Rallying Behind A Frog Named Freddy, Neighborhoods Embrace Kindergarten

Kindergarten in two City of Pittsburgh low-income neighborhoods isn’t the same anymore. By all accounts, that is a good thing.

As recently as two years ago, for example, as few as 25% of the children who during the year would enroll in kindergarten actually attended the first day of class at the Pittsburgh Public Schools Northview Heights Accelerated Learning Academy and the Weil Accelerated Learning Academy in the Hill District. This year, first-day attendance reached 90% and 83% respectively at both schools.

In Northview Heights, kindergarten enrollment last year exceeded school district projections, requiring school officials to add another kindergarten classroom.

In past years, many parents in Northview Heights and the Hill District were unaware of their school’s kindergarten enrollment dates, who their children’s teachers would be or how they could help smooth their child’s transition to kindergarten.

Now, they are an integral part of that transition and have met the teacher before their children enter school.

And in the Hill District, the first day of kindergarten has become a community celebration with balloons, food, fanfare, teachers, principals, community leaders and a frog named Ready Freddy greeting new kindergarteners and their parents when they arrive at school.

This new embrace of kindergarten is the result of the work of local agencies, parents and their children’s teachers.

(Ready Freddy continued on Page 4)

Shift In Orphanage Demographics Brings New Challenges For China

In Russia and Latin America, researchers from the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development found that improving the social-emotional development of children in orphanages required interventions and structural changes to promote a more nurturing relationship between caregiver and child. A recent visit to China revealed that orphanages in the nation of 1.3 billion people face a similar challenge of replacing less child-sensitive practices with warmer, more family-like care – as well as a challenge researchers had not experienced elsewhere.

Within the past five years, China has experienced a shift in its primary orphanage population from mostly healthy girls to large and increasing numbers of abandoned children with disabilities whose range of special needs are straining the capacity of the nation’s social welfare institutes to train staff or hire specialized staff to care for them.

This new challenge comes at a time when improving

(China continued on Page 9)
ents, public school officials, community leaders and others who have rallied around Pathways To School Success, a series of grant-supported projects developed by the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development (OCD) to intensify school readiness efforts in low-income neighborhoods.

“Our work is to help people be aware of the importance of the transition to kindergarten,” said Laurie Mulvey, director of the OCD Division of Service Demonstrations. “It’s a great time because parents are positive, children are positive and it’s a chance to get a positive start.”

Research suggests quality kindergarten transition predicts long-term school success. In a recent national study of kindergarten children in 992 schools, students in schools with transition practices scored higher on student achievement tests on average than those attending schools where kindergarten transition was not practiced. Researchers also found evidence to suggest kindergarten transition practices may play a vital role in reducing achievement gaps.

However, the research also noted that the same low-income children who are at the greatest risk of school failure and would benefit the most from kindergarten transition are also the least likely to attend schools with transition processes.

**Focus On School Readiness**

The first project under Pathways To School Success was the Centers of Excellence funded with a grant from The Heinz Endowments. Launched in 2007, the project sought to intensify the school readiness practices of family support centers in the city’s Northview Heights and Hill District neighborhoods. Children in these neighborhoods attend one of the eight Accelerated Learning Academies in the Pittsburgh Public Schools that offer longer school days, special curriculum and other features to help raise academic achievement among low-income students.

Kindergarten transition emerged as an important issue while researching ways to ramp-up school readiness. Traditionally, school readiness literature focuses on academic readiness, but does not focus on family and child readiness.

However, for many children, kindergarten represents their first experience with formal education outside of the home; for others, it means getting to know new teachers, new friends, a new building, and a new set of rules. The transition sets the tone for how well children will do in school, but almost half of children who start kindergarten have difficulty with the transition. Without proper transitions, children can experience high levels of anxiety and exhibit “early and persistent school failure, behavior problems, low levels of parent involvement, and a widening gap in their academic achievement.”

In addition to child readiness, there was also a lack of information to increase parent readiness. In other words, there was a need for a way to prepare the whole family. “There weren’t parent-child curriculums that would help parents as well as children get ready for school,” said Ken Smythe-Leistico, director of Pathways To School Success. “There are some curriculums that help parents get their children ready for school, but we felt there was a need for families to get ready, especially families who are having their first child go to school.”

