

MINNESOTA'S Early Childhood Family Education: Answers to Commonly Asked Questions



Parenting in the 21st Century

Parents* are the first and most important influence on a child's physical health, mental health, moral values, and learning. Early parental influences form the foundation for school success and a meaningful and productive adult life. Research shows that early childhood programs that include parents build protective factors through:

- 1 child development and guidance information that leads to skills related to sensitive care and limit setting,
- 2 social networks that provide reassurance and support for busy and stressed parents, and
- 3 connections to community resources that address child, parent, and family needs.

All parents benefit from information and support during the early years. This information and support helps parents face the stresses of caring for and nurturing young children.

*The word "parents" includes all individuals who function in a parenting role – mothers, fathers, partners, grandparents and other relatives, foster parents, etc.

In the 21st century families are vulnerable to stress from a variety of sources including demanding work expectations, presence of information technologies, increased mobility, recent immigration, tensions in parenting partnerships, fragile family systems, and the complex choices of modern life including changing and often conflicting advice about child-rearing. Many children and families are living in poverty, which makes meeting even basic needs a daily struggle. Early childhood programs that include parents offer families in poverty additional support and connections to more intensive services. Despite these stresses all parents want their children to succeed in school and life.

INTRODUCTION

1 Why are the early years of parenting important?

Children's early years are a period of rapid growth and development in the structure and function of their brain pathways. **Brain research confirms that the first three years are an extremely critical period in a child's development**, especially in the areas of language, emotional regulation, and social competence. In addition, **the parent's sensitive and responsive interactions with their infant are necessary for secure attachment**, which influences healthy development throughout the life span.

Parents of toddlers face challenges related to setting limits and guiding children's emotional development and emerging social skills. Parents also have a strong influence on the development of language and literacy skills during the first five years. **This parental influence on these critical areas of development is a foundation for school readiness and success.**

Informed parents who have a supportive family and friends and positive connections in their communities are better equipped for the challenges of caring for infants, toddlers, and young children. These early years are also a time when parents are most receptive to and can benefit from parent education and support.

2

What is Early Childhood Family Education (ECFE)?

Early Childhood Family Education (ECFE) is a public school program for all Minnesota families with children between the ages of birth and kindergarten. The program recognizes that families provide children's first and most important learning environments and parents are children's first and most significant teachers. Since adults and children both participate in ECFE, it is considered a two-generation program. *The mission of ECFE is to strengthen families through the education and support of all parents to provide the best possible environment for the healthy growth and development of their children.* Established in 1974, it is the largest and oldest program of its kind in the country and has been cited as a national model for parent education and family support.

ECFE provides a place for parents to learn about and practice important parenting and family life skills and build trusting relationships with other parents from their community. ECFE supports the growth and learning of parents and children together at a critical time for building protective factors in families and resiliency in children.

Research confirms that children whose parents are involved in their education and learning are more successful in school. A positive connection to the public school system enables a smooth transition to kindergarten and the K-12 system for both children and parents. Engaging families through ECFE services prior to kindergarten encourages parents to become involved in their children's learning from birth through the elementary years.

3

What are the goals for ECFE participants?

- 1 Parent-child relationships support the child's development in:
 - Physical well-being and motor development,
 - Social and emotional development,
 - Approaches to learning (e.g., curiosity, persistence, attentiveness, reflection, interpretation, imagination, invention), and
 - Language development and communication skills, and cognition and general knowledge.
- 2 Parents understand the importance of their role and how it changes over time.
- 3 Parents have the knowledge and realistic expectations to anticipate and meet the developmental needs of their children.
- 4 Parents demonstrate sensitive and responsive care and interaction with their children.
- 5 Parents and children experience a smooth transition from early childhood programs and services into kindergarten and the K-12 school system, setting the stage for school and life success.
- 6 Parents are engaged in their children's learning and education in the school-age years.
- 7 Families participate in formal and informal social networks in their communities that support effective parenting.
- 8 Families are knowledgeable about and use community resources.

4 What happens in ECFE?

All ECFE programs include **parent education, early childhood education, and parent-child interaction**. Since ECFE programs are locally designed to meet the needs of children, parents, and families, programming and services are unique to each community.

Most programs include the following components based on best practices for children and parents:

- **Parent education classes** guided by a licensed parent educator focused on research-based curriculum topics related to child and parent development and learning and tailored to meet parent and family needs (some parent education classes available online)
- **Early childhood education activities** for children based on their developmental needs planned by a licensed early childhood teacher
- **Parent-child interaction activities** during which parents observe positive models of interaction and build new skills in an environment that supports parent-child relationships
- **Family events** and other opportunities for building community connections
- **Home visits** to address individual child, parent, and family needs
- **Early screening** for children's health and developmental concerns
- **Community resource information and referrals** for families with young children

Based on community characteristics, programs are designed to meet specific needs of parents including fathers, parents of children with disabilities, first-time parents, teen parents, and culture-specific populations. ECFE functions as a base for more intensive, costly services which are made available to meet unique child, parent, and family needs through partnerships with other service providers. Examples include working with Early Head Start, adult basic education, family literacy programs, and collaborating with social services and child protection.

Building community and social support is an important factor for young families' success. In ECFE parents learn about community resources and gain social support from relationships with other families that often continue long past the time families leave the program.

For more information contact the ECFE program in your local school district.

Examples of local program variations designed to meet community needs.

