

# Community Connections

December 2009

## Early Childhood Education

*Erie County, Pennsylvania*



The Erie  
Community  
Foundation

*Helping today... Shaping tomorrow.*

**Community Connections is a series of publications  
designed to build and share knowledge on public issues in Erie County, Pennsylvania.**

**D**oes it make a difference when a three year old participates in a quality early care and education program? Does mixing colors, building with blocks, listening to stories, experimenting with various sights and sounds, and playing really influence a person's life? Do the effects last? Do the effects impact our larger community? The answer, simply, is yes!

**Children are  
the world's  
most valuable  
resource and  
its best hope  
for the future.**

*—John F. Kennedy*

Both short- and long-term research has documented the positive impact of quality early care and education with significant, immediate effects on cognitive, social and emotional development of children. Children with early education do better on achievement tests and have better attitudes toward school. Early childhood education creates long-term results including consistent employment and higher earnings, lower teen pregnancy and decreased arrest rates. Additionally, early childhood education is touted as a tax savings and great economic investment for the community.

Strong community collaborations already exist producing positive benefits for early childhood care and education. Erie County benefits from a significant number of highly qualified professionals committed to continuous learning. Yet more work must be done to ensure barriers to essential services are removed and all children are given the best opportunity to succeed early in their lives.

**Erie County Stats:**

- 88% of the adult population are high school graduates
- 23% percent have bachelor's degrees or higher
- 10% of families are at or below the poverty level, which is higher than the national average of 9.8%.
- Erie County leading industries are educational services, health care and social assistance at 26% and manufacturing at 20%.
- Estimated average household income from 2005-2007 is \$42,073.

## *Early Childhood Education — Where Do We Stand?*

Erie County is an urban-mixed county with a population estimated at nearly 280,000. Of that population, 16,486 residents are age five or younger. Only **55%** of children are enrolled in an established early education full day experience. Of the children from birth to age five:

- 13.8% participate in Child Care Works.
- 14.9% participate in Keystone STARS.
- 15.8% participate in Early Intervention.
- 3.4% participate in Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts.
- 5.4% participate in federal Head Start.
- 0.9% participate in Nurse-Family Partnership.
- 0.6% participate in Head Start Supplemental Assistance.

### **Where are the other 45% of the children?**

Hopefully, they are in safe, secure environments with one or more adults providing quality care and stimulating activities, or, possibly, they are in private preschool programs or church nursery schools. Unfortunately, we know some are not.

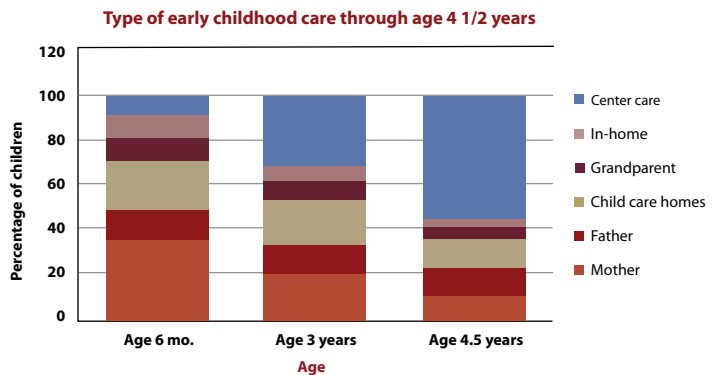
Some children are simply at-risk for failure due to environmental circumstances. The 2008-09 Reach and Risk Assessment for Erie County reports that 43.5 percent of children under age five live in low-income families and 18.6 percent of births are to mothers with less than a high school education.



# Who Takes Care of Our Children?

Children are not developing all of the skills they need to succeed. Research shows that children entering kindergarten do not have the expected pre-kindergarten skills. In fact, one-third of children entering kindergarten do not know the letters of the alphabet; more than one-half do not know basic math skills; and one in three kindergarteners do not know how to pay attention in class. Further negatively affecting school readiness is that, of five year olds, one in six lives in poverty.

Thankfully, a surge in early care and education programs has occurred in response to the critical importance of early educational experiences and the increased demand for child care.



## Early Care and Early Education

Day care traditionally refers to a child's experience in a setting outside his or her own home while the parent works outside the home. Early care and education encompasses the period of time from birth through age eight with services delivered in a nursery school, preschool, family child care home, pre-kindergarten program, child care center or Head Start.

Of the 184 licensed provider sites in Erie County, 91 are child care centers, 84 are family child care homes and 11 are group child care homes. All have a certificate of compliance from the Department of Public Welfare.

## Transition to Kindergarten Practices

The transition from early childhood to kindergarten and elementary school is a significant milestone for children, families and educators. The transition can be extremely stressful for five year olds because they face new expectations in an unfamiliar environment. Adding to the stress, many young children enter school without the skills expected by the school.

Successful transitions occur when there are strong relationships linking children, families, school, and community, including child care programs, and are established before kindergarten starts. Pennsylvania's Community Engagement Groups (CEG) work on developing relationships between school districts and early learning programs to improve transition planning. The long-term goal is to establish transition teams that will develop and implement transition plans.