The project’s “K-Club” curriculum was developed to help parents and children get ready for kindergarten together. The curriculum is divided into six sessions. Each session has a different theme focusing on a topic important to helping children transition to kindergarten. Every session includes a child activity, a parent activity, a parent-child interaction activity and a take-home activity.

The child-only activity offers children opportunities to interact with one another and exposes them to the kinds of experiences they’ll encounter in the classroom. Parent-only activities provide parents with training to help them better understand the importance of kindergarten and help them learn the tools necessary to support their child’s education, such as how to build a relationship with their child’s school and teachers. The parent-child activity encourages quality parent-child interactions and models activities that promote school readiness in the home.

The vast majority of literature supports the notion that parent involvement is a key component to school success. Studies show that strong parent involvement and a positive relationship between home and school are two of the greatest predictors of school success. The Pathways To School Success projects focus on finding ways to encourage schools to engage parents before school starts and to teach parents to support learning in the home.

Focusing on early and positive parent engagement during the transition to kindergarten shapes the type of relationship that families and schools will have from that point forward. This is important because the quality of this relationship determines how parents will be involved with their child’s school.

Increased parent involvement is also closely associated with better school attendance. One study of early school absence reports that elementary school attendance increased and chronic absenteeism fell among schools that actively involved families and communities using positive activities and communication strategies. In turn, early school attendance positively impacts achievement scores and reduces future
Rallying Community Support

One of the factors working against full kindergarten enrollment and steady attendance is the fact that kindergarten is optional in Pennsylvania. And in the Northview Heights and Hill District neighborhoods, early education hasn’t been a widely shared experience. In fact, project staff found that up to 60% of children in those neighborhoods had never been enrolled in preschool, Head Start, or any other early learning programs.

Such factors put a premium on raising awareness of the importance of kindergarten, finding kindergarten-bound children and encouraging their parents to enroll them early enough to attend on the first day.

To help with this, a community transition team was created. Research indicates that school-implemented strategies are more effective when there is a partnership between schools, families and communities. Assembling a collaborative team made up of parents, teachers, principals, local agencies and community leaders proved a vital strategy. Another key strategy was adopting a mascot – a cartoon-like frog named “Ready Freddy” – that became the widely recognized face of the project.

One of the first tasks was identifying all of the kindergarten-eligible children. In Northview Heights, parents were hired to accompany project staff as they canvassed the neighborhood, knocking on the doors of more than 276 households to enroll children for kindergarten, and encouraging their parents to enroll them in kindergarten and to participate in K-Club and other transition activities offered to incoming kindergartners and their families.

The community team generated ideas for neighborhood-relevant activities to enhance kindergarten enrollment. Strategies were designed to both reduce anxiety and increase awareness. Successful ideas that helped acquaint children and their families with their classroom, teacher and principal included offering school tours and free hair braiding and haircuts at the Northview Heights Accelerated Learning Academy. Another was to remind parents of enrollment deadlines by putting the Ready Freddy image on pizza boxes delivered in the neighborhood. Agencies pooled their resources to support the cause and to provide families with materials needed for enrollment.

Ready Freddy backpacks were given to children who enrolled early and, through Beginning With Books, book packets were purchased for children who enrolled in kindergarten.

“Once all of the children are found, the idea is to find creative, fun activities to draw them to the school. And when children come to the school for the activity, make sure they are enrolled, they have a book bag, they meet their teacher – that they feel welcome. This starts the relationship between the teacher, child and parent that the literature tells us is so important,” said Mulvey.

The result was first-day kindergarten attendance that was unprecedented in the school. Both Northview Heights kindergarten classrooms were full on the first day of class. And there was a surprise in store for school officials. “They anticipated 44 children in kindergarten, but even more came after the first day, probably because of the outreach effort,” said Smythe-Leistico. “They ended up with about 60 children and had to add a third kindergarten class.”

In addition, parents participating in the K-Club overwhelmingly found the curriculum helpful and they showed greater involvement in their children’s education and their school, as measured by increased attendance at PSCC meetings, school events and record attendance at parent-teacher conferences. One parent said, “It prepared me to see what my child would be facing so that anything she didn’t grasp there I could help her with.”

