



ECRC Community Chronicle

EARLY CHILDHOOD RESOURCE CENTER :: *Spring News 2014*

Poverty and the Developing Brain

For young children, poverty is not simply a stumbling block. The detrimental effects of poverty on learning and development are significant and pervasive.

Research shows that the stress of childhood poverty physically impairs the parts of the brain that process emotions, transfer short-term memory to long-term memory, and control spatial navigation skills. During the earliest years, from birth through age five, a child's brain is in its most rapid stage of development. This is when the effects of poverty can be the most damaging.

The damage doesn't take long to become apparent. A low-income student who isn't reading at grade level by the end of third grade is six times less likely to graduate from high school on time. Framed in this way, we can see why the State of Ohio passed its Third Grade Guarantee legislation that requires schools to give special attention and support to elementary students who aren't reading on grade level. According to Time Magazine Reporter Annie Paul, third grade is "the year that students move from learning to read – decoding words using their knowledge of the alphabet – to reading to learn." This makes third grade something of

a "pivot point." As educational researcher Donald Hernandez says, "we teach reading for the first three grades and then after that children are not so much learning to read but using their reading skills to learn other topics. In that sense, if you haven't succeeded by third grade, it's more difficult to [remediate] than it would have been if you started before then."

Poverty during early childhood is strongly correlated with lower adult income, lower educational attainment, and higher incarceration rates. In fact, researchers at Northwestern University found that high school dropouts were *63 times more likely* to be incarcerated than high school graduates. Because low-income children are likely to begin school behind academically and to stay behind year after year, they are also at much higher risk of dropping out. This lag—the sustained disparity in educational performance between low-income students and their more affluent peers—is known as the achievement gap. If we can narrow the achievement gap early, so that the playing field is level when children begin kindergarten, the chances for success increase dramatically.

In 2011, 46.2 million Americans were living in poverty, the highest number in the 52 years since the census bureau began tracking. Closer to home, the numbers are equally bleak. In 2011, nearly a third of all Stark County

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A FOCUS ON POVERTY

A MESSAGE FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

"The best way to improve the American workforce in the 21st century is to invest in early childhood education, to ensure that even the most disadvantaged children have the opportunity to succeed alongside their more advantaged peers."

~ James Heckman (Nobel Laureate in Economics)



As we've been working to integrate the SPARK program into the ECRC, we've naturally been thinking a lot about the importance of early literacy skills. For those unfamiliar with SPARK, it's a kindergarten readiness program that helps families become engaged and invested in their children's learning and development. Through SPARK, parents discover how important it is to help their children develop early literacy skills. One reason SPARK is so effective is that once a parent understands the ways she can become an advocate for her child's success, the child invariably becomes enthusiastic about learning and eager to start school.

Education expert James Britton once said that in a classroom, "reading and writing float on a sea of talk." This applies also to the time before a child even enters the classroom. Language is essential to setting a child up for both early and sustained life success (or failure). Nearly everything we learn in school depends on language. Even learning math concepts often depends upon being able to read and comprehend.

And language is often where children from higher-income families seem to gain their most important boost. **A child from a low-income family hears an average of eight million fewer words per year than a child from a wealthier family. That's more than 30 million fewer words by the time the child turns four.** If so much of school depends upon language, it's no wonder that by the time both children begin school, the child from the low-income family is already at a huge disadvantage.

Poverty is such a complicated problem, but it's really very simple as well. As with any problem, the solution begins with the basics. In poverty, the solution begins with the youngest children. They have within them great power to break the cycle of poverty, if only we can nurture and develop that power. And that's why we do what we do. Because helping young children can ultimately effect massive change, we put all of our effort into solving the problem, one child at a time.

SCOTT HASSELMAN, Executive Director

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children were receiving government benefits from SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, formerly known as food stamps). Within the boundaries served by the Canton City School District, 82.9% of the children under age 6 qualify for free or reduced-price lunch.

The achievement gap is such a constant that, as stated by David Brooks in the New York Times, "By age 5, it is possible to predict, with depressing accuracy, who will complete high school and college and who won't."

The good news is that we have the power to mitigate some effects of poverty. If we give young children high-quality learning experiences and equip their parents with crucial parenting and coping skills, children of poverty can become successful, resilient adults. Toward that end, the ECRC uses a multifaceted strategy to address the effects of poverty on our community's youngest children. We provide parenting education classes for low-income parents, and we bring the classes right to their neighborhoods. Our family programming helps to foster healthy development and school readiness while strengthening parent-child bonds.

We work directly with the centers that serve our community's poorest children and with the individual educators and care providers working on the front lines, who are often perilously close to the poverty line themselves. By helping to shift the culture in centers and schools, and by making continuing education accessible, we work to help educators and providers build the foundation for a stable and rewarding career. And by addressing the effects of poverty on all fronts, we're helping to give our community's youngest citizens the best possible start.

