

Emily Hanford: From the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University, this is Ways & Means. I'm Emily Hanford.

Bell ringing, nat sound of mothers laughter. Mother: Say hi! It's a microphone! Wanna say anything? Not today?

EH: We've popped in on a new mothers' group in North Carolina. There are a dozen or so moms and infants in the room, in a big circle. Moms are sitting cross-legged on the floor, with their babies on pillows in front of them. This group is known as the "New Mothers Hangout." A doula – which is a woman who gives guidance and support to moms-to-be and moms with newborns — meets each new mom at the door.

ADoula: How are you? That hairdo is everything.

K: I know, right?

EH: Kate Vanneman Scheidler from Chapel Hill, is showing off her 6-week-old son, Colson.

K: Yeah, I don't know why, but also it's very overwhelming. I've gone out but for some reason it's just- we just went on a Target run before too and he's screamed the entire time, so.

EH: Colson cries a lot. Kate would ask her friends and her mom, "Is this right? Do babies cry this much?" People would tell her, "that's just how it is."

K: There was a lot of "Babies cry, babies cry." And I'm like, "No, I'm telling you, this is not normal. Like - there's something inside of me that's saying, 'This is not normal.'"

EH: But every time they went to the doctor, Colson would fall asleep in the car, so the doctor never saw the intense crying jags. It took weeks for Kate to figure out that something was actually wrong, something that was eventually fixed by medicine. Those weeks felt like a lifetime, up around the clock with a new baby screaming. It was stressful and exhausting, not knowing what was wrong... and it shouldn't have to be that way.

In fact, if Kate lived just one town over, in Durham, North Carolina, the issue probably wouldn't have taken so long to get a handle on. That's because Durham has a free program where nurses visit brand-new mothers in their homes. The nurse would have been more likely to witness Colson's intense screaming – and get mom and baby help more quickly.

(Music)

EH: Coming up on this episode of Ways & Means – we go inside an innovative, free public program that helps new moms and dads adjust more easily to life with a newborn.

EH: The visiting nurse program in Durham is called Family Connects. "Home-visiting" programs are nothing new they exist in other communities to support low-income families. One of the things that makes the Durham program stand out is

that ALL families in the city – rich and poor - are eligible. The project was started by Duke Professor Ken Dodge.

Ken Dodge: We go into the hospital, we welcome the family - the baby - into the community. We deliver the message that every parent can be successful, but no parent has ever been successful alone, and so we invite ourselves into their home to follow up, to learn what they need.

EH: The program is based at Duke University. It officially started in 2008 as a pilot project. At the time, child abuse rates in Durham were unusually high, above the state average. Researchers thought a home-nurse-visiting program might help. Ken says sometimes abuse can be prevented with support and education. Early on his team interviewed lots of new mothers and two of these stories stick in his mind. One new mother had slapped her 6-week-old baby so hard it left an imprint.

K: She had just bizarre ideas about what babies could and could not do. She said she was changing him one night and he peed all over her and she got so mad, that she needed to teach him a lesson and she slapped him. Well you can't teach a 6-week-old baby a lesson.

EH: Ken tells another story about a 23-year-old single mom who worked an overnight shift, cleaning office buildings. She had two children, a 3-year-old and a 9-month-old.

K: Every night at 10:30 a babysitter would come. One night the babysitter didn't show up. She panicked, the babies were asleep. She locked the apartment door from the outside, went to work, at two o'clock in the morning, one baby woke up and cried, and woke the other baby up, they're screaming, a neighbor had come and knocked on the door, nobody was there, called police, the police came and knocked the door down, found two babies alone, and arrested mother for child neglect. It was 9 months before she saw her babies again. She was trying hard... she had poor plan and no backup plan...that could have been prevented.

EH: It's not that a nurse visiting program would have provided overnight childcare, but this mom clearly needed someone she could call for advice, talk through her options before she made the decision to leave her children alone.

Tam So.. Want me to walk you through how we start a visit?

EH: Tamara Sidirov is a Family Connects nurse. Her job is to go from home to home, meeting new parents. One of our producers, Carol Jackson, met her in a parking lot outside the clinic where she works. It was a typical summer day in the south – really hot.

