

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE

A Needs Assessment for Children Birth to Five
in St. Joseph County, Indiana

June 2005

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Scientists continue to explore the awesome process of child growth and development. We now know that the brain develops as a result of the interaction between genetic components and a child's encounters in the world—especially in the earliest years. These experiences actually shape the brain's structure and chemistry, thereby affecting a child's learning well into the future. Research guides us, too, on what these optimal experiences are, providing a valuable road map for parents and other caregivers of infants and young children.

Several new longitudinal studies document the positive *life-long* impact that quality early childhood programs have, especially for low-income children. Other studies show that third grade reading levels are correlated with early childhood program quality—and that when children do not read on grade level by third grade, they often do not catch up.

It is important for communities to ask, then, “How well are we utilizing this flood of information to improve the life chances of children? And how can we do better?” *Early Childhood Education and Care* is a report on community progress towards a high-quality environment for children birth to five in St. Joseph County. It helps answer these questions.

The needs assessment was conducted between July 2004 and April 2005 by Sue Christensen and Ann Rosen for Step Ahead of St. Joseph County with funding from the Community Foundation of St. Joseph County, Inc. and United Way of St. Joseph County, Inc. Information was collected from a variety of sources, including surveys of early childhood providers, interviews, research studies, and the U.S. Census.

The report is intended to be a springboard for organization and systemic planning, a reference for grant writing in St. Joseph County, a touchstone for funders, a resource for policy-makers, and a tool for early childhood advocates. It provides the fundamental information needed to set priorities, seek supporting funds, and advocate to increase accessibility, assure quality, and extend the affordability of early childhood education for our children and families.

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**COMMUNITY
FOUNDATION
OF ST. JOSEPH
C O U N T Y**



United Way
of St. Joseph County

WHO ARE THE CHILDREN?

◆ **An estimated 18,713 or more children under age five live in St. Joseph County.** The quality of their early childhood education and care are vital to their healthy growth and development.

◆ **Up to 13,485 young children may need some type of child care.** In St. Joseph County, almost two of every three children under the age of six have all parents in the family working.

◆ **Many children are at risk.** Research indicates that a number of factors put children at risk for lower academic achievement, including the following:

Low economic status: As they enter school, children in low-income families are significantly behind their more affluent peers—academically, socially and physically. In St. Joseph County in 1999 there were approximately 7,445 children under age five living in poverty or in low-income families.

Minority Status: Children from African American and Hispanic families are more likely to have one or more other risk factors, compared with children from White families. In St. Joseph County in 2000, there were 3,023 African American children and 1,745 Hispanic children under the age of five.

Low birth weight: Children born with an extremely low birth weight have a higher incidence of behavior problems at school entry, poorer cognitive performance, and an increased incidence of learning disabilities and academic difficulties. In St. Joseph County, at least 1,455 babies were born with low or very low birth weight from 2001 through 2004.

Level of maternal education: Lower levels of maternal education are correlated with children's early school failure, including a lack of reading and math achievement. In St. Joseph County, 5,061 women between age 18 and 34 do not have a high school diploma; 241 babies were born in 2002 to mothers under age 20 without a high school diploma.

Abuse and neglect: Children who are maltreated have higher rates of school problems, including lower test scores in math and English, lower IQ scores, lower social acceptance and more grade repetitions. In St. Joseph County, 808 cases of child abuse and neglect were substantiated in 2003.

ACCESS

◆ **The number of licensed centers has dropped.** The number of licensed child care centers has declined by over 30 percent since 1993, while the number of registered ministries has more than doubled. Changes in available funding and stricter licensing regulations that are expensive to implement coupled with the lower cost of unlicensed programs may be driving these changes.

◆ **Capacity appears sufficient, but it is difficult to get a handle on parent needs.** The number of child care vacancies is higher than the number of children on waiting lists in St. Joseph County. Whether or not what is available matches what families need is mostly undetermined, since this phase of the needs assessment does not include information from parents. Would these vacancies be filled if parents could afford them? Would they be filled if they were higher quality?

◆ **There are gaps in service for infants and three-year-olds.** While the overall number of spaces may be adequate, some children are being underserved. Providers report turning away infants and there are far fewer spaces than what would be predicted as needed by the number of babies born each year and the percentage of mothers in the workforce who have infants. Head Start did not serve three-year-olds in the 2004-05 school year, a matter of concern especially throughout the special needs community.

*“Infant care is hard to find.
Everyone is closed, full,
at their limit.”*

QUALITY

◆ **Quality child care makes a difference.** Several long-term studies show that, when children attend higher quality child care centers, they perform better on measures of cognitive and social skills in child care and on into their school years. Further, *these early experiences have the greatest impact on children who are at high risk of academic difficulties.*

The Perry Preschool 40 year study and other long-term studies show that children in low income families who attended quality programs perform better on intellectual, language, and literacy measures; and as adults have higher graduation rates, higher earnings, greater employment, and less involvement with the criminal justice system.

