



Putting People First – UCS works with local government to mobilize resources

United Community Services of Johnson County (UCS) has a long history of collaborating with County government and cities to build awareness of the community's health and human service needs. An example of this is the creation of the Human Service Fund in 1981. Since then, UCS has worked with the County and cities to provide grant review, evaluation and allocation recommendations to support critical programs. The fund provides grants to nonprofit agencies for programs meeting the needs of Johnson County residents with income at or near the federal poverty level. As a result, costs that might otherwise be

incurred by local governments are avoided, deferred or reduced.

Kansas Children's Service League's Healthy Families Johnson County is an example of the type of programming funded through the Human Service Fund. The program provides intensive home based education and family support services to parents who are experiencing stress, may feel overburdened and are in need of connection to community resources. Interactions between Family Support Specialists and families are relationship based, designed to promote positive parent-child relationships and healthy attachment, strength based, family centered, culturally sensitive and reflective.

The Need: Healthy Families Lead to Healthy Communities

When Zack was born, his mother Jenni was 22 and nearly died from heart failure due to an undiagnosed degenerative disease. Jenni learned about the Kansas Children's Service League Healthy Families Johnson County program from the hospital social worker while she was recovering. As a single mom, Jenni believed Healthy Families could provide much-needed support, as she lacked confidence in her ability to meet Zack's needs and the tools to encourage his development.

After her release from the hospital, she lived with family members. She was unable to work and received only a small amount of income from disability. Jenni had a close-knit family and friends, but after becoming a parent she stopped socializing and – even with a supportive family – she still often felt isolated.

Healthy Families America is the signature program of Prevent Child Abuse America, founded on the belief that early, nurturing relationships are the foundation for life-long healthy development. Kansas Children's Service League is the state chapter for Prevent Child Abuse America.

Jenni and her home visitor from Healthy Families Johnson County met weekly to focus on her parenting skills. Jenni expressed great interest in child development which inspired her Healthy Families home visitor to think of novel and more challenging activities each week. Jenni and her home visitor brainstormed activity ideas together to keep Zack interested and engaged. The visits were full of creativity, wonder, messiness, art, music, movement, and free expression. Zack's favorite activity was drumming. He could turn any object into a drum and drumsticks.

Jenni also struggled with feelings of anxiety about leaving her home for any reason and being separated from Zack. Though she knew he was safe in the care of Grandma and Grandpa, she described feeling disconnected

and overwhelmingly worried when he wasn't near. She talked with her home visitor about ways she could slowly become more comfortable leaving the house to pursue family activities and her self-interests. One of these included taking Zack to Healthy Families family events. Another was attending playgroups, which connected her to other moms in the area.

The Result

Jenni started blogging about her parenting adventures. It started with baking. She enhanced boxed baking goods and recipes. One of her recipes caught the attention of the Duncan Hines cake company, which invited her to present her recipe in their test kitchen at the company's headquarters. Fueled by this recognition, companies began sending free trial products to her for a blog review, including products for babies, moms, health and home. Eventually, this led her to paid contract work through a homeschooling curriculum company.

As Jenni became more confident in parenting, Healthy Families visits gradually decreased from weekly to twice a month, then eventually once a month. When Zack turned three, he and Jenni graduated from the program.

Jenni now has her own blogging website that empowers other moms by providing tips and tricks for home, food, faith, togetherness, and education.

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Jenni

Jenni shares that "Healthy Families was a positive experience that I can't totally put into words. Being a first-time parent is really nerve-racking. I was thrown into a situation of being a single mom who was recovering from some big health issues and suddenly I had a new baby to care for, too. There are just so many questions and it's important to do it right. I wanted to do all I could to give Zack the best care possible. Healthy Families helped me realize what I was doing right and gave me ideas of how to meet his future needs."

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