

## **Support Systems Lend Strength to Parents**

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When people become parents, they are not given a book that contains the secrets of taking care of infants, toddlers, teenagers, and adults. Often, parents have no prior experience and are left to figure out this new and daunting responsibility for themselves. Nevertheless, many parents and caregivers strive to become the best guardians they can be. During my summer in Walker County, Alabama as a JOIP intern, I had the honor to work directly with many parents from all walks of life. Specifically, I worked at Jasper Area Family Services Center (JAFSC or Center), a non-profit that offers an array of programs all centered on its mission to support families. The Alabama Network of Family Resource Centers, ANFRC, defines a Family Resource Center as a non-profit that provides a wide range of services designed to protect children and strengthen and support families in Alabama. This summer I worked specifically with the Family Initiative, HIPPY, and Head Start and saw the ways these programs strengthen families in Walker County.

One of the greatest benefits of a Family Resource center is the fact that all the programs are housed under one roof, making referrals to different programs easy and frequent. When I sat down with Kourtney Liebe, a participant at the Center, for an interview, she talked about how getting connected to one program led to the other programs—all of which wound up working together to support her family. She initially signed her oldest up for Head Start as a

three-year-old. From there, she learned about Early Head Start, was referred to HIPPY, and finally was told about the workforce development program in the Family Initiative. All these programs were able to work together to support various aspects of parenting and family life and helped to strengthen Liebe's abilities as a mother. A study done by Zero to Three, an organization focused on the wellbeing of infants and toddlers, found that 87% of parents are striving to become better parents. This means it is crucial that we provide better opportunities for parents to learn. Through resources such as Jasper Area Family Services Center, parents can be equipped to improve every day.

The backbone of JAFSC is helping people like Liebe thrive in today's world. All the programs at the Center are dedicated to helping support the whole family rather than just the child or just the parent. Dr. Suzanne Snow, the Director of Head Start, told me that "in Head Start you are not taking children, you are taking families." The Office of Head Start states on their website that the program "staff actively engage parents, recognizing family participation throughout the program as key to strong child outcomes." This mentality is evident in the ways the staff strives to get to know the parents and caregivers of children. In an interview, Dr. Snow recalled a story of a mother who did not have adequate car seats for her children at drop-off one morning. By pick-up that afternoon, the Head Start staff and community had purchased brand new car seats for all of her children and installed them properly in her car. Dr. Snow also talked about the volunteer hours that parents are required to fulfill for their children to be enrolled in Head Start. She said that the goal is for these parents to say, "I've seen what my child

can do, and I want them to do better.” Early Childhood education is crucial because we undergo key stages of brain development as children. As Dr. Snow said, “children are like sponges.” It is important that both in childcare options and at home children are receiving appropriate activities for their developmental stage, which Head Start introduces them and their parents to.

While it is critical that programs like Head Start exist, it is also vital that children receive needed support at home. Unfortunately, many parents do not understand the stages of their children’s development, or do not have resources for appropriate activities. Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youth, HIPPY, is another program at the Center that works to meet this need in the community. Home visitors meet with parents each week and provide them with activities, books, knowledge, and training about activities to do with their children. Kim Hobson, the Program Director, said that often parents resist these developmental activities as a burden or excessively time-consuming. In actuality, it takes less than 15 minutes a day to engage with your child in developmentally appropriate activities. Liebe, the Center participant I interviewed, told me about how one of her children was incredibly sensory seeking, and consequently, difficult to control. Through the HIPPY program, Liebe was able to learn activities such as filling a bin with rice and other methods for her child to devote her energy to play. Liebe said that it was a game-changer when she began to provide appropriate activities, and that now, her daughter helps her cook and wash dishes.

Through these programs, JAFSC helps parents better support their kids and encourage their development. However, it is also important for the parents to feel supported and learn how to better manage themselves and the relationship with their children's fathers. The Center offers both Fatherhood and Motherhood classes through the Family Initiative Program. The coordinator of the programs, Taylor Johnson, leads classes with incredible insight, support, and compassion for the parents. I had the opportunity to participate in a cycle of motherhood classes during the summer, and it was amazing to see the ways that Taylor met each mother where she was. Liebe talks about how the classes were challenging to her as a student because they forced her to confront past trauma and issues with her parents. However, the classes also helped her strengthen her relationship with her husband. One key concept in the classes is the need for communication and helping to identify productive confrontation strategies. Liebe talked about how she was able to use those lessons to break negative cycles she and her husband were in. These classes are so important for the children's development, as they help support the parent to become the best they can be.

While parenting and child development will always be something individuals can work on, the programs at JAFSC can help parents grow and hopefully see generational impact. One quote that is frequently seen at the Center is "Children should never have to recover from their childhood." Through its many programs and through the work of parents, Walker County is working to break harmful cycles, and the future looks so much brighter. Liebe said that her driving factor in attending all the programs at the Center was the hope that her children could

have a better childhood than she did. This focus on the next generation and desire to improve the lives of those to come is what makes a lasting impact. Jasper Area Family Services Center is working to provide more and better programs to support these goals and to ensure that no kid ever has to recover from their childhood.

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