

On the Right Path

The Children's Home Society of Florida's Early Head Start program helps families realize they are stronger together. **by PETER PROKO**



Any parent of a young child will tell you that while each day is its own adventure, what matters most to them is that they are raising a happy and healthy individual in a stable, loving environment. But for many families struggling with the complex challenges that arise in life, this is certainly easier said than done. When faced with major issues like poverty, food insecurity, homelessness and domestic abuse, the family dynamic too often becomes fractured, resulting in child neglect and further suffering.

Recognizing how fragile these situations can be, the Children's Home Society of Florida (CHS) strives to keep families together during the most trying of times, working to strengthen the bond between parents and their children by helping to create nurturing home environments. Serving families in Orange, Osceola and Seminole counties, CHS offers a variety of programs in early childhood services, Community Partnership Schools, mental health counseling and child welfare.

And because a child's first few formative years play such a crucial part in their overall development, CHS is particularly proud of its Early Head Start (EHS) program, which serves low-income families, specifically pregnant mothers and children from birth to age 3, and educates parents on ways to help their child grow developmentally in preparation of transitioning to preschool.

Martha Fitzpatrick has been with CHS for 21 years and serves as the director of EHS. She says the

free program plays a vital role in providing families with the necessary tools to help their child reach key milestones, whether that be improving literacy and language skills or breaking barriers with emotional development and social interaction.

"Our goal is to help more children and families throughout Florida to realize their full potential. We provide comprehensive services focusing on child development and school readiness, preparing parents to be their child's first teacher," says Fitzpatrick.

The core of the program centers around weekly visits with an EHS home visitor who works with families to set goals for their child and establish proven practices to build and solidify parenting skills. This could be anything from carving out an area in the home for learning to establishing regular schedules that create a solid foundation to build upon.

"We focus on helping parents set up routines in the home. Bed time routines, meal time routines, reading and literacy routines; and that helps the parent-child bond to have set times where they are going through these routines together and it gives the child a sense of stability if they are repeated every day," Fitzpatrick says.

What's more, EHS aligns families in need with resources in the community like food banks, the local school system and even assists those seeking gainful employment. EHS families also have access to mental health counselors, occupational and speech therapists and much more.

"These are vital services that many families struggle to access on their own. At CHS, we say, 'We do good,' but we know we can't do it alone and community support is vital to our success," says Fitzpatrick.


One local mother who benefited greatly from EHS is Hillary Ortiz. After going through the program with her firstborn and seeing how overwhelmingly positive the experience was, she is now currently taking part in EHS with her second infant.

"I love the program because it has taught me about my child's development. Zaida, my home visitor, always makes sure that my child and I learn through daily moments and our visits are always fun," says Ortiz.

Of course, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused more disruptions to family life with increased rates of anxiety and depression, joblessness and rising mental health concerns. All of these factors have made the work that EHS does more important than ever. Experts project that child poverty will increase 25% from its pre-COVID rate. In Florida, that could mean an additional 21,000 children will be affected.

It's part of the reason why CHS launched its Family Support Warm Line, (888) 733-6303, in May 2020. The service immediately connects callers to a trauma-informed counselor for support and allows them to tap into a comprehensive network of partners and local resources depending on their specific needs. The service is free, confidential and available to anyone in Florida.

And yet despite the many great offerings it can provide and the fact that EHS has existed locally since 2010, many remain unaware of the program and that is something that Fitzpatrick would desperately like to change.

"We know the need is great and growing," she says. "Parenting during a pandemic is stressful and we need parents to know they are not alone and that they do not need to struggle through their challenges without a lifeline or support. There is a community waiting to embrace them," Fitzpatrick says. 



The Children's Home Society of Florida
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