Battling the Effects of Poverty in the Classroom

Hidden rules are the unspoken cues that guide our daily lives and help us fit into society. The hidden rules of the middle class, those rules that prioritize work, cooperative behavior, and achievement, are the norm in schools and workplaces. Students living in poverty come equipped with an entirely different set of hidden rules and behaviors, and they do not know the hidden rules that most teachers and employers take as common sense.

Education expert Eric Jensen is the author of *Teaching with Poverty in Mind: What Being Poor Does to Kids' Brains and What Schools Can Do About It*. According to Jensen, children of poverty are different because their brains have adapted to the suboptimal conditions around them. In order to grow up emotionally healthy, children need a reliable caregiver who provides consistent and unconditional love, guidance, and support; a safe and stable environment; harmonious relationships with others; and challenging educational enrichment. If these elements are provided, the brain can adapt and the child can succeed.

Jensen believes that the most significant difference between low and middle-income children may lie in the brain area responsible for language skills. Since reading is the basis for the majority of what we learn in school, a child who begins school with language deficits will have an incredibly difficult time. Because low-income parents typically devote much more of their time and energy to basic survival, "only 36 percent of low-income parents read to their k-age kids each day, while 62 percent of upper-income parents do," and children from low-income families "are less likely to be coached in learning skills or helped with homework." ♦

Ten years ago, more than twice as many Ohio children were enrolled in state preschool programs as they are now, and the state is spending significantly less per child. Ohio's Early Childhood Advisory Council estimates that of all Stark County's early learning slots that were available between 2010 and 2012, only 47% were in accredited, quality-rated programs.

SPARKing Sustained Success for Low-Income Families

EDUCATION
IN ACTION



If children of poverty are to succeed, we must explicitly teach them the rules and behaviors that will make them successful. According to Eric Jensen, two things that help children move out of poverty are education and relationships.

This makes the teacher a crucial bridge between the world of poverty and the mainstream world. While it may be hard work, working to impact the lives of children in poverty can make a real and dramatic difference for generations.

We know that if we remove barriers to learning before kindergarten even begins, children are much more likely to complete high school, find employment, and become positive, productive contributors to society. Our SPARK (Supporting Partnerships to Assure Ready Kids) program works to level the playing field by coming right to the homes of preschool-age children and helping their parents get them ready for kindergarten.

The communities in which SPARK operates are areas of disadvantage. The low incomes, high rates of unemployment, and lack of early education and care resources in these areas mean that the children from these communities are at great risk of beginning school already behind. Unlike many programs that work directly with the child, SPARK is primarily focused on parents. The underlying premise is that the parent is always a child's most effective teacher. By guiding parents and showing them how to become educational advocates for their children, we set the stage for the child's sustained success.

During monthly home visits, a parent partner engages the child and parent in a prescribed lesson developed around the Ohio Department of Education's Early Learning and Development Standards. At each session, a book, an activity kit, and supplies are given to the family, so that the parent is

Two things that help children move out of poverty are education and relationships.

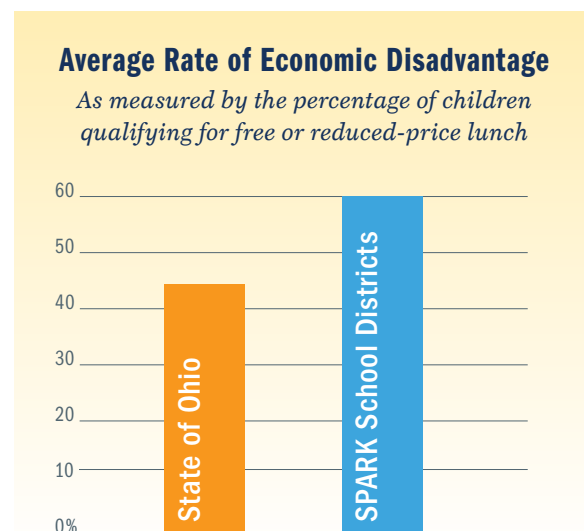
empowered to continue supporting the child's development in between visits. The resources and support SPARK parents receive help them focus on their children's emotional and cognitive development and work to strengthen their children's early literacy, communication, problem solving, social-emotional, fine and gross motor, and self-help skills.

SPARK Addresses Barriers to Learning

Simply guiding families and giving them resources is not sufficient, however. Because SPARK is offered in vulnerable neighborhoods, SPARK families sometimes face very complex life situations. The children may have multifaceted issues that interfere with parents' ability to adequately prepare their children for school and life. One of the most effective ways to confront the barriers that prevent school readiness is to ensure that children receive attention well before kindergarten begins.

