

Family Foundations Home Visitors Improve Life for Vulnerable Families



“Our program would not be what it is today without the training offered to our staff by UW-Extension Family Living specialists. Our home visitors have exhibited new skills and mastered skills in so many areas!”

--Family Foundations supervisor



Situation

To parents living in poverty or lacking the knowledge and skills to create a nurturing environment for a child, a home visitor program can make a world of difference. And to a community, a home visitor program is an investment in the health and future of its citizens.

Home visitors help struggling families who may be living in reduced economic circumstances, who need parenting education skills or who lack an adequate support system. The visitors work one-on-one with parents to teach them how to care for young children, how to handle stress, and how to tell if their child is developing in a healthy way. Sometimes home visitors fill a need as basic as simply listening to family members voice their concerns and frustrations.

Research shows that parents who understand their children’s development and are connected to their communities are less likely to abuse or neglect their children, resulting in fewer out-of-home placements for children. Families that are connected to their communities may need less help from social service agencies and are more likely to avoid the corrections system—reducing strain on these often overtaxed agencies.

In 1997, the State of Wisconsin acknowledged the need for a greater effort to build stronger families and promote child safety by authorizing the Department of Health and Family Services (DHFS) to establish programs to reduce child maltreatment and to support families.

The Family Foundations program (originally Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect) was the result. Funded by grant money, Family Foundations prevention programs began operating in nine Wisconsin counties—Brown, Door, Fond du Lac, Manitowoc, Marathon, Portage, Vernon, Waukesha, and Waupaca—and in the Lac Courte Oreilles Tribe.

Home visitation was a major component of Family Foundations prevention programs in the ten sites. With a grant from DHFS, Family Living Programs provided the crucial training and technical assistance that has elevated the skills of Family Foundations home visitation staff and supervisors since 1999.

Response

Family Living specialists developed training and technical assistance based on the expressed needs of the ten Family Foundations sites, current research and DHFS priorities to meet these goals:

- Develop workshops and courses based on best practices from the field of home visitation.
- Enhance leadership skills in program leaders and supervisors.
- Build skills for beginning and advanced home visitors to enable them to work effectively with vulnerable families.
- Provide site technical assistance to Family Foundations staff and their community partners.

After determining the training needs of the sites, Family Living staff worked with the DHFS to develop workshops and curricula that focused on best practices for home visitation, incorporating technology such as webcasts, teleconferences and online learning to reduce costs to participants and to extend the training to statewide audiences.

Family Living educators enlisted UW-Madison and UW-Extension faculty, as well as other experts to serve as presenters in areas such as child development, nutrition, parenting and poverty.

In 2005, 2006 and 2007, advanced training emphasized three issues that research has shown challenge the ability of home visitors to be effective with families—substance abuse, mental illness and domestic violence. The training also covered how to conduct motivational interviews to help families as they contemplate making changes.

Outcomes

Family Living specialists have conducted more than 190 home visitation trainings with nearly 4,500 educational contacts since the beginning of the Family Foundations program. On a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 being the highest score, participants gave these trainings an average ranking of 4.4.

In 2006, a survey asked participants who had taken home visitor training if they had made use of the communications skills they had learned in the training. One hundred percent responded that they had used the new skills in their work. The vast majority (82%) also reported that they had applied the principles of family development to create action plans with families.

Other positive results included home visitors' finding ways to ensure their personal safety on the job, improved confidentiality and the ability to maintain appropriate professional boundaries with families.

Family Living specialists produced resource materials and curricula, and developed a new web site for Family Foundations staff at www.uwex.edu/ces/flp/homevisit/pocan/index.cfm

According to the final evaluation report issued by the DHFS in 2003, estimates of substantiated reports of child abuse or neglect would have been higher among Family Foundations families without the program's services .

In summary, the training and technical assistance provided by Family Living Programs for the Family Foundations home visiting program has had a positive impact on the program's quality and the families who benefit from skilled home visitors. Advanced training has raised the skills of Family Foundations staff and supervisors. The group of ten Family Foundations programs now serves as a model for Wisconsin's growing number of home visitation programs.

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