

## Agency Works with Families to Help Children be Ready to Learn

In northeastern Oregon, an agency is strengthening families through education and support. [Building Healthy Families](#) in Enterprise stresses life skills and children's readiness to learn.

"We're an umbrella agency with family-focused programming," explains Building Healthy Family's Executive Director, Amy Johnson. "Giving [young people] the tools they need for school readiness and school success is critical."

BHF serves Wallowa and Baker counties. The agency looks for gaps in services and fills them by teaming with 16 other area groups. The agency's parent education focus is on reducing child abuse and neglect, using grants to develop an Early Childhood Campus and a mentoring program.



*BHF's belief in family meal time forms the backdrop for Amy Johnson, the agency's executive director, and Maria Weer, education coordinator.*

The Campus includes a meeting room for formal family education opportunities, a USDA-approved kitchen, an outdoor play space and a learning center classroom.

BHF also provides supervised parental visit services, a multi-agency community resource team, an alternative education school, programs through an outside-of-school-time alliance, home visits, literacy programs, prevention programs and a one-stop service for area resources. Everything is geared toward helping families gain the tools they will need so the children are ready to learn.

Maria Weer, BHF's education coordinator, says the agency uses "seven evidence-based curricula" for parenting education. She likes to stress that parents need to do good self care.

Amy adds, "We just finished two [of Parenting Now!'s] *Make Parenting A Pleasure*® groups. We had participants who were referred by mental health and recovery staff, the YMCA, all over. It was our first opportunity to have a real [diverse] audience."

"I was very excited," Maria recalls. "We had 13 participants finish at least 85% of the sessions. When we passed around a sign-up for the next opportunity, all 13 signed up. One woman signed up her two sisters. We had a grandma who was on the board of the

Commission for Children and Families. She came to see what the group was, then said, 'I'm bringing my daughter to the rest of the classes.'

"It works and it's enjoyable. The reason they're staying with it is that it's information and it's self-care time for them. One couple said, 'This is our date every week.'

"I just wrapped up a *Make Parenting A Pleasure*® class on secondary strategies. I said, 'The reasons we're practicing these are that you're making dinner and your 2-year-old is banging on the pots in the kitchen.' When we brought it up, it was the obvious choice to take the child to another room or to explain that mommy has a headache, but in the situation – parents agreed they might not think to make those choices. ...if the scenarios were unrealistic, parents would have a harder time. [But now they can say,] 'Oh, I've seen that before.'"

The opportunities to learn resiliency and relationship building don't occur only in early childhood. "There are windows of learning opportunities at ages 12-14 and 18-24," Amy says. "We know children are resilient; our programs give us another opportunity to support how they may parent in the future and how they handle relationships."

Maria and Amy have developed ways to recruit new participants successfully. [Read more](#) about how they do it!