

Nurse Family Partnership aims to develop model mothers in Polk County

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When Zuri Cienfuegos, 23, first found out she was pregnant, she remembered it was hard for her to take it all in.

Cienfuegos was married, had a full-time job and had just begun thinking of returning to college to get a degree that would move her career forward. How would a baby now fit in with all her plans? Jalisha Wynn, a Nurse Family Partnership (NFP) nurse with the Early Learning Coalition (ELC) of Polk County listened with a trained ear.

“I remember her saying, ‘What if I do it all wrong?’” recalled Wynn.

Cienfuegos’ concerns were not unlike those of other first-time mothers. Kristin Normand, nurse supervisor of the NFP program at the ELC, says that many first-time mothers feel unprepared for the many changes that will occur.

The lack of sleep, the importance of time management, the adjustment of the parents’ relationship and many other factors can become daunting to juggle for new moms.

At the NFP, each of Normand’s nurses are specially trained to support their clients as part of a free program offered to eligible mothers who are pregnant for 28 weeks or less and that have met the income requirements.

Once enrolled, the mothers are monitored for a healthy pregnancy and taught many things that will help make them become successful and confident mothers. They are also given referrals for healthcare, childcare, job training and other support services.

Wynn provided guidance and a special trust that Cienfuegos began to feel.

Wynn emphasizes knowing the strengths of each mother, since everyone is different. She strives to get to know the culture and circumstances of each mother and celebrate their successes to build confidence.

“It’s rewarding knowing that you’re building a relationship and seeing the changes,” said Wynn. “We are there to help them become self-sufficient.”

After the baby arrives, the nurses strive to keep the mothers talking about their feelings and their dreams. Lately, for instance, Cienfuegos has been discussing her original plan to return to college. She has decided to wait until Jacob, her newborn, is two. In these instances, nurses such as Wynn often serve as a sounding board.

“We’ve been talking about FAFSA forms and I break it down into easy steps. We talk about ‘what will your family think about you going back to school?’” said Wynn.

“When they ask you these questions, it gets you thinking,” reflected Cienfuegos.

In the NFP model, there is an emphasis to keep the focus on the mother, and her ultimate success with developing a close and healthy relationship with her baby. Because of this, the program has been successful for more than 40 years.

The program offers benefits that continue to show up in data. Among a few of those statistics for clients are a 48 percent reduction in child abuse and neglect; 67 percent less behavioral problems for children at age 6; and an 82 percent increase in the mother’s employment.

In preparation to be an NFP nurse, registered nurses that are hired must go through 40 hours of in-class training and 40 hours in the field training.

“Visits are client-led,” said Normand. “Our nurses need to be completely non-judgmental, empathetic and

transparent — but with boundaries. I teach them to wait 10 seconds, to pause and allow a mother to respond. The listening is not just with your ears. You have to listen with all your senses.”

Because Normand knows that some of the mothers may not feel they can vocalize their true feelings, she believes it’s important to also hear what they’re not saying, whether through body language or other behaviors.

When the time came for Cierra Edwards, 23 to have her baby, Aubree, she was prepared for what to expect during the birth and she decided her delivery option.

“I had the baby natural,” said Edwards. “I didn’t need the epidural. I liked it better that way to experience it.”

Aubree is now nine months old and Edwards is still nursing her, something Normand encourages all of the mothers to at least try. Throughout the pregnancy, and even now, Normand is only a call or text away to answer any questions Edwards may have.

“I always have someone to go to for professional advice,” said Edwards. “(Normand) is always accessible and she has the science to back up why things work.”

“We incorporate bonding and attachment into everything we teach,” said Normand. “We encourage infant massage, mom and baby classes, holding the baby often, answering the babies’ cries quickly. ...

“I tell them, talk to them, read to them, sing to them,” said Normand. “They will remember it.”

Cienfuegos, mother of two-month-old Jacob, often read Bible stories to her son and talked to him months before his arrival. Her voice soon became familiar to him.

“I actually always talked to him on the way to work in the morning, to tell him how I would want my day to go,” said Cienfuegos. “I would always call him ‘Baby Jacob,’ and sweet names like that. Now when he hears me call him those names I get his attention.”

At a recent visit with her client Nyree Velez, 23, Normand was happily greeted by Jaderius, Velez’s son who is almost 2. While his mother and Normand discussed developmental benchmarks in Jaderius’ development and diet, the bright-eyed boy played happily nearby.

He spoke clearly, giving evidence that his mother often spoke to him. She proudly reported that when he sees books in a library he runs to them and loves listening to stories. Velez is no longer a fearful mother that lacked confidence.

“She has a career now and even bought a new car,” said Normand. “She makes decisions for herself. She’s like a flower that finally bloomed.”

Learn more

To learn more about the Nurse Family Partnership offered by the Early Learning Coalition of Polk County, call or text (863) 519-8550, or email NFPinfo@elcpolk.org.



Luis Hernandez and Zuri Cienfuegos are all smiles with their son, Jacob Hernandez.

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