



# Healthy Families

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## Program Facts and Features

**What is the Healthy Families America Initiative?** Healthy Families America (HFA) is a national initiative to help parents of newborns get their children off to a healthy start. Participation in HFA services is *strictly voluntary*. HFA offers home visiting and other services to families in over 450 communities, with a ninety percent acceptance rate.

In 1992, Prevent Child Abuse America, formerly known as the National Committee to Prevent Child Abuse, launched Healthy Families America in partnership with Ronald McDonald House Charities. The initiative promotes positive parenting and child health and development, thereby preventing child abuse, neglect and other poor childhood outcomes.

**Why is Healthy Families America Needed?** Each year an estimated three million cases of suspected child abuse and neglect are reported to Child Protective Service (CPS) agencies, yet more than half of child abuse fatalities are typically unknown to CPS. Almost three children die from child abuse and neglect each day.

At the same time, according to a report released by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, “the earliest years of a child’s life are society’s most neglected age group, yet new evidence confirms that these years lay the foundation for all that follows.”<sup>1</sup> Programs that begin working with parents right after birth stand the greatest chance of reducing the risk of child abuse for several reasons:

1. new parents are eager and excited to learn about caring for their babies;
2. positive parenting practices are supported before patterns are established;
3. most physical abuse and neglect occurs among children under the age of two;
4. forty-four percent of fatalities due to child maltreatment occur before the first birthday;
5. children need to be immunized from childhood disease during the first two years of life; and
6. the most critical brain development occurs during the first few years of life.

**What is the Relationship between HFA and Prevent Child Abuse America?** Prevent Child Abuse America is the nation’s leading child abuse prevention organization. Founded in 1972, Prevent Child Abuse America is committed to preventing child abuse in all its forms by working at national, state and local levels. Prevent Child Abuse America, in collaboration with its Chapter Network in most states, is improving quality of life for at-risk children and families.

Prevent Child Abuse America/Healthy Families America has nationally recognized strengths in public awareness, research, training, quality assurance, and a system to provide technical assistance to state HFA leadership teams. This combination of strengths enables HFA to put research into practice, and assures the consistent provision of quality services as programs grow and expand.

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1. Starting Points: Meeting the Needs of our Youngest Children. (New York: Carnegie Corporation of New York) April, 1994.

**Who are HFA's Partners?** HFA programs collaborate with other family support organizations to most effectively utilize scarce resources, provide a comprehensive array of services to families, and avoid duplication of services. Prevent Child Abuse America and national partners such as the American Academy of Pediatrics, the National Association of Children's Hospitals and Related Institutions, the National Head Start Association and the Cooperative Extension Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, have been collaborating to facilitate partnerships among state and local affiliates so that services will be available for families with young children.

**What are Healthy Families America's Critical Elements?** All HFA programs adhere to a series of Critical Elements, which represent the field's most current knowledge about implementing successful home visitation programs. Critical Elements serve as the framework for program development and implementation. Only those programs that apply for affiliation and promise to adhere to all the elements, as determined through the HFA credentialing system, may be referred to as HFA sites. In addition to helping assure quality, these basic elements allow for flexibility in service implementation to permit integration into a wide range of communities and provide opportunities for innovation.

The following are brief descriptions of each element.

### **Service Initiation**

- Initiate services prenatally or at birth.
- Use a standardized assessment tool to systematically identify families who are most in need of services.
- Offer services voluntarily and use positive outreach efforts to build family trust.

### **Service Content**

- Offer services to participating families over the long term (i.e., three to five years), using well-defined criteria for increasing or decreasing frequency of services.
- Services should be culturally competent; materials used should reflect the diversity of the population served.
- Services are comprehensive, focusing on supporting the parent as well as supporting parent-child interaction and child development.
- All families should be linked to a medical provider; they may also be linked to additional services.
- Staff members should have limited caseloads.

### **Staff Characteristics**

- Service providers are selected based on their ability to establish a trusting relationship.
- All service providers should receive basic training in areas such as cultural competency, substance abuse, reporting child abuse, domestic violence, drug-exposed infants, and services in their community.
- Service providers should receive thorough training specific to their role to understand the essential components of family assessment and home visitation.