Recognizing the need to respond to each family's individual needs and provide effective individual therapies for families, linkages to community resources, and support for parent partners, SPARK established from the outset a responsive services team, which includes a child psychologist, an early childhood educational specialist, a speech and language therapist, a mental health consultant, school-based personnel, and all of the parent partners. While in SPARK, children are assessed for developmental delays and social and emotional problems using the Ages & Stages

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Revitalizing the Future of Learning

There's a lot going on at JRC these days. For one thing, JRC (formerly the J. R. Coleman Center) is undergoing a rebranding effort. The 39-year-old organization recently changed its name and logo to differentiate it from other local organizations that are also named "Coleman" and to more accurately reflect its mission of serving kids, seniors, and the community.

JRC is working to become a comprehensive community resource for the Mahoning Road Corridor community. The Mahoning Road Economic Development Project is a partnership with the city of Canton, SARTA, JRC, and many others working to restore vitality to the area. The goal is to attract new businesses while creating a strengthened sense of "neighborhood," with capital improvements, a Farmers' Market, a community garden, a health initiative, and several other projects designed to cultivate community engagement.

When it comes to early learning, the ECRC is helping JRC follow its path of transition. JRC's Learning Center cares for and educates infants and children from six weeks of age through the elementary years. According to JRC Learning Center Director Jennifer Palmer, the ECRC is involved in nearly every aspect of Learning Center operations. All Learning Center staff are connected with the ECRC in some way, from receiving a variety of training courses to creating educational materials in the production lab. Many families with children in the Learning Center are sufficiently low-income to qualify for subsidized care. Palmer and her staff see the challenges of poverty every day and they firmly believe that high-quality early education is the key to breaking the cycle of poverty.

To ensure that success, Palmer has been leading many changes, including a new curriculum and working toward attaining another star in the state's Step Up to Quality system. The added star will make JRC a four-star center, indicating a very high level of commitment to providing high-quality early learning. ~ The ECRC is helping every step of the way, from providing training on the new curriculum to guiding JRC through the star rating process to training staff in the Incredible Years program, which helps staff members learn techniques for providing positive guidance to the children.~ The staff will soon receive training in lesson planning through the ECRC. The training has not only been beneficial for the end recipients (children and families); Palmer has seen a significant increase in staff engagement and morale as well.

JRC is committed to ensuring that its children are physically, emotionally, and intellectually healthy. In order to accomplish this, they know that simply changing curriculum is not enough, nor is focusing on techniques to help staff interact more effectively with the children. If they want to create lasting change in the lives of the families they serve—and in the larger community—they have to reach out and engage families in their children's early learning processes. Toward that end, the ECRC has been training Learning



Center staff in the parent engagement techniques of the Strengthening Families model. Strengthening Families focuses on preventing abuse through family engagement. JRC reaches out regularly to its families, by offering programs for parents on child development and parenting skills and by promoting initiatives that are inclusive of the whole family, such as classes in healthy, budget-friendly cooking. By incentivizing parent participation (for instance, dinner is provided at the parenting classes), they're helping whole families make positive changes and building the foundation for a revitalized community. ♦

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Listed here are the names of our generous donors. Please consider making a gift to the ECRC's current annual fund.

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We thank those who have made in-kind contributions and those who have volunteered over the past year. We are so grateful for your support!

Special thanks to Incept and The Karcher Group, who decided to hold a Halloween costume contest. Each organization's Facebook fans voted on which photos of the costumed employees were Funniest, Scariest, and Most Authentic. The organization whose photos got the least votes would have to donate to the charity of the winner's choice. Luckily for us, both companies designated us as their charity of choice, and both Incept and the Karcher Group made generous donations to the ECRC. It was a lot of fun!



COMING EVENTS

SAVE THE DATE

APRIL 6-12: THE WEEK OF THE YOUNG CHILD™

The Week of the Young Child™ is an annual celebration sponsored by the National Association for the Education of Young Children to promote the needs of young children, their families, and the early childhood programs that serve them. The 2014 Week of the Young Child™ is April 6-12. We hope everyone will take some time to support early literacy initiatives, thank the teachers who work with our children, and advocate for public policies that benefit all young children.



SEPTEMBER 28: THE BIG, BIG, REALLY BIG TOY BOX FUNDRAISER

Join us for our second annual family fundraising event, The Big, Big, REALLY BIG Toy Box. We're going bigger and better this year, with games, magical interactive experiences, surprises, giveaways, and entertainment for the entire family.

When: Sunday, September 28 from 2:00-6:00 p.m.

Where: Cultural Center for the Arts in Canton

All proceeds will go to support the ECRC's programs, services, and resources for educators and families. For information on sponsorship, contact the ECRC's Development Manager, Dan Gravo, at dgravo@ecresourcecenter.org or (330) 491-3272.

