the mother some advice to help with the transition into school for a child suffering from separation anxiety, such as a comfort item that reminds them of mom or a detailed daily schedule to ease anxiety. The educator also recommended a children's book called "The Invisible String," which is commonly used for children who miss a loved one while away. The mother liked the tips provided and said that the comfort item sounded like a great idea that she had not thought of previously.

*"It's been an overall great experience having [parent educators] be part of our team. I would hope that we would always have this resource. I think everybody can benefit from the program."*  
*-Pediatrician Cherece Grier, Wake Forest*

In addition to changes in parents' knowledge and skills, the PHP program is a deep partner in the Ready for School, Ready for Life collaboration which is working to change Guilford County's early childhood education system. Ready, Ready considers PHP a pilot study of expanding Healthy Steps to 3–5-year-olds county-wide. The program is on pause, however, and CHS is reflecting on what they've learned and considering plans for the program's future.

## Lessons Learned

- **The community wants and needs parenting support; PHP is a highly acceptable intervention.** CHS staff stressed that this program is universally well-received by parents as it provides them with trusted support in a safe environment. The program has wide acceptability among parents regardless of background, SES, race, and other demographic characteristics. Dr. Kimbrough stated, “We have identified a universal intervention acceptable to the community. The approach of working with families from early ages and stages – prenatal through pre-K – are all times parents need support.” The more confident a parent feels, the better they can handle the inevitable stresses of child-raising.
- **Parents rely heavily on school services, which were disrupted by remote learning during the pandemic.** PHP educators learned parents rely on school services to address behavioral and development concerns. The pandemic and quarantine changed that relationship – with parents as educators teaching kids remotely. This increased the need for referrals to services usually provided through school with IEP plans. Even as children return to school or childcare, additional support is needed to address the lasting impacts of the pandemic.
- **Physicians value the addition of parent educators in the clinic.** Pediatricians have a short time with children and their families, yet many caregivers have questions that warrant longer discussions. Parent educators have time to provide parents with in-depth support and refer to resources to address needs beyond just medical issues.
- **The model isn't sustainable without outside resources despite physician and parent support.** While CHS is exploring billing Medicaid for parent education, this isn't currently allowed in North Carolina. The Foundation could play a role in advocating for policy change so that these important services could receive a reimbursement and not be dependent on support from the philanthropic sector.
- **The Ready, Ready collaborative is “driving the boat” in making lasting changes to early childhood education in the county but keeping High Point's unique needs at the forefront is important.** CHS staff discussed how High Point has specific needs related to the community's history and environment. Staff suggested that the Foundation continue to work with Ready, Ready to identify the needs and work on strategies for making lasting changes.