



# GROW

## SCHOOL READINESS: MORE THAN THE “THREE R’S”

Increasingly, early childhood programs are being called upon to get young children ready for school. In center-based programs as well as home-based programs like CHIP, there’s a growing emphasis on finding ways to help children start kindergarten ready to learn. But just what is “school readiness”? And how does CHIP’s health-focused program fit into this new emphasis? This edition of GROW will look at school readiness and how CHIP helps children succeed.

Much of the discussion about school readiness comes from the National Educational Goals Panel (NEGP). The NEGP, which was set up in July 1990, is made up of federal and state officials who assess and report on state and national progress toward achieving the eight National Education Goals set for the nation. The first of these goals states, “by the

year 2000, all children in America will start school ready to learn.”

The year 2000 has come and gone without achieving that goal. But the NEGP made an enormous contribution to our understanding of

school readiness.

According to the NEGP, school readiness isn’t just about whether a child can follow instructions or recite the alphabet. Instead, the NEGP identified three elements that

are integral to our current understanding of school readiness:

- (1) the condition of the individual child;
- (2) the ability of schools to welcome and meet the needs of a diversity of children; and
- (3) family and community supports and services that contribute to children’s well-being.

This understanding of school readiness has been adopted in many



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communities. For instance, Charlottesville’s Partnership for Children, a coalition of 13 agencies, defines school readiness in the same terms – as something that has to encompass children, their families, and their schools and communities.

At the level of the individual child, the NEGP lists five dimensions of school readiness, aspects of the child’s health and development that must be “ready” if a child is to learn. These five dimensions are:

- Physical well-being and motor development
- Social and emotional development
- Approaches to learning: enthusiasm, curiosity, persistence on tasks
- Language development, including both verbal development (listening, speaking and vocabulary) and emerging literacy (print awareness, story sense and writing process such as drawing and early attempts to form letters)
- General knowledge and cognition

At every CHIP site in Virginia, our comprehensive child health and family support services help get children ready for school. CHIP’s mission focuses on good health, which is crucial to a child’s ability to learn. Sandy Graves, Director of Clinical Services and Education at CHIP of Greater Richmond, points out that persistent ear infections can cause hearing loss, which in turn affects language development and learning. CHIP nurses and home visitors help parents ensure that their children get good nutrition, avoid or manage chronic diseases like asthma, and are screened for developmental delays that could set them back in school. CHIP children diagnosed with delays are referred to early intervention services, and many CHIP sites make sure parents have transportation to get their children to appointments.

Oral health is also associated with school readiness. According to the Oral Health 2000 report, children miss over 50 million hours of school per year because of tooth decay. Tooth decay matters because it hurts – and a hurting child is not a learning child – and because it affects children’s chewing ability, self-esteem, and overall health. CHIP staff work hard to teach parents about dental hygiene for their children, which includes brushing even those first tiny baby teeth, minimizing “juice abuse” and not letting children sleep with a bottle. They also try to connect families with dental care, although there continues to be a shortage of services for low-income families in many parts of Virginia.

Likewise, by providing family support and parenting education, CHIP helps families provide a stable and supportive environment for their children, fostering their social and emotional development. Dozens of studies have shown that the most accurate predictor of student achievement is the extent to which the family is involved in the child’s education.

“Every parent wants their child to be successful in school,” says Jefferson Area CHIP Coordinator Judy Smith. CHIP is there to help. 🦷

## THE 30 MILLION WORD GAP

For years, advocates of early childhood education have watched in dismay as early gains from Head Start faded over time. Students from low-income families do as well as their more affluent peers during first and second grade. Then, in fourth grade, the magic of Head Start seems to wear off. Teachers call it the fourth grade slump. A gap appears between children at different income levels. As children grow, the gap gets wider and wider. Why?

For CHIP staff, the answer seems obvious. Every day, CHIP’s nurses and outreach workers visit families who move once or twice a year, suffer domestic violence and drug abuse, live in dangerous neighborhoods, and can’t afford decent child care. Clearly, children in middle- and upper-class homes have the advantage.

But research shows that with good preschools, children like the ones in CHIP can do as well as their peers, *until fourth grade*.

Between third and fourth grade, a big change occurs in what schools expect of children. From kindergarten through third grade, children are expected to *learn to read*. At nine and ten years old, however, children begin reading more complicated academic texts. In other words, starting in fourth grade, children must *read to learn*.

Two researchers, Betty Hart and Todd Risley, set out to find out what made *reading to learn* so much harder for children from low-income families. They looked at professional families, working class families, and families on welfare. All these families loved their

children. Despite their different income levels, they were all stable. The parents loved their children and did their best to be good parents. None of them abused or neglected or abandoned their children.