NEWS BRIEFS

DRAMA IN THE CLASSROOM

In February, a group of preschool teachers learned the power of using dramatic (or "pretend") play to help children develop their social-emotional skills. They also learned first-hand that creativity and dramatic play are powerful learning tools for adults, too. Both children and adults are drawn to stories and pretending as tools for learning.



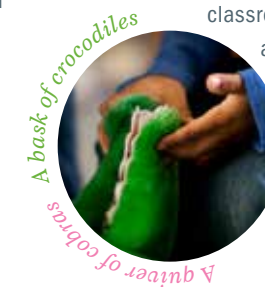
The group learned how to strategically set up a dramatic play area to facilitate the development of early literacy, communication, social, fine motor, cooperation, organization, and exploration skills. They used the production lab to create flannel board activities, played theatre games, used puppets for daily activities, and even went for a walk in outer space. They also used improvisation, incorporating puppets, boxes, and flannel board materials to create and envision new ways to enhance drama skills. This creative group came up with several ideas for using boxes as well. One group developed the concept of Going on a Bear Hunt while the other created a large circus tent children could crawl into and use for reading or creative play.



PUPPETS INVADE THE ECRC

An unprecedented number of frogs, monkeys, sea creatures, birds, jungle animals, farm animals, dragons, reptiles, and insects visited the ECRC in February as Melinda Dannemiller, known as "The Puppet Lady," offered for sale the hundreds of creatures she's accumulated and created over 16 years of storytelling throughout the community.

All good things must come to an end, and for Melinda, it's time to retire and pass the torch to local educators and families. She also sold a wide range of storytelling props, puppetmaking/craft supplies, classroom displays, and children's books. Many families and educators flocked to the sale to give these beautiful animals new homes. Melinda was also kind enough to donate some of the puppets and materials to the ECRC.



SUPPORT THE EARLY CHILDHOOD RESOURCE CENTER

Because we are a nonprofit organization, funding from foundations, businesses, community organization and individuals provides most of our income. Your gift will help equip teachers and parents to respond to the needs of children with special needs and will provide families with access to low-cost programs and resources that promote creativity, boost interest in learning, and build healthy relationships. And you'll be helping to ensure that policymakers and community leaders are fully informed as they make decisions that impact programs and services for children.

You can send a donation in the enclosed envelope or make a secure donation online at ecresourcecenter.org. Any amount helps us foster the healthy development of the youngest children in our community. Your generosity today will have a direct and significant impact on children and families in our community for years to come. **FIND US ONLINE** Visit ecresourcecenter.org to learn more about our programs, services, and volunteer opportunities, and to make a secure online donation.



EARLY CHILDHOOD RESOURCE CENTER

A Ministry of the Sisters of Charity Health System

1718 CLEVELAND AVENUE NORTHWEST
CANTON, OHIO 44703

ecresourcecenter.org

OUR MISSION

In the spirit of the Sisters of Charity of St. Augustine, the mission of the Early Childhood Resource Center is to promote the healthy development of young children by improving the quality of their early education and care through comprehensive programming, resources, and support services for families and early childhood professionals, to be leaders and advocates at the state level, and to promote the professionalism of the early childhood field.

CENTER HOURS

Monday	CLOSED
Tuesday, Wednesday & Thursday	8:30 a.m. – 8:00 p.m.
Friday & 2nd & 4th Saturday	8:30 a.m. – 11:30 a.m.

Continued from page 4 Questionnaire (ASQ) and the Ages and Stages Questionnaire: Social-Emotional (ASQ:SE), respectively. The responsive services team meets monthly to discuss the children's screening results and share concerns about suspected delays and/or behavioral concerns that were either observed by the parent partner or mentioned by the parent. A plan for addressing the concerns is then developed. Some children are monitored, while others are referred to the school district for assistance or to community organizations that provide specific services such as behavioral counseling, vision screening, or speech therapy.

SPARK Gets Results

We know that when low-income children enter school ready to learn, their chances of success rise considerably. SPARK's evaluation results bear that out. For eight consecutive years, independent evaluators have found that, to a statistically significant degree, SPARK children outscore their non-SPARK peers on the kindergarten entry assessment that measures the early literacy skills the children will need to succeed in school.

Not only do SPARK children enter kindergarten more ready to learn, they also score significantly higher on the third and fifth grade Ohio Achievement Assessments in English and Math. **That's right: SPARK children are reaping the benefits of SPARK participation even six years after kindergarten has begun.** We believe a major reason why the success is sustained is that the support skills the parents learned in SPARK remain with them, year after year.

SPARK has served nearly 4,300 children since 2003, and is currently serving almost a thousand children in nine Ohio counties. *For more information about SPARK, visit sparkohio.org.* ♦