[Sound of trunk opening]

T: ...and in my trunk I have all my nursing gear. Nursing bag here that has blood pressure cuff for mom, as well as alternative manual cuffs as well, a scale, length-measuring pad, head circumference tape...

EH: Tamara visits with two new mothers each day, and is on the phone with many more.

T: ...I have diapers, and swaddle blankets, and breast pads, thermometers, nipple shields – what else do I have?

EH: Tamara is all set, and she and Carol set off for a drive around Tamara's territory.

(Car starts)

T: ...you're welcome to move the seat back.

EH: They start in an urban area on the edge of downtown Durham. There are a lot of small, one story, single family homes. Some have porches and flowers, some have boarded up windows.

T: I mean this is a real on the go job, you have to be flexible to so many environments, go in the range of homes... And I'm learning to be good with sense of direction ... OK, well there's a stop sign the person did not oblige to! That's OK, sir...The dangers of a Durham Connects nurse. (chuckle)

EH: The nurses work with all kinds of moms.

T: Yeah we see moms and their babes from different walks of life we see teenage moms, we see moms in their 20s, we see moms in their in their 30s, we see

moms in their 40s, we see moms from all countries, we see American moms, we see moms with all of the socio-economic resources and are still having challenges...we see moms who are under privileged, and are also having challenges. We see such a range of families. And I think going into families' house, you see such a raw reality... it puts us in a position where we are able to collect information from the source, from the mom's perspective

EH: For privacy reasons Tamara didn't take us inside a home to observe a visit, but Alison Coovadia told us what a visit is like. A Family Connects nurse visited her and her husband when their first baby was born. They just couldn't seem to get their daughter to sleep.

Al: She did not sleep at all, and she just would make these little noises when she did sleep, I would jump up thinking something was wrong...she'd gotten tangled in her blanket or something, and I would hover over her pack and play, she would wake up because I was hovering over her, it was this horrible cycle that just continued and nobody got any sleep for the first few weeks.

EH: Alison and her husband were exhausted and anxious -- and then the Family Connects nurse showed up.

Al: The nurse came, knocked on the door and brought in a scale to weigh her on and had a tape measurer. She had a few gifts for the baby and for me, which I thought was very nice. Nice lotions and some bubble bath and I believe she

even bought some baby books for the baby and she measured her and weighed her and did a well check on her and of course everything was fine but it was wonderful to have the extra set of eyes to take a look at her

EH: Allison felt reassured. She was less worried about messing things up. When her second and third children were born, even though she was more experienced, she again welcomed home visits by Family Connects nurses.

Al: Instead of being a mom with one child I was now a mom of two children or a mom of three children and so questions about siblings and questions about what do you do with your oldest child who's one and a half, almost two when you are trying to nurse an infant? They were able to help with ideas for that ...

EH: Allison had plenty of time to talk with the nurses about anything and everything.

Al: The thing I think is fantastic about the program is the time the nurse comes and spends with you. The second and third visits from the nurses lasted an hour or an hour and a half. I offered one lunch I think because she had stayed for so long. They had so much information about things going on in the community that could benefit me, the la lecha league information, programs that the fire station were doing for things like smoke detectors and carbon monoxide detectors. They're just a wealth of information

EH: Family Connects is short-term - usually just a visit or two but the nurses arrive armed with ideas about where parents can get further assistance in the community, whether its help with post-partum depression or finding child care. You're just not going to get all that in a trip to the doctor's office.

Al: The pediatrician visits are fantastic and I love our pediatrician but they are short so I think that the real thing is the time.

Sound of baby hitting blocks, coos. It's a cool new trick, isn't it?

EH: We're back with the new mothers group. Hi, my name is Zawadi Walker and my daughter is Cora Walker and she's 10-week-old. Yes, little tinything.

Zaw: We had a Durham Connects nurse come by the house. I forget her name, but she was wonderful...

EH: Zawadi says she got practical advice from the nurse, including learning a new swaddle technique for baby Cora.