Ready Freddy, the K-Clubs, community transition teams and other aspects of the Centers for Excellence project were replicated the following year in the Hill District with similar outcomes.

“We found it was necessary to do more than just help the individual child get ready for school,” Mulvey said. “It took a community approach to school readiness – raising awareness of the importance of school readiness, focusing

(Freddy continued on page 4)
on the period just prior to kindergarten and creating a community effort to get families feeling positive about enrolling their children in school.”

That lesson led to a second grant-supported project under the Pathways To School Success umbrella known as Communities of Excellence, which began this year with additional funding from The Heinz Endowments.

**A Broader Initiative**

Communities of Excellence builds on the strategies and activities developed in the Centers for Excellence project – including Ready Freddy, K-Clubs and community transition teams – with an eye toward expanding them throughout the entire community. In the Hill District neighborhood, efforts are expanding to include all elementary schools and engage a broader base of stakeholders, including the faith-based community.

In addition, stakeholders are being invited to share more of the responsibilities of the school readiness initiative. The idea is to teach the parent-child school readiness curriculum to parent groups and other community stakeholders so they can implement it throughout the Hill District.

One of the first activities, “Hands Across the Hill,” turned a routine first day of school for kindergarten students into a community event. Ready Freddy was on hand, as were community leaders, church leaders, teachers, school officials and other stakeholders. “The community planned this,” Mulvey said. “A lot of agencies worked together on it, community leaders, the faith-based community. It wasn’t just the transition team saying welcome to school. It was the Hill District saying we care about our children. That’s how these kids started kindergarten.”

In Northview Heights, a grant from the United Way of Allegheny County supports Communities of Excellence project by hiring “kindergarten liaisons” to continue with outreach and K-Clubs, and to provide year long communication between parents and the school. These liaisons, who are affiliated with the neighborhood family support center, work with kindergarten families to provide guidance, support and help to make sure children attend school regularly. “Our job now is to make that model effective and efficient as possible, show outcomes, and demonstrate that it can be brought to scale and used in other communities,” Mulvey said.


Just as mathematical ability begins to form in early childhood, so, too, does the knowledge gap separating low-income children from their more affluent peers, who generally enter school with much greater math knowledge.

This gap is troubling given that early deficits in mathematical knowledge can have profound implications for future learning. Researchers report, for example, that children’s knowledge of mathematics in kindergarten predicts their scores on achievement tests during the elementary grades and on into high school.

One of the many areas of math that young children from low-income backgrounds struggle with is number sense. Number sense is about understanding numerical magnitudes – being able to choose numbers whose magnitudes are close to the correct values. Recent studies suggest there are simple ways to promote early development of number sense that could be widely used to help low-income preschoolers improve their overall mathematical knowledge.

After looking at how children’s understanding of numerical magnitudes develops, Carnegie Mellon University researcher Robert Siegler and colleagues applied their analysis to design and test a brief, inexpensive activity that resulted in improving a wide range of numerical skills and knowledge. This report examines the problem of early math deficits among low-income children, and discusses the activity they developed and its implications.

Early Mathematical Deficits
Children from low-income families are more likely to begin school with much less math knowledge than children from middle-class and wealthier backgrounds. This gap is seen across several fundamental math tasks, including counting from one, counting up or down from numbers other than one, recognizing written numerals, adding, subtracting and comparing the magnitudes of numbers.2,3

Early deficits in mathematical knowledge can have long-lasting consequences. In general, a child who starts out behind stays behind. Achievement test scores provide evidence of the math achievement gap between low-income students and their more affluent peers.

This gap, for example, was identified by the 2003 Mayor’s Commission on Public Education as one of the challenges facing the Pittsburgh Public Schools. Test scores showed that only 29% of low-income students in the city public school were proficient in math during the 2001-2002 school year.4 Statewide, 52% of all students were proficient in math that year. The commission’s report defined low-income students as those whose family income fell below poverty levels, as well as those with family incomes low enough to qualify for the federal free and reduced lunch program. About 60% of the students enrolled in the Pittsburgh Public Schools in 2001-2002 fell into these categories.

