

DHS  
MAKING  
AN  
IMPACT

## FAMILY SUPPORT CENTERS

As proponents of prevention, the Department of Human Services has for many years depended on family support centers to be a linchpin in the work we do to strengthen families with young children.

When we asked parents in some of the 4,000 families who take part in family support centers annually to name the benefits of participation, their answers reflected our confidence in the services the centers provide.

The parents have found responsive, knowledgeable and respectful partners to help them strengthen their skills and overcome their challenges to be their best as individuals and as parents. They find support from their peers and playmates for their children. They find a trustworthy place to turn for advice and in times of urgent need. The parents find they share a desire to spread the news about family support and how it helped them change the course of their lives.

No family is immune from struggle. Some face challenges that are best met by teaming up with others who have similar goals. Here we share three personal stories as told by parents who look back with gratitude for the opportunities family support centers have afforded them to grow.



Selena was with her 2-year-old son at a SummerFood site four years ago when a staff member from the nearby family

support center invited her to come by for a visit.

“It took a little while before I could go because my job interfered,” Selena said. “As soon as I was able to go, I went. I love it there. I love the people there.”

At the time, Selena had been having some issues involving child welfare. She was grateful for the family support center services that helped her improve her parenting skills and get her through that difficult time.

“Once a week, for an hour and a half, they had some kind of class,” Selena said. “Some taught about positive parenting—things like how to take care of babies, Ages and Stages [child development assessments] and Love and Logic [discipline without force]. Then on Thursdays, we have an exercise class that teaches routines that we can do at home. It’s great because it helps me to keep my [chronic illness] in check. While the parents are in their group, the kids are doing a program for school readiness.”

In addition to the activities that take place at the family support center, Selena also appreciates the referrals she has gotten to help her care for the special needs of her children.

“I was referred to the Alliance [for Infants and Toddlers] and to a child development specialist when my daughter was two,” Selena said. “They helped me be the best parent I can be and helped my daughter. The center is a great place where moms can get together and share their stories. We all have rough times. The center helps you not have to go through them alone.”

Marc Cherna  
Director

Allegheny County Department of Human Services



Dan Onorato  
Allegheny County Executive

John relocated to Allegheny County in 2004 after he was injured during his second tour of active duty as a mechanic with the U.S. Army. He works hard to make ends meet and might have made it through life without ever hearing of family support centers.

However, when the father of one of his son's Head Start classmates invited him to join the fatherhood group at a local family support center, John's life changed.

"We include single dads, married dads, dads who share custody, stepdads...any man who cares for children is welcome to join," John said. "It's all about meeting different people from different backgrounds and learning that you're not alone."

The monthly meetings generally include about 10 fathers. Dads commonly bring their children along for their own opportunity to socialize in a safe and engaging environment.

Each meeting has a purpose beyond peer support, though. Guest speakers present the fathers with topics such as balancing a household budget; first aid basics; setting reasonable expectations for a child's behavior; effective, safe disciplining; and how to control anger.

---

Elsa and her husband love their children—a 25-year-old son who works in the trauma unit at a local hospital, an 8-year-old daughter who is well despite her premature birth and a 4-year-old son who has come a long way in his short life.

"I was young and didn't know about family support centers when my first child was born," Elsa said. "I'm so thankful I found out about them for my last two. Knowing what I know, I tell lots of moms in my neighborhood about the benefits."

Elsa first joined her local family support center when her daughter was born. The staff enrolled them in the Healthy Start program, where Elsa learned how to meet her baby's special needs and how to take care of herself. Through other area family support centers, Elsa attained her GED, took part in parenting groups, enjoyed family-focused activities and benefitted from a food pantry.

John sees great value in all he's learned. "Having conversations about these challenges shows that everyone has hardship. But, we can look at our own upbringing and see that we can do parenting differently. We can do the right thing, not make the same mistakes our parents did. I've learned to stay calm when one of my kids acts up. Then my choice of discipline is consistent, safe and effective. I've learned I have good options."

The fatherhood group is about more than meetings. It also organizes fun family outings to local attractions, with the admission provided for free through community donations. Families from many family support centers also come together for an annual picnic.

"All these programs have made such a difference in the lives of our families," John said. "I'm so thankful the fatherhood program found me."

---

When Elsa moved before her second son was born, she joined a family support center in her new neighborhood.

"My son had a few seizures soon after he was born," Elsa said. "The center referred me to the Alliance for Infants and Toddlers who evaluated his health on a regular basis. I took part in Healthy Baby, Healthy You [and] that helped me, too. Then, before he was even two, I knew something was wrong. He was aggressive toward other children, he hadn't started talking and other milestones were absent. I couldn't find anyone who believed me that things weren't right. After continuing to speak up, the center connected me with the SET [Starting Early Together] office. They referred me to an Alliance staff person who did an Ages and Stages evaluation. He was diagnosed with social and emotional disorders. Pittsburgh Public Schools got involved and now he goes to a special pre-school where he gets the attention he needs."

"I don't know where I'd be if I hadn't learned how to advocate for myself and my kids by being part of SET and the family support center. My kids love the center because there are so many things to do. Right now I'm involved in fundraising so we can keep doing nice things for kids and families. I feel so protective of our center. It means a lot to this community."

For more information, visit:

[www.alleghenycounty.us/dhs/fpsupport.aspx](http://www.alleghenycounty.us/dhs/fpsupport.aspx)