

Inside

the life of a

Family Home Visitor

Before Maggie left for her first visit of the day, she made sure she brought along an egg from the community kitchen. She was on her way to see a single mom who was almost sixteen years old, and who today was celebrating the first birthday of her beautiful baby boy. Maggie had been visiting this mom and her baby for some months, and was proud of how well they were doing: she was a devoted mom, loving and patient.

Their tiny apartment was decorated with laminated pictures and plaster casts. Maggie had helped the mom to make the casts: pressing the baby's tiny hands and feet into play dough, they had then filled the impressions with plaster. Hanging on the wall, the little casts were a poignant reminder not just of his growth, but also of the afternoon they had



spent together making and decorating them.

Today, Maggie arrived with the egg to help the mom bake and decorate a cake – she had never made one before – and to celebrate this milestone in her baby's life. Maggie knew that there would be no one else to celebrate it with them, and she felt privileged to be

there. When the cake was ready they lit its candle and sang a hearty chorus of “Happy Birthday”.

As a family home visitor, Maggie's job was to visit at-risk parents and promote the health, growth and development of both babies and moms. She did so in partnership with a Public Health



nurse, who made the initial assessment and devised a basic plan of action. In going to a visit, Maggie might be walking into any sort of environment – she had been to cockroach-infested apartments, to homes with lice infestations, to places that were filthy – but she had learned to leave her judgment at the door. She was there to look out for the child’s well-being, and to support the mom. And if she could show the mom how to air out her home and make it more pleasant, all the better.

Maggie helped moms in lots of ways – showing them how to make inexpensive and nutritious baby food, or rattles and toys from water bottles; she also taught them simple action songs with hand movements. Sometimes, though, the mom needed help for herself. Maggie’s second visit today was a joint visit with a public health nurse to a mom who had suffered from post-partum depression. When Maggie had first met her, the mom thought she was going crazy, and had been trying to hide her thoughts.

Maggie had talked with the mom, assuring her that what she was going through was normal, not a source of shame, and then assisted her in making an appointment to get help. The mom had made real progress, and today Maggie was going to accompany her and her child to the drop-in centre. It all went well, but on the way back Maggie had a shock. As they were waiting at a stop light, she recognized a young woman on the other side of the street, panhandling. This was someone Maggie had tried to help, a young prostitute who had tried to pull herself together so she could keep her baby and

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start a new life. She had been doing well, too, but the lure of her addictions had got the better of her, and it sort of broke Maggie’s heart to see her there.

Many of the families Maggie visited were new immigrants who often needed help adjusting to the way things are done in Canada. In some families, for example, it wasn’t common to play with young children. They were fed and changed, of course, but it was assumed that they were incapable of understanding much anyway, so playing with them was pretty much a waste of time. Not only that, but it was considered rude to allow a small child to interrupt the conversation of adults, especially with a guest.

Maggie’s last visit of the day was with one such family. Over the past month they had learned about creating a safe environment for their child – about moving chairs away from the balcony railing, never leaving the child alone, and about the dangers of hot pots on the stove. Maggie had recently discovered that the child was uncomfortable in the bath – the mom had resorted

to sponge baths – so today was bath time. When Maggie had drawn a shallow, warm bath, the mom took her daughter by the arm to pull her over to it. Maggie assured the mom that that wasn’t necessary, and took out three rubber ducks from her bag. She put them into the water and started playing with them. Before long the child came over and

joined in – it was something quite new to her – and after a while Maggie asked the girl if she would like to swim with the ducks. Within a few minutes she was in the bath with the ducks, splashing and playing. Maggie was pleased at this important step for the child, but more than that, she knew it was also a good lesson for the mom – sometimes simple play could achieve what was needed, and could do so almost without effort.

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