Similar gaps are seen throughout Pennsylvania. Despite general improvement in statewide academic proficiency scores during the 2007-2008 school year, students who attended school in disadvantaged communities continued to struggle, accounting for 68% of those whose math and verbal scores fell “below basic,” which is the lowest category on the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment.5

Learning Support
Research suggests that the mathematical knowledge gap reflects a difference in the learning support children receive from their parents and others. Studies have found, for example, that middle-income parents engage in a wider range of math activities with their children and do so more frequently than do parents in low-income households.6,7

Studies also point out the benefits of such practices in the home: Children whose parents engage in more numerical
activities generally possess greater math knowledge.\(^9\)

Such findings underscore the value of designing activities to improve the understanding of numbers that can be widely used among low-income preschoolers who are less likely to be exposed to adequate early math support at home.

**Number Sense**

Number sense is one area of mathematical knowledge found to be particularly weak among low-income children. Definitions of number sense cite broad and varied types of knowledge, including skill at immediately identifying the numerical value associated with small quantities, facility with basic counting, and understanding how to compose and decompose whole numbers.\(^6\)

Siegler and colleagues focused on a single, important process in defining number sense as the ability to approximate numerical magnitudes.\(^7\) Such approximations can be applied to numerical operations, such as answering the question: “About how much is 12 x 55?” Another common application is approximating objects, events or sets. For example, “About how many people were at the football game?”

The researchers found estimation tasks using a number line to be an advantageous way to investigate children’s number sense. Studies suggest that math achievement correlates with children’s ability to correctly space numbers on number lines.

Young children typically have difficulty doing that, but improve with age and experience. For example, even preschool-age children who can count perfectly from 1 to 10 do not understand the rank order of the numbers’ magnitude.\(^11\) Even after they learn the rank order of numbers’ magnitude, they do not immediately show the magnitudes as increasingly linear.

**Learning Experiences**

Such findings led researchers to look at what experiences tend to lead children to represent the magnitudes of small, verbally stated or written numerals as increasingly linear. Counting experience in early childhood is believed to contribute. However, children often are able to count in a numerical range for a year or longer before they are able to make linear representations of numerical magnitudes in that range,\(^12\) which suggests other experiences are also involved.

One activity seen as ideally suited for producing such representations is playing board games with linearly arranged, consecutively numbered, equal-size spaces, such as the popular commercial children’s game, Chutes and Ladders. That game’s board has numbers up to 100, each having its own square of equal size, which are arranged in a grid.

Such games offer children cues to the order and the magnitude of numbers: The greater the number in a square, for example, the greater number of moves the child makes with the token or the greater distance the child has moved the token. The games also give children practice in counting and in identifying numerals.

**A Simple Board Game**

Researchers tested the notion that a numerical board game could improve mathematical knowledge by randomly assigning 4- and 5-year-olds from Head Start centers to one of two simple board games they designed.

Each game had 10 squares of equal size horizontally arranged. One game, however, had the numbers 1-10 listed consecutively from left to right, while the other game had colored squares without numbers. Children spin a spinner and moved their token the number of spaces shown on the spinner. They were also asked to say the numbers or colors on the spaces they moved the token through.

Children took part in four sessions that lasted 15-20 minutes each and were spread over a two-week period. The games themselves lasted only about 2-4 minutes each.

In addition, children were given a number line estimation task with numbers 1-10 before and after they played the game. For comparison, the same number line estimation task was given to a group of middle-income children who did not play either version of the board game.

The idea was to use the task to measure any change in the estimating abilities of the Head Start children who played the board game and to see how their performance compared with that of middle-income children who, studies suggest, are exposed to more math-related activities at home. In fact, a survey taken in a follow-up study showed that middle-income children reported twice as much experience playing board games than children from low-income backgrounds.

**Broad Gains Reported**

The brief experience of playing the numbered board game resulted in significant gains in how Head Start children performed on the number line estimation task. Before children played the numbered board game, the best-fitting linear function accounted for an average of only 15% of the variance in individual children’s scores. After they had experience playing the game, the best-fitting linear function accounted for an average of 61% of the variance.

That improvement brought their performance on the estimation task up to levels seen among the middle-income children who had not played the game, but as a group tend to have much more experience with board games and other math activities at home.

On the other hand, playing the board game that used
color squares did not affect the number line estimation performance of the Head Start children who were assigned to it. The best-fitting linear function accounted for an average of only 18% of the variance in their estimates on both the tests given before playing the game and the tests given afterward.