Where they differed, Hart and Risley found, was in how they talked to their children.

The higher the parents’ income and education level, the more they talked to their children. By the age of four, Hart and Risley discovered, “an average child in a professional family would have accumulated experience with almost 45 million words.” For children in working-class families, the number dropped to 26 million words. And for children in welfare families, just 13 million words. That’s a 30 million word gap by the age of four.

And, the researchers found, even loving parents differed in what they said to their children. The better-off a parent was, the more encouraging to her child she tended to be. The average professional family gave six encouragements for each discouragement (six “good jobs!” for every “don’t touch that!”) In working class families, the ratio was two to one. And in families on welfare, for every one phrase of encouragement or praise a child received, he got two of prohibition or criticism.

As Hart and Risley point out, a child’s experience from birth through age three affects her *cognitive development* (what she learns), her *neurological development* (how her brain develops), and her *behavioral development* (how she acts).

It’s not hard to imagine why parents like the ones in CHIP might speak less to their children. Many are depressed or just plain tired. Try having a lengthy conversation with a two-year old after being on your feet for twelve hours. It’s not easy.

It is easy to see why CHIP parents might say “NO!” more often. Daily life for an unemployed single mother can seem like one big NO. Living in unsafe neighborhoods, “NO, you can’t” (climb that, touch that, go outside) is often the only reasonable answer. And we all know how stress cuts into our patience.

None of this means that programs like Head Start don’t matter or that children can’t catch up. It does mean, however, that programs like CHIP, which work in the home with parents of very young children, have a unique role to play in leveling the educational playing field. In the pages which follow, two CHIP staffers explain what their sites do to help close the gap.



**“We’re committed to preparing children to succeed in school”**

**SANDY GRAVES** is Director of Clinical Services and Education for CHIP of Greater Richmond.

*GROW: School readiness seems like an unusual area of focus for a children’s health organization.*

**SANDY GRAVES:** Not really. We’ve had a longstanding belief in the idea that parents are a child’s first teachers. And we’re committed to preparing children to succeed in school.

*What are the biggest health concerns relating to school readiness?*

One really important aspect is screening. We make sure children get developmental assessments and tests of hearing and vision. That means that they get help as early as possible and don’t go to school with problems that haven’t been identified.

*Do the screens do a good job of that?*

Yes, although language development is one of the most significant issues. We use the Denver (Developmental Screening Test), which is not very discrete on language development. And tied into language is hearing. A lot of our kids get ear infections, so we’re always on the alert for hearing loss, which affects receptive language development.

*How can you help parents support their children’s development?*

It’s important to work with parents to help them understand things like fine motor skill development. We bring families crayons, paper, puzzles. Things children need if their fine motor skills are going to be ready to take on tasks like writing. But it’s also a question of guidance and helping parents understand.

*Can’t children gain a lot of these skills in preschool?*

Yes, but transportation is always a problem. Only one of Richmond’s Head Start programs has transportation. The counties don’t have transportation.

*Can CHIP help get children ready to read?*

Absolutely. For a long time, our program has been committed to reading and to getting books out to kids. We’re part of Project Excel’s “Raising a Reader” project. Every ten to fourteen days, parents get a bag of four books and activity guides.

*Is reading a challenge for some of our parents?*

For some. But these are toddler books. They’re easy and rewarding for parents to read, and it’s a wonderful way for them to interact with their kids. There’s very little print material in our families’ homes, so these books make a big difference.

*What about family issues? How do they play into your school readiness efforts?*

Overall, family stability is crucial. That includes domestic violence, but it also means helping parents set consistent boundaries and learn how to discipline effectively, as well as dealing with attachment issues.

*I would think domestic violence could be devastating in terms of a child’s ability to do well in school.*

What’s probably unique to our families here in Richmond is these kids’ exposure to violence in their homes and their neighborhoods. This has a serious effect on all aspects of their development – the way they react to their peers and to adults, the way they handle impulse control. They can’t play outside the way kids in other communities do, so they end up with a lot of excess energy, and that in itself causes problems.



**“Every parent wants their child to be successful in school”**

**JUDY SMITH** is Coordinator of Jefferson Area CHIP.

*GROW: How did Jefferson Area CHIP get involved in school readiness?*

**JUDY SMITH:** CHIP is part of the Partnership for Children, a coalition of 13 agencies in Charlottesville and Albemarle. We took on the issue after some local funders asked if children’s programs were getting kids school ready, which they defined as entering school ready to read. The Partnership has worked to broaden that definition!

