



Supporting Partnerships to Assure Ready Kids

Fall 2020 Community Newsletter

Staying Connected Through the Pandemic

Since 2003, the SPARK program has given Ohio families a kindergarten readiness advantage. In-home visits are at the heart of the SPARK model. But of course, in-home visits became impossible in March. A pandemic certainly wasn't going to keep SPARK staff from serving families. Luckily, they're used to working with young children, so they're experts at expecting the unexpected.

SPARK sites across the state had to re-envision home visiting. Parent partners had to quickly learn new technology for virtual lessons. And they weren't the only ones dealing with a learning curve; parents were anxious about making online learning work.

As the weather improved, some families became

interested in socially distanced in-person visits. This was challenging for both families and parent partners. It's hard for a parent partner to keep her distance when a young child is so excited to see her. Naturally, the child wants a hug—and so does the parent partner!

No one wants to experience a pandemic. But SPARK staff are confident they've done everything they can to make the time productive and engaging. Staff from some of our sites tell their stories in this newsletter.

Stark County Parent Partner Missy Beebe sums up the experience well: "It took me out of my comfort zone, and I feel I have become a better parent partner because of it."

15,000 and Counting!



This year, SPARK served its 15,000th child!

We're thrilled that we've been able to help thousands of Ohio children start kindergarten ready and excited to succeed.

We look forward to serving our next 15,000 SPARK Ohio children.

Parent Partners Speak

I work with Hispanic families. For these families, learning a second language is a challenge.

I had been working with one family for two years when the pandemic hit. The SPARK child called me every week to see if I was okay and ask whether I needed anything. She would tell me stories about her life during the pandemic. Every week, she reminded me not to forget to send her SPARK lessons; she wanted to keep learning. But she also asked me not to send too many worksheets, because she got tired of writing.

I feel good about her effort and achievement. She's a quick learner. Now she's in kindergarten, and she's starting to read. She still calls to give me updates!

I'm blessed to serve families who care about me and appreciate the work that I do.

Yazmin Colon-Green, Parent Partner
Homeless Families Foundation, Franklin County



Action for Children, a Franklin County SPARK agency, asked its parent partners about their goals for the families they serve. These were their answers.



I want parents to know that SPARK will enhance what their child is learning in an early childhood education setting, and it will help build their child's confidence and self-esteem. The activities and lesson packets give parents and children many opportunities to build upon the skills introduced in the lesson with the parent partner.

Abby Alexander



I want children to be kindergarten ready in their literacy and math skills. But more importantly, I want them to feel confident and excited about learning! I want to help cultivate the excitement of reading a new book and mastering new skills, so the kiddos are excited and ready to thrive in kindergarten.

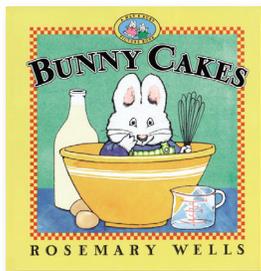
Haley Hickman



We want to help every child—and their families—reach beyond the stars when it comes to kindergarten readiness. As a team, we promote parent engagement, children using the skills they have to their maximum potential, and helping parents understand that they are their child's first and best teacher.

Terena Howard

SPARKing Imagination, Deliciously



On one SPARK visit, I read one of our standard stories with a family. The story is called *Bunny Cakes* and it features two rabbits working to bake a birthday cake for their grandmother.

Throughout the story, the younger brother bunny visits the grocery store several times to buy items he has spilled (eggs, milk, etc). Each time, the bunny also tries to buy his favorite candy, Red Hot Marshmallow Squirters. He tries numerous times, then finally succeeds in getting the candy.

For this SPARK lesson, we use a fake grocery store ad that features a picture of the Red Hot Marshmallow Squirters from the book. This pretend advertisement must have been quite convincing, because a few days after the visit, the mother reached out to tell me that her child had become obsessed with the Red Hot Marshmallow Squirters.



The child kept asking her mother to buy some for her, insisting they could be found in the grocery store. Unfortunately, the candy is fictional. No matter how many times her mother told her the candy was made up, the child insisted the candy was real. After all, the child had seen a picture of the candy in the fake newspaper ad. The mother jokingly texted me, “Thanks a lot for getting my child obsessed with a candy that does not exist.”

Amused by this story from the mother, and hoping to bring a fun sense of closure to the whole thing, I came to the next visit prepared. I brought pink marshmallows, a tube of squirtable cake frosting, and “red hot” glitter sprinkles. If the candy doesn’t exist in the real world, we decided to use our imagination to create it ourselves!

It made the mother laugh and gave the child an opportunity to create Red Hot Marshmallow Squirters for her entire family.