In a later study, researchers looked at the range of mathematical knowledge that 124 Head Start children gained by playing the numbered board game and whether those gains could be expected to last.

To investigate the range of math knowledge, they compared the effects of playing both the numbered board game and the color game on the children’s understanding of the numbers 1-10 in tasks that included making estimates with a number line, comparing magnitude, identifying numerals and counting. These tasks were done immediately before and after children played the games. Researchers followed up those tests by having the children perform the tasks again nine weeks after they had completed their last game session.

Again, playing the numbered board game produced wide benefits for the Head Start children who were assigned to do so. The accuracy of their number line estimations increased from pre-test to post-test, and their performances on the magnitude comparison, numeral identification and counting tasks also improved after having had the experience of playing the game.

The group of children who played the board game with colored squares showed no change in their performance on the tasks used to assess mathematical knowledge.

In all cases, the Head Start children who were assigned to play the numbered board game showed improvements that lasted over the nine-week follow-up period, while the children who played the color board games failed to demonstrate any gains, either immediate or delayed.

Such findings add to a growing body of evidence that suggests improving the numerical understanding of low-income preschool-age children leads to broad, rapid learning. In this case, the learning tool was a simple, inexpensive board game that could be widely used to help close the mathematical knowledge gap between low-income children and their more affluent peers.

References


This Special Report is based on the publication cited above. It is not intended to be an original work but a summary for the convenience of our readers. References noted in the text follow:


Parenting Guide Series Available From OCD

The University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development is offering a series of easy-to-use parenting guides offering information and advice on 50 parenting topics. These guides are available free of charge to parents and organizations, agencies and professionals who work with children and families.

The You & Your Child parenting guide series, written and edited by the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development, covers topics ranging from how to deal with children’s fears, finicky eating habits, and aggressive behavior to getting a child ready to read, setting rules, and coping with grief.

Each guide is based on current parenting literature and has been reviewed by a panel of child development experts and practitioners. The series is made possible by the Frank and Theresa Caplan Fund for Early Childhood Development and Parenting Education.

To receive a printed set of all 50 guides by mail, send a request along with your name, organization, mailing address and telephone number to:

Parenting Guides
University of Pittsburgh
Office of Child Development
400 North Lexington Avenue
Pittsburgh, PA 15208.

The You & Your Child parenting guides are also available on the OCD website as portable document files at: www.education.pitt.edu/ocd/family/parentingguides.asp.

References:


the conditions of orphanages in China is a work in progress whose prospects for success benefit from a number of strengths, including more robust foster care and adoption systems, levels of care that are on the rise, adequate and well-regulated orphanage infrastructure, a deep-rooted value of family and caring, an emphasis on pragmatic and balanced approaches to solving complex problems, political support for improving orphanages and an openness to innovation.

“Despite all of the progress China has made with adoption and foster care, the vast majority of children who get adopted or placed in foster care are those who are either healthy, young or, if they have disabilities, they are mild, correctable disabilities,” said Junlei Li, PhD, director of the Office of Child Development (OCD) Division of Applied Research and Evaluation. “Of the children who remain in the orphanages, nearly 90 percent of the children have moderate to severe disabilities.”

The purpose of the fact-finding visit this fall by Dr. Li and OCD Co-Directors Christina Groark, PhD, and Robert McCall, PhD, was to explore whether their experience with orphanages in Russia, Nicaragua and El Salvador could be of help to the government agencies, academics and nongovernmental organizations working to improve orphanage conditions in China.

“We went to see if we might contribute in some way,” Dr. McCall said. “We wanted to learn what their needs are, whether what we’ve learned would be useful in fulfilling those needs, and to meet Chinese specialists and policy makers who might take a lead role in modifying what we’ve learned to fit their situation.”

Lessons From Russia
Research conducted in Russian orphanages found that when conditions were in place to promote and sustain warm, sensitive and responsive relationships between young children and with their adult caregivers, the children’s social-emotional and cognitive development improved.

This research was begun nearly a decade ago as an investigation by OCD and a team of Russian researchers to determine the impact of interventions and structural changes intended to promote family-like care in Soviet-era orphanages in St. Petersburg, which for decades had emphasized conformity and discipline over warmth and sensitivity.

