

GOVERNOR'S EARLY CHILDHOOD SUMMIT

Issue Brief

Family Matters

Safety, parent education and family support

Ultimately, parents are responsible to keep their children safe, healthy, and growing and learning well, but parents cannot do this job in isolation. All parents with a new baby or young child benefit from support that fits their unique situation. Many of these supports are relatively inexpensive; others are more costly. Whatever the cost, keeping children safe and thriving in their own homes is the best investment society can make. It is much more costly to attempt to undo the damage that is created by poor parenting than to prevent it from occurring. By supporting families and educating parents, we benefit two generations – parents and children.

Some families just need basic information and access to community resources to do well. Other families are overburdened by poverty, lack of employment and education, homelessness, mental health or drug and alcohol issues, physical or cognitive limitations. Some families face the unique challenges presented when a like a child has special needs. These families need more intense and targeted education and support to keep their children safe and thriving.

Some families have fallen into the child welfare system, because they have already failed to keep their children safe. These families benefit from more intense and targeted support that meets their pressing needs. Many of these parents are themselves survivors of difficult childhood experiences and some were the victims of abuse and neglect themselves as children.

There are proven strategies to effectively support families and young children whatever their level of need or risk. No one strategy will fit all needs or situations, but a diverse, coordinated continuum of proven strategies can support and benefit families at all levels of need and risk. Even when families face very significant issues, they can be helped through participation in effective programs and services. The *Oregon Early Childhood System of Supports* and Services is dedicated to addressing the diverse needs of families in order to assure that all parents are able to protect and nurture their children. Within this system, the services and supports for families target the following objective:

OBJECTIVES OF SERVICES AND SUPPORTS FOR FAMILIES

- Promote healthy children, nurturing families, and caring communities;
- Ensure that all parents and caregivers have the mental health and knowledge and other essential resources to build and sustain nurturing relationships with the children in their care.
- Ensure that all families can not only meet their basic needs, but also thrive and nurture their children's development
- Promote the above objectives through a statewide coordinated continuum of community-based family-focused services and supports for all families, particularly the most vulnerable

GOVERNOR'S EARLY CHILDHOOD SUMMIT

Issue Brief

Family Matters

Safety, parent education and family support

WHAT RESEARCH TELLS US

Children can only develop to their fullest potential when they live in nurturing families that are supported by caring communities. Research summarized by the nation's most prestigious scientists confirms the following¹:

- To develop to their fullest potential, children must have early relationships that provide stability, consistency, affection, and responsiveness, as well as protection from harm and support for growth of new skills and capabilities
- When young children experience early nurturing relationships, they develop self awareness, social competence, emotional growth, and other accomplishments.
- Strong attachments to parents and other caregivers buffer children against behavior problems. Strong attachments not only strengthen human connections but also provide a structure for monitoring a child's development and behavior.
- The longer a child experiences care that fails to meet basic needs or provide nurturance, the greater the challenge in getting the child on a healthy life trajectory.
- The quality of care giving has diverse roots in family ecology, marital relationships, and adults' pasts. Improving the quality of care requires carefully designed interventions that take these social and cultural features of families into consideration.
- If families are to nurture their children, communities must reduce the stresses on families that arise from poverty, social isolation, untreated physical and mental health issues, drug and alcohol abuse, domestic violence, and community violence.
- There are effective strategies to support families and young children whatever their level of need or risk. No one strategy fits all needs or situations, but a coordinated continuum of proven strategies can support and benefit families at all levels of need and risk.

CURRENT CLIMATE FOR YOUNG FAMILIES IN OREGON

Over 300,000 children under the age of 5 live in our state. These young children are dependent on their families for the nurturing and support they need to grow to their full potential. In turn, their families depend on the communities in which they live to provide the diverse supports and services they need to do the most important job they will ever undertake - parenting young children. This job is especially complicated when young parents face poverty or other risk factors.

Poverty is a significant stressor for many young families and children. 19% of Oregon children under age 6 live in below the official federal poverty line. Fully 24% of Oregon children under 6 live in "working poor" families with incomes at or below 200% of poverty level. Poverty is not evenly distributed in Oregon, Substantial pockets of poverty are found in the greater Portland Metropolitan Area and in other larger cities. Many of Oregon's poorest families live in rural or frontier counties, where social isolation and lack of services compound the challenges they face. Families of color, recent immigrants, single parent families, and very young families have substantially higher rates of poverty than do general population.

GOVERNOR'S EARLY CHILDHOOD SUMMIT

Issue Brief

Family Matters

Safety, parent education and family support

Other challenges also face Oregon families with young children. Many of these challenges are documented by statewide screening conducted with first birth families across the state. Last year, approximately 10,000 first birth families screened by Oregon Healthy Start. These statewide screenings of first birth families revealed the following.

