

Too Much ANGER

WHEN THE HAMPTON ROADS REGIONAL CHILD FATALITY REVIEW TEAM REVEALED THAT MORE CHILDREN ARE KILLED FROM ABUSE AND NEGLECT IN HAMPTON ROADS THAN ANY OTHER REGION IN THE STATE, THEY ALSO OFFERED SUGGESTIONS FOR ELIMINATING CHILD ABUSE. AMONG THE SOLUTIONS WERE TWO PROGRAMS CALLED RESOURCE MOTHERS AND HEALTHY FAMILIES.

WHAT ARE THEY — AND DO THEY WORK?

BY KRISTEN DE DEYN KIRK ✱ PHOTOS BY KATHY KEENEY

SITTING IN THE HEALTHY FAMILIES Partnership's cafeteria in downtown Hampton, Shannon and Chris Whitney immediately reveal why they're taking an anger management class. ✱ "We're court-ordered," Shannon says matter-of-factly. ✱ Chris nods. ✱ The two 20-somethings remain expressionless as they describe the class.

"It's not from a textbook," explains Chris, who previously took a 28-week anger class offered through the city's Community Corrections. "You don't go from page to page. You get to act out your anger."

He likes the fact that tonight's class is one of only six sessions, and it's free. Participants get dinner and childcare, too.

"It's geared toward dealing with children," Chris continues. "It helps when my kids have tantrums."

Chris, who's wearing a God Bless America T-shirt, used to be in the Navy. About a year ago, he quit and came home to help Shannon "with this," he says.

"This" is the challenge of raising their four children, ages 8, 6, 5, and 9 months.

Shannon, who works as a waitress, had been taking care of them while Chris was out at sea. Her parents were back home in Rhode Island.

"There was no one to help me," she says with a sigh. "And I was dealing with people at work."

Shannon says she's worked with the Department of Social Services in the past because her 5-year-old daughter has learning and hearing disabilities. She's also taken parenting classes at Healthy Families.

A neighbor didn't think she was a good mother, though, and called Child Protective Services (CPS).

"The caller got it all wrong," says Shannon.

She won't give more details about her neighbor's accusations, only saying twice that "the caller didn't know what was going on."

CPS, however, found cause for concern: One night seven months ago, the department's employees visited the Whitneys' home and took their children.

Afterwards, one of the employees told Shannon to take an anger management class, before she "got out of control."

"They said it was just the way my face looked," Shannon says.

She clenches her jaw and squints her eyes to demonstrate.

"I didn't say anything when they came for my children, but they told me they could see my anger."

LAURI HOGGE, director of Children's Hospital of the King's Daughters' Child Abuse Program, has seen too much anger, the kind that starts as red in a parent's face and ends as a break in a child's arm.

Or worse.

Five years ago, Hogge worked as a child-abuser prosecutor for Norfolk. She held the position for six years, and for four years in Hampton.

"I grew tired and frustrated," she says, "of having to look at autopsy reports of babies."

Too often, someone she knew was an abuser was "dealt" a lower charge or found innocent, due to a lack of evidence. Also too often, she'd prosecute an abuser she'd previously faced. >>

Barbara Brennan can charm 40 percent of the mothers who need home visitations to accept them — but she'd like all 100 percent to say yes.

APRIL 2004 CHILD ABUSE PREVENTION MONTH

**Hampton Child Protection Team
Candlelight Vigil**
March 31, 6 p.m.
First United Methodist Church
Hampton
Call 898-8291 for details.

Blue Ribbon Campaign
begins April 1

**22nd Annual
Prevent Child Abuse
Celebrity Night**
April 1
Give donations/tips to your favorite
local celebrity-walter at Rargo's in
Chesapeake; at Azalea Inn and Town
Point Club in Norfolk; at Roger
Brown's Restaurant and Sports Bar
in Portsmouth; and at Federico's, Ha-
vana and El Giardino in Virginia Beach.

**CHKD Parent Workshop
"Positive Discipline"**
April 7, 7-8:30 p.m.
Call 688-7600 to register.

**Virginia Beach
Child Abuse Awareness Day**
April 24, 9 a.m.-1 p.m.
Seatack Recreation Center
Virginia Beach
Call 313-3799 for details.

FOR A COMPLETE LIST OF EVENTS, CALL PREVENT CHILD ABUSE HAMPTON ROADS AT 440-2749.

Hogge now works with officials from Norfolk, Virginia Beach, Chesapeake, Portsmouth and the Navy to collect evidence and review child abuse cases. Their goal is to build a strong-as-possible case against each abuser and prove his or her guilt.

