

COMMUNITY ACTION

Healthy Families Cayuga-Seneca: Standing on the stairway to success



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Healthy Families Cayuga-Seneca is one of more than a dozen programs administered by Cayuga/Seneca Community Action Agency, and one of 36 Healthy Families programs in operation throughout the state. We are funded through the New York State Office of Children and Family Services, and partner with Prevent Child Abuse New York and the Center for Human Services Research at SUNY Albany. In July of this year, Healthy Families New York received national accreditation by Healthy Families America.

Healthy Families Cayuga-Seneca is an evidence-based, voluntary home visiting program launched in 2007. Our goal is to promote positive parenting and parent-child interaction; ensure optimal prenatal care, health and development; and enhance family self-sufficiency. Our services include

educating families on parenting and child development, connecting them with needed services, and assisting parents in assessing their children for developmental delays.

We offer services to those pregnant and parenting infants younger than three months of age. We can even enroll fathers who are awaiting the arrival of their baby and are planning to play an active role in parenting their child. Based on the Healthy Families America model, trained paraprofessionals use a strength-based approach to service, and provide in-home services until the child enters Head Start or kindergarten.

Our program is effective on many levels and for durations lasting much longer than the enrolled time frame. The intensity of home visits seems to be a significant predictor of children's outcomes. Home-visited children are half as likely to repeat first grade and 70 percent more likely to perform above grade level on behaviors that promote learning. Children who receive high-intensity services are more likely to perform above grade level. Healthy Families New York has also demonstrated a positive effect on birth outcomes in terms of fewer low-birth-weight babies born to enrolled moms.

How do we measure our success? Through the families that we serve! We are a relationship-based program; the well-being and success of each member of the family is important to us. We are your personal cheering squad, your shoulder to cry on, and sometimes your voice of reason. It is always your voice, your goals and your wishes that matter most to us. Our direction comes from you. We are there to provide support and information.

We consistently ask for parental input in a variety of ways, including our newsletter, surveys and group activities. Recently, following our July graduation, we did an exit interview with one of our graduating families. When asked how we might improve our services, one mom suggested, "Get the word out to more people! This program is the best-kept secret." We don't want to be a secret. We want to expand our program in both Cayuga and Seneca counties. One of the greatest aspects of each and every day is the opportunity to laugh and embrace the miracle of birth and the amazing journey of a child's growth and development. Given the chance, we would love to shout your success from the roof top!

I titled this article "Standing on the stairway to success" as a reflection of each of the children who stood on these wooden stairs at graduation, ready to move forward in their growth and with their strongest supporters by their side — their family. Armed with a book bag stuffed with summer activities and a few items for Head Start or kindergarten, they leave us grateful and proud to have experienced so many achievements along the way.