◆ **Quality early childhood education is an investment for the community.** Some economists believe that early childhood programs should top the list of economic development for state and local governments. According to the economic analysis of the Perry Pre-school Study, every dollar invested in early childhood education has a return of \$12.90.

◆ **Quality programs share recognizable characteristics.** In high quality programs, teachers have more formal education and more specialized early childhood training, are better compensated, and have better benefits and working conditions. According to the National Association of Education of Young Children, high quality programs also have low rates of teacher turnover and “a comprehensive system of curriculum, assessment, and program evaluation.” Yet in St. Joseph County, evidence of these quality indicators is disappointing.

◆ **For many programs, teacher education levels are insufficient.** Despite clear evidence that well-educated teachers are critical for quality, no teachers in licensed centers responding to the Needs Assessment survey have a BA in Early Childhood Education; more than half of responding licensed centers and registered ministries have no teachers with a BA of any kind.

“Studies are mixed as to whether or not accredited programs offer better staff compensation or have lower staff turnover, but accredited programs consistently demonstrate higher quality for children.”

—Marcy Whitebook, Ph.D.

◆ **Early childhood teachers work for poverty wages.** Real wages for the teachers of young children in St. Joseph County have also declined over the past six years. Nor do many receive any benefits.

◆ **Teacher turnover in St. Joseph County appears to be lower than the national average.** In light of low wages and lack of benefits, it is encouraging that teacher turnover in St. Joseph County appears to be somewhat lower than the national average.

◆ **Most programs do not have a comprehensive system of curriculum, assessment, and program evaluation.** While a majority of responding programs use a curriculum, most are not research-based; only five have a curriculum that is aligned with research-based child assessments and program evaluation.

◆ **The number of programs accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) has increased.** Eight of the 48 child care centers and preschools in St. Joseph County have earned the demanding NAEYC accreditation, a clear mark of quality. Two family child care homes responding to the needs assessment survey have National Association for Family Child Care (NAFCC) accreditation.

AFFORDABILITY

◆ **Child care costs place a heavy financial burden on families.** It costs more to place a toddler in a full day child care center than it costs for a teen's tuition and fees at Indiana University. Costs can take from one-fifth to one-third of a family's income, eating up a considerable portion of a low-income family's budget. Even with child care wages at poverty levels, many parents find the cost of care beyond their reach.

◆ **Over \$5 million in child care subsidies came into St. Joseph County in 2004.** Even so, many children remain on waiting lists for federal and local dollars, and the funds have been shrinking. To stretch dollars state-wide, eligibility criteria have been tightened for the Child Care and Development Fund, which allows parents to use vouchers for child care; now even fewer parents will qualify. Nationally, only one in seven children eligible for child care assistance under Federal rules actually receives that help.

*“Finances are always
an issue.”*

TRENDS AND ISSUES

◆ **Finances are precarious for many early childhood education programs.** Stricter state licensing regulations and the need to raise quality and increase staff compensation put pressure on programs to raise prices. That puts a financial squeeze on parents, many of whom cannot meet the expense. Cost, not quality, may therefore be the primary criteria for selecting a provider, which impacts the bottom line of higher quality programs. With higher cost and fewer subsidies, many providers are finding financial stability a problem.

◆ **The landscape of child care providers has shifted.**

The upsurge in unlicensed programs is a concern since, according to a recent Purdue study, children in licensed child care settings in St. Joseph County received higher quality care than children in unlicensed settings.

◆ **Teachers need training and support if they are to help children with challenging behaviors.** Almost two-thirds of center and ministry directors said that children with very challenging behaviors are enrolled in their programs. Training in working with these children was by far the most frequently selected topic for all providers. Concern about challenging behaviors has surfaced at the national level as well, and research is underway around the country into the most effective interventions.

◆ **Training in early literacy is not on the radar screen.** Given the rapid growth in understanding about how children learn to read and the serious consequences for children not reading on grade level by the third grade, providers' lack of interest in early literacy training for teachers was surprising.

◆ **Parenting skills are seen as weakening.** Providers identified decreasing parenting skills and involvement as a trend. A need for parenting education has been heard in the community at least since the Step Ahead Needs Assessment in 1993.

◆ **An overemphasis on academic preparation of children may obscure the importance of other developmental domains.** Survey respondents identified a push to early academics as a disturbing trend that is affecting parents' expectations of early childhood education. Teachers recognize the importance of social-emotional development and are concerned that too much attention on cognitive development diminishes time for activities that nourish the whole child. Some identify this trend as contributing to the numbers of children who display difficult behaviors in the classroom.

The full report is available online at <<http://www.cfsjc.org/publications/research.cfm>>.