Last year, the CHKD Child Abuse Program followed 850 cases. The start of this year has been even busier — which is not the kind of news Betty Wade Coyle, executive director of Prevent Child Abuse Hampton Roads, needs to hear.

She's had a rough enough start to 2004. In February, she authored the report "Child Abuse and Neglect Fatalities in Hampton Roads," and found that two-thirds of child-abuse-related deaths in the state occurred in Hampton Roads — where one fourth of the state's children live. For the year between July 1, 2002 and June 30, 2003, 31 child deaths in the state were caused by abuse or neglect. Twenty deaths occurred in Hampton Roads, with eight in Norfolk and four in Virginia Beach. In the previous fiscal year, 13 deaths had been reported in Hampton Roads.

Coyle is hesitant to say that parents in Hampton Roads are worse than those in other parts of the state. The higher-than-should-be number of fatalities for the region may simply be due to her diligence in investigating the cause of child deaths.

"I see a death in the paper and I know it's neglect," says Coyle. "I refer it to Social Services and ask them to investigate."

She doesn't know if community leaders in other regions of the state are as proactive.

Without this knowledge, Coyle can only focus on what she knows for sure when she looks for trends and recommends solutions.

Three conclusions she's reached: Eight of the deaths in the last fiscal year involved military families; one-fifth of the children killed suffered from chronic child abuse; and since 1998, there's been an increase in the number of children dying from neglect, versus abuse.

The strong military presence in our region could be part of the reason why our child-abuse fatality numbers are high. Coyle says there's been some speculation that the war in Iraq and the war on terrorism have increased military family stress this year with more frequent and longer deployments. The numbers could support this theory: Military families

accounted for 40 percent of the child deaths in fiscal year 2003. In past years, the number has been around 20 percent.

Obviously, though, Hampton Roads always has a transient population — which means many residents don't have extended families nearby to offer help with children; they may not have ties to the community; and they may not even know their neighbors.

Coyle praises the military for offering parenting classes, but just like with other communities in Hampton Roads, she'd like more classes and more parents attending them.

"It's a stigma (to attend a class)," says Coyle. "Like you're being bad. Good parents want to know more."

Some parents who need the classes the most have a difficult time getting to one because they're working three or four jobs. A solution would be for businesses to offer classes before or after shifts.

Those parents with more flexible schedules may be more likely to attend a class if it were offered at their church or nearby school or daycare center. Keeping the cost low, or free, and offering childcare are important as well.

Coyle notes that good parenting classes are available through the local YMCAs, St. Mary's Infant Home and the Kiwanis-sponsored Kids Priority One — but she's disappointed that the government doesn't do more for families.

President George Bush is encouraging marriage, which Coyle doesn't necessarily disagree with when the relationships are healthy, she says. But she wishes he and other leaders would take a broader approach, and honor all types of families — such as ones led by single parents or grandparents.

"Anyone working with kids needs information on being a good caregiver," she says.

"The government needs an abuse prevention plan for everyone."

Coyle is impressed with one local effort that sprang from leaders with vision: Hampton's Healthy Families Partnership. Over a decade ago, then-Mayor Jimmy Eason decided he was going to make Hampton the best city for families, says Coyle. Today, the city has a program that links the nationwide Healthy Families initiative with the Health Department, the libraries and Social Services

to reach as many families as possible — not just those who are traditionally "high risk" for child abuse and neglect.

WALK INTO THE HEALTHY Families Partnership in Hampton and you might think you've walked into the '80s show *Fantasy Island*, where moments before your arrival everyone has been coached with an enthusiastic "smiles everyone, smiles."

Joanne Tribus has two smiles painted on her: One on her face with cranberry lipstick, and the other on her name tag in the "O" with purple Magic Marker. She helps class participants select their name tags as they enter the building and jokes with them that she's glad they came back for the fourth of the six sessions.

"I was worried I was a little hard on you last week," she teases one woman.

Tribus' class was one of three being held last Tuesday night for parents, and maybe the most serious, at least in title. The other two were called *Siblings Without Rivalry* and *The 10 Greatest Gifts You Give Your*

Children. Tribus' class is simply titled *Anger Management*.

She has 14 students, five of whom are men. Typically the class has more women, with some being single moms and military wives.

The fourth session is often a favorite with class participants because Tribus focuses on what the participants need.

"It's nurturing *themselves*," she explains. She starts off with a stress test — not the physical kind offered in doctors' offices but a written, 15-question test about what causes the class participants stress. Then she offers the antidote: Figure out what you need to do to de-stress. Is it more sleep, more exercise, more time with friends?

To get the class thinking, Tribus uses a "needs wheel" with five sections: physical, spiritual, creative, intellectual and social. She also passes out a list of 50 ways to relax.