Z: I think this is called the "square swaddle"? Because little Cora here is like a Houdini, she would always get her arms out (chuckle) of the traditional swaddle and wake herself up, but our nurse showed us a different way to swaddle, where her arms stay down and she's very comfortable and sleeps a good 4 hours.

EH: Zawadi is on leave from a local university where she works as an executive assistant. The Family Connects nurse helped Zawadi think through how she is going to keep breastfeeding when her maternity leave is over.

Z: She mentioned the conversations that I might want to have with my supervisor, talking about the times that I want to feed and gave examples, such as, "Get into work early, perhaps breaking the 1-hour lunch break down into 20-minute sessions."

EH: Family Connects is offered to every single mom who gives birth in the city of Durham - and MOST moms want it. 9 in 10 women say yes to the program. It's funded by the Duke Endowment, the Durham County Government, United Way and other grants and partnerships.

As I mentioned earlier, nurse home visiting programs are not a new idea. They are widely used in some European countries.

But researchers say the Family Connects approach of offering the program to every mother, for free, reduces stigma...you're not getting a nurse visit because you're poor, or somehow deemed "at risk"...you're getting a nurse visit because everyone in the community gets one. And all new parents have questions and concerns.

(Music)

Not all Durham moms got the home-nurse visits at first. Back in 2008, when the project launched, it was set up as a randomized control trial. Some moms got the nurse home- visits, some did not.

Ken: For the first randomized control trial, we took every birth in Durham, North Carolina resident to a Durham family over an 18-month period, that was 4,800 births, and we randomly assigned them to receive the program or not based on the date of birth. So if you were born on an even numbered birth date, your family was randomly assigned to receive the Durham Connects intervention. if you were an odd date, you were in the control group

EH: Researchers gathered data on both groups to try to figure out what kind of impact the project had. They found that families who received the nurse home visits had better outcomes on some key, measurable indicators.

K: The results are really straightforward: that parents randomly assigned to even numbered birthdates receiving Durham Connects even numbered birthdates were indeed more connected to community organizations at 6-months of age, were better at providing positive parenting according to in home observers who didn't know whether they received the intervention or not. And they had fewer emergency room visits for illnesses and injury, less likely to appear on a child abuse register for child protective services records.

EH: Researchers calculate that for every \$1 spent on the nurse home visiting program, \$3 was saved in avoided emergency room visits. Preliminary findings also show a significant reduction in child abuse investigations for children ages 0-5.

K: Those are gratifying results.

EH: It would seem like a program like this is a win-win – it can nip problems in the bud and researchers can document cost savings to governments and to hospitals ...but Ken says not everyone reacts positively to the idea of a program like Family Connects. Some question why it's needed at all. People say things like -

K: When I was a child, my mother stayed at home, my family made did it alone, why can't they pick themselves up their own bootstraps and succeed? Why should a community provide support, why should government provide a support? Why should even health insurance provide a support?

EH: Ken believes these concerns are outdated... because society has changed.

K: Families have too many challenges; the challenge to work and put food on the table, do all of that is very difficult and successful families have never done it on their own, successful families have always had those community resources. whether it's the church, neighborhood, or extended family, or affordances of wealth...successful families have always had that, it's low income families that

have been denied those kinds of resources, and if we really want to have population impact and provide positively for the entire community, we've got to provide those resources more.

(Music)

EH: We have more information about the Family Connects program - at our website, ways-and-means-show-dot-org.

Special thanks to Emerald Doulas in Durham, North Carolina for letting us record at the New Mothers Hangout. And thanks to all the moms there who shared their experiences with us.

Ken Dodge is the Pritzker Professor of Early Learning Policy Studies and a Professor of Public Policy, Psychology and Neuroscience at Duke University.

If you're a fan of this podcast we hope you'll tell your friends about us. That is one way to help us grow. You can also find us on Twitter. We're at [WaysMeansShow](https://twitter.com/WaysMeansShow), that's all one word: [WaysMeansShow](https://twitter.com/WaysMeansShow) Tweet at us. Let us know what you think.

Ways & Means is produced by Carol Jackson, Alison Jones and Karen Kemp. Our engineer is Johnny Vince Evans. Our assistant producer and graphic designer is Melissa Carrico. Until next time - I'm Emily Hanford.