

Starting early gives children a leg up

By Doug Blackburn Democrat senior writer
January 3, 2013



Tomaka Ceasor and her three children, Iyana Smith, Jazzlynn Smith and Sierra Smith pose before a Head Start visit in Havana in December. - Mike Ewen/Democrat

Tomaka Ceasor knows all about daily challenges.

A single mother of three children ages 3 and younger, Ceasor works part time as a cook with the National Guard's 160th Reserve Unit. She's also taking online classes as she pursues a degree in psychology.

The Havana resident says she would never be able to stay on top of everything if it wasn't for Early Head Start, a program Florida State University has administered in Gadsden County for the past 16 years. An EHS home visitor has been spending up to two hours a week with Ceasor and her children for the past year, since she was pregnant with Jazzlynn, now almost 11 months old. The home visitor offers advice while helping Ceasor organize her life.

"They make sure I'm not stressing, that I'm able to cope. They help me better myself," Ceasor said.

The EHS home visitors also work directly with Ceasor's children, making sure they are ready for the school systems that await. As a result, Ceasor's oldest, 3-year-old Sierra, is on track for pre-kindergarten.

"She basically knows her ABCs, she can spell, she knows her colors. She knows what she needs to know to be ready for school," Ceasor said.

FSU uses an \$829,000 annual grant from the federal Department of Health and Human Services to fund EHS, one of a handful of programs housed in the university's Center for Prevention and Early Intervention Policy. Sandra White, who has been working with Ceasor and her family, is one of six full-time home visitors. Each has a client list of about 12 families.

"At times it can be overwhelming, but when it comes to lots of challenges in a family, we have staff on our

team that can help me with different issues and help keep them focused," White said. "I have several team members that I can go to: a supportive supervisor, health coordinator, education coordinator and others."

FSU has developed an extensive, evidence-based curriculum that serves as a road map for its home visitors. The curriculum is employed by numerous institutions and social service agencies across the country.

Deborah Perry, with Georgetown University's Center for Child and Human Development, described FSU's EHS curriculum as invaluable.

"They (FSU) are on the cutting edge of maternal and early child work," Perry said. "Their program is extremely flexible and helps address a range of outcomes. It takes the research and packages it in an extremely accessible way."

EHS is an outgrowth of Head Start, the federal program which started three decades earlier in 1966. EHS was born out of a realization that key developmental issues needed to be addressed well before a child was in preschool.

FSU started EHS in Leon County at the same time the Gadsden County program began in 1996. The Leon County program has been run by Kids. Inc. since 2001.

EHS is designed for low-income families that are below the federal poverty level. For a family of four, that translates into an annual income of \$23,000 or less.

Rebecca Pruet, the founding director of FSU's EHS program - she held that title for 16 years, until September -- describes EHS as a program that helps families learn to clear what can seem like insurmountable hurdles.

"Early Head Start can be essential to helping these families to become self-sufficient and to develop goals to be more self-sufficient. Over the years we've had quite a few success stories," Pruet said. "It's families who need just a little bit of help at a time when their children are young and it's a crucial time in the children's development."

Damonica Haywood doesn't need much prompting to sing the praises of EHS, and how it helped her and her then 2-year-old son Tommy seven years ago. Tommy had suffered a stroke that left him with severe language and other developmental delays.

A health-care worker in Quincy recommended she contact EHS, which she credits with essentially saving her life and Tommy's. Her home visitor helped enroll Tommy in a child care center near where she worked at Riverchase Care Center and Nursing Home.

"The staff members at FSU were phenomenal," Haywood said. "They made sure Tommy got all the therapy he needed in a setting he was familiar with."

Seven years later, Tommy is in the fourth grade and fully recovered. EHS staff also counseled Haywood on what it would take for her to commute to Chipola College to earn her nursing degree, which she has done.

"Early Head Start worked wonders," Haywood said. "Now I recommend it to almost anyone whose child has had any type of delays."

[Share on Facebook](#)

[Share by SMS](#)

[Share on Twitter](#)

[Share by Email](#)