

HEALTHY LIVING

Supporting Durham families with Head Start

BY JENNIFER GILL

Durham Connects

After the birth of a baby, many parents face the reality of needing to return to work, and yet have not secured reliable, quality child care. The high cost of quality child care, and waiting lists for child-care vouchers, present an obstacle for families who want to find appropriate child-care environments for their children. It is a common problem, particularly for lower income families, or for families who need help navigating the labyrinth of services in Durham.

Child-care concerns are not the only issues facing families. Research clearly shows that the ages of birth to 5 account for the most critical time in a child's development. Starting early is critical, especially for young children who live in poverty. The need for comprehensive early childhood programs, particularly those serving prenatal moms and children from birth to three, has become a priority in the Durham community.

Durham Connects nurse Jenny Mauch, who is a registered nurse, says, "Typically if a mother does not have a plan for child care, I will refer her to Child Care Services Association for financial assistance and help finding a child-care arrangement that meets her needs."

Mauch recalls a mother who phoned her "to let me know that her 4-year-old son was accepted into child care." During the visit to the family's apartment Mauch noticed that the preschooler was exploding with energy. "This I found to be their greatest need to decrease stress in their life. So, I encouraged her to call and get him on the waiting list and he got in. The mother and son were both thrilled. Success!"

There will be more success stories in Durham



soon due to a two-year \$3.3 million federal grant to provide Durham's first Early Head Start (EHS) program for 120 Durham children from low-income families. There has never been an Early Head Start program in this county. According to Durham's Partnership for Children, a Smart Start Initiative, which will administer the grant, almost 23 percent of the 15,600 children in Durham aged birth to 3 are living in poverty. The goal of Durham Early Head Start is to assist families needing child care through partnerships with quality child-care centers, or through home-based services that support families in a variety of ways, including providing information and activities that promote optimal child development.

Early Head Start is a free, comprehensive child development and family support program for eligible children birth to 3 years old and for pregnant women. Children participate in activities designed to promote their growth and development. Families receive information and support on topics including early childhood education, health and nutrition.

Families have two program options if they apply and qualify for Early Head Start. Durham's EHS program will provide a home-based option for 60 children, and a center-based option for 60 children.

The families who enroll in the In-Home program will participate in weekly home visits that provide child development, health and safety information in English or Spanish.

A qualified home visitor who is trained in the research-based Parents as Teachers curriculum will assess each child's development. In addition, families will attend two educational groups a month.

Before receiving the grant, Durham's Partnership led a year long collaborative planning process with Healthy Families Durham and Chapel Hill Training Outreach Project. The federal grant is part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act.

The goal with the home-based Early Head Start option is to help families give their children the best possible start in life by helping parents learn appropriate activities to stimulate growth and development. They will also work with parents to improve parent/child interaction and to provide referrals to resources to support the family.

For families who enroll in the center-based option, children will receive a full day, full year of quality child care in a Durham child-care center that meets the stringent Early Head Start quality guidelines, which include a ratio of one teacher to four students, and specific guidelines for quality assurance. Parents will participate in a minimum of two parent-teacher conferences a year and two home visits a year, and will receive family support, including access to information and referrals on a variety of topics.

According to Early Head Start Director Brenda Marshall, "Head Start is the longest running, most successful federally funded early childhood program in history." She believes its success is due to the active involvement of parents and family, combined with a strong early childhood curriculum and family support services. She says, "the goal of Early Head Start is to give families the opportunity to participate as full partners in the education of their children, and to help families achieve their goals."

To be eligible for Durham Early Head Start, families must meet the federal income guidelines established by Early Head Start.

Currently, Early Head Start is accepting applications for the home-based option. The first home visits will begin in early June. The center-based option will begin, at the earliest, in late June. For information or an application, call Durham Early Head Start at 439-7107. For Home-Based Services, you may also contact 419-3474, ext. 313. Applications are available in English and in Spanish.

Durham Connects is a collaboration of the Durham Family Initiative, itself a partnership of the Center for Child and Family Policy at Duke University and the Center for Child and Family Health, and the Durham County Health Department. For more information, please visit www.durhamconnects.org or call (919) 668-3279.