Caregivers were trained and encouraged to be more warm, sensitive and responsive in their interactions with the children with the idea of integrating loving care into daily routines, such as feeding, bathing and dressing. They were taught how to position and interact with children in their care who had disabilities. For the first time, primary caregivers were designated and their schedules adjusted to give children some consistency in who was caring for them.

Key structural changes were also made to the way orphanages operated. The groupings of children were made smaller – about half the size of previous groups – which enabled caregivers to spend more time with individual children. Similar to families, these groups included children of different ages, as well as children with disabilities, in contrast to the more homogenous groups of the past. And children were allowed to remain in their group for several years.

The results were significant. Children saw fewer, but more consistent caregivers. Caregivers substantially improved their responsiveness and involvement with children. They reported being more satisfied with their work. They also reported that they had gained confidence in their ability to work with and care for children with disabilities.

Children showed significant improvement across all developmental domains. On average, their developmental quotient rose from 52 to 92, which is the largest increase associated with a developmental intervention ever reported in child development research. Their behavioral development also improved. They showed more mature social and emotional behavior than children who did not receive the intervention. They were more engaged with caregivers. Even their physical growth improved.

Children with disabilities made significant developmental gains as well, improving across every domain. Their average developmental quotient increased from 23 to 42. The DQ for more than 25% of these children rose 30 points and in 1/7 increased their DQ by more than 40 points.

Training Alone Not Enough
One important lesson from the study was the importance of making structural changes to the orphanage. “We believe that for training to work there has to be follow up and supervision,” Dr. Groark said. “But we learned from our experiences in Russia that training and follow-up alone doesn’t work as well as when you make structural changes, such as changing staffing patterns so children are cared for by the same set of caregivers to provide stability.”

The study reported that although children’s development improved in orphanages where only training was provided, the gains were much lower than those experienced by children in orphanages where training was supported by structural changes that offered caregivers better opportunities to practice what they were taught.

Such findings not only have implications for orphanages in nations engaged in improving their conditions, but also for early childhood policy and practices in the United States, where training for teachers, social workers and others who work with young children is increasingly emphasized, but making key structural changes to the environments in which they work is not.
China’s Challenge

In recent years, China has been looking at ways to create settings within its orphanages that promote more child-sensitive, family-like care.

Orphanages in China generally have adequate infrastructure, staffing and funding. Steady progress is being made in the nation’s adoption and foster care systems as alternatives to the placement of children in orphanages, including children with mild disabilities.

Traditional care in these orphanages, however, differs from family-like care in several important ways. Orphanages, for example, tend to group children by age and segregate those with disabilities in separate wards. Assigning primary or permanent caregivers to groups of children is uncommon. Instead, children are cared for by different caregivers who change shift to shift, year to year. These caregivers, who often have little time to devote to individual children, typically perform their duties with little talking and one-on-one or face-to-face interactions.

And reform is made more challenging by the dramatic increase in the proportion of children with disabilities who now reside in China’s orphanages. The recent surge in this population has come about for several reasons. There are, for example, few resources available to parents to help them care for a child with disabilities at home. The lack of high quality prenatal care and birthing procedures also contribute to the rising number of infants with disabilities, evidenced by a rising number of children with cerebral palsy, a condition often triggered by preventable trauma to the brain sustained during birth. And China’s rule limiting family size to one child still creates a climate in which families favor keeping the most “viable” infant. Previously, the rule led to an increase of girls being placed in orphanages as a result of families preferring to have their only child be a male. When the rule was relaxed to allow families to adopt a second child, the number of abandoned girls declined, but the percentage of children with disabilities in the orphanages increased.

Several innovative efforts are underway in China to create more family-like care within the orphanages. Some, for example, have implemented supplemental programs, such as separate activity rooms where children are given a few hours of individual attention from trained nannies. Such supplemental programs serve only a limited number of children in each orphanage and requires ongoing foreign investment to pay for the additional staff. They do not create the level of structural change the Russia study found to be an essential to producing significant developmental gains among children.

Appetite For Collaboration

The visit by OCD researchers this fall succeeded in gaining a working knowledge of the needs of orphanages in China, the efforts to improve conditions within the orphanages, and the key players in government, academia and elsewhere who are involved in promoting change.

