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10 years of helping kids succeed

By Peggy O'Farrell
pofarrell@enquirer.com

Terry McCutchen learned a lot about parenting from Every Child Succeeds.

The most important lesson? "They taught me to just let kids be kids," said the Newport woman, whose twins, Ben and Bogan, are now 9.

Every Child Succeeds, an Avondale-based home visitation program aimed at helping first-time mothers in Greater Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky give their babies the best possible start, marks its 10th anniversary this year. Since its founding in 1999, staff have made nearly 300,000 home visits to more than 15,000 families around the region, said president Judith Van Ginkel.

"Our whole focus is on developing autonomy for the moms and the families," Van Ginkel said. "They're with us for a certain period of time, and we want to make the best use of that time that we can."

The program was established as a collaboration between the United Way, Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center and Cincinnati-Hamilton County Community Action Agency when community leaders realized no United Way programs addressed developmental issues for very young children.

Kaycee Kellens' daughter, Kearney, routinely outsmarts the developmental tests that her home visitor administers. And Kellens credits the program with giving her the encouragement to earn her nursing degree.

"It was nice to have your own personal cheerleader," the Harrison woman said.

Home visitors work one-on-one with families until the baby turns 3.

Their jobs include everything from getting pregnant clients to a doctor for prenatal care to helping reduce premature birth and infant mortality to teaching parents how to manage temper tantrums.

They also make sure the children are ready to start pre-school when the time comes, Van Ginkel said.

"We're creating a literacy curriculum for children 0 to 3 in cooperation with the National Center for Family Literacy in Louisville," she said. "We're building it. It doesn't exist."

The program collects data on all of its families to measure their progress and identify which approaches are effective and which aren't.

The program's clients, who tend to be young and poor, are at greater risk for premature birth, which can lead to a host of health and developmental problems for their babies.

The program's focus on getting moms prenatal care has helped it rack up some impressive numbers:

90 percent of infants and children in the program are on-track developmentally.

90.9 percent of mothers who enrolled while pregnant delivered babies at a healthy birth weight.

99.5 percent of mothers who enrolled while pregnant went to four or more prenatal visits.

Infant mortality rates for families in the program is 4.7, compared to 7.8 for Ohio, 6.9 for Kentucky and 17.4 for the city of Cincinnati.

The program has earned a national reputation for its effectiveness, Van Ginkel said, and staff are working with agencies in Connecticut, Boston and Little Rock, Ark., interested in adapting its principles.

Through its 15 partner agencies, Every Child Succeeds offers a variety of parenting classes.

Kellens and her husband, Vic, attend classes together on effective discipline techniques and other topics. When Kellens struggled with post-partum depression after Kearney's birth, her home visitor helped her get through it.

"My mother hadn't dealt with it. My mother-in-law hadn't dealt with it. So there really wasn't anyone close that I could ask," Kellens said. "It was really helpful to have my home visitor there to tell me, 'It's not you. It's not that you're a bad mom.'"

Kellens and her daughter will graduate in December.

McCutchen still keeps in touch with her home visitor.

That could come in handy, she said when the twins started squabbling with their young sister, Cecily.

"Maybe she'll come back," McCutchen said.

Additional Facts

About Every Child Succeeds

Every Child Succeeds marks its 10th anniversary this year. Workers based at Beech Acres in Anderson Township made their first home visit in February 1999, and the agency was born on July 1 of that year as a cooperative effort by Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center, the United Way of Greater Cincinnati and the Cincinnati-Hamilton County Community Action Agency with six goals:

Strengthen the parent-child relationship

Maximize the development of high-risk children

Promote an environment for learning and emotional growth

Reduce unintentional injuries

Encourage health promotion

Link families with primary care services

The program serves families in Brown, Butler, Clermont or Hamilton counties in Ohio; and Boone, Campbell or Kenton counties in Kentucky.

In fiscal year 2008, the program served 3,521 families.

To be eligible, mothers must be a first-time mother and either be pregnant or have a baby under 3 months old at the time of enrollment and meet at least one of the following criteria:

-Single mother.

-Low-income.

-Receiving little or no prenatal care, or under age 18.