



Posted on Sun, Apr. 22, 2007

Experts: Focus on early years prepares a child for life

BY SUZANNE PEREZ TOBIAS
The Wichita Eagle

Kindergarten -- that magical time when children learn to read, write, share graham crackers and say the "Pledge of Allegiance" -- was once considered the starting line of education. Not anymore.

A new movement is gaining momentum in Kansas and elsewhere, as experts in neuroscience, education, psychology and politics consider the importance -- and impact -- of a child's earliest years.

Kids don't begin learning in kindergarten, they say. They begin in utero. First cries, first words, first scribbles with a crayon, all are critical. They spark a brain into action. They affect whether a child starts school ready to learn.

And how kids start, experts say, is our first and best clue to how they'll finish.

What does 'ready' mean?

In Kansas, any child who turns 5 before Sept. 1 can start kindergarten.

But not every 5- or even 6-year-old has the cache of knowledge, motor skills and self-control they need to function well in a classroom.

"Some parents think, 'Ready? What do you mean, ready? He's dressed. I got him here,' " says Melinda Rocha, a former first-grade teacher.

"But oh, goodness, it's more than that."

"Ready to learn" -- a phrase being chanted like a mantra by educators and advocacy groups -- means more than showing up. More, even, than singing the alphabet or counting to 10.

"Ready to learn" means using the bathroom by yourself, sharing a toy, listening to a story, being curious. It means holding a pencil correctly, treating books gently, asking questions and taking turns.

"We're talking about kids having academic skills, but also the social and emotional skills they need to be successful," said Shannon Cotsoradis, executive vice president for Kansas Action for Children, which collects and analyzes data about children's well-being.

The group recently launched "Ready or Not," a public awareness campaign focused on the need for greater access to early health care, literacy programs and publicly funded pre-kindergarten.

According to some nationwide estimates, Cotsoradis said, one in three children starts school "not prepared for success."

And research shows that children who start behind tend to stay behind. Long-term studies in Chicago, Michigan and North Carolina found that children who attended high quality pre-K programs were more likely to graduate from high school, be employed and earn higher wages than peers who did not attend pre-K. They also were less likely to require special-education services, become teen parents or be arrested for a violent crime.

Babies' brains matter

So what causes some children to start school reading, while others can't distinguish print from pictures?

Early experiences, says Bruce Perry. Lots of them, built up in the brain like bricks in a child's tower of potential.

Perry, senior fellow of the Houston-based ChildTrauma Academy and a leading authority on child development, says brain research proves how a child's earliest years affect his future.

By a child's third birthday, more than 80 percent of his brain is formed, Perry says; by age 5, more than 90 percent. Simple, seemingly insignificant moments -- singing lullabies, playing peek-a-boo -- become the foundation for everything a child needs to know: how to talk, how to read, how to think, how to love.

For example: A mother touches her baby's nose and says, "Is that your nose? I see your nose! Lemme kiss that cute

little nose!" Then, she grabs the baby's feet. "And there are your toes! I'm gonna tickle those toes..."

The mother smiles. The baby giggles. What you can't see, Perry says, is what's happening inside the baby's brain. Loving smiles and simple words, repeated over and over, turn chaos into understanding. "Sounds become words, and words become meaning, and meaning becomes language," Perry said. "Those moments, that repetition, those loving exchanges -- they're profound."

Measuring readiness

This fall, for the first time, officials will test 2,100 public school kindergartners, including some in Wichita, to gauge school readiness statewide.

The Kansas Health Institute, in cooperation with the state Department of Education, the University of Kansas and other partners, is developing assessments that will measure a range of skills, from literacy to social interactions.

"Until now, we haven't really had a systematic way of understanding how 'school-ready' children are," said Robert St. Peter, a pediatrician and president of the Kansas Health Institute.

"This will give us some look at how we're doing, but even more importantly, the ability to track it over time."

