

The making of a family

A grant from The Ford Family Foundation is creating networks in rural communities to support families and children. Here is a story of one of those families.

There's order to the chaos created by six kids, two dogs, two cats, and mom and dad in the neat three-bedroom house on Adelaide Street in Philomath, Oregon. And Carmon Thomas gives credit to the Enhancing the Skills of Parents Program that's helping families navigate the choppy waters of life with kids. "If we didn't have these classes and this information...we wouldn't be a family." It's that simple, says Carmon. She and Torry Joyner are raising six kids together – each brought three to their blended family. Despite different backgrounds and parenting styles, the couple has managed to create a smooth-running household where members are heard, respected, and responsible for their actions. "There's a huge difference in our home," she explains. "We're more cooperative, happier, and everyone knows what's expected of them. We've learned how to talk with our kids and each other, how to compromise, and how to deal with negative behaviors. There are rules for playing music, watching TV, and completing daily responsibilities."

Carmon first took The Incredible Years (3 to 9), then she and Torry took Active Parenting (3 to 8) and Active Parenting of Teens. They are currently doing the Active Parenting for Step Families course. "Our families have been through a lot. These classes have really been a lifeline," says Carmon thankfully. "We learned a lot, shared stories with families, and found out about other community services. It's too bad that so many families won't admit they need help or are afraid to ask for it. This program makes it so easy. They have free child care, free dinner, and it's only \$40 for each six-week class. If you can't afford it, they have scholarships."



Families like this are finding new tools for coping and thriving, thanks to a variety of public and private funding including a generous four-year grant from The Ford Family Foundation that established Enhancing the Skills of Parents Program (ESPP). Targeting families with children from birth to age 8, the ESPP program is offered in 17 rural Oregon counties and Siskiyou county in California. "The initiative was designed to build the capacity of rural communities to offer services that support families," says Denise Rennekamp of the OSU Extension Family and Community Development program. She oversees the grant along with fellow Extension faculty Cheryl Peters and Sally Bowman. "We want to create networks of family friendly activities and educational programs that are supported by each community involved and assure that sparse resources aren't duplicating services," Denise explains. "Structures vary from one county to the next, some building on existing networks and others creating new ones. And we want to



Torry and Carmon's six kids range in age from 8 to 15.



For more information on ESPP programs visit extension.oregonstate.edu/fcd/parentchild/parenting/espp.php

Torry (left) intentionally sets aside time to spend with all the kids, including Justus (center) and Tyler.



erase the stigma of participating in parenting education classes. Regardless of circumstances, we can all benefit by coming together with other parents and learning something new...about everything from nurturing newborns to understanding brain development.”

The flexibility of The Ford Family Foundation grant is important, she adds. “We have the time and resources to conduct research on the kinds of programs that work, evaluate program impact and outcomes, and provide networking opportunities including two annual conferences so program staff can learn from each other and from experts in the field.” Local programs hire staff and facilitators and can use funds for gas vouchers, food, and child care so more families can attend. “Our goal is to assure that beyond the grant, programs are sustainable,” says Denise. “The results are clear – when parenting skills improve, kids do better at school, families are healthier, so communities are healthier.”

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