*National experts seem to have a broader definition.*

Yes, and we now define the three components of school readiness as the child, the family, and the school and community. Home visiting programs like CHIP focus on children and families, but it’s important that families have community supports and that schools be ready to welcome families.

*And to welcome children!*

Of course. Children are ready in different ways at different times. Schools need to recognize those differences.

*What are some of the family issues that affect school readiness?*

Frequent moves decrease a child’s ability to do well in school, so housing stability is important. Structure matters, too. Having the discipline to get kids to bed on time and up in time for school. And parents’ attitude matters as well. After all, how many of our parents have ever had success in school?

*What can CHIP do about that?*

We can prepare parents for what schools will expect of their children. Some parents really don’t understand what’s expected of them. We try to get parents to be ready to be active in their children’s school.

*How?*

Preschools are a good introduction to teach parents how to interact with schools. CHIP staff often go with parents on preschool visits.

*What about all the skills children need? How does CHIP help in that respect?*

Whenever possible, we help parents enroll their children in preschool, whether it’s Head Start, Bright Start, or a church program that offers scholarships. We also encourage parents to do out-of-home activities, as well as reading, games, and singing.

*I’ve read that reading aloud to your child is the single most important thing you can do to ensure your child becomes a good reader.*

The Partnership for Children provides Literacy Kits, which include books, a library card, and activities parents can do with their kids.

*But don’t we have parents for whom reading is a challenge?*

We do have parents who don’t read very well, and we haven’t had much success with literacy volunteers. How can we get parents to read? How can we know how well they read? These aren’t easy questions. Fortunately, if you start with very young children, you’re starting with simple books. And we also show parents other preliteracy activities, like helping children name things and just talking to their children.

*Parent-child interaction is enormously important.*

Yes, and we do a lot of parent education to help parents understand just how important little things like talking to their babies can be.

*A lot of middle-class families these days worry that their sons aren’t ready for kindergarten. They talk about how boys mature more slowly.*

That’s true, but the biggest problem boys in CHIP face is the lack of male role models, especially males who live in the home and are successful. Many of our boys don’t even know their dads, or their dads are in jail.

*Sounds like there are a lot of challenges.*

Yes, but the thing to remember is that every parent wants their child to be successful in school. The fact that they can turn to their CHIP worker for support and advice makes it easier for them to know how to help. 📖



### WHAT IS CHIP?

CHIP of Virginia is a non-profit network of community-based programs working in 30 communities and regions to improve the health of young children in low-income families. CHIP's nurses and outreach workers visit families at home to provide help signing up for health insurance, health screening and supervision, and referrals to medical and community services. Home visitors also educate parents about health, nutrition, and home safety. CHIP works with community organizations as well as doctors and other providers in order to ensure comprehensive care and good health for children.

### HOW YOU CAN HELP:

To donate time or resources, please contact the CHIP site nearest you or call CHIP of Virginia at (804) 783-2667.

## MEETING THE CHALLENGE: SCHOOL READINESS IN VIRGINIA

In 2002, Virginia joined a multi-state project to track child well-being indicators in order to improve school readiness. In April 2004, the School Readiness Indicators State Team, released *No Time to Waste: Indicators*

*of School Readiness 2004 Data Book*, available online at [www.vakids.org](http://www.vakids.org). The chart below shows where CHIP communities stand on some school readiness indicators. Most data are for 2002.

COMMUNITY	Maternal Education <sup>1</sup>	Prenatal Care <sup>2</sup>	Low Birthweight <sup>3</sup>	Children in Poverty <sup>4</sup>	Child Abuse, Neglect <sup>5</sup>	Child Health Insurance <sup>6</sup>
STATEWIDE	15%	85%	8%	6%	4.7	92%
Arlington	15%	72%	7%	7%	5.4	71%
Chesapeake	12%	89%	8%	11%	4	83%
Charlottesville	19%	81%	7%	22%	8.8	96%
Albemarle	12%	83%	5%	7%	1	91%
Fluvanna	9%	82%	6%	7%	3.2	87%
Louisa	17%	84%	7%	14%	2.5	88%
Floyd	6%	92%	9%	13%	6.2	84%
Giles	11%	83%	7%	13%	17	95%
Montgomery	12%	89%	6%	17%	7.2	92%
Pulaski	15%	86%	9%	26%	15.1	100%
Radford	12%	86%	1%	14%	6.1	100%
Norfolk	20%	79%	11%	28%	8.5	81%
Petersburg	33%	75%	11%	30%	9.6	91%
Portsmouth	24%	76%	10%	28%	5.5	89%
Richmond	29%	79%	13%	34%	9.7	85%
Henrico	10%	91%	9%	10%	3.7	100%
Chesterfield	12%	92%	8%	6%	4.5	100%
Roanoke City	22%	98%	8%	28%	9.4	99%
Roanoke County	9%	98%	7%	6%	5.1	88%
Botetourt	5%	97%	9%	4%	2.3	83%
Craig	8%	98%	4%	11%	11	98%
Salem	7%	99%	8%	5%	1.4	6
Bristol	17%	83%	11%	25%	14.1	100%
Washington	14%	88%	7%	12%	6.1	89%
Russell	14%	85%	10%	21%	7.5	84%
Buchanan	23%	86%	11%	27%	9.4	79%
Dickenson	19%	90%	5%	27%	5.7	80%
Williamsburg	13%	92%	12%	39%	6.8	75%
James City	10%	95%	6%	7%	8.9	98%
York	4%	93%	8%	6%	2.8	61%