The Erie County CEG (Success By 6™) School Transition Committee's Pre-K Transition Project provides tools to parents, caregivers and teachers to ensure as many children as possible, in all 13 Erie County school districts, have a successful transition. The project is open to any early care and education provider. Completed information packets are forwarded to a child's kindergarten teacher.

## *What Else Factors into the Healthy Development of Our Children?*

### **Brain Development**

The most significant advances in brain development occur prenatally; however, growth of the brain is life-long, hierarchical, cumulative and integrated. The brain incorporates experience into its architecture.

#### ***Play:***

In a developmentally appropriate curriculum, play is recognized as crucial to cognitive physical, emotional and social development. Play provides a context for children to practice newly acquired skills and to take on new social roles, attempt novel or challenging tasks, and solve complex problems. Play is the precursor to reading. Direct relationships exist between a child acting out a role, or using his or her imagination, and growth in the brain. Programs need to promote the wonder of discovery.

#### ***Health Care:***

Early brain development is positively impacted by prenatal and well-child health care, good nutrition and the elimination of exposure to harmful pollutants. Early prevention and intervention is better and less expensive than later remediation.



### ***Learning Methods:***

Sensitive interactions with adults do more to promote brain development than any toy, CD or DVD. Preschools need to deliver services enabling adults to have rich, nurturing interactions with children.

### ***Psycho/Social:***

Exposure to chronic stress is harmful. As early as possible, mental health experts need to provide support and consultation to preschool staff who work with children with behavioral problems.

## **Mental Health**

Most adults find poor mental health in young children as incomprehensible; however, more than 10 percent of children enrolled in the Erie School District were diagnosed with an emotional disturbance. Children are at risk for mental health problems when they have witnessed or experienced violence, psychiatric disorders of family members, poverty, abuse, parental discord, substance abuse or neglect.

Addressing children's mental health means early recognition of problems and using research-based methods such as play therapy to help children express emotions. Intervention and support can lead to better emotional outcomes for the child.

### ***Trauma:***

The younger children are when they experience trauma, the more vulnerable they are to its effect on brain development, including difficulties with learning, ongoing behavior problems, impaired relationships and poor social and emotional competence. Trauma is pervasive; 25 to 90 percent of children and youth experience events leaving them traumatized. Low-income and minority children disproportionately experience trauma.

### ***Mental Health Screening:***

Nationally, only 21 percent of children who may benefit from mental health evaluations actually receive them. Preschool programs that focus on readiness are recognizing the significance of children's socio-emotional difficulties.

## **Special Needs Children**

According to the Pennsylvania Special Education Data Report for 2008-09, more than 19percent of children enrolled in the Erie School District have special needs. The Erie County Office of Mental Health/Mental Retardation, Head Start, Erie County Department of Health, Erie City School District and Northwest Tri-County Intermediate

Unit recognize and aggressively address the issue of early intervention services in the Erie community. Each agency's individualized approach addresses the need to empower and involve the family in the early intervention process.

### **Child Abuse Prevention & Intervention**

Child maltreatment is the sixth leading cause of death for children under the age of 14 in the U.S. In 2008, 892 reports of child abuse and neglect were reported in Erie County, of which more than 13 percent were substantiated. Research shows abused children are nearly one-third more likely to be arrested for violent crimes later in life. Child abuse prevention and intervention programs with proven outcomes include: Strengthening Families Program, 123 Magic, STEP, FIRST STEP, Nurse-Family Partnership, Mother-to-Mother and trauma-focused programs.

### **English as a Second Language (ESL)**

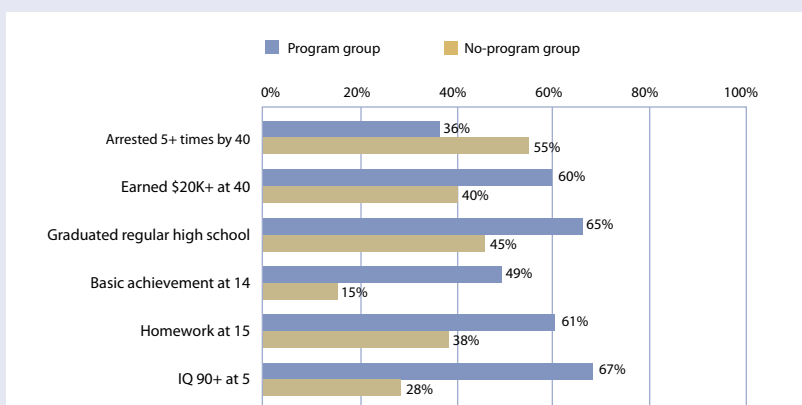
Bilingual children face additional challenges beyond those of their classmates, including the need to move effectively between two languages and two cultures, as well as the ongoing developmental task of maintaining their own identity. A well-structured early childhood education program provides engaging opportunities for children to be creative, social, self-motivated and purposeful.



