



Supporting Partnerships to Assure Ready Kids

Spring 2021 Community Newsletter

Weaving a Safety Net in a Vulnerable Neighborhood

SPARK sites throughout the state have always pursued the collaborative community relationships that are integral to the program's success. Relationships with schools, behavioral health providers, and a wide range of community organizations ensure SPARK children have the support and interventions they need to be ready for school. Those relationships also go a long way toward embedding SPARK as an essential community resource.

The Cuyahoga County SPARK program is amplifying that approach by partnering with Cleveland Central Promise Neighborhood, and with organizations focused on mental health and high-quality child care, to implement the Family Partners Initiative.

Richaun Bunton is the Central Promise Neighborhood Initiative Manager. She says the initiative had partnered informally with SPARK for about five years. As she states it, "To not partner with SPARK, we wouldn't be reaching our mission."

SPARK as a Gateway to Family Stability

More recently, Promise expanded its vision to focus on a two-generation approach. This prompted a formal partnership with SPARK, OhioGuidestone, and Starting Point, in order to directly serve and support both children and parents. The formal partnership has just entered its second year, and it has been highly successful. SPARK acts as a gateway to getting parents the help and support they need to create strong, stable homes.

Keesha Funches is the SPARK parent partner who serves Promise Neighborhood families. She witnesses the challenges they face every day, and she's committed to helping them. Issues endemic to generational poverty (such as food insecurity, housing instability, and substance use) can exacerbate many mental health challenges. Unfortunately, there's a stigma against seeking assistance. Keesha says deep trust is required to create an environment in which parents feel confident in seeking the help they need to stabilize and strengthen both their mental health and their families.



Bringing SPARK to Akron's Nepalese Community

Thousands of people from Nepal have come to settle in the Akron area. One article on the increase in Akron's Nepalese population gives a great definition of what inclusion should look like in practice, saying, "Akron offers a reminder that immigration simply looks like people from various places living side by side."



Baby Sunar.

As the local Nepalese community has grown, the need for kindergarten readiness services has grown too. In Summit County, SPARK is meeting the inclusion mission by working with the Akron Public School District to serve Nepalese families.

Because many of the families don't speak English, Summit County SPARK has hired a Nepalese parent partner named Baby Sunar. Baby is no stranger to early childhood. She's currently a SPARK parent herself, and she's a student in the Early Childhood Resource Center's Child Development Associate program who runs her own family child care center.

Almost 30 million people live in Nepal. It's the largest country in the Himalayas, and it's a little larger than New York. Nepal is home to Mount Everest. Nepal's is the only national flag that is not quadrilateral; instead, it's made of two triangles.



Extra Supplies = More Learning Fun!

Support from the Osteopathic Heritage Foundation, in partnership with United Way of Central Ohio, allowed YMCA Columbus to provide extra supplies to SPARK families during the pandemic, including puzzles, colorful counters for sorting/counting/patterns, extra writing materials and play dough, alphabet locks, and an Amazon Fire tablet for each family.

This was extremely helpful in transitioning to virtual program delivery. The materials gave SPARK families opportunities to do hands-on activities instead of just watching the parent partner use manipulatives through a screen.

This kept the children's attention and focus for longer periods of time, and gave the families lots of learning materials to use between SPARK lessons.



This little boy loved his new alphabet locks so much that he just had to give them a hug!

SPARK Families are the Best!

Parent partners always have the best stories about the unexpected things SPARK families do, say, and create. Here are some recent examples:

Jack Legg shares a cute story about one of his Clark County SPARK families:

We have been meeting virtually with our families. I arrange to drop off the book and materials in advance, then families meet with me via Zoom to read the story and do the lesson activities together.

At the end of every online meeting, I invite children to “choose a way to say goodbye.” I usually offer a few options, such as waving, giving a thumbs up to the camera, doing a little dance, etc. Instead of the adult abruptly ending a call, the idea is to let the child take an active role in ending the session, which gives them a sense of closure and agency.

Recently, I said to a child, “It’s almost time for our meeting to end. How do you want to say goodbye? Would you like to do a wave, or a thumbs up, or a dance?”

The child thought for a moment and replied, “Thank you for watching. Be sure to like and subscribe!” This is a way YouTube video creators commonly end their videos, asking viewers to react and follow their channel.

The boy’s mother laughed and gently asked, “Do you think your teacher is a YouTube video?”

Rachel Jackson discusses the creative and generous SPARK families she serves in Ashland County:

Last month, I had a SPARK visit focusing on the book *The Doorbell Rang*, which uses cookies as a way to teach math concepts.

Apparently, the SPARK child had shared the SPARK book with his older sibling, and they made the cookies together out of play dough.

The family sent me a really cute picture of the older sibling with the plates of cookies.

Also, I thought it was very sweet that one of my SPARK kids colored five pictures and asked me to give them to other SPARK kids.

The kids who received the pictures were delighted that a child they had never met, but had a connection with through SPARK, gave them a small gift!



Resilient Children and Families Program: Strengthening Families



During the 2020-2021 program year, Hamilton County parent partners were invited to pilot the Resilient Children and Families Program (RCFP).

RCFP integrates trauma-informed practices into service delivery using a two-generation approach to increase the social-emotional wellness of children and families who are experiencing adversity and stress.

The Consortium for Resilient Young Children is a collaborative group of early childhood and mental health organizations dedicated to supporting young children's social-emotional development. The pilot project was funded by Ohio Children's Trust Fund to strengthen families and increase children's resilience.