The State Team chose its indicators because they have been cited in scientific literature to be related to school success, because reliable statistics are available for tracking them, and because they influence children's development and can be affected by policy. 🍌

<sup>1</sup> % births to mothers with less than a 12th grade education.

<sup>2</sup> % women receiving early prenatal care.

<sup>3</sup> % children under six below 100% of federal poverty level.

<sup>4</sup> Number of founded cases per 1,000 children.

<sup>5</sup> % of estimated number of eligible children who are enrolled in Medicaid and FAMIS. Data for October 2004.

<sup>6</sup> Included in Roanoke County.



## NEWS FROM AROUND THE NETWORK

Doug Pierce, founder of **CHIP of Roanoke Valley**, has received the Medical Society of Virginia's 2004 Salute to Service Award. His lifelong work to improve the health of children was honored at a gala ceremony in Arlington in early November. In addition, **CHIP of Roanoke** received a \$500 cash prize. Congratulations!

As a volunteer with **CHIP of Greater Williamsburg**, Jennifer Beckham Mendez facilitates CHIP's Spanish-speaking parent group. She's also a sociology professor at the College of William and Mary. In September, she received a volunteer award from the College, which made a \$500 donation to CHIP of Greater Williamsburg. The donation allowed both the parents' group and the children's play group to visit the Virginia Living Museum. Thank you to both Professor Beckham Mendez and the College of William and Mary for their generous support.

**CHIP of Roanoke Valley** received a \$1750 grant from the Virginia Department of Health to

conduct safety programs for low-income families. The grant will help purchase safety items to use as incentives for parents to attend Parent Meetings. **CHIP of Roanoke** also received a \$20,000 grant from Anthem Blue Cross Blue Shield to continue funding an in-house FAMIS Outreach Worker in 2005-2006.

A lot of sites have been bringing on new staff lately. **CHIP of New River Valley** recently welcomed a new coordinator, Sheri Parcell. Sheri, who graduated with a B.S. in Human Development from Radford University in 1995, has worked with children and their families as a teacher, childcare consultant, and Director of a Child Development Center. Most of her work with children and families has been spent with the at-risk population. Sheri is dedicated to helping families and children become self-sufficient and empowered as they face the everyday challenges of life. She and her "wonderful and crazy" husband, Mark, have two children, 14 year-old Josh and 6 year-old

Addie. They are all, Sheri says, big time Tech fans. GO HOKIES!!

**Jefferson Area CHIP** has three new staff members to introduce to the network. Amy Josephson and Cezeline Panis-Smith are working full time as Family Support Workers in Charlottesville and Albemarle, and Yvonne Gardner is working part time in Fluvanna. Amy most recently did home visiting for 0-3 programs and Cez has been the director of a day care program. Yvonne worked at the Shelter for Help and Emergency and has done different outreach programs for a high-risk population. Welcome, Amy, Cez and Yvonne!

**CHIP of Portsmouth** recently welcomed Veleka Davis to its staff. In less than two months, Veleka has made herself a valuable member of the Portsmouth team. Welcome!

**CHIP of Greater Williamsburg** has hired Janniliecei Reyes as a part-time Family Consultant. Welcome aboard!

## THE FIVE DIMENSIONS OF SCHOOL READINESS

The NEGP highlighted five dimensions of children's school readiness in their report, *Reconsidering Children's Early Development and Learning: Toward Common Views and Vocabulary*:

- 🍌 **Physical well-being and motor development.**
- 🍌 **Social and emotional development.**
- 🍌 **Approaches to learning.** This dimension refers to the inclination to use skills, knowledge and capacities.
- 🍌 **Language development.**
- 🍌 **Cognition and general knowledge.**





CHIP of Virginia

You'll find CHIP in these communities ...

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