

Healthy babies start at home

Case workers teach young couples basics of parenting

By **DIANE D'AMICO**
Education Writer

The Atlantic City apartment doesn't have a lot of furniture, but most of what is there is dedicated to its smallest resident.

The high chair, car seat, playpen, bassinet, swing and baby Jeep exerciser all belong to Ronald Williams III, just 6 months old, who is the center of attention.

Kashea Braithwaite pops a "Born to Learn" video into her portable player.

The video for this visit demonstrates how babies learn through their senses. It addresses ear infections, how it's normal for babies to put things in their mouths, and how to use touch and massage to sooth a cranky or colicky baby.

"I wish I'd seen this when he was first born," Ronald's mother, Alicia Saxon, 19, said. "He had colic."

A case manager for the Healthy Families program coordinated by the Southern New Jersey Perinatal Cooperative, Braithwaite visits 15 families, starting on a weekly basis, to help them get a good start raising their newborn.

Braithwaite combines the home visits with group sessions where mothers can share ideas and baby stories.

"By coming to the home, we can really see how the baby is being cared for, how they are responding," she said.

During her visit, Braithwaite talks to Ronald's parents about playing patty-cake, peekaboo and talking to him constantly — whether it's about changing a diaper or trying a new food — and simply holding him.

"It's really not spoiling him to hold him," Braithwaite explains. "When you hold him to your chest, he can feel your heart beat. He knows your voice from in the womb. He knows that's my mom and dad."

Ronald Williams Jr., 25, marvels at the way his son learns. "It's interesting to see how they learn from touching," he says.

"What you're really saying is just be interactive."

"Yes," Braithwaite says, pleased at Williams' interest. "No way is the TV going to interact with your child. They are little sponges. He's grabbing everything you put in front of him."



South Jersey Perinatal Cooperative case manager Kashea Braithwaite plays peekaboo with Ronald Williams III at his parents' Atlantic City home. Press photos by Matthew Strabuk



Alicia Saxon, 19, and Ronald Williams Jr., 25, watch as their 6-month-old son, Ronald, plays with Braithwaite during her weekly visit with the young family.

Ronald III demonstrates by grabbing for the pictures in a pop-up book.

Braithwaite is part of a network of workers who visit more than 2,800 families statewide and almost 100 families in Atlantic County. The program is managed by Prevent Child Abuse with funding from the state Department of Children and Families Division of Family Development.

Gina Hernandez, the Healthy Families program manager of Prevent Child Abuse, said any par-

ent can take advantage of the service. They also get referrals from high schools, pre-natal clinics and doctors.

The families are visited weekly at first, then twice a week and finally monthly until the children are 3 years old. Each child is evaluated every six months. The goal is to enhance parent-child interaction, teach parents about their babies' development, and prevent abuse and neglect.

Each visit includes a lesson and goals for the baby. Saxon wants

Healthy Families Program Providers

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Cape May County
Holy Redeemer Health System

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Swainton, NJ 08210

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Web site: www.holyredeemer.com

Contact: Marguerite Smith, Manager

Cumberland/Gloucester/Salem Counties

Robin's Nest

42 South Delsea Drive

Glassboro, NJ 08028

Phone: 856-881-8689

Web site: www.robinsnestinc.org

Contact: Rubi Lukasiewicz, supervisor

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Ronald to learn to recognize his body parts. She and Williams are getting pictures together to make a scrapbook.

Williams is not usually home when Braithwaite visits, but he's interested in helping his son learn, and he believes all young parents would benefit from the program.

"I don't want him to be too advanced," he said of his son. "I just want him to keep up, so when he goes to school he's not behind."

Saxon said she is concerned about health hazards, such as lead poisoning.

"You think parenthood comes naturally," she said. "But there is so much you don't know."

"Call me anytime," Braithwaite tells her. "Even if you think it's the dumbest thing in the world."

Hernandez said they try to reach families as quickly as possible after the baby is born. At that age, every day is crucial.

"Our major strength is that we go out to them," she said.

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