Part of the evening includes the participants' family log: Tribus asks each of them to try one technique from the class during the week with their family and then write about. How did the technique change a situation? You? Your family? The participants hand in their statements, and Tribus reads them back.

"I'm wondering if the class is making a difference," she says.

As Tribus and the other two teachers lead their classes, the participants' children gather in three other rooms, divided by ages.

The rooms have VCRs and games, but it's not playtime for the kids. Not exactly. Their teachers talk about how you feel when you get angry and how you can use self-talk to calm down.

Shelia Reynolds, who has taught both children and adults at Healthy Families,



Betty Wade Coyle recommends making more parent education classes available to parents working multiple jobs and removing the stigma of attending such classes.

says everyone, regardless of age, faces the same challenges when it comes to anger, and each family often has a pattern for dealing with it.

Reynolds likes when she can bring both groups together. She asks everyone to write what makes them mad about the other group, and every time an adult will note "Never listens" — and so will one of the kids.

"Everyone laughs," says Reynolds, "and it's an eye-opener. Parents forget that kids want to be heard."

THE USE OF HUMOR, ALONG WITH free dinner provided by area merchants and free childcare, keep participants enrolled in Healthy Families, says Brenda Snead, a manager with the Hampton program. Those who attend at least 50 percent of their classes receive a certificate of participation and those who attend 75 percent receive a graduation "diploma." Her class retention rate is 78 percent, compared to a national average of 40 percent.

Snead also knows of repeat customers, such as Karen Green. A tall woman with long blonde hair and a youthful face, the 46-year-old is the first to volunteer when a group is asked if they'd like to share their Healthy Families experience.

She was introduced to Healthy Families when she lived in Newport News and gave birth to her now 5-year-old daughter. Her boyfriend had left her, and the business she thought would hold her job didn't.

After being referred to the program, Karen met Jessie, a Healthy Families case manager who visited her once a week.

"Losing my job and boyfriend were big blows to my self-esteem," says Green with tears welling in her blue eyes. "Jessie was real sweet and encouraging. I don't know what I would have done without her."

Green, who also has a 26-year-old daughter, relearned a child's developmental stages from Jessie and turned to her when she needs clothing and counseling.

Back then, she lived in a one-bedroom apartment. Two years ago, she bought a house.

Women in most Hampton Roads cities have the opportunity to be helped like Green, because most of the cities have Healthy Families and Resource Mothers programs. Whether or not a new mom will learn about the program is a gamble, though. Most of the programs rely on referrals from doctors, hospitals and city Social Services offices for finding new clients. The Healthy Families office or a Resource Mother then has to follow-up with the referred family, which is challenging because many of the families don't have a phone and move often.

Chesapeake's program, Chesapeake Health Investment Program/Healthy Families, takes the most pro-active approach in recruiting new mothers. Barbara Brennan visits Chesapeake General Hospital and takes a two-prong approach. She first reads patients' charts looking

for signs that a new mom is at a high risk for abusing her child. If she sees enough — the mom is under 18; separated, divorced, or widowed; received no or late prenatal care or didn't attend many appointments; or she unsuccessfully sought an abortion — Brennan visits the new mom while she's still in the hospital. During the conversation, she tries to learn about the mother's education level, employment history, housing and drug use. If the mom shows enough risk factors, Brennan will offer Healthy Families' services.

But even after hearing all that Brennan can offer — help finding a doctor, insurance, transportation, job counseling, guidance on baby development, support groups — many decline help. Last fiscal year, CHIP/Healthy Families visited 658 new Chesapeake moms in the hospital and determined that 144 were "positive," or in need of their services. Only about 40 percent, or 54 mothers, enrolled.

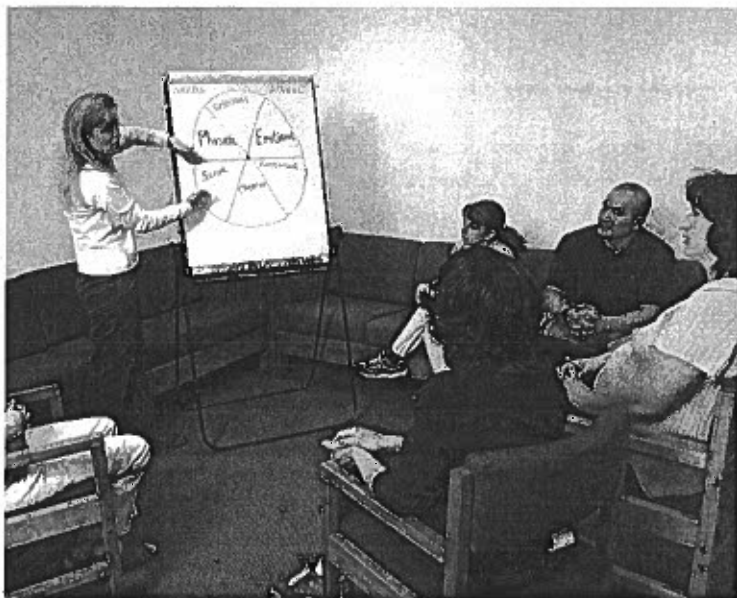
"It's hardest to get through to the 15-year-olds," says Brennan. "The grandmothers should be more supportive. They'll say 'it's up to her (the young mother.)' I wish they'd try to convince their daughters to sign up instead. That 15-year-old thinks she knows everything."