## *What are the Economic and Societal Impacts?*

Each dollar invested in early childhood education significantly reduces government spending on remedial education, teenage pregnancy and prisons. In fact, an investment in early childhood is a secure economic development tool.

One study found that the 40-year-old adults who had participated in a pre-school program had higher earnings, were more likely to hold a job, had committed fewer crimes, and were more likely to have graduated from high school.



**High/Scope Perry Preschool study at 40**

### **Workforce Benefits**

Reliable child care boosts the economy. One in five parents miss work each year because of child care problems, costing business an estimated \$3.5 billion annually. Free child care increases the labor supply by 10 percent among low-income mothers, especially single mothers. Additionally, working parents who are comfortable with their child's care are happier and more productive.

### **Tax Revenues and Public Savings**

For every dollar invested, high-quality preschool programs generate \$7 to \$17 in public savings and tax revenues. For example, when teenage pregnancies are reduced, the need for welfare and federal public assistance services are reduced.

### **Crime Prevention and Delinquency Reduction**

Children who participate in early childhood education are 70 percent less likely to be arrested for a violent crime by age 18 than those who did not participate.

## *What are the Current Efforts and Local Initiatives?*

In 2002, Child Care Resource Developers awarded The Erie Community Foundation's Nonprofit Partnership with a grant to formalize an early care and education planning process and delivery system for Erie. Led by Mike Cox of Erie County's Child Care Information Services, an unprecedented number of educators, parents and other concerned individuals explored outcome measurement, quality promotion and methods used to prepare children for school. Ultimately their collaboration laid the groundwork for the important work that was to follow.

### **Success By 6**

Pennsylvania created Early Childhood Community Engagement Groups to build support networks of early childhood programs, parents, school districts and child-serving organizations. They assess current quality early learning programs and develop ways to encourage early learning.

In Erie County, the Community Engagement Group is the United Way's Success By 6. With significant funding by The Erie Community Foundation and the Pennsylvania Office of Child Development and Early Learning, Early Connections administers Success By 6. Today, more than 300 professionals and parents volunteer their expertise to promote Success By 6, focusing on five areas: child abuse and neglect, children with special needs, health care, children's mental health and education.

*More specifically, Success By 6:*

- Sponsors parent learning fairs in collaboration with schools
- Hosts, through the Director's Committee, an annual Children's Early Learning Expo at Penn State Behrend attracting more than 500 participants
- Presents an Annual Symposium featuring nationally recognized speakers in the field of early care and education, including an evening of information for parents and a daylong professional symposium
- Sponsored a postpartum depression workshop with more than 120 nurses and service providers attending, resulting in increased postpartum depression screenings of new mothers
- Partnered with WQLN to develop infant and toddler Ready-Set-Learn literacy and activity segments; the segments air on WJET-TV's "Morning Show"
- Revised the parent booklet "*Children Do Come With Directions*"



## Curriculum & Assessment

As part of Governor Rendell's commitment to early childhood education, the Department of Education and Department of Public Welfare developed The Early Learning Standards, which guide the development of pre-kindergarten programs for children birth to age eight. The Department also developed early childhood assessment for children from birth to age eight that looks at individual child assessment information and the early childhood classroom environment. Pennsylvania's comprehensive approach is having a very impressive effect on the quality of early care and education in the commonwealth.

## *What Else Can Be Done?*

### For the Professionals

Erie County is fortunate that early childhood educators can easily access high-quality professional development through three institutions of higher education for associate, bachelor's or graduate degrees in the field. In addition, two CDA programs and a director's credential exist. Despite available opportunities, smaller sites and group settings cannot offer release time or compensation for staff to take advantage of available educational programming.



Delivering high-quality early childhood programs can be improved by offering multi-day seminars teaching professionals how to use learning centers in the classroom, develop portfolios and

communicate effectively. However, providing professional development to childcare providers is not easy due to varied skill levels. To be successful, multiple options are needed to meet the varied abilities of these diverse, adult learners.

### For the Parents

Erie County lacks adequate programming to help parents address and cope with problems. Parents would benefit from the implementation of high-quality, comprehensive parenting programs from basic parenting to meeting more sophisticated needs.

## *In Summary*

Early childhood is the most rapid development period in a human's life. Although children develop at their own pace, all children progress through physical, cognitive, and emotional growth and changes. Many approaches exist, which educators and caregivers can use, to encourage and stimulate a child's progress.

Outcomes for children are better when they attend programs that include

a developmentally appropriate curriculum geared to young children, have well-prepared staff and include parent involvement in programming. These characteristics of quality have clear cost implications, and unless the programs are high-quality, the public sector cost benefits cannot be achieved.

A child who is ready for school has a combination of positive characteristics: socially and emotionally healthy, confident, and friendly; has good peer relationships; tackles challenging tasks and persists with them; has good language skills and communicates well; listens to instructions; and is attentive. A child who is ready for school has less chance of repeating a grade, being placed in special education, or becoming a school drop-out statistic.



***Please visit [www.ErieCommunityFoundation.org](http://www.ErieCommunityFoundation.org)  
for a full environmental scan.***

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