



It was hard enough for Jessika to learn that she was pregnant at age 20. What made it even harder: Few others seemed to have faith in her ability to be a good mother.

“Friends thought I wouldn’t be able to do it,” she recalls. “They doubted I could be a good mom. My family fully supported me, but they thought I was going to need a lot of help.”

The reason: Jessika was a recovering heroin addict. Though clean for three years leading up to her pregnancy, she was still in a methadone treatment program.

“Everyone still thought of me as a junkie,” Jessika says. “It hurt my self esteem a lot. But it kind of pushed me to show everyone that I could do it.”

Jessika went to the Berrien County Health Department in Benton Harbor, Michigan, to get a test confirming her pregnancy. While there, someone handed her a brochure for Berrien County’s Nurse-Family Partnership program. “It sounded like something that would help me,” Jessika says. “I didn’t have any experience with kids.”

Upon enrolling in the voluntary program, Jessika was paired with NFP Nurse Home Visitor Julie Sittig, a registered nurse with more than three decades of experience, the last five with NFP. Julie first visited Jessika when the young woman was 14 weeks pregnant, and Julie was immediately struck by Jessika’s determination.

“She was very engaging and well-spoken,” Julie recalls. “She expressed a desire right away to change her life. We hit it off, and I wanted to work with her — but I have to admit, I was worried her chances of success were slim.”

Julie felt this way for many reasons. Jessika was unemployed, and in addition to taking methadone she also smoked cigarettes. Making matters worse was Jessika’s tenuous relationship with the father of the baby, whom she moved in with after learning she was pregnant.

“I had been with him for three years, so it wasn’t some random guy,” Jessika says. “We tried to make it work, but he started cheating on me the minute I got pregnant. You can imagine what that did to my self esteem — the bigger I got, the more he cheated.”

“Jessika was looking for someone to help her through all this,” adds Julie. “She was missing that in her life.”

It took Jessika a bit longer to realize it, though. After their first few visits together, the young mother-to-be briefly resisted seeing Julie again. “I almost wanted to stop, but my mom told me to keep doing it,” Jessika says. “After I had cancelled some visits, Julie said, ‘Give me a couple more appointments to change your mind’ — and I am so glad she did.”

From then on, it was full steam ahead for nurse home visitor and client. Jessika quickly reduced smoking and then quit altogether while pregnant. With Julie’s help, she applied for food stamps and other assistance programs, improved her diet, and began walking several times per week for exercise. Jessika also took a keen interest in prenatal health. “She realized all of it could have a potential impact on her baby,” Julie recalls. “She just changed everything — her baby and herself became the most important things in her life.”

Jessika soon realized how much Julie cared about her future, especially because of the young woman’s past. “[Julie] was so worried about the drugs,” Jessika says.



Jessika, Lilly and Nurse Home Visitor Julie Sittig

“I just want her to be happy,” Jessika says of her daughter. “I want to give her everything she wants. I never thought I wanted to be a mom, and I know it sounds cheesy, but it is so gratifying. When you teach them something and they learn it, it’s incredible. It’s rewarding to know that I taught her — that I did that.”

“She was always giving me books and having me read them out loud while I was pregnant, and telling me to keep busy. She never came out and said it, but I could tell she was worried about me relapsing. It was so nice to have someone who wanted me to stay clean.”

This strong bond with her NFP nurse also provided Jessika support during a physically difficult pregnancy. Jessika began having chronic vomiting spells — she now suspects it may have been due to the methadone — and frequently visited the hospital to receive I.V.s of fluids to stay hydrated. Then, five weeks before her due date, Jessika went into labor quite suddenly and delivered a baby girl. She named her Lilliana, or Lilly for short.

Jessika’s past caught up with her once again. First, because the baby was born methadone-positive, the hospital was required to notify Child Protective Services (CPS). But thanks to the visible and active support of Julie and the methadone clinic, CPS officials closed their case quickly and Jessika never lost custody of Lilly.

“[Jessika] said she’d work with CPS to do whatever she could to be a good parent, and she has,” Julie says. “She is just awesome, and has made remarkable strides.”

Next, Jessika enlisted Julie’s support in helping her move out of the house she had been sharing with the baby’s father. “He was verbally abusive,” Jessika says. “I know [Julie] wanted me to get out of there. She knew the environment at my parents’ house would be much better for Lilly, so I moved back home.”

Today, Lilly is nearly two, and 23-year-old Jessika will soon graduate from the NFP program. Her daughter is happy, healthy, and ahead of all her developmental milestones. Jessika recently got a job as a home health aide, and she is applying to college — she hopes to become a registered nurse herself someday. She donates

time at her local church. Not only is she still clean; she’s also weaning off the methadone with the full support of the treatment clinic, her doctor, and Julie.

“I just want her to be happy,” Jessika says of her daughter. “I want to give her everything she wants. I never thought



I wanted to be a mom, and I know it sounds cheesy, but it is so gratifying. When you teach them something and they learn it, it’s incredible. It’s rewarding to know that I taught her — that I did that.”

“Her high is her daughter now,” Julie says. “That’s how she stays focused on Lilliana’s future, and what she can be to her child. She loves her daughter so much. I think she’s going to do well.”

This Nurse-Family Partnership program is implemented through the Berrien County Health Department located in Benton Harbor, Michigan.