

From the YakimaHerald.com Online News.

Published on Thursday, March 13, 2008

Nurse-Family Partnership helps build better parents

by Jane Gargas

Yakima Herald-Republic

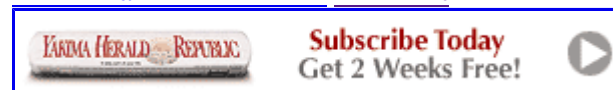


SARA GETTYS/Yakima Herald-Republic Trishell Tate, left, a Public Health Nurse, talks to new mother Peroa Martinez on Wednesday, January 9, 2007. Tate discussed Martinez's goals of going back to school and finding work, as well as the changes in the behavior of her 2-month-old son. To help Martinez understand the changes she faces, Tate gave her worksheets to keep track of her budget, the time to take care of her own needs as a mother, and the schedule of her baby as he grows.

Links

[E-mail](#)

 [Print](#)



Advertisement

"Yes," said her visitor, and she meant it.

That's just one of the poignant moments several local nurses encounter daily in their jobs as surrogate mother, grandma, teacher and friend, blended into one.

They're part of the Nurse-Family Partnership, a national program that endeavors to boost parenting skills among the most vulnerable of women in this country.

And, quite simply, it works.

That's why The New Yorker magazine has profiled the program, and why ABC's "Nightline" called it "startlingly successful."

One on one, woman to woman, the NFP is quietly building better parents, by focusing on first-time, low-income mothers.

"It's all about making a better life," explains Trishelle Tate, a nurse in Yakima's program, one of 10 in the state (Spokane is the only other in Eastern Washington).

Here's the premise: if parents are given guidance early on in raising stable families, their babies will grow up

healthier -- physically, mentally, emotionally.

Nurses take the program to the prospective mother, starting to visit her home when she's pregnant and continuing until the child turns 2. During two-hour sessions, weekly during the baby's early months, then bi-weekly and monthly, they help quell the universal anxiety of new motherhood.

It's a little like living next door to Dr. Benjamin Spock, the famous pediatrician.

"I feel like I've learned a lot of knowledge and strength to help me continue to be a better mom and person in general," says Amy Knight, who joined the program when she was five months pregnant.

A sympathetic ear

"We tell them we're going to help them be the best parent they can, support their goals, help connect them with resources," explains Marilyn VanOostrum, NFP supervisor. "We ask a lot of questions and do a lot of listening.

"Who doesn't want to be listened to and understood?"

Housed at Children's Village, the countywide program began in August 2003 with four nurses (a fifth will be added later this month). The service is offered free; funding for the nonprofit agency comes from federal and state grants along with Yakima Valley Memorial Hospital and the Yakima Valley Farm Workers Clinic.

In Yakima's NFP program, the average mother's age is 17, but some have been as young as 14. The oldest is 33. All meet federal poverty or Medicaid guidelines.

Many harbor heartbreaking stories, such as the 13-year-old who was left caring for her three younger siblings after their mother was deported. Not long after, the teen became pregnant.

"These moms do have barriers," acknowledges Tate. "One of the biggest is they're teens."

Giving birth to a child as an unmarried teen and failing to finish high school are common indicators for a lifetime of poverty, as NFP nurses are well aware.

Their job is to encourage a climate of possibility: No matter the conditions of the home, the age of the parent, the lack of money, job or education, the baby can be parented to become a healthy, thriving contributor to society.

Keeping dreams alive

Ever nonjudgmental, nurses let the mother know they believe in her. "We're one adult in their life who even when things don't go as they would have liked, we're going to keep coming out and talking about their dreams," says VanOostrum.

Launched in 1977, NFP has become the life work of its founder, David Olds, Ph.D., a professor of pediatrics at the University of Colorado.

Motivated to improve the lives of some of the most fragile families in America, Olds has data showing that the program's benefits have been quantifiable and lasting.

For instance, follow-up studies were done in 1992, when the first children reached age 15, in Elmira, N.Y., where the program began. There had been a 48 percent reduction in child abuse and neglect and 59 percent fewer arrests compared with a control group.

NFP serves more than 20,000 mothers in 23 states; in Yakima, 100 women are enrolled in the program at any given time.

The program's efficacy in this state was documented two years ago by the Washington State Institute for Public Policy. The institute factored in the \$5,000 costs per family per year and found a net savings of more than \$17,000 over the mother and child's lifetimes in reduced hospital, welfare and criminal costs for families who have taken part in the program.

Family planning is one of the subjects emphasized in NFP. The goal is for no more than 25 percent of the mothers to get pregnant again during the program. Yakima meets that target with a 24 percent rate.

VanOostrum says there are other positive signs among local women. Many have graduated from high school or obtained GEDs, and some have gone on to college.

Most of all, she notes, "We see them working hard to be the best mom they can be."

Acknowledging that her job can sometimes be a battle against despair, Tate adds, "I get tired and overwhelmed sometimes, but every day there are successes. A mom will stick with breast feeding, someone will go back to school."

Tackling difficult issues

Nurses also broach the toughest subjects -- mental health problems, substance abuse, a partner's suspected gang ties, domestic violence -- and are mandated to report suspected abuse.

Emphasizing a mother's strengths rather than dwelling on problems is a hallmark of the program.

One day last spring, Tate opened a visit with 21-year-old Amy Knight by complimenting the young mother for successfully juggling her part-time job, class work at Yakima Valley Community College and 2-year-old Nathan.

While Tate and his mother chat, Nathan, stuffed Elmo in tow, toddles around the bedroom. Knight, her husband, Jonathan Tellez, and Nathan live upstairs in the home of Tellez' parents.

Tate talks with Knight about nutritious foods, well-child checkups, fresh smoke alarm batteries, getting Nathan outdoors and visiting the library.

Knight tells Tate she finds herself frequently saying "Don't" to Nathan, even though she tries to say "Do this" instead.

With soothing calm, Tate says, "I don't know a single person, no matter how enlightened, who doesn't say 'Don't'. You can pat your self on the back for coming up with alternatives."

Parenting has been easier for Knight because of NFP.

"I feel that I have gained a friend who cares and loves to listen and relate. I don't feel that I'm just a client," she says.

While developing the bond between nurse and mother is an overriding goal, the program also strives to involve fathers, but the primary focus remains on the mother.

Even when they believe they're positively impacting a mother and child's lives, there's still plenty of heartbreak to go around, the nurses say.

But, you deal with what is, Tate says.

"You can't rescue people, but you can help them rescue themselves," she explains.

The work is a perfect fit for her, she notes. Bilingual, the 37-year-old was raised in Peru by missionary parents and says she's used to the dismal poverty of the Third World.

"Some people aren't suited to do this job -- they haven't seen people living in garages, living in poverty. It doesn't faze me; I've seen every kind of living condition."

But there is still the angst of letting go. In accordance with the belief that a strong foundation has been laid by the time the child is 2, families graduate from the program when the child reaches that age. Then it becomes time for the nurse to take another future mother under her wide wing.

"It's gut-wrenching for the nurses" when a family graduates, admits VanOostrum. "But we treat it as a huge accomplishment -- because it is."

A graduation, a healthy toddler, a positive outlook on parenting -- that's what gives the nurses hope.

"We do change lives," stresses Tate. "We've been able to do some amazing work."