



**When I first came to Guilford Child Development, a Nurse-Family Partnership implementing agency in North Carolina, I never dreamed my work with NFP would become a peak employment experience.**

First of all, as a registered nurse, I had not worked in maternal-child health nursing since I completed my bachelor's degree. Nor had I ever worked with teenagers, pregnant mothers, or infants. Consequently, I knew I had a huge learning curve to overcome. At the time, I would not have described myself as someone comfortable doing an intense home visitation program. Boy, was I wrong!

The Nurse-Family Partnership training represented a paradigm shift in my views of infant development. I have worked in many different areas of nursing, other than the training I received as a surgical intensive care nurse, and none have come close to the depth of preparation I received for NFP. And, after training, the program also had excellent internal supports in place to help new practitioners circumvent failure.

During initial training, I became acutely aware of what a nurse's visits meant to an inexperienced mother. Throughout the prenatal months, the nurse was a source of support and information that covered the gamut of topics and concerns a new mother might anticipate. One important goal was to convey the messages required by the program's protocol, in order to give the mother an opportunity to experience a healthy pregnancy. To the mother, it often meant having someone teach her and her family how to make a healthy pregnancy possible—to impart information in order to alleviate fears of the unknown abyss of childbirth, breastfeeding, and the day-to-day care of a newborn.

Once an infant was born, the goals changed. At this juncture, not only was it important to teach the mother how to be an informed parent, but it was also important to facilitate self-efficacy. Assisting the mother in finding solutions for positive outcomes was an integral part in the mother's development. For this challenge, it was necessary for me to understand the mothers' dreams for themselves. Some articulate their life's vision quite easily, while others were in the formative state of goal-setting, and more self-exploration was required. It was this experience that separates Nurse-Family Partnership from other programs designed to improve outcomes for vulnerable new mothers. I felt as if I were teaching these young women to fish.

The transformations I witnessed in the mothers were a constant source of gratification for me. To observe the benefit our relationship had upon their infants' social and physical development gave me an incredible sense of accomplishment. During the 2+ years I spent with each mother, I witnessed changes that were life-altering. Many of the mothers I served were from different countries and backgrounds—which meant that on occasion, ideas I suggested were sometimes opposed to traditions and information prevalent in their cultures. I was also exposed to new customs as I listened to understand their thinking and feelings. The sharing of beliefs allowed us to decide what was negotiable, and this strategy created an environment in which both could grow and work toward common goals.

In order for me to facilitate such a major change in their beliefs and practices, a trusting relationship was required. Having a woman allow me to be part of one of the most important and sacred events of their life sprung from the strong commitment I had to guard and protect their trust in me.

I had moments of great pleasure throughout my relationship with each family, not just at the end of the time I spent with them. As a relationship would come to a close, I realized I had a very strong feeling of ownership. I was ecstatic to see a two-year-old—previously destined to be physically, emotionally, and developmentally delayed—move to within the normal ranges of infant growth and development. Even more rewarding was to watch them progress into toddlerhood with flourishing cognitive, motor and language skills.

I was always impressed with the mothers' commitment to create a nurturing and supportive environment that allowed their children to meet developmental milestones. After many months together, these women were finally in the position to teach their own children and others to fish.

*Gail Ricks is currently employed by the National Service Office as Nurse Consultant, Southeast Region. She was formerly a NFP Nurse Home Visitor for over 2 years at the Guilford County NFP, located in Greensboro, North Carolina. She has a B.S. in Nursing and a M.S. in Guidance – Human Resource Counseling from North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University. Gail also spent time at North Carolina Central University as Director of the Office of Student Support Services in the Department of Nursing, where she provided counseling support to 300+ students.*