They found that nearly all Chinese stakeholders accept the research evidence that family-like care leads to better outcomes for children, including children with disabilities. OCD researchers were asked to write an article on that topic for a government journal that is required reading for civil affairs government personnel and others who work with young children. OCD is also exploring the possibility of collaborating with Half the Sky Foundation, a nongovernmental agency working in China that provides supplemental programs to orphanages. The talks to date have focused on developing a tool to assess the quality of care in orphanages, including caregiver-child interactions and relationships, and on piloting the kinds of structural changes in orphanages OCD found were critical to achieving more nurturing caregiver-child relationships in Russia and Latin America.

OCD researchers learned there is wide agreement in China that the nation does not lack ideas, commitment to family-like care or small-scale experiments intended to promote family-like care in orphanages. What the nation needs most, they were told, is a systematic effort to examine small-scale demonstrations that exist, understand what works and
what doesn’t, and develop effective strategies for bringing the best practices up to scale. If OCD were to have a role in a Chinese-directed collaboration, one possibility would be to help nurture the existing orphanage experiments toward broader implementation.

Perhaps most important, OCD researchers wanted to gauge whether there is an openness and readiness in China for collaboratively creating family-like settings in orphanages to improve the development of children with disabilities, which can involve difficult decisions and hard work. “That was our big question,” said Dr. Li. “And the answer was, Yes.”

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**Family Support Conference**

The Pittsburgh Association for the Education of Young Children (PAEYC) in collaboration with the University of Pittsburgh, Office of Child Development and the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts are pleased to announce the exciting 2010 conference event - **Creativity: Where the Future Begins**, to be held May 14 – 15 at the Omni William Penn Hotel and the David L. Lawrence Convention Center in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. These organizations are partnering for this unique opportunity to explore the many positive benefits of art for child development as well as showcase art’s role in strengthening parent-child relationships.

Why the topic “Creativity: Where the Future Begins?”

Creativity is the ability to have new ideas, to be imaginative, original, to think in a different way, and to make new adaptations to old ideas. Creativity is a process. It begins in infancy and as one continues to engage in the creative process, provides the urge to continue exploration and discovery. Environments that value creativity and provide for artistic expression and experimentation are fundamental to a child’s physical, cognitive, social, emotional, and cultural development and need to be a focus of the educator’s role in the early childhood program.

For more information, please contact Kaitlin Moore at kmmoore@pitt.edu or 412.244.5387. We hope you’ll join us for this exciting event!

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**Free Background Reports Cover Children’s Issues**

University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development offers a recently-update series of free background reports providing concise overviews of current topics important to children and families.

New topics in the series, *Children, Youth & Family Background*, include childhood obesity, foster care, early literacy, parent-teen relationships, and the trend among non-profit agencies to help support their missions by starting money-generating social enterprises.

The reports, originally produced to keep journalists and policy makers up to date on children’s issues, are available free of charge to anyone interested in learning about the latest developments in areas ranging from education and child development to child welfare and juvenile crime. These reports are written, edited, and reviewed by the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development.

All *Children, Youth & Family Background* reports are posted on the OCD website as portable document files (.pdf) for viewing and downloading at the following address: http://www.education.pitt.edu/ocd/family/backgrounders.asp.
Dispensing parenting advice, long the domain of grandmothers and other family relations, is drawing more attention from policy makers and others looking for ways to strengthen families and communities – and for good reason. Studies show effective parenting improves a child’s chances of healthy development.

Sound parenting advice on more than 50 topics is now available free of charge in a series columns written by Robert B. McCall, Ph.D., Co-Director of the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development and former columnist for Parents magazine.

The columns, well-suited for newsletters and community newspapers, provide clear, concise and accurate information on topics such as dealing with a child’s lying, how to toilet train, what to do about nightmares, discipline and finicky eaters, and how to recognize and address grief in children.

OCD offers the columns free of charge as Microsoft Word documents. All columns are available on OCD website at: www.education.pitt.edu/ocd/family/parentingcolumns.asp

The public service initiative is made possible by the Frank and Theresa Caplan Fund for Early Childhood Development and Parenting Education, whose contributions support production of the columns and other Office of Child Development projects.