

SAFE AND SOUND

Helping foster parents care for babies born with prenatal drug and alcohol exposure



The "Safe Babies" program, developed by Marcellus, is now in use throughout B.C. with plans to expand it to Alberta. PHOTO: NIK WEST

by Peigi McGillivray

Giving babies the best start in life is always a challenge, especially when they have been exposed to drugs or alcohol before they were born.

As poverty and other social issues have increased, the number of babies born with prenatal substance exposure has also risen. Many of these babies are resilient and can develop and grow well. However, because of the health issues they may face—including delays in development, Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder and neonatal drug withdrawal—these infants may spend their earliest days with foster families, receiving specialized care. Birth parents also need compassionate support as they cope with challenges such as violence, trauma, poverty, and mental health issues.

That's where Lenora Marcellus, University of Victoria assistant professor in nursing and a former neonatal intensive care nurse, comes in. In 1997, Marcellus began working with the Ministry of Children and Families and the local health authority to develop a training and support program for foster parents caring for substance-exposed infants.

Called 'Safe Babies', the pilot project was so successful that it has since been implemented across British Columbia and Marcellus is now helping adapt it for use in Alberta. In 2010, the Vancouver Island Foster Parent Support Services Society received a \$100,000 award for Pediatric Home Care Innovation from the Sick Kids Foundation for the program.

"Foster parents can make a real difference in outcomes for babies with prenatal drug or alcohol exposure—and their families," says Marcellus. "Safe Babies teaches foster parents how to care for babies who have experienced withdrawal, about the impacts and effects of alcohol and other drugs, about developmental challenges, and about how to partner with and support families experiencing multiple life challenges in addition to substance use."

Experienced foster parents deliver Safe Babies in partnership with local community organizations, and with continued support from the Ministry of Children and Families and regional health authorities.

Marcellus sits on the board of the Vancouver Island Foster Parent Support Services Society, which coordinates the delivery of the Safe Babies Program, so is directly involved in bridg-

ing the gap between university and community.

"The research I do into prematurity, substance use during pregnancy, and birth and foster parent support feeds directly into Safe Babies," says Marcellus. "And the things I learn from foster parents and birth parents about the issues they face inspire new avenues of research."

This process has recently led to the development of a new program that supports pregnant women and new mothers experiencing substance use challenges. Called HerWay Home, it is the culmination of a six-year collaborative process involving Marcellus and a group of committed community organizations in Victoria.

Marcellus' students also benefit from this integration between university and community. Undergraduates experience practicum placements with programs in the community that support families, such as the Foster Parent Support Services Society and pregnancy outreach programs. Graduate students are directly involved in Marcellus's research projects.

"My goal is to find better ways to support birth parents so fewer children go into care," says Marcellus. "And to ensure that babies, especially those with prenatal substance exposure, have the best possible start in life."

GREAT MOMENTS IN RESEARCH

UNIVERSITY PARTNERSHIPS PROVIDE CARE

Distance education in child and youth care has had a long and successful history at UVic. In 1989, an award-winning partnership was established between UVic's Child and Youth Care program and the Meadow Lake Tribal Council in northern Saskatchewan — a program which has since been recognized by UNESCO as one of 20 leading programs around the world that use Indigenous knowledge. A similar program helped family care workers from rural Manitoba complete master's degrees at UVic. Those grads then helped UVic launch a diploma program in early childhood education, taught by the master's graduates in their own communities.

As a result of these early programs, Dr. Alan Pence founded the Early Childhood Development Virtual University, a UVic program that trains caregivers in Africa in a manner that reverses the "brain drain" from developing nations. Pence has since been named a UNESCO chair for this work.

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