The assessment, which will cost about \$400,000, is being funded by the Kansas Health Foundation.

Researchers are using bits and pieces from established tests, such as the Devereux Early Childhood Assessment and the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test, and will train about 50 early-childhood professionals to perform the test this fall.

Children will be chosen at random for the test to reflect racial, ethnic and gender balances, as well as urban and rural school districts.

Each child selected will take a 20-minute portion of the survey. Researchers will combine those results with social and behavioral assessments reported by teachers to create an overall measure of school readiness.

Officials are careful to note that the test will not evaluate specific children, or be used to keep kids from starting school.

"Whether a child is judged to be ready or not, they shouldn't be excluded.... That's not what this is about," said Susan Palmer, an associate professor at KU who is helping to create the test. "It's about getting a snapshot of where our state is, and then talking about what we should do to get better."

The institute hopes to present the results to lawmakers before the 2008 legislative session.

The new test marks a notable shift for Kansas, which just five years ago had no plans to measure school readiness.

Today, still fewer than half of U.S. states perform statewide assessments, "which puts Kansas right up toward the top," said Lisa Klein, director of a 17-state initiative on school readiness.

The reason, she said, is the growing number of politicians, business leaders and others who are aligning behind early childhood education. Gov. Kathleen Sebelius made pre-kindergarten a rallying cry of her re-election campaign last year. And the Kansas Health Foundation, The Opportunity Project and Visioning Wichita have put early childhood at the top of their agendas.

'Investment gap'

Despite some progress, early childhood advocates point to what they call a "major investment gap" in state and federal spending.

A 2004 report by Kansas Action for Children showed that education spending is significantly greater during a child's school-age years than from birth to 5. For every \$1 of state and federal spending on education, only about 11 cents goes toward early childhood.

And a recent Education Week report ranked Kansas among the lowest in the country in per-capita spending on early-childhood programs.

During a tour of Kids' Cove, a Wichita child care and pre-kindergarten program run by Rainbows United, local lawmakers saw some of the state's pre-K money at work.

Freshman Rep. Raj Goyle, D-Wichita, smiled as he watched 3-year-old Alisyn Leitzel scoop sand and play with plastic toys, then don a princess costume and listen to a story on tape.

"We know what works.... It's just a matter of putting money where it needs to be," Goyle said. "And right now, there are a lot of different interests out there."

So far, only a portion of Sebelius' proposed budget for early childhood -- a \$1.6 million expansion of Early Head Start -- has passed the Legislature. When lawmakers return for their wrap-up session this week, they will consider spending

\$1 million to improve infant/toddler child care and \$3.5 million to expand the state's pre-K pilot program.

Advocates aren't optimistic all the measures will pass.

"What we need to get to is a sense of urgency. That's what's missing in the conversation," said Cotsoradis, of Kansas Action for Children. "Of course investments in public school make sense. But we can't just start when a child enters kindergarten. We need to focus on the earliest years, where it can have an even bigger impact."

For parents like Charlotte Gantt, who attends a weekly parent-child play group at Little Early Childhood Education Center in Wichita, even simple things make a difference.

"Things I learn here, I take home," said Gantt, who last week helped her 3-year-old daughter, Marie, make a color flip book out of pictures and plastic baggies.

"She's already learned a lot of the things she'll need in school," Gantt said.

Rocha, the former teacher who also runs the play group for Wichita CARES, a partnership of school and health officials, said she's glad more Kansans are focusing on school readiness.

"From the time a child is born, everything that happens to that child and to that family affects how prepared that child will be for school," Rocha said.

"Setting the table, reading, talking about things, going places -- parents are a child's first teacher.... Anything we can do to help make them better parents, we need to do it."

Reach Suzanne Perez Tobias at 316-268-6567 or stobias@wichitaeagle.com.

© 2007 Wichita Eagle and wire service sources. All Rights Reserved. <http://www.kansas.com>