- **Half of Oregon's first birth families reported two or more significant risk factors that are linked to poor childhood outcomes.** These risks included depression or other mental health issues, drug or alcohol abuse, single and/or teen parenting, low educational levels and unemployment.
- **Social isolation is a major risk factor among Oregon's first birth families** screened by Healthy Start. Among these *first* birth families, over half were single mothers. Among the higher risk first birth families enrolled in Healthy Start home visiting service, over half do not have *anyone* who they could call on in an emergency.
- **Behavioral health issues, particularly parental depression, violent relationships and parents' use of drugs and alcohol put many infants and young children at risk.** These factors undermine parent-child attachment. Strong parent-child attachment reduces the risk of maltreatment and is the foundation for infants' socio-emotional development, mental health and learning.

Despite the great need, mental health services have been reduced in recent years through cut backs in the Oregon Health Plan. In addition, many young parents experience behavioral health challenges that are not severe enough to be diagnosed, but are significant enough to impact their parenting; access to treatment is particularly difficult for these parents. Parents may be eligible for some kinds of services *after* their child is diagnosed with a behavioral, emotional, or mental health problem, but proactive services for parents that may have helped avoid or minimize the child's problems, are lacking.

Recovery services for parents who use drugs and alcohol are also limited. In particular, family-oriented treatment facilities and programs that are responsive to the needs of parents with young children are very rare. Oregon has some outstanding small-scale models of family-centered recovery services, but, overall, more are needed.

Methamphetamine use has had a tremendous negative impact on the lives of many of Oregon's young children and their families. Motivation to enter treatment is sometimes lacking. Family support with trained "parent coaches" can help motivate parents to seek help and support them in their efforts to change. When parents are ready to enter treatment, services must be immediately available or the opportunity may be lost.

Mental health and recovery services are especially limited in rural areas, and for non-English speakers. Services must be culturally sensitive to be effective and the lack of access to appropriate, culturally grounded treatment is pronounced.

GOVERNOR'S EARLY CHILDHOOD SUMMIT

Issue Brief

Family Matters

Safety, parent education and family support

- **The child welfare system is overrun with reports linked to substance abuse, domestic violence, and mental health issues affecting parents.** In 2006, the largest category of substantiated child abuse and neglect reports was “threat of harm” (50.2%). This category is directly related to parental behaviors that put the child in danger. In many cases, children must be removed from these unsafe homes. The challenge is enormous. In 2006ⁱⁱ,
 - ✓ **15 Oregon children under the age of 5 died from causes related to abuse or neglect in fiscal year.**
 - ✓ In that year, 5,947 children ages 0-5 years were victims of child abuse/neglect, and in the same year, the rate of child maltreatment for children ages 0-2 was 28 in 1000, an increase over previous years.
 - ✓ 1,433 of Oregon’s young children entered the foster care system.

Clearly the burden on the child welfare system and the taxpayers to keep these children safe is overwhelming, and most importantly, the human cost to the children and their families cannot be measured.

- **Many young families are parenting children who have significant developmental delays, disabilities and/or sensory impairments.** Children with developmental delays and/or disabilities are at much greater risk of abuse or neglect and poor educational outcomes. Improved screening and detection services have contributed to an increasing number of Oregon’s children ages 0-5 years being identified and diagnosed with developmental delays, disabilities and/or sensory impairments. These children need early intervention or early childhood special education services.

Moreover, their parents need specialized education, resources, supports and services to assist them in parenting their child with special needs. Parents are encouraged to partner with early intervention services to design and carry out the child’s individualized plan of care. Parents also must be educated to be effective advocates for their children. Parent-to-parent support as well as professional support can help families and children thrive in these challenging situations.

OREGON’S SYSTEM OF SUPPORTS FOR FAMILIES

The Oregon System of Supports for Families offers a continuum of services and supports that range from prevention to early intervention to intervention and treatment. State services and support programs for young families are implemented by providers and partners in local communities. Three state agencies administer these programs: the Oregon Commission on Children and Families (OCCF), the Department of Human Services (DHS), and the Department of Education (DOE). These state services and supports are briefly described below.