The parent partners were trained on how to:

- Help families strengthen the protective factors that promote family wellness;
- Build trusting relationships with children, families, and early childhood professionals;
- Screen for developmental concerns, toxic stress, and resilience;
- Infuse strategies for building children's social-emotional skills into the curriculum; and
- Employ strategies that build resilience and deepen connection.

The parent partners also work with a coach, who guides them on how to help children or families dealing with life stressors or struggling to engage in lessons. With parental consent, the coach shadows the parent partner during SPARK visits to observe and later consult with the parent partner. That way, any concerns can be revisited by the coach and parent partner, and effective strategies can be explored.



Kindergarten Readiness Levels Decrease in Ohio

Unfortunately, it appears that the pandemic has affected kindergarten readiness across the state, especially for our most at-risk children.

The Kindergarten Readiness Assessment (KRA) that's administered at the beginning of the school year gauges readiness in several domains, including language and literacy.

In fall 2020, the Ohio Department of Education implemented a shortened form of the KRA, called the Kindergarten Readiness Assessment Revised, or KRA-R. That assessment was administered to 78% of Ohio kindergarteners, compared to 93% in 2019.

Students without scores were more likely to have disabilities or be English learners, economically disadvantaged, or non-white.

Scores were lower this time around: 52.4% scored as *On Track* in language and literacy, far fewer than in 2019 (60.2%), 2018 (60.9%), or 2017 (61.7%). Read more at bit.ly/krareport2020

It seems SPARK is more needed than ever. Fortunately, our sites across the state are working hard to help families be ready.



SPARK Goes Virtual!

As the pandemic has progressed, SPARK sites throughout the state have adjusted to engage families virtually in a wide variety of ways. All of the sites have expanded their understanding of what's possible with virtual learning, making SPARK programs, and the families they serve, more flexible and adaptable in their readiness journeys.

Virtual Family Math Night

SPARK recently offered a virtual math night for families in Stark and Summit counties, thanks to Sister Joanne Caniglia from the Dominican Sisters of Peace Motherhouse in Akron.

Sister Joanne is a mathematics education professor at Kent State University; she pursued grant money to create a virtual lesson and activity materials focused on the book *The Mitten*.

The lesson reinforces patterning, one-to-one correspondence, and other key math skills. The accompanying materials, created by the sisters at the Motherhouse, include paper mittens for patterning, a clothesline and clothespins to display the patterns, and several manipulatives. SPARK parent partners delivered the materials to families before the session.

Virtual Group Lessons are Fun!

In December, Action for Children offered its very first virtual group lesson for three-year-olds. It focused on the book *Bear's Busy Family*.

The parent partner team (Abby, Haley, and Terena) gave SPARK families the opportunity to interact with one another throughout the virtual lesson.

They read the story, danced to songs, talked about who was in their families, and participated in a scavenger hunt to find lots of different household objects.

Everyone had fun, and both the parent partners and the families are looking forward to the spring group lesson that's coming up soon.



Making Learning Possible in Alliance

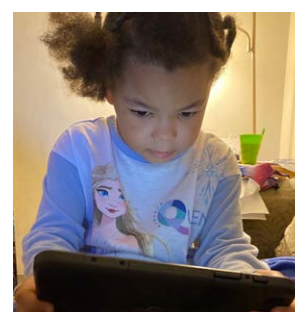
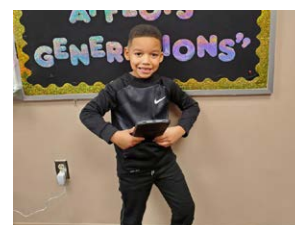
At the start of the pandemic, our in-person SPARK visits were paused. However, the SPARK programs in Alliance and Sebring continued offering visits via porch deliveries of learning materials, along with the use of various internet platforms such as Zoom and FaceTime.

Resource availability wasn't the same for everyone. Thankfully, the city of Alliance was able to help by providing a grant that paid for the children to have tablets with unlimited data for the entire year, along with hard protective tablet cases. This has helped to ensure that all children have access to high-quality early childhood education and experiences.

Early Childhood Education Alliance is incredibly grateful to the city of Alliance for its support and allocation of the COVID funding, as it has made learning possible for Alliance-area children despite the events of this last year.

No matter what the future holds, Alliance-area children now have equal and equitable access to education. In times like these, *Thank you* is an understatement.

Liz Hibbs
Director, Early Childhood Education Alliance



Reading is Fundamental in Summit County

With the return of warm weather, our parent partners have resumed offering outdoor, socially distanced visits with families. We have seen several families re-engage, as it is their preference to only participate face to face. Parent partners continue to offer virtual visits, with activities being delivered prior to the visit. Staff continue to individualize visits to each family's needs and continue to focus on family well-being, ensuring that basic needs are met, and assisting with appropriate referrals for needed services.

Akron Metropolitan Housing Authority's Parents as Teachers team kicked off a series of spring events to assist with recruitment and provide fun activities to families living in our family developments. The parent partners are recruiting SPARK families by participating in these events and sharing free books. The teams are excited to get back into the family developments and are looking forward to seeing all of the families.

The Book-Rich Environments Initiative is a collaborative effort to provide books, in an effort to foster a love of reading and improve the educational outcomes of children living in public housing. Because there wasn't much opportunity to share mass numbers of books over the past year, many books remained.

We are using the books donated through the initiative to assist with SPARK recruitment efforts. These left-over 2020 books have had SPARK stickers placed on them with the new SPARK Summit phone number, and they have been donated to Akron Children's Hospital to be distributed through their Reach out and Read program. Akron Metropolitan Housing Authority is in the process of receiving an additional 7,000 books.

Jill Spillman
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EARLY CHILDHOOD
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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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