

## Heather, Florida

My story may be similar to other moms you know. I hope that I can help you realize the impact that you have and inspire each and every one of you in the important work that you do each day. My parents divorced when I was 2 years old and I lived with my mother, who was addicted to drugs, until I was 6. My siblings and I often went without food or clothing. Our mother was too high to care for us and sometimes she couldn't even remember our names. After Child Services found out about our situation we were sent to live with our dad and stepmother.

The rest of my childhood went pretty smoothly but after high school, I fell in with a bad crowd and started using drugs. At 21, I found out I was pregnant and my family encouraged me to give that baby a name. They encouraged me to get married and settle down, which I did, however it was not long before my husband became physically and verbally abusive. After a very rough year I divorced him and went to live with my sister. I got licensed to do nails and I supported myself and my daughter Nicole. The next ten years were a constant struggle and in my early 30's I started using again just to cope. Things quickly escalated and soon I was using cocaine, crack, heroine, about anything I could get my hands on. I had to send Nicole, now my teenaged daughter to live with her father. I had no contact with any of my family and I had no place to live. I just couched surfed and I lived to get high.

I did whatever it took to get my next fix, from selling drugs to selling myself. I became pregnant for a second time during this period and I had a child and gave him up for adoption. When I was later arrested for drug charges I was pregnant with my third child, Nicholas. By this time my mother was clean and remarried and she agreed to take Nicholas from me until I was out of prison. After prison I struggled to stay clean, a lot of times people don't have options when they get out of prison. There aren't a lot of people who are willing to give you a chance so you just turned around into the same crowd.

I was trying to turn my life around and started dating a great guy named Fernando. Even though I was no longer with Nick's father he came to see me and he slipped me drugs, and while I was incapacitated he took advantage of me. He sexually assaulted me. Which resulted in another pregnancy. Fernando and I were in love and he was very supportive of me. He understood how much I wanted to get my family back. He agreed to move with me to Florida where my mother and my son, Nicholas, were living. We moved here a little over 3 and a half years ago with about 300 dollars to our name. We moved into a little travel trailer with Fernando's brother when I was 7 months pregnant. I had been in denial about my pregnancy this whole time but I finally went to the doctor at this point, where I completed a questionnaire and that's where Healthy Families begins.

Healthy Families sent someone to talk to me at the hospital when Christopher was born. We stayed engaged in Healthy Families services and I never ever missed a home visit, not one. That's partly because she made the effort to see us when it was most convenient for us. And she was always encouraging and never ever judgmental. Hope helped us set goals and then build the skills we needed to reach those goals. Some goals were harder to reach than others. I paid off my traffic fines and got my license back. We bought a car and I went to job training and then I got a full time job with Habitat for Humanity. Hope also helped us find resources like how to use a computer, and child care. After our home visits we felt like we were becoming better parents and building a stronger, more stable family.

I'm very proud to be part of Healthy Families and have always promoted it. During our time with Healthy Families our home visitors have provided someone to talk to about our challenges but mostly provided someone who believed in me. Y'all saw leadership potential in me and with every new skill and every small success we have grown more capable and confident. I have become a better parent and so has my husband. He is very active in the program. Whenever he was home during a visit our Family Support Worker always included him naturally in our activities. We learned that we are always teaching our children by our examples. We learned how to handle life's challenges, how to find quality child care, how to do activities with our little ones to build their brains. We recently took custody of Nicholas from my mother. I have completed my biggest goal which was having my family back together and Healthy Families made this goal attainable for me. Thank you.  
*[Transcribed and shortened from video.]*