St. Paul ECFE: Classes for parents meet in various locations to accommodate families, including in public housing, high schools, and homeless shelters. Parenting groups are held in partnership with adult education opportunities at the HUBBs Center, The Father Project, Head Start, Promise Neighborhood, and others. In addition, they offer culture-specific groups. They conducted 1,266 home visits in 2013-2014 and have five culture-specific home visitors. Transportation is offered to families.

Robbinsdale Area Schools ECFE: In addition to regular parent groups, the program also provides home visiting, one-on-one meetings and phone consultations, preschool classes, and Kickstart Kindergarten classes. There is an ECFE licensed parent educator in each of the elementary schools. Classes are offered at high schools, in an apartment building, and through partnerships with Creative Play and Great Start Preschools, Family Literacy programs, and Seeds of Imagination, weekly parent-child science-based learning activities.

Alexandria ECFE: The program provides Facebook networking; evening classes; summer classes; and co-location with the school readiness preschool, Early Childhood Special Education, and Head Start. It has partnerships with Douglas County Early Childhood Initiative, Community Education, School Social Workers, and Parent-School Liaisons.

5 Who participates in ECFE?

Parents and children usually participate together. Participation by families is voluntary and services are offered free or for a nominal fee. Costs to deliver the program vary with extent, intensity, and location of services. Early Childhood Family Education is committed to universal access for all families. Availability of the program to all families avoids the potential segregation, stigma, and labeling associated with targeted programs. *All parents can benefit from support and information, especially during the early years of parenting.*

In 2013-2014, 111,384 parents and 107,570 children participated in ECFE classes, home visits, and special events. The three programs listed below are examples of the variety that exists around the state in terms of participation in ECFE. Parents are served from all income, educational, and cultural groups.

2013 - 2014 DATA

	St. Paul	Robbinsdale	Alexandria
Parents Served	3,595	1,713	538
Children Served	2,965	1,334	836
Males Served	30%	30%	29%
Family Income			
Below \$40,000	61%	33%	33%
\$40,000 and above	39%	67%	67%
Parent Education			
High School Diploma or less	43%	18%	6%
Some college	15%	26%	57%
Bachelor's Degree or more	42%	56%	37%
Child Race/Ethnicity			
White	37%	61%	92%
Black/African/African American	17%	16%	<1%
Hispanic/Latino	14%	10%	0
Asian	23%	5%	<1%
Two races or more	7%	8%	5%

6 How is ECFE funded?

ECFE is a low cost, low intensity, two-generation program that offers tailored and intensive services based on local community needs. The programs are financed with combined local and state funding, which may be supplemented with registration fees and funds from other sources through partnerships and collaboration. For many years ECFE has been funded at a maximum of \$120 per child based on the 0-4 year old census in each school district. The 2014 legislature increased funding by \$4.6 million, bringing the per child funding to \$134.

7

What do we know about the effectiveness of ECFE?

Studies over the 40 years of ECFE program services provide evidence of program effectiveness in several goal areas. **Evaluations of the Minnesota programs and similar programs throughout the country show child and parent learning, school readiness, and prevention or reduction of later learning and social problems.** Researchers have described dimensions of parenting behaviors that have been found to contribute to school readiness in children: nurturance, language use and reading, discipline, materials in the home, monitoring, management of the home, and direct teaching of skills to children. ECFE, through its licensed parent educators, assists parents in developing and enhancing their knowledge and skills in all of these areas.

The research link between parent involvement in their children's schools and children's academic success is strong. In a 2003 study of 2,276 parents of kindergarten and 3rd grade students in 13 Minnesota school districts, significant differences were reported between former ECFE participants and other parents in how they are involved in their children's learning both at home and with school. **Data from this study suggest that former ECFE participants arrive at school participating in their children's learning and in the school community and connected to other parents.**

A 2013 study of over 5,680 ECFE parents in 32 school districts representing urban, suburban, and rural communities concludes that both parents and children benefit from participating in ECFE. **Ninety-six percent of parents reported that participating in ECFE helped improve their parenting.** Parents reported improved parenting skills in communication and limit setting, understanding child development and individual differences, understanding their role in children's success in school, and awareness of community resources to help their family. **Parents also noted positive changes in their child's development in social skills, language skills, and problem solving based on attending ECFE programs. The greatest improvement was seen in lower-income families and families of color.**

8

What are the benefits of ECFE?

For children:

- Focused time with parent to learn and explore in an early childhood environment
- A home environment with parents who have positive parenting skills and promote healthy child development
- Positive changes in child development
- Social skills developed in interaction with other young children in a rich early childhood environment
- Early identification of developmental and learning concerns
- Familiarity and comfort with a school setting

For parents & families:

- Support during the transition to parenthood
- Information on early development and what to expect from children
- Strategies for effective limit-setting and teaching
- Quality time with children in a supportive and stimulating learning environment
- Time with other parents to reflect on family values and parenting practices in a supportive group setting
- Enhanced family communication and co-parenting skills
- Strategies for balancing work and family and managing stress
- Familiarity with community resources for families with young children
- Comfort with schools and understanding the parent role in supporting kindergarten readiness and long-term school success

For schools & communities:

- Parents who have positive connections to schools and other community programs
- Parents who are engaged and ready for leadership in the schools
- Enhanced social connections and informal support between families in the community
- Community norms for appropriate and effective discipline for young children

All of society benefits from strong families and healthy, capable children.

**Strong families are the foundation
of a strong society now and far into the future.**