

### SYSTEM CHANGE INITIATIVE: Early Childhood Mental Health

*“Wow, so many things! First of all, I was relieved to get some tools with which to help the child.”*

The 2002 Community Comprehensive Plan for Children and Families identified early childhood mental health as a major area of unmet need in Washington County. Gaps were noted in capacity of the mental health system both in terms of a lack of practitioners with early childhood expertise, and a lack of specialized early childhood interventions and treatment approaches. Additionally there were gaps identified related to parents, child care providers and other early childhood program staff having knowledge of young children’s social emotional development , how to recognize and identify children with emergent mental health issues, and how to enhance interactions and structure environments to promote positive social emotional development.

Since the 2002 plan, several initiatives in Washington County have resulted in significant improvements in community capacity to recognize and address these mental health issues in early childhood, as well as improvements in young children’s behavioral health outcomes. The initiatives grew out of successful resource development achieved through community partnerships convened by the Washington County Commission on Children and Families.

In 2003, the Commission on Children and Families in partnership with the Beaverton, Hillsboro and Tigard-Tualatin School Districts was awarded grant from the federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) to implement the First Steps to Success model. This evidence based program model out of the University of Oregon provides a classroom



## Early Childhood Mental Health

support program and a home based parent education component designed to improve anti-social and challenging behaviors among kindergartners and first graders. The three year grant for First Steps to Success was successfully implemented in each of the three districts over the grant period.

More than 200 children with high risk behaviors and their classmates were served over the grant period, with more than 90% of children demonstrating a reduction in problem behaviors and an increase in on-task classroom behavior. More than 500 teachers and early childhood professionals in the three districts received training in classroom management techniques through the initiative. In 2006 funding responsibility for the First Steps to Success program was assumed by the three school districts, with assistance of bridge funding from the Northwest Health Foundation. This grant also enabled the program to be expanded to the Forest Grove School District, and Forest Grove assumed funding responsibility for the program in the 2007-08 school year. Of particular note the program evaluation found that one of the most significant outcomes was to the classroom management skills of participating teachers, so that **all** children in the classroom benefited from the program not just the student with identified behavioral concerns.

In 2004 the Childhood Care and Education Advisory Committee (which serves as the Early Childhood Team for the county) worked with the Commission on Children and Families to secure funding from the State Addictions and Mental Health Division office for an Oregon Children's Plan grant to implement a second initiative, an Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation model in Washington County.



## Early Childhood Mental Health

The Commission on Children and Families contracted with Morrison Child and Family Services to provide Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation to professionals working with young children and families in a variety of community settings, including: child care, both family and center based; Head Start and other pre-school settings; home visitation programs such as Healthy Start or Babies First!; Early Intervention and Early Childhood Special Education; child welfare and foster care; health clinics; and other community settings. At least one consultant has been bilingual (Spanish / English) throughout the project's history. Among early childhood professionals who have received consultation services:

- 95% reported their knowledge of early childhood mental health has increased;
- 92% reported their ability to support children's positive social and emotional development has increased; and
- 88% reported their confidence in managing children's challenging behaviors has increased.

*"Her evaluation of what we are doing was helpful. The perspective on the child's behavior and how to best meet his needs."*

Parents who receive individualized consultation also reported gains in their capacities to support their children's social emotional development and manage their challenging behaviors:

- 98% reported they think they are more able to help their child to grow, learn and develop; and
- 95% reported they are confident they can manage child behavior problems on their own.

More than 150 individual children and more than 500 parents and early childhood professionals are served each year by this program, which has quickly become an essential component of the County's early childhood service infrastructure. Since 2005-06 County Mental Health funds have contributed to the pro-

## Early Childhood Mental Health

gram's operation, with the majority of funds provided by Oregon Children's Plan funding from the Addictions and Mental Health Division. Currently, efforts are underway to identify local funding options for this program as the county was notified in July, 2007 that the Addictions and Mental Health Division was going to transition Oregon Children's Plan funding to support a specific evidence based program, Parent-Child Interaction Therapy.

A third significant system improvement initiative in the early childhood mental health arena also emerged from the Childhood Care and Education Advisory Committee, the Commission on Children and Families and County Mental Health. The CCF and County Mental Health successfully partnered to secure a State Incentive Grant pilot project for Early Childhood Behavioral Health System Improvement in 2004. This grant provided almost two years of funding to support an initiative to increase the early childhood and mental health systems' capacity to address behavioral health concerns among the county's growing Latino population. While Latinos represent more than 12% of the population, they have been significantly under-served in the mental health system, with less than a 3% penetration rate.



The following key elements were implemented through the initiative:

*Systems Change:* A System Design Work Group was established to guide the project. The work group identified system barriers that deter families from accessing behavioral health services or that restrict treatment providers from providing services in familiar settings for families in culturally appropriate and relevant ways, and implemented strategies to address barriers identified.

## Early Childhood Mental Health

***Staff Training and Development:*** staff training focused on addressing the lack of bilingual-bicultural early childhood staff and behavioral health staff and clinicians. A key strategy was hiring two paraprofessional mental health promotoras and investing extensively in their training and professional development and supporting their access to higher education and career advancement in the behavioral health field. Through the initiative, a number of community trainings were offered for early childhood program staff and behavioral health professionals to increase community capacity to address emergent behavioral health concerns in young children.

***Mental Health Promotoras:*** Mental health promotoras to provide health education, screening and support to Latino families to increase access to essential health services were an essential component of the SIG initiative. Mental health promotoras for this project were hired by LifeWorks NW, a community behavioral health provider, and served as bridges between cultures and languages and between the early childhood field and behavioral health; and helped prepare families for participation in parenting education and treatment services.

***Parent Education:*** Participation in parenting classes provided initial access to the promotoras and the behavioral health system in a non-stigmatizing way that recognized and built on their strengths. Capacity to offer evidence-based parenting classes in settings where families were already engaged in programming and services such as Head Start centers and migrant health center sites was expanded. Promotoras and staff from these partner agencies were cross-trained in the Incredible Years curriculum, to assure that capacity to offer classes would be retained upon conclusion



## Early Childhood Mental Health

of grant funding. Once the project was under-way, the project also took advantage of an opportunity to have promotoras trained in another curriculum: Make Parenting A Pleasure. All parenting education classes were offered in Spanish.

The County contracted with LifeWorks NW to hire and supervise the promotoras involved in the project. The State Incentive Grant demonstrated some promising results. 300 children and families received individual and family support through the Promotora initiative in the grant period. Several key local findings included:

All families surveyed reported that services were accessible and effective in resolving their concerns in a culturally sensitive way.

66% of children assessed, demonstrated improved social-emotional functioning.

In more than 50% of families served, a child and/or parent was referred to and accessed community mental health services.

Because of the effectiveness of the promotora approach in reaching at risk Latino families, and engