

Healthy Families

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Tonique Williams, mother of 2-year-old Ny'Asia Williams, has participated in the Healthy Families Durham program since she was pregnant.

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DURHAM -- With "a smile in between the tears," Tonique Williams has nearly reached the three-year mark of first-time motherhood.

She's the first to admit that it hasn't been an easy road, saying that when pregnant, she was "weak and didn't have any support," but thanks to Healthy Families Durham, she's standing on her own two feet as the strong mom of a giggly, whip-smart 2½-year-old girl.

Healthy Families, a home-based family support program of the Center for Child and Family Health, is marking its 15th anniversary this week.

Jan Williams (no relation to Tonique), is director of the program -- funded by Durham's Partnership for Children, a Smart Start initiative, and the United Way of the Greater Triangle -- and has been there from the very beginning.

"I truly believe that it can change the trajectory of a child's life, and I guess that's what

keeps me here after 15 years," she said.

Tonique Williams became involved with Healthy Families, which targets first-time parents of children up to age 3, when she was pregnant with her daughter, Ny'Asia.

The first task was to identify some of her needs and goals. The inclusion of her own goals was "excellent," she said, noting that not all programs focus on what parents want to achieve.

"This program cares about everything you need," she said. "I didn't have housing, and I didn't have a job when I first got pregnant."

Family support worker Agatha Schutte said that despite Williams' obstacles, her love for her daughter was undeniable.

"With all this was happening, I saw that she was so strong with the baby," Schutte said. "As hard as it was, anytime you talked about the baby, she'd have a smile in between the tears."

One of eight family support workers at Healthy Families, Schutte's job is three-fold: educate parents on child development, screen children for progress and connect families to community resources.

She helped secure housing for the family, linked Williams with funds to provide some financial stability and did her best to keep little bookworm Ny'Asia supplied with plenty to read.

With the goal being long-term success, Schutte also helped Williams chart a course for her career. The new mom's dream is to become an interior designer, so she participated in a Durham Technical Community College construction program, brought to her attention by Healthy Families, to learn more about the construction and design of homes. She was the lone woman to graduate from the program earlier this month.

"It opened doors for me," said Williams, who now does secretarial work for the city of Durham and is planning to take an interior design course at Durham Tech this fall.

Schutte has been a shoulder to cry on when life was rough and a cheerleader in times of joy.

"She really supported me a lot," Williams said, her eyes glistening with tears. "She helped me out when I was down and out, stressed out and stuff like that. And then she supported me as far as going to my graduation.

"She knows my dreams. She's like a mom to me."

Williams is now one of Healthy Families' biggest advocates. Although her official

relationship with the program will end in June when Ny'Asia turns 3, Williams said she'd like to stay involved to some degree, perhaps as a volunteer.

"I'm going to stalk them!" she joked.

For now, she's focused on encouraging other parents, "especially the single mothers," to take advantage of the benefits of Healthy Families. She said the program does a great job of ensuring client confidentiality and stressed that family care workers won't "be in your business. It's more about the support system." Families can opt out of the program at any time.

Healthy Families teaches first-time parents valuable lessons about child development, such as when they should be expected to know the alphabet, and about free or inexpensive activities that parents can do with their children, Williams said.

It also helps parents keep their cool when things get out of hand.

"As a mom, to be honest, it's stressful, but Healthy Families keeps it balanced," she said. "When my daughter had her 'days' -- like a normal child has those 'upset' days -- they helped me to deal with it, to cope with the problems."

Jan Williams, the program director, noted that the popular program does have a waiting list. It operates on a first-come, first-served basis, and those who are interested in getting involved should call 419-3474 or email info@ccfhnc.org.

Anyone interested in supporting the program, either with money or donations of things such as developmental toys, diapers, baby wipes or story gift cards, can contact Jan Williams at jan.williams@duke.edu.

Tonique Williams said that thanks to her efforts and the work of Healthy Families and Ny'Asia's day care, 21st Century Child Care, the toddler's future is as bright as her smile.

"She's 2, and she knows how to do so many things," she said. "People ask me, 'Are you sure she's 2?' That's how smart she is."