

## **DHS implements PCIT to support families**

For caregivers of young, disruptive children, opportunities for outside assistance often seem limited; however, DHS is now encouraging families to use a unique therapy to decrease problem behaviors, enhance parenting skills and disrupt the cycle of abuse.

Parent Child Interaction Therapy (PCIT) is an evidence-based intervention for parents and their young children ages 2.5 through seven who have disruptive behaviors, or families that have experienced violence or neglect. During weekly PCIT sessions, the caregiver and child interact in a specially designed playroom. While the caregiver and the child play, a therapist watches through a one-way mirror and coaches the caregiver through an earpiece. The first half of the program allows the child to lead the play while the parent focuses on using praise to reward positive behavior and ignoring negative behaviors. The second half of the program focuses on ways the parent can offer consistent, predictable responses to negative behavior beyond ignoring. Families “graduate” from the program when the parent can successfully use PCIT skills and the parent rates the child’s problem behaviors as low – typically after 18-25 sessions.

“Often, the best way for people to learn is by doing, and PCIT allows for the parents to practice skills in an environment where they are constantly supported and guided,” said Joyce Blackburn, behavioral health specialist in the Office of Children, Youth and Families (CYF) Central Regional Office. “This really increases the parent’s confidence and allows them to feel prepared to practice these skills in ‘real-world’ situations.”

Through generous funding from the Heinz Endowments, DHS has recently constructed PCIT playrooms in four of its Family Support Centers: Braddock Family Care Connection, Duquesne Family Support Center, Hilltop Family Care Connection (Carrick) and Providence Family Center (North Side).

“We’re excited to bring PCIT right into the neighborhoods of the families we serve,” Joyce said. “The Family Support Centers offer a friendly community setting which may be close to home and familiar to the families, while avoiding the formality and stigma of a mental health clinic. The settings are warm and non-threatening, and serve as a comfortable environment for this type of therapy.”

Caseworkers who are interested in referring a family to PCIT should contact their office’s behavioral health specialists for more information.