

# Healthy Start for Mom & Me

...working together as a community to help babies have a chance for a good beginning, since 1997.



**Our beginnings and our name:** We started with a community development process under sponsorship of the Manitoba Association of Registered Dietitians, with developmental funds from the Canada Prenatal Nutrition Program of Health Canada. Community agency personnel, mothers with experience of low income, public health and other representatives worked enthusiastically together with a paid coordinator to design a collaborative, multi-site, informal model to reach out to pregnant women. Prenatal drop-ins started in 1997, followed by postnatal programs in 1999.

*The name Healthy Start for Mom & Me was decided by a small group of mothers involved with the initial planning group. They all had experience with the issues facing women in the focus population.*

**Focus population:** expectant women and teens, and new mothers and their partners who experience the risks and barriers of poverty and other social factors. We try to reach people who avoid or are uncomfortable with mainstream services.

## **9 locations -drop-in sessions & a "kitchen table" approach:**

Through the community process that helped design and plan Healthy Start for Mom & Me, it was unanimously agreed that we would operate in several Winnipeg neighbourhoods, in neutral & non-medical sites close to bus routes, and that we would eliminate the barriers to participation by providing on-site childcare, bus tickets, healthy snacks, milk coupons and friendly interactive activities. Moms told us: "call it a class and I won't come; call it a drop-in - and leave the choice to me - and I will". (The exception to this is for immigrants and refugees who appreciate the word "class". Newcomer classes with interpreters are held in a central location; the approach is a bit more formal to accommodate language needs.)

The "kitchen table" approach refers to both a style of working and to a starting point; at the outset of the program in 1997, drop-ins started in the kitchen and ended in another room with other activities. Once attendance increased, there was no room in the kitchen or feasible way to incorporate hands-on food preparation. The "kitchen table" approach now refers to our casual style and to the fact that nutrition is a key launching point of a holistic program. Cooking parties, food demonstrations, availability of \$1.50 recipe/meal bags (non-perishable ingredients) that serve 4, and other activities and resources supplement drop-ins.

**Sites:** Magnus Eliason Rec Centre, Freight House, Hope Centre, Weston Community Centre, Wolseley Family Place, St. Philips Church, Trinity Church, NorthEnd/Stella Community Ministry and Knox/International Centre – for newcomers to Canada. Healthy Start also participates at the Adolescent Parent Centre.

**A team approach / blue jeans teams:** Outreach workers, dietitians, public health nurses and other community staff work together (dressed in jeans) to support women in a respectful, strength-based and non-judgmental way. It is a model and a partnership that work! Outreach workers that have lived some of the challenges that face our participants are key to the effectiveness of a holistic and woman-centred approach. Outreach staff is a bridge to the professional - who is more apt to be trusted as a result.

**Separate prenatal and postnatal "Baby Steps" sessions:** The needs of women and families are very different at these times. Postnatal sessions include the baby and take place on mats with toys, encouraging parent-baby interaction. Funding from the Province of Manitoba enabled the development of the postnatal program, for babies up to one year of age.

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**Continuous entry:** Women (and their family members as they wish) are welcome to come any time. No one is turned away. This has been noted by participants as something they really appreciate and that is different from other programs. It can mean that the drop-in can be very crowded at times; this does not appear to bother most women but for those that prefer a smaller group, an alternate site is suggested.

**Home visits and other support:** Drop-in group programs are supplemented with individual contact provided by outreach staff and dietitians, as needed by participants. This is an important aspect of the program, of building relationships, and for assisting in problem-solving with families. Other support includes things such as taking a mom to a doctor or other service, offering help with interaction with systems such as Employment Insurance, Income Assistance, Child and Family Services, etc.

**Numbers of families:** Healthy Start sees well over 1,000 women a year, *plus* babies, dads and partners and other family members, and their other children who are taken care of in a separate babysitting area during sessions.

### **What women and families tell us:**

- Outreach workers are a real service.
- I started because of the milk coupons; I stayed because I liked it & meeting other moms.
- I learned to talk to my baby.
- You talk to me like I already know something.
- I never would have trusted a public health nurse if it wasn't for Healthy Start.
- I stopped /cut down smoking...I stopped drinking... I eat better...I drink more milk...
- I wouldn't have known to start feeding my baby solid foods, except for this program.
- I sing the nursery rhymes you teach me and it calms my baby – and me.

### **Information about our participants' babies:**

- Our 10-year average low birth weight (LBW) rate is 6.3%, in a population that can be expected to have LBW rates of 10% to 20%. The mean birth weight is approximately 7.5 lbs. for Healthy Start participants' babies.
- Over 80% of participants are initiating breastfeeding. Duration is not known in a reliable way, but many moms are continuing for 6 months or more.

***Funding and how we operate:*** Healthy Start for Mom & Me is funded by the Public Health Agency of Canada's "Canada Prenatal Nutrition Program" (CPNP) and Healthy Child Manitoba - Healthy Baby. The Healthy Start office is located on the second floor of Knox Church in downtown Winnipeg.

In-kind partners include: Public Health - Winnipeg Regional Health Authority; Health Action Centre, Mount Carmel Clinic, Klinik, Youville Clinic, NorWest Community Health Centre, Wolseley Family Place, Immigrant Women's Counselling and the International Centre; Canada Safeway that prints milk coupons; businesses that provide discount prices; Harry's Foods (now Food Fare) that delivers groceries to our office weekly, facilities where community programs are held.

Dietitians of Canada was the administrative sponsor for eight years until March 31, 2005, at which time Healthy Start became an independent incorporated organization. A Board of Directors composed of service professionals, former participants and other community members oversees the program. There are 14 staff members who work with our other partners in offering the program; 7 are outreach workers, 3 are dietitians, 1 is an infant specialist. The Executive Director was the initial Community & Program Development Coordinator who worked with the community in designing and planning Healthy Start for Mom & Me. Two other staff based in the office round out the staff team.

Other community members are an essential part of Healthy Start. On-site babysitting is provided by neighbourhood people (who have undergone criminal record and abuse registry checks); assistance in the kitchen is provided by student dietitians or other community members. Interpreters are involved to assist newcomers to Canada.