GOVERNOR'S EARLY CHILDHOOD SUMMIT

Issue Brief

Family Matters

Safety, parent education and family support

OREGON COMMISSION ON CHILDREN AND FAMILIES (OCCF)

Healthy Start is Oregon's largest statewide program specifically charged to nurture young families, reduce child abuse and neglect, and promote early learning. As universal voluntary prevention program, **Healthy Start serves first birth families with children from birth to age 3** following the research-based Healthy Families America program model. This model is shown to be effective in Oregon and across the nation. In fact the HFA home visiting model has been designated by the Rand Corporation as a proven practice. In 2007, Oregon Healthy Start became one of only six fully accredited Healthy Families America state systems; this prestigious designation recognizes that Oregon Healthy Start has implemented the rigorous research-based practices of the HFA model.

Funded primarily by state general funds through the Commission on Children and Families, local Healthy Start programs annually provides screening and information and referral services to almost 10,000 first birth families statewide. Through screening some families are identified as experiencing significant risks for poor outcomes including child abuse and neglect. These families are eligible for Healthy Start intensive home visiting by highly trained home visitors; annually over 2,700 of Oregon's most overburdened families participate in home visiting which may continue through the first three years of the child's life as needed. Home visitors provide one-to-one parent education, provide linkages to needed resources, and nurture families as they build stronger support systems.

Most importantly, Oregon Healthy Start reaches its goals: Healthy Start reduces the incidence of child abuse and neglectⁱⁱⁱ, promotes early learning and positive parent-child relationships, and effectively screens children for developmental delays and links families with healthcare.

Despite these successes, Healthy Start currently able to serve about half of the families who are eligible for intensive home visiting support. Most importantly, Healthy Start is effective. Strategies like home visiting that decrease social isolation and connect families with the larger community, while providing parents with sound information help to keep children safe.

Relief Nurseries successfully work with **families of children 0-5 experiencing very significant stressors in their lives**. Relief Nurseries are funded by state and local Commissions on Children and Families, local contributions, and grants from foundations and governments. Unlike the prevention-focused Healthy Start which serves only first birth families, Relief Nurseries help families who have significant life issues, such as drug and alcohol abuse, and many have been involved in child maltreatment. Relief Nurseries provide therapeutic early childhood classrooms for children as well as intervention services for parents. These interventions include supportive home visits, parent education classes, peer recovery support services for drug and alcohol issues, and mental health counseling.

GOVERNOR'S EARLY CHILDHOOD SUMMIT

Issue Brief

Family Matters

Safety, parent education and family support

There are currently only 10 Relief Nurseries in Oregon, thus most communities have no access to these effective services. Even in the communities where Relief Nurseries exist, the need for services outstrips the capacity to serve families. There are long waiting lists and families are on “outreach” for extended periods. The existing Relief Nurseries could each be expanded to serve more families, and additionally, communities throughout Oregon are working to build Nurseries in their areas.

DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES (DHS)

DHS Child Welfare provides services and supports for parents when child abuse or neglect has occurred. DHS Family Based Services contracts for special supports to parents so that family homes can again become safe places for children. These DHS services include family counseling, parent training, family sexual abuse treatment, and housekeeper services.

Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) through the Department of Human Services (DHS) serves families who live in poverty across the state. All TANF eligible families have children under age 18; however, many families have young children. All TANF services seek to increase families’ self-sufficiency primarily through employment. In addition to financial and employment services, families may receive child care subsidies and parenting support as part of their services. Recent changes in TANF policies have increased attention to the needs of the children in families receiving TANF aid. Within DHS, the *Family Support and Connections (FSC)* program provides supportive services to parents considered to be at higher risk.

Oregon’s healthcare system provides family support and parent education regarding health and wellness. When surveyed, most parents say that their child’s doctor is their primary source of parenting information. Primary care providers, nurses and health care workers including community based “promotoras” (Latina Leaders) provide parent education and a sense of connection for families.

Throughout the state, **public health nurses** educate and support families with specialized health needs through three home visiting programs^{iv}: *Maternity Case Management*, *Babies First*, and *CaCOON* which supports families whose children have chronic or other long-term health conditions. Each program achieves positive health outcomes. *Oregon Mothers’ Care* begins with prenatal education at the time when pregnancy is diagnosed, and assists in linking mothers to prenatal care and other resources. The *Women, Infant, Children (WIC)* program operated through country health departments, improves expectant and nursing mothers and young children’s access to nutritious food and provides nutrition education, in both individual and group settings..

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION (DOE)

Head Start^v is usually thought of as an educational program for children; however, it also provides vital family support and parent education. Head Start is funded through a

GOVERNOR'S EARLY CHILDHOOD SUMMIT

Issue Brief

Family Matters

Safety, parent education and family support

partnership of federal and state resources and serves **families with children ages 3-5 living in poverty**. When a child enters Head Start the entire family is included. Head Start recognizes that what happens at home impacts children's ability to learn. Head Start parents are actively involved in the classroom and in the governance of their local program. Trained Family Advocates and parent groups deliver supportive services to the entire family.

