

EARLY CHILDHOOD

“In their earliest relationships, children develop a lasting sense of whether being connected to other people hurts or feels good, whether relationships are helpful or painful, worthwhile or inherently disappointing.”

John Constantino, M.D.

When the growing problem of child abuse was thrust into the spotlight by the 2004 and 2005 Community Focus reports, Springfield and Greene County launched a response. Those red flags not only raised awareness, they generated action. Most notably, the Grantmakers’ Challenge for Children resulted in more than \$9 million for funding projects aimed at children’s issues.

The Junior League of Springfield, in partnership with Burrell Behavioral Health, City of Springfield, CoxHealth, Community Partnership of the Ozarks, Missouri State University, St. John’s, Springfield-Greene County Parks Board and United Way, opened Isabel’s House, a crisis nursery for children, in June 2007.

Other efforts include a Children’s Bill of Rights introduced in the Missouri General Assembly, child abuse prevention training and a community-driven children’s plan. In addition, Springfield-Greene County was chosen by America’s Promise/The Alliance for Youth for a second time as one of 100 Best Communities for Young People.

Science now supports what early childhood experts have always known: The first years of life are critical to a child’s development. Brain growth, development and learning are extraordinarily rapid during the first three years of life.

While a child’s genetic makeup provides the blueprint for what he or she may achieve, early care has a decisive and long lasting impact on how children develop, their ability to learn and their capacity to regulate emotion.

Risk factors include child abuse and neglect, maternal depression, substance abuse and poverty.

Child Health. Maternal and child health indicators are improving in Greene County: Births to mothers younger than age 18 and births to mothers without a high school education inched down. The number of mothers who smoke during pregnancy declined. (See Community Health section.)

Effects of Poverty. The number of children ages birth to 18 who

are living in poverty increased from 13.6% in 2000 to 15.9% in 2005. Thirty-four percent of families are living at or below the federally defined poverty level (\$35,000 for a family of four). The number of children under age 6 on Medicaid dropped from 10,513 in 2003 to 9,464 in 2005, due more to eligibility changes than lack of need.

Child Abuse and Neglect. Substantiated child abuse and neglect numbers decreased, but are higher than state numbers. The number of child abuse reports in Greene County continues to be high, but *substantiated* cases decreased. Child abuse/neglect fatalities increased in Greene County, while state numbers decreased.

CHILD ABUSE/NEGLECT, substantiated cases 0–18 years/1,000 children				
Indicators		Greene County	Greene County*	Missouri
Child abuse/neglect	2003	10.9	13.1	6.8
	2005	8.5	11.5	5.7
Hotline/Letter Reports	2004	5,660	—	—
	2005	5,801	—	—
Children removed from home	2004	819	—	—
	2005	766	—	—
*5-Year Mean				

CHILD FATALITIES DUE TO ABUSE/NEGLECT			
	2003	2004	2005
Greene County	2	4	5
Kansas City Region (Clay, Jackson, Platte)	6	9	4
St. Louis Region (Jefferson, St. Charles, St. Louis)	18	10	6
Missouri	55	42	32

Three areas significantly impact the future success of our children:

- **Community Awareness**
- **Childcare**
- **School Readiness**

COMMUNITY AWARENESS. Since 2005, there has been a push to increase community awareness of the significance of early childhood:

- Presentations by child protection advocate Victor Vieth, child abuse expert Dr. Toni Johnson, and child development experts Dr. T. Berry Brazelton and Dr. Joshua Snow.
- Ozarks Summit on Poverty
- Mayor’s Summit on Children in Poverty
- Faith-Based Early Childhood Resource Fair

- Grantmakers' Challenge for Children
- Children's Bill of Rights (legislation proposed)
- Isabel's House, the Crisis Nursery of the Ozarks
- Musgrave Foundation's Lighthouse Child Development Center
- Quality Indicators Rating Scale for early childhood programs
- Hunger Hurts Kids symposium and backpack program
- Parent Information Resource Centers
- New early childhood centers at Logan-Rogersville School District, Shady Dell Elementary and Ozarks Technical Community College.

