

Early Childhood

Early childhood encompasses the *first eight years of life*, when a child learns to communicate, love, trust, think, and make friends. Specifically, **90 percent of brain development occurs before a child's fifth birthday** with a child's moral development beginning to form at age two. Referred to as plasticity by neuroscientists, *children's brains are far more impressionable in early life* than in maturity, which has both positive and negative implications. On the positive side, young children's brains are more open to learning and enriching influences. On the negative side, young children's brains are more vulnerable to developmental problems should their environment prove especially impoverished or unnurturing.

Unfortunately, every year budgets to care for the young citizens of our community continue to see cuts in a dwindling pool of funding. In addition to addressing these funding challenges, early childhood initiatives must become a community priority in order to support the most vulnerable in our society.

BLUE RIBBONS

SPS-OACAC Co-Qualifying Classroom

In response to the increasing trend of homeless children in an environment of shrinking resources, Ozarks Area Community Action Corporation's (OACAC) Head Start program and Springfield Public Schools' Wonder Years Title I program collaborated to create a co-qualifying classroom to serve 15 preschool children living at the Missouri Hotel, local domestic violence shelters, and other programs serving homeless families. The collaboration represents an ideal opportunity to share resources, minimize costs to each program individually, and maximize participation of children who otherwise might not have access to a high-quality preschool experience prior to kindergarten.

Springfield-Greene County Library Outreach Programs

The Springfield-Greene County Library's signature early literacy program, Racing to Read, uses education-based standards to teach children the early skills needed to be ready to learn to read. The program is available at the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) clinic, day cares, Head Starts, and after-school programs. Racing to Read has a play component, with activity stations in library branches. Additionally, periodic workshops for parents and caregivers provide fun ways to build early literacy skills their children need to learn to read.

Throughout the year, children's librarians take stories and activities outside the library setting to children at Head Starts, day care centers, after-school programs, and the Missouri Hotel.

Of the 97,451 children the library saw during the 2011-2012 fiscal year, 63,277 children were seen in outreach programs. This outreach and the Summer Reading To-Go program have attracted thousands of dollars in state grants to continue their work.

'Every Child' Series

In late 2011, the Springfield News-Leader launched the "Every Child" public-service journalism project. The purpose of this series is to focus public attention on the critical challenges facing children, foster discussion, and build on existing initiatives. Working from the theme "every child grows up safe, happy, healthy, and successful," and using input from a community advisory committee, it has raised local public awareness and education to an unprecedented level by highlighting hard issues including abuse and neglect, safety, healthcare, homelessness, poverty, and education.

The value of this continued media exposure is immeasurable in dollars and goodwill. While there have been short-term fixes for some issues, the community must also develop an appropriate response and implement action. The News-Leader staff has been recognized by its parent



The News-Leader brings attention to the plight of children in poverty. PHOTO CREDIT: VALERIE MOSLEY, SPRINGFIELD NEWS-LEADER

organization, Gannett, and other national journalism entities with several Awards of Excellence including First Place-1st Quarter Public Service, Finalist-1st Quarter Outstanding Writing with coverage of child abuse/neglect, Best in Show for 3rd Quarter coverage of poverty in the Ozarks, as well as the Greater Good award for contribution to the communities it serves.

RED FLAGS

Child Abuse and Neglect

Greene County child abuse and neglect rates have been identified as a red flag since the 2004 Community Focus report. In spite of several years of improvement, the economic downturn eliminated all gains and pushed us back to 2006 levels. Changes in public policy and laws and adequate funding of enforcement of both are critical to protect our children from this devastating ill.

Poverty and Children

The 2007 and 2009 Community Focus reports identified the impact poverty has on the Springfield-Greene County community, paying particular attention to poverty's impact on our youngest citizens. Unfortunately, the community continues to see negative changes in child poverty, in

"If the number of additional poor people in Greene County, going back to 2001, were gathered for a symposium on how they might work their way out of poverty, no venue in southwest Missouri could hold them. Not even the Missouri State University football stadium, which seats 16,600."

—Steve Pokin, Reporter, Springfield News-Leader

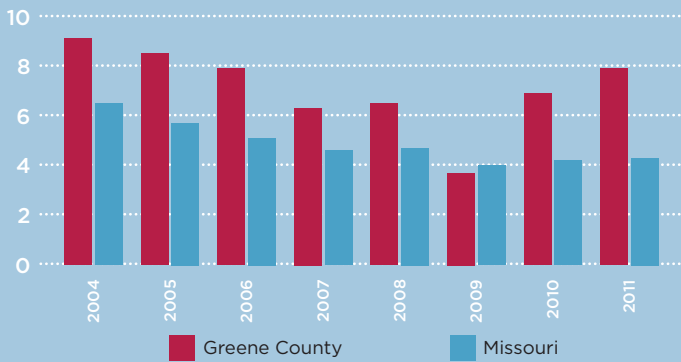
spite of increased awareness. Attributable in part to the recession and very slow recovery, statistics for children in poverty in our community have grown worse. According to MO Kids Count 2012, Springfield-Greene County has 6,016 (30.9 percent) of its children under age six living in poverty, a 12.8 percent increase from 2010. The number of young children in poverty has more than doubled since 2000. Poverty is disproportionately impacting children. Although the number of children as a percent of our community's population has actually decreased slightly since 2006, the rate of child poverty significantly increased. Also alarming, the number of children in poverty under the age of six continues to climb in spite of decreases in the number of births to teens and births to mothers without high school diplomas, indicators typically correlated with increased likelihood of child poverty.

Pre-K Investment

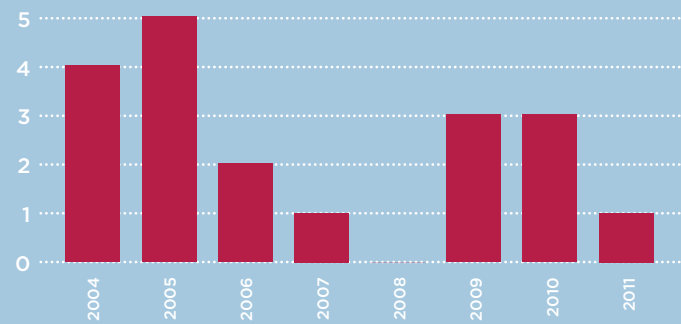
As indicated in the 2009 Community Focus

CHILD ABUSE IN GREENE COUNTY

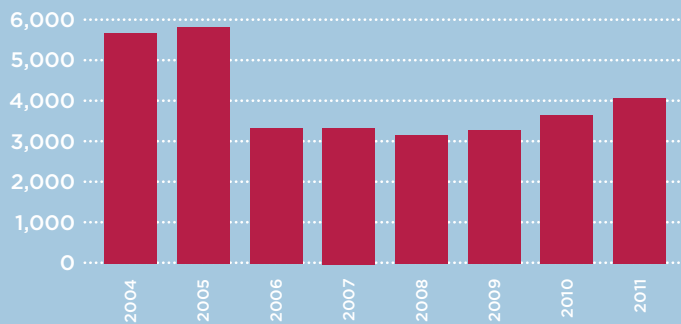
Substantiated cases of child abuse and neglect, per 1,000 children



Child fatalities from abuse and neglect in Greene County



Hotline reports in Greene County

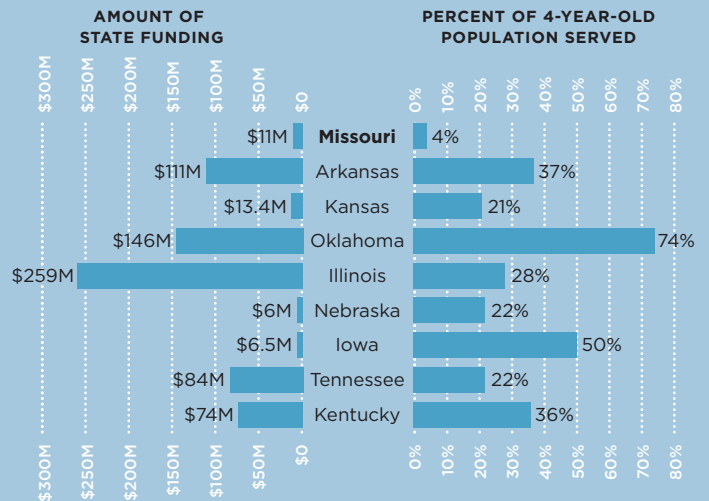


Source: Missouri DSS Children's Division Child Abuse and Neglect Annual Reports



Monica Meredith and son, Cooper, reading during Parent/Child Interaction Time.

PRE-K EDUCATION INVESTMENT BY MISSOURI AND SURROUNDING STATES



Source: National Institute for Early Education Research, The State of Preschool, 2012

report, kindergarten readiness is an area where many Springfield and Greene County children struggle. Based upon the latest Readiness for Kindergarten study, released in March 2011, teachers continue to report 20.2 percent of local students enter kindergarten not socially or emotionally ready based on the Devereux Early Childhood Assessment (DECA). Children who experience high-quality early childhood education are more prepared for kindergarten and, therefore, typically more successful. Many families, however, cannot afford to provide this needed preschool experience for their children. Relying on state or federal government seems futile, particularly in light of recent cuts to early childhood programming, such as Head Start, Title I, accreditation facilitation, and the Missouri Preschool Project. In response to this red flag, an active group of Springfield and Greene County early care and

preschool accessible to all children is critical to address kindergarten readiness in Greene County and will require broad-based public and private support.

State of Early Care and Education

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, 63.9 percent of mothers with children under the age of six were in the paid labor force in 2011. The average child in a working family spends 36 hours per week in childcare. These families depend on childcare to earn a living or to further their education. The recent study reported by Child Care Aware® of America identifies quality of childcare and childcare cost as major concerns for families nationwide. The reality is today's families, at all income levels, are struggling to find and afford quality care.

education professionals are collaborating to ensure more children are able to access high-quality preschool. Making high-quality

A Greene County family with an infant and preschooler will pay an average of \$1,239 per month in center-based childcare, which equates to \$14,872 per year. Therefore, childcare can often cost a family more than mortgage or rent. In Greene County, 1,190 families receive the state childcare subsidy. However, Missouri's subsidy system ranks among the lowest in the country. As a result, families are often forced to make childcare choices based on affordability rather than quality.

Families need to feel secure that the early childhood setting they are choosing is safe, nurturing, and educational. Many families assume childcare is regulated and must meet quality standards, like other businesses in town. Unfortunately, from 2007 to 2010, at least 45 children died in Missouri childcare facilities due to reasons other than existing illnesses. Thirty five of these cases occurred while infants napped and all but four cases occurred in unlicensed childcare programs. Minimum safe sleep practices and CPR first-aid training for all providers receiving state childcare subsidy funds should be required to ensure the safety of children in care.