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Ray and Shayla McPherson and their two children, J'marki and J'mesyn.

Photo by Rod Thornburg

Mentors teach self-sufficiency

PROGRAM AIDS THOSE WHO FIND LIFE A STRUGGLE

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Most of his adult life has been spent as a drug addict. Job, family and personal hygiene all took a back seat to getting high.

After completing a stay in 2005 at a sober living home, Ray McPherson was at a crossroads. A husband and father with a baby on the way, McPherson knew it was time for a new start.

Since becoming part of Family to Family Mentoring, McPherson, 35, has obtained a temporary full-time job to support his wife, Shayla, and their two daughters, 2-year-old J'marki and 18-month-old J'mesyn. He has

stayed off drugs and been emotionally available to his family.

"I had to step up to the plate," McPherson said recently, as his daughters vied for his attention at his Bakersfield apartment.

McPherson said in a few months he'll be getting a raise and going permanent at Alon Asphalt, where he is a technician.

Family to Family Mentoring is a non-profit organization that helps parents learn how to find a career and communicate better with each other and their children. A volunteer mentor is assigned to many families to facilitate the process.

"We are preparing them for long-term skills," said Karen Goh, executive director of

Family to Family Mentoring, which is a division of Garden Pathways Inc.

"Our goal is to help them achieve self-sufficiency and help them develop life skills, activating the potential within," Goh said.

Clients are referred to the program through organizations like the Department of Human Services, CalWORK's Welfare to Work program and Child Protective Services.

Many of the hundreds of families in the free program have referred themselves. The McPhersons learned about it when Family to Family representatives visited a class for pregnant women that Shayla was part of while pregnant with J'mesyn.

Participants attend the program for about



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Ray and Shayla McPherson and their two children, J'marki and J'mesyn.

four months, taking a class one hour a week in life skills training, then, depending on their needs, being matched up with a mentor. Follow-up sessions typically occur.

Ray McPherson was matched up with volunteer mentor Randy Arie, a 43-year-old parent, husband and South High School teacher. Shayla said she thinks Arie made a major difference in her husband's life.

Arie and McPherson often had long talks in a Bakersfield park.

"I basically reaffirmed his beliefs," said Arie, who helped find an apartment for the family. "He had some good ideas and I just validated them."

McPherson said the best advice he got from Arie was: "Keep your head up and try to work your way through it."

Arie and McPherson have kept in touch outside the program, and recently the McPhersons attended a barbecue at the Arie's home.

Explaining why he became a volunteer mentor, Arie said, "Whenever I needed help, my family was there. A lot of people

don't have the extended family to help them, so I'm being somebody's extended family."

Single mother back on track

Kristy Dagostino, 33, is a single parent with four children. With the help of Family to Family, Dagostino got her first full-time job. She has been off welfare for the last five months.

"It helped me budget my money and look forward and not back," Dagostino said. "My mentor helped me see that there is so much more life out there."

A newcomer to the program is Sara McMurray, a single mom who recently moved in with her mother after living in a shelter home.

McMurray, 33, said she comes from a broken family and that she got into drugs as an adult.

Though she has not yet been assigned a mentor, McMurray is already feeling hopeful about her future. She wants to be a cook and plans to take cooking classes at Bakersfield College next year.

"I've learned that I can talk to people about what's going on in my life," McMurray said of Family to Family's group sessions, in which participants with similar backgrounds converse openly.

"They understand my problems because they've been through similar things," McMurray said.

Though Family to Family doesn't keep statistics on its parental success stories, staffers say they see success every day, no matter how small.

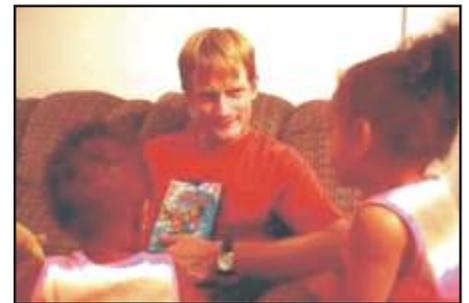
"We see people who can now look for a job when before they weren't able to do it," Goh said. "Others are able to gain employment, then job retention and advancement."

"To control anger and communicate successfully for one day," Goh said, "may be a major success for someone."

Ray McPherson is reveling in the simple joys of being a breadwinner and taking his family out for bowling or a football game.

He beamed as he told of the greeting he gets after coming home from his night shift at Alon Asphalt.

"Every morning I come home and the kids are so happy to see me," McPherson said. "They're like, 'Daddy!'"



Ray McPherson and his two girls J'marki and J'mesyn.
Photo by Rod Thornburg

MORE INFORMATION

Family to Family Mentoring

For more information on the program or becoming a mentor, call 633-9133, or go to www.gardenpathways.org