CHILDCARE. Total childcare capacity increased and accredited programs doubled. Forty-five percent of accredited programs in Greene County are Head Start centers, equating to high quality care for some of our most vulnerable children.

Early Care Costs. Childcare cost is a major expense for any family, often higher than the cost of college tuition. A Greene County family with an infant and preschooler will pay an average of \$1,062 per month in day care center childcare, which equates to \$12,740 per year.

CHILDCARE COSTS			
Full Time Childcare	Average Weekly Cost		% Increase
	2005	2007	
Infant/toddler care, home	\$105	\$107	2%
Infant/toddler care, center	\$144	\$148	3%
Age 2+ care, home	\$87	\$92	5%
Age 2+ care, center	\$91	\$97	6%

More than 1,550 Greene County families are receiving state subsidies to help pay for childcare. The difference between subsidies and actual cost—and how to pay it—means care choices are sometimes based on affordability rather than quality.

Sadly, Missouri has the lowest eligibility threshold in the nation for childcare subsidies. Missouri's eligibility is at 110% of the Federal Poverty Level. This means that a single working mother earning more than \$17,500 per year would not qualify for any state assistance, even though the average annual cost of childcare in Missouri is over \$7,000 for two children.

Head Start. Head Start is an early childhood program for children ages birth to 5 from low-income families. In early 2007, all 670 Greene County slots were filled. In 2003, oral health education was started in Early Head Start Centers (birth to 3). Payback was dramatic. In 2005–06, 44% of Head Start children had tooth decay. Of the Early Head Start children who had received dental education, none had dental decay.

SCHOOL READINESS. The School Readiness Work Group, comprised of early education stakeholders, surveyed area kindergarten classrooms to assess kindergartners' preparedness. The two-year study released in August 2007, found that social and emotional skill development is at least as important, if not

more so, than cognitive development in preparing children to enter kindergarten ready to learn.

Parents as Teachers. The Parents as Teachers program works in partnership with public schools to improve parents' knowledge of early childhood development, parenting practices and school readiness. PAT is a free service to all children birth to 5. In 2006, 37% of eligible families participated, compared with Missouri's goal of 40 to 45%. The Missouri legislature approved Gov. Matt Blunt's recommendation for an additional \$2 million in 2007–08.

Special Needs. An emerging challenge is the increased number of children receiving special services through First Steps and early childhood special education. In 2006, 218 Greene County children (birth to 3 years) were referred to First Steps, a state program for children with delayed development or developmental disabilities. Participation of children ages 3 to 5 in public school early childhood special education in Greene County is 5.5%, just above the state's average of 5.4%.

The Literacy Connection. "While the average 4-year-old in a family receiving welfare has heard some 13 million spoken words, a child from a working-class family has heard about 26 million, and a child from a professional family almost 45 million."—Betty Hart, *Meaningful Differences*.

Literacy is one of the greatest predictors of success and should start long before a child enters kindergarten. Children who start school with undeveloped basic literacy skills are three to four times more likely to drop out in later years. Sixty percent of prison inmates, more than 75% of individuals on welfare, and 85% of unwed mothers are illiterate.

The Springfield-Greene County Library delivered "Stories to Go" to preschoolers, serving more than 17,600 children in 665 facilities. In 2005–06, Building Blocks Literacy program, Junior League of Springfield, Early Learning Opportunities Act program, Community Partnership of the Ozarks and Educare distributed more than 14,000 books to young children.

 Isabel's House, offering residential childcare for children whose families are in crisis, was established in direct response to a 2005 red flag. Community education about children in poverty began with a call to action using the Five Promises: caring adults, safe places, healthy start, marketable skills, and opportunities to help others. Logan-Rogersville voters elected to build an early childhood facility. Gov. Blunt established a state-wide Early Childhood Coordinating Board for early childhood issues.

 Red flags remain the same as in the 2005 Community Focus report: the effect of poverty on children, child abuse and neglect, and community awareness of the early years. These complex generational issues require time to reverse. For example, in November 2005, Greene County voters failed to pass the Community Safety Initiative Tax, which contained funding for early childhood programs. While progress has been made, gains are not sufficient to change focus.