



## Healthy Start helps first-time parents in Washington County

BY KRISTEN FORBES

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**Healthy Start, formerly known as the New Parent Network, provides information, support and basic and intensive services to first-time parents in Washington County. Basic services include referrals to community services and parenting classes, as well as information about child development. Intensive services include coordinated home visits with family support workers from various agencies who provide information on child development, demonstrate activities for parents and children and answer questions about parenting.**

Two key players at Healthy Start are Annalise Johnson, an AmeriCorps member, and Devenie Harris, an intern from Pacific University. Harris, who is majoring in social work, was drawn to Healthy Start because of the dual perspective it offers.

“I can focus on both a macro and micro perspective, working with the community in general but also, through partner agencies, working one-on-one with direct client services,” she says. “It’s a really cool thing to be able to work with both pieces of the puzzle.” Laughing, she adds, “The fact that I get to see babies is also a plus.”

Johnson says that a lot of their efforts right now are focused on planning for a kick-off event that will focus on all first-time parents and specifically teen parents.

“We want to see what the interest is for support groups,” explains Johnson, “and then hopefully get some support groups from the county going. It will be focused on prenatal care and postnatal care.

The kick-off event will take place on both the east side and west side of the county in January, likely around the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday.

Getting the word out about the program is important because many people are unaware of the free services it provides.

“I wish people knew this resource was here,” Harris says. “I think a lot of people don’t know about all of the benefits that are available to them, and all the resources and education that are pretty much at their fingertips.”

“It’s not specific for a certain population,” Johnson adds. “Anyone who is a first-time parent can benefit. There are play groups and socialization and other resources available.”

They are also always seeking feedback as far as the kinds of services or the types of scheduling people are looking for. For example, Johnson says at the kick-off event, they are trying to figure out if people would be interesting in participating in a six-week consecutive group, as well as a group that meets once or twice a month.

Johnson, who majored in psychology at the University of Oregon, thinks this major helped to give her the background she needs for this position.

“I took a lot of different kinds of psychology classes,” she says. “To be able to understand the way people behave and where they come from, and to be able to have an open mind – that definitely helps me here.”

For Harris, working at Healthy Starts goes right along with the kind of work she hoped to get into.

“It sounds cliché, but I want to help people,” says Harris. “When I started out, I really wanted to be a counselor and have that one-on-one interaction with people to help get them to a better place in their lives. When I went to Pacific, they steered me in the direction of looking at social work and to see how that differs from sociology and psychology. I fell in love with the mindset and how everything works in this field.”

The Healthy Start website is [co.washington.or.us/HHS/Services/NewParentNetwork](http://co.washington.or.us/HHS/Services/NewParentNetwork). Those interested in learning more about the program can also call or write Randy Fulgham at 503-846-4746 or [randy\\_fulghamco.washington.or.us](mailto:randy_fulghamco.washington.or.us).

“The program is free,” says Johnson. “All the services are free. It can never hurt for anyone to just call or e-mail to figure out if they qualify for the services. They can get a packet of resources in the mail and from there, they can come to the playgroups or support groups.”

(Kristen Forbes is a freelance writer. To view her blog, visit [www.krissymick.blogspot.com](http://www.krissymick.blogspot.com).)

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