Oregon Pre-K is funded by the state and directly parallels Head Start. Recent increases in state funding for Oregon Pre-K resulted in a much needed expansion in access and promoted the inclusion of groups of children who had previously been difficult to reach including migrant children and children who are homeless or in the foster care system. These children now are targeted with special outreach efforts. Currently, 11,325 children and their families participate in Head Start and Oregon Pre-K. However, there is still a need for more classroom slots statewide.

Early Head Start serves **families in poverty and their children ages 0-3**, with a home-based educationally focused program. Funded with a mix of federal, local, and tribal resources, like its older sister, Head Start, Early Head Start provides services for the entire family while building the learning abilities of infants and young children. Early Head Start has demonstrated excellent results. Unfortunately, only 7 Oregon communities currently have Early Head Start programs and only 1,000 children and families are enrolled statewide. Clearly, Early Head Start could be expanded to serve more families statewide.

Early Intervention/Early Childhood Special Education (EI/ECSE) offers support not only to children with disabilities but also to these children's families. These supports assist families to manage the unique situations that result when a child has a disability. In 2007, approximately 9,080 Oregon **children with disabilities ages 0-5** were enrolled in EI/ECSE. These children require special educational services because of developmental delays or physical or mental disabilities.

Regular developmental screening provided by medical providers, public health nursing, Healthy Start, Relief Nurseries, and Head Start have increased the early detection of delays requiring early special education services. Additionally, all children involved with the child welfare system are now required to receive developmental screening. Federal legislation *requires that all eligible* children receive services free of charge, however, funding is limited and as the need for services increases, the ability to provide high quality services is challenged.

EI/ECSE services actively support the families of the children they serve. Parents participate in developing and carrying out their children's plans of care. Parents have a role in the governance of state and local services through Interagency Coordinating Councils. The *Oregon Parent Training Institute* is a statewide organization that provides parent education and support for EI/ECSE families. Despite these efforts, a recent survey

GOVERNOR'S EARLY CHILDHOOD SUMMIT

Issue Brief

Family Matters

Safety, parent education and family support

of parents receiving EI/ECSE services revealed a lack of perceived support. In addition, services are constantly challenged to be fully culturally competent because of barriers of language and culture around this sensitive topic.

The education system is also involved with parent education and family support through a number of other programs, including the following.

- *Teen parent programs* in some high schools provide access to degree completion, parenting education and support; many also often providing on-site day care to facilitate young parents bonding with their child and academic progress.
- The *Oregon State University Extension Service* offers educational resources on child development and parenting, and nutrition for parents. In particular, the federally funded Oregon Food and Nutrition Education Program (OFNEP) offers education on nutrition, food security and food safety education to food stamp eligible families.
- *Even Start*, a federally funded program offered through the Department of Education, provides parent education and support to student parents who are pursuing diverse educational goals including building basic literacy or competency in English, GED completion, and higher education.

In some states, parent education and support for children's early learning is a core part of the state education plan, and home visiting programs such as *Parents as Teachers* are offered to all interested families. Oregon has a few *Parents as Teachers* programs scattered throughout the state, run through local health departments or non-profit agencies. Many Healthy Start programs and Relief Nurseries use the Parents as Teachers curriculum as part of their services.

DIVERSE LOCAL PROGRAMS COMPLETE THE SYSTEM

In addition to state supported programs, many programs exist only in individual communities. Some local communities are relatively rich in resources, while others are very limited. Innovative and creative services exist scattered throughout the state, some of which could be expanded to work in other communities. These local programs run the gamut from new and original ideas to those based on proven practices being given a unique local spin. Some move beyond existing research to break new ground with exciting results. Many of these programs and services are funded through local contributions from individual donors or groups, the local Commission on Children and Families flexible funds, grants from private foundations, or other federal, state or local sources. Much parent education and family support happens through informal networks like neighborhoods, extended families, social groups, and communities.

Parent education and family support happens in communities throughout Oregon, often through informal playgroups, social groups, child care centers, and faith communities. Libraries, parks and recreation facilities play a part in supporting families and providing parents with the information they need. Parent to parent support is a proven and effective strategy to reduce parental stress and increase knowledge and

GOVERNOR'S EARLY CHILDHOOD SUMMIT

Issue Brief

Family Matters

Safety, parent education and family support

confidence. Doctor's offices, clinics and hospitals, and WIC offices sometimes provide settings where families can join together and find mutual support.