Jack Legg, Parent Partner

WellSpring, Clark County

Red Hot Marshmallow Squirters

Inspired by the book *Bunny Cakes* by Rosemary Wells



Ingredients

- Pink marshmallows
- Squirtable cake frosting
- “Red Hot” edible glitter sprinkles

Instructions

Go to the store with your mom and ask for Red Hot Marshmallow Squirters.

When she tells you they don’t exist, make them yourself!

Eat while reading *Bunny Cakes* with your family.

Successes in Alliance

Aydin: When COVID started to spread, SPARK lessons became virtual. Aydin was extremely shy and unable to stay on task during his initial virtual lessons. By positively reinforcing Aydin's efforts and finding fun and creative transitions, his Mom, Kayla, and Aydin's SPARK parent partner, Ms. Kim, helped him learn to focus and meet the goal of writing his entire name before he started kindergarten this year.



Aydin and Ms. Kim.

Kayla says, "SPARK helped Aydin so much! He is doing really well. Both Aydin and I loved how interactive SPARK was. Aydin especially enjoyed the games and fun activities. He really looked forward to his lessons and misses them now that he has completed the program. I'm so proud of him and thankful for SPARK!"

Adrienne and Tevin: We love when we have multiple children from the same family who participate in SPARK.

Adrienne and her brother Tevin both participated in SPARK. They're succeeding, and they've both learned a lot.

Their mom, Nicole, learned various strategies for supporting them. Both children are doing well — so well that their teachers are taking notice. Adrienne in particular is scoring above average on assessments.

We're excited to see how far they've come!

Liz Hibbs, Director

Early Childhood Education Alliance, Stark County



Adrienne and Tevin.

SPARK Sites Learning Together



On October 30, staff members from SPARK sites all over Ohio participated in a virtual meeting that included training on PAX Tools.

PAX Tools is a collection of evidence-based, trauma-informed strategies that help create a nurturing environment. Parent partners can use PAX strategies during SPARK visits to help children improve cooperation and self-regulation.

Clark County Parent Partner Jack Legg led the session. He has been using the strategies during SPARK visits.

Response to the PAX training was very positive:

Hi Mary, I just wanted to thank you for providing us with the PAX training.

Jack was a wonderful presenter, and I thoroughly enjoyed the training! It was one of the best and most helpful early childhood trainings I have attended in a long time.

You can feel Jack's passion for the program, and through his explanations the four hours just flew by; I could hardly believe it was time for the training to be over.

**Abby Alexander, Parent Partner
Action for Children, Franklin County**

Staying Flexible and Creative in Summit County

As soon as the threat of COVID spread to Ohio, the SPARK Summit-Akron Metropolitan Housing Authority (AMHA) team began to prepare for the possibility that home visits would no longer be an option.

In addition to packing up necessary information and supplies in anticipation of possibly moving to remote work, the parent partners began to think of ways they could complete lessons virtually, in the hope that services could continue without disruption. As of March 13, in-person visits were suspended. By March 20, virtual visits began.

Of the children enrolled at the time of the stay-at-home order, 78% have stayed engaged in virtual lessons. We checked in weekly with all enrolled families to ensure their basic needs were met, and AMHA parent partners delivered food, diapers, books, and extra activities to help keep children busy as parents helped their older children with virtual schooling. AMHA was able to provide free Wi-Fi hotspots that enabled nine families to participate in programming.

As summer arrived, our parent partners were missing their families, and the families were missing their parent partners. We held several drive-by parades to remind families that we were still there for them; they were a great morale boost for all.

As the new school year approached, parent partners helped families with online kindergarten registration. SPARK participation gave them priority status for early Chromebook pick-up from Akron Public Schools. This allowed them the time they needed to get comfortable with the new technology and participate in additional online learning opportunities as they prepared to transition into kindergarten. Parent partners were trained to help families learn how to use the Chromebooks, which also eased the start of the school year.

We began providing socially distanced outdoor visits over the summer, but as the days grow shorter and the temperature gets colder, we realize that we will need to once again pivot to virtual visits. As we continue working through this public health crisis, we remain committed to listening to our families and being flexible and creative, so we can provide the individualized services that work for them.

Jill Spillman, Educational Initiatives Supervisor

Akron Metropolitan Housing Authority, Summit County



Meet Skylar!



Skylar began with SPARK in our three-year-old program back in January. She recently transitioned into our four-year-old program and has grown by leaps and bounds.

This sweet girl loves to learn new skills. She takes great pride in writing in her journal. Each time we talk about a new skill, before I am done explaining, she asks right away, “Can I write it in my journal?”

