

## GROWING HEALTHY FAMILIES Program teaches the art of parenting

BY SUSAN K. LIVIO  
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

Yris Checo makes house calls in her job as a Spanish-language translator, accompanying therapists who teach parents how to help their developmentally delayed toddlers walk, talk and learn.

Every Wednesday, however, 30-year-old Checo becomes the student and her basement apartment in Jersey City the classroom, where a trained family worker comes to help her unravel a mystery that at times feels as foreign as another language.

Parenthood.

"I've worked with children before, but to be a mother is different," Yris (pronounced Iris) Checo said during a recent visit with Nala Ortiz, a family support worker from the Healthy Families Hudson County program.

Ortiz began making home visits about four months before Checo's daughter, Keily, was born, coaching the rookie mom-to-be and her husband, Wilfredo Soba, on what to expect at delivery, such as the cesarean section that wasn't expected but happened anyway.

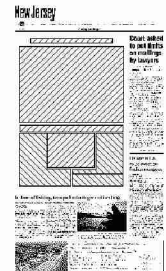
"This is a blessing — to have someone help you and give you information to take care of your baby," Checo said.

State agencies are investing in these voluntary home visitation programs more than ever before, making them the cornerstone of child abuse prevention strategy, as well as a service for low-income families on welfare. They've more than doubled the number of openings for families from less than 2,000 to about 4,200 over three years.

Women are matched with a trained family specialist or nurse who will advise and emotionally support them and monitor their children's development on a regular basis for 2½ to 3 years through programs such as the nationally recognized Healthy Families, Nurse-Family Partnership, or Parents as Teachers.

Most women like Checo join at the suggestion of their medical providers. A smaller but significant number

of these families also qualify for visitation programs because they rely on



public welfare. Some participants have been monitored by the Division of Youth and Family Services, the agency that investigates child abuse, but DYFS cannot make them join. Membership is voluntary, said Gina Hernandez, program manager for Healthy Families-TIP, overseen by the nonprofit Prevent Child Abuse New Jersey.

But numerous national studies indicate the relatively modest amount  
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of money spent to prepare and teach parents how to take better care of their children pays big dividends: Children are healthier, safer and more prepared for school because they come from stable and involved families.

"There are parents who need help, but they are embarrassed or feel ashamed to ask for help," said Robert McCormick, director of the Center for Child Advocacy at Montclair State University.

Professionals who make these routine visits are legally bound, as all people are, to report child abuse or neglect if they see it. But these workers and nurses enter these families' lives "in a non-threatening way" to focus on the child's health and development, McCormick said.

"People are so afraid if DYFS will be involved," McCormick said.

From a child protection standpoint, there is no more risky time in a child's life than in the first 12 months. About 60 percent of an estimated 1,760 children who died from abuse or maltreatment in the country in 2007 were 1 or younger, according to statistics from the U.S. Administration of Children and Families. The same pattern holds true in New Jersey, where 61 percent of the 81 children who died from maltreatment since 2006 were no more than a year old, according to the state Department of Children and Families.

The most common form of maltreatment is neglect, accounting for 59 percent of all confirmed incidents, federal statistics say.

Home visitation programs are especially geared to prevent neglect, McCormick said.

On a recent Wednesday morning, Checo's family support

worker Ortiz is talking about the mechanics and importance of teaching Keily how to play.

Ortiz, herself a mother of three children, has brought with her household items she's fashioned into toys; one is a cardboard paper towel roll wrapped in gold paper she uses to hide a scarlet red napkin. Ortiz coaxes the baby to pull the napkin, and Keily's olive eyes widen and her lips curl into a smile at this example of today's lesson in "cause and effect." Play-

ing peek-a-boo, and teaching a baby to grasp something with her hands reflects a vital skill in child growth and development.

"She wants to pick everything up and put it in her mouth," Checo said with a note of worry.

"We know why she does that, right? Remember why she does that? That's how they explore. They taste everything to see what it is first," Ortiz said reassuringly "Right now, her brain is 50 percent developed."

The state has just signed an \$80,000 contract with Johns Hopkins University to conduct a five-year evaluation of the home visitation programs' cost-effectiveness and impact on families, Children and Families officials announced last week.

Ortiz and her colleagues who work for Care Plus-NJ know the program makes a difference because the parents tell them so.

"I'm going to miss this program when she turns 3," Checo said at the end of Ortiz's visit. "They care about me."

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PHOTOS BY JOHN O'BOYLE/THE STAR-LEDGER

Family support worker Nala Ortiz, left, uses toys to interact with 5-month-old Keily Soba, in the arms of her mother, Yris Checo. Ortiz visits the family's Jersey City home to help with the child's development.