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April 14, 2003

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**A successful program prevents child abuse by teaching the art of being a mother.**

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Magdalena Matias turned to Healthy Families to protect her kids Brian and Nailea. (Ben Baker)

In 2000 Magdalena Matias called Angelita Rodriguez in a panic. The two women had met before, when Rodriguez showed up at Matias's door after hearing reports of loud arguments at the house from concerned neighbors. Now the situation was worse: Matias, a farmworker newly arrived in the United States from Mexico, said her common-law husband had just attacked her 8-year-old daughter. Rodriguez drove to the family's squalid house in Trilby, Fla., where Matias would barely even crack open the door. "She was afraid," recalls Rodriguez. "So I told her what I tell all of my moms — 'I've been there.'"

Three years later Matias has left her abusive husband and has rebuilt a safe and healthy home for her four children, thanks in large part to Rodriguez. "She knew what it was like to be scared," says Matias, 35. "I could tell she was speaking from the heart."

As one of about 500 Resource Moms working for an innovative anti-child-abuse project called Healthy Families America, Rodriguez works to stop abuse — or in Matias's case, more abuse — before it can happen. Relying on tips from doctors, social workers and even neighbors, the project's counselors zero in on mothers and pregnant women

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with a combination of risk factors such as drug addiction, poverty, mental illness and a violent parent or spouse that could spell danger for their children — even if no actual abuse has yet been reported.

Once contact has been made, women like Rodriguez step in to offer all kinds of support, from medical assistance to relationship counseling to help with finding free furniture and preparing healthy meals. For Matias's daughter Zhoemy, now 11, Rodriguez located a counselor who could help her cope and used Healthy Families funds to pay for the sessions. Then she drove Zhoemy and her mother to and from the counselor's office. "This is keeping kids out of the system because we're working with the highest risk families either at the pregnancy stage or at the birth of the baby," says Carol McNally, director of the program in Florida. "The earlier you educate parents, the better the success rate."

So far, the 11-year-old program, which operates in 38 states, has had astounding success. More than 93 percent of children whose mothers receive help from Healthy Families counselors remain free from abuse, according to independent studies around the country. "There is no greater success story in the area of positive parenting," says Jack Levine, president of Voices for Florida's Children, an advocacy group that has been sharply critical of that state's troubled child-services department.

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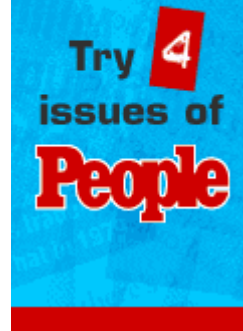
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"You should be proud," Rodriguez (right) tells Matias (with, from left, Brian, Zhoemy, Nailea and Kevin). (Ben Baker)

Perhaps one reason for its success is that some of Healthy Families resource moms once walked in the same shoes as their clients. On a recent sunny afternoon in Hampton, Va., Shealene Michael-Dumont drove from the agency's office to the home of one of her toughest cases. Nicole Varner, now 24, a former drug dealer who, as a teen, was in and out of mental health facilities, has already lost three of her own children: Her firstborn, a daughter named Tiara, died at age 3 months of sudden infant death syndrome in 1998 while Nicole was dealing drugs and living in a crack hotel. Two other girls, Alexis, 4, and Kira, 3, were removed by the state after Nicole's ex-boyfriend (not the children's father) broke several of Kira's ribs when she was 6 weeks old. Now, with 6-month-old Miya bouncing happily on her lap, Varner knows she has only one more chance to get it right.

Perfectly at home in Varner's untidy, cramped house, Michael-Dumont, 37, runs her fingers through Miya's brown curls while checking her physical condition. A former welfare mom herself, Michael-Dumont grew up watching her mom being terrorized and abused by several boyfriends. So when she gently prods Varner to retake her GED test and encourages her to put Miya in the crib that a friend has delivered instead of sleeping with her on a couch, Varner tends to listen. "Nicole wasn't nurtured as a child, so she doesn't know the basics," Michael-Dumont says. Molested by her grandfather at 7, Nicole grew up in foster homes. Yet with Michael-Dumont's help, she finally seems



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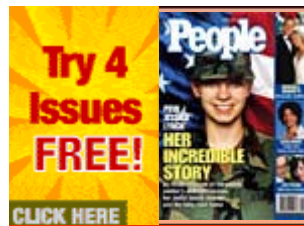
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to be learning what it means to be a mom. "I want her to grow up and be happy and healthy," Varner says of Miya. "I get up in the morning and feed her. I talk to her and read to her. She knows when she gets up from her nap, she's going to get fed." It's a start, but Michael-Dumont is also adamant that she get off welfare. "She's very blunt," Varner says of her helper, "but she gets me through each day."

Back in Florida, Angelita Rodriguez and Magdalena Matias have formed a similarly tight bond. At Rodriguez's urging, Matias summoned the guts to call the sheriff to report that her husband, Paulino Lopez, had attacked Matias's daughter. Today, Lopez, 32, is serving a nine-year prison sentence — and Matias and her four kids are thriving. On a recent house call, son Kevin, 3, neatly dressed and smiling, greets Rodriguez at the door and ushers her into the orderly — and now safe — home. "You're doing so well," Rodriguez, 27, tells Matias, whom she visits regularly. "You should be really proud of the job you're doing."



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Just four years ago Rodriguez herself was in need of some serious help. After getting pregnant at 17, she married the child's father only to realize almost immediately that he had trouble controlling his anger. "He'd tell me the house was a pigsty, the kids were dirty, I was lazy," says Rodriguez. When she defended herself, she says, the fights turned physical. Yet because of her Catholic upbringing, she didn't even consider asking for a divorce, even after her husband was arrested for domestic abuse.

Rodriguez was holding down two jobs, at a Wal-Mart and as a preschool teacher, when she finally realized in 1999 that her bad marriage was taking a toll on her two sons, Christopher, now 8, and Sammy, 7. "One night my younger son woke up screaming, 'Daddy is mad!' " she recalls. "It broke my heart. I remember holding him, crying, thinking, 'I've got to put a stop to this.' " She and her husband fought for the last time in 2000: "He told me what a stupid mom I was, and I told him I was sick of being called names in front of my kids," she says. Her husband left the house that day for good, and they divorced the following year. (Dad sees the kids every two weeks.)

Coincidentally, that was also the year that Healthy Families, which is funded with both private donations and taxpayer funds, opened an office in Trilby, just outside Dade City, and hired Rodriguez for \$18,000 a year as their newest, shyest caseworker. "She didn't really understand what she had within her," says Kathy Bell, program manager of Healthy Families of Pasco County, who met Rodriguez at a clinic where she had gone for prenatal care. "It took a long time, but she realized she could have a better life."

Today Rodriguez is enjoying every minute. Married last year to a Honduran-born construction worker, Orlin Rodriguez, 27, she is a resource mom to 24 mothers. In the end, she says, safeguarding children — your own or somebody else's — is really a matter of deciding what's important in this world and leading by example. "My children mean everything to me," she says. "That's a lesson that all my moms can learn."

— PATRICK ROGERS  
— LORI ROZSA in Trilby and ROSE ELLEN

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