Some communities have **Family Resource Centers** sometimes located within a school, where parents can gather for learning and support. These and other local programs are often sponsored by non-profit agencies serving specific communities with one-stop services. Some provide services tailored to the needs of immigrants and refugees. Others focus on supporting parents with physical or cognitive impairments. Oregon is home to some innovative programs that began as small local efforts, and have grown to national prominence.

Local Commissions on Children and Families provide seed money to help fund for local initiatives that address needs documented in comprehensive community plans. Each local community has a specific *Early Childhood Plan* and *Local Early Childhood Teams* meet to discuss the community issues and implement responsive local services for young children and their families.

Private foundations and donors contribute to the mix of family support and parent education programs in the state, including The Oregon Community Foundation, The Children's Trust fund, the Ford Family Foundation, Meyer Memorial Trust, and many others, including some that are specific to certain geographic areas or special areas of interest. The local programs and initiatives that are funded by these foundations spring directly from local needs and concerns. Supports and programs families are also funded by local service clubs, communities of faith, and individual supporters as well as large charitable organizations such as United Way.

This diversity of funding sources makes continuity and sustainability of parenting education and support initiatives extremely complex. Although diverse funding resources keep family support and parent education alive in local communities, diverse grant funding also creates enormous and continual demands on the non-profit organizations that run local programs. Local family support and parent education efforts are continually faced with funding challenges that threaten their survival, especially in rural and frontier areas of the state, where resources are few, distances are long, and salaries are lower than the state average.

STRENGTHS AND OPPORTUNITIES; GAPS, AND NEEDS

Oregon has key components of an Early Childhood System in place, with proven practices and innovative programs. Nevertheless, family support and parenting education in Oregon is a patchwork where support and education services are not uniformly available throughout the state. The challenge is to more fully invest in Oregon's young families and children by increasing and strengthening this system with focused support across the state.

GOVERNOR'S EARLY CHILDHOOD SUMMIT

Issue Brief

Family Matters

Safety, parent education and family support

Strengths and Opportunities Oregon's current system of supports and parent education to keep young children safe has unique strengths. Many proven strategies are being implemented as part of the *Oregon Early Childhood System of Supports and Services*. Among these effective approaches are community-based and parent education, quality home visiting programs following established research-based models, parent- to-parent support in various forms, quality parenting classes, and early education programs that support the entire family like Head Start, Early Head Start and Relief Nurseries. These approaches have repeatedly been shown to be effective. These strengths offer great opportunities. We know what is effective, we simply must do it.

Gaps and Needs Despite great system strengths, there are significant gaps in service capacity across Oregon. Information about resources in communities for families is not universally available or accessible in many areas of the state.

- **Safety information, child development information, and basic parenting skills education is not universally available, or accepted by all families of young children.** Forms of sharing information at the appropriate times and through methods that engage parents are not present in all communities. Strategies like home visiting, parent education and support groups repeatedly have proven to create more effective and nurturing families. Unfortunately these strategies are not yet the societal norm.
- **Effective services and supports are not uniformly available to families throughout the state.** Rural and frontier areas are frequently underserved. Spanish language services and services available to families without regard for immigration and health insurance status are lacking in many communities. Keeping pace with changing demographics including the cultural and language needs of new immigrants.
- **Young families need an integrated and comprehensive a continuum of supports to meet diverse needs.** Today's families need more than parent education alone to succeed. Basic needs must be met for food, shelter, work, and health care. Parent education must provide the skills and knowledge that parents need to nurture their young children, including those with demanding needs. Families who are isolated, poor and /or stressed by mental health issues and domestic violence need more intensive ongoing support. The increasing need for drug treatment and mental health services for young families must be met if families are to thrive and nurture their children. Oregon must commit to nurturing our young families so they can in turn provide nurturing homes that enable the next generation grow, thrive, and reach their full potential.

GOVERNOR'S EARLY CHILDHOOD SUMMIT

Issue Brief

Family Matters

Safety, parent education and family support

ⁱ *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development*, produced by the National Research Council and the Institute of Medicine, edited by Jack P. Shonkoff and Deborah A. Phillips, and published in 2000 by the National Academy Press.

ⁱⁱ data from the Oregon Department of Human Services

ⁱⁱⁱ The 2006-07 program evaluationⁱⁱⁱ reports that the rate of abuse/neglect for Healthy Start children 0-2 as only 11 per 1,000—less than half the incidence of the general population.

^{iv} The *Health Matters Issue Brief* provides a more comprehensive description of DHS administered health programs; only the programs specifically providing parent education and support are described here.

^v The *Education Matters Issue Brief* provides a more comprehensive description of the Head Start, Early Head Start and EI/ECSEP programs administered by the Oregon Department of Education. Only the parent education and support aspects of these programs are described here.