CHIP/HEALTHY FAMILIES USED to co-exist with Resource Mothers in Chesapeake. Healthy Families focused on first-time moms, and offered services for up to five years. Resource Mothers assisted any mother with a child under the age of 2. That is, until this past June when Resource Mothers lost its funding for Chesapeake. Maryellen Browne, director of home visitation services for Family Services of Tidewater, used to oversee the program. She doesn't know why her grant of about \$35,000 wasn't renewed for Chesapeake — but her funding for Portsmouth and Virginia Beach remained intact.

Now, some 100 Chesapeake women who previously had free home visits from a Resource Mother don't.

Grant funding has become risky, says Kay Carey, CHIP/Healthy Families' new director of development. While state and federal funding have been level (good news considering budget cuts), grants haven't. With fluctuations in the stock market, some foundations have lost money and aren't offering as many grants. Others offer funding only for new programs and for a limited amount of time.

Carey's job, a newly created position which began last month, is to change the make-up of CHIP/Healthy Families' funding. Right now, about four percent of her \$632,000 annual budget comes from businesses and donors in Chesapeake — including the City of Chesapeake. (The City provides \$5,000 annually; compared to Hampton's \$1,789,185. Overall funding is even worse in Portsmouth, where the annual Healthy Families budget is about \$100,000.)



According to Brenda Snead, free food and free childcare keep parents coming to classes at Hampton Healthy Families Partnership. Her programs' retention rate is 78 percent, compared to a national average of 40 percent.

Carey wants that number of four percent local donor funding to grow to 22 percent.

Donors, of course, want to know what kind of return they'll get on their investment. And fortunately, fundraisers can show some bang for donors' bucks: Research shows home visitations and parenting classes do impact the recipients' lives. A study conducted at Hampton's Healthy Families Partnership over a four-year period found an increase in the number of children immunized with an average 92 percent, compared to the state average of 69 percent. The study also noted a decrease in the number of repeat births to teenagers. The citywide average for Hampton was 36 percent and the state's was 30. Healthy Families teen participants' repeat birth rate was 8 percent.

Statistics linking parent education with a reduction in child abuse aren't as easy to find. In the early '90s, the National Committee for Prevention of Child Abuse conducted a study of over 1,000 participants in a child abuse prevention program. Researchers found that parents' potential for committing child abuse declined — but they didn't review actual child abuse reports or hospital records.

Lée Huntington, a developmental psychologist and researcher, has conducted studies for Hampton Healthy Families Partnership. From 1992 until 2000, he found a 26.8 percent reduction in the rate of child abuse and neglect among program participants. The region's rate declined by only 3.4 percent during the same period.

A 2002 study he conducted, however, showed no significant difference between the program group and a control group. But good news came in a summary re-

port released last October by the national Task Force on Community Preventive Services. The task force reviewed 26 studies that attempted to link home visitations and a decrease in child abuse. They found a 40 percent median reduction in child abuse and neglect. The most successful programs used nurses or mental health workers with post-high school education.

Odessa Thompson, program coordinator for Resource Mothers in Norfolk, doesn't need numbers to know home visits make a difference.

She goes into homes and sees stress everywhere. A mother may be working as a housekeeper, and she's late to work because she's been throwing up because of her morning sickness. It's her third pregnancy. Her 4-year-old has strep throat, and her 5-year-old has measles. Grandma can't come and watch the kids, and the mom is about to lash out.

"I can talk to that boss," says Thompson, "and explain the situation, try to make it easier."

She also talks to the mother about backup childcare plans, and then stays in close contact with her.

Thompson and the other home visitors' pro-active focus can save lives. According to the Healthy Families America website, three million cases of child abuse and neglect are reported to CPS every year. Yet half of the child abuse-related fatalities stem from families not under CPS's watch.

Healthy Families and Resource Mothers get a set of eyes into homes that aren't on CPS's radar screen.

They just need more money for more eyes — and more community support to get into more homes. ■