In this picture, she’s writing the letters that go with the lesson we were working on that day. Her writing skills have improved greatly with the many tracing activities we have worked on. She now holds her writing utensil correctly and no longer uses the fist hold when writing.

Skylar is great about asking if she doesn’t understand directions. She didn’t go to preschool, so SPARK is giving her a great foundation to build on before she enters school.

**Kelley Moffett, Parent Partner
Early Childhood Resource
Center, Summit County**

Cuyahoga County: Stories of Perseverance

During this time, though trying, SPARK families have adjusted to the changes forced upon us all. Many of the families we serve have minimal means when it comes to technology. This leaves them with only the use of a single smartphone, often with a prepaid plan that limits data usage. The resourcefulness of our families is evident.

Together, we’ve figured out how to provide the best experience. One family visits a close relative weekly. Using that relative’s Wi-Fi, we use FaceTime to keep up with lessons. The ability to assist with overcoming a hurdle was key to the change in this child’s learning. Because the interactions have shifted between parent and child, the child is now more receptive to learning.

Both child and parent now learn together using everyday life as the classroom. Virtual interactions can be challenging, but this family has found a way to not only continue learning, but also find better ways to learn more than ever expected. Since the stay-at-home order was put in place, the child has gone from not knowing all the letters to actually reading short words like *cat*. The parent now has the tools, resources, and confidence to be her child’s first teacher.

We all love to hear about our families and their successes, but our parent partners are the ones who make the successes possible. When COVID-19 hit and the stay-at-home order went into effect, we all went into survival mode. Cuyahoga’s parent partners made a seamless transition to virtual visits. They worked tirelessly to keep families engaged.

Parent partners lost the most important aspect of why they became parent partners. They lost the chance to hug our kiddos and hi-five parents during their “ah ha” moments. They lost the opportunity to physically see the 2020 cohort graduate from their preschool programs. They lost the opportunity to give our families a proper goodbye.

To all of our parent partners – Aja, Chrissy, Demi, Clarence, Edward, Gina, Keesha, Monica, and Salema – stay safe and strong and continue to persevere through these unprecedented times. We thank you!

**Trena Saxon, Parent Partner Coordinator
Family Connections, Cuyahoga County**

The Results Are In: SPARK Children Gain Reading and Math Skills

Evaluation is an essential part of SPARK; it’s built into the program’s design, and has been from the beginning.

Fifteen years’ worth of independent evaluation results clearly show that SPARK is highly effective at cultivating kindergarten readiness.

The 2019 results show that SPARK children gain the skills they need to start kindergarten ready to succeed.

The SPARK parent partner assesses reading and math skills when a child enters the program, and again when the child has completed the program.

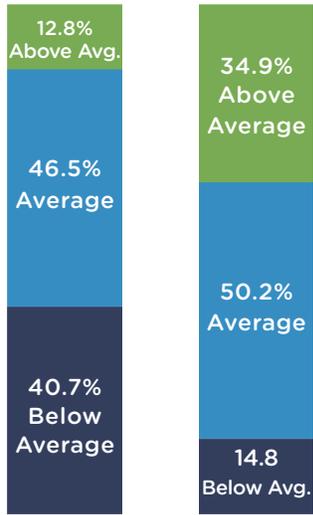
These charts show pre- and post-participation scores for SPARK children who began kindergarten in 2019.

These scores are predictive of future performance.

Children who scored *Above Average* or *Average* after participating in SPARK were more likely to score as *Demonstrating Readiness* on the Kindergarten Readiness Assessment.

Just look at that progress!

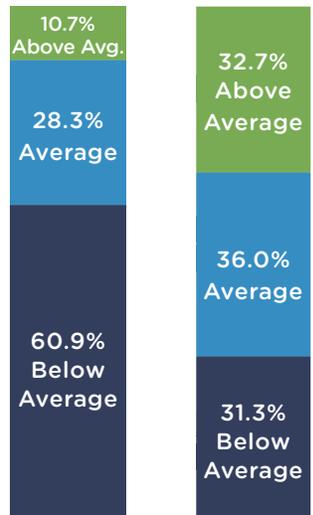
Get Ready to Read Screening 2019 Ohio SPARK Scores



Before SPARK (n=1,108) After SPARK (n=1,065)

Statistically Significant (p<.01)

Preschool Early Numeracy Skills Screening 2019 Ohio SPARK Scores



Before SPARK (n=1,108) After SPARK (n=1,077)

Statistically Significant (p<.01)



EARLY CHILDHOOD
RESOURCE CENTER
ecresourcecenter.org

SPARK is a program of the Early Childhood Resource Center. For more information or to learn how you can bring SPARK to your community, contact SPARK Ohio Director Mary Brady at (877) 691-8521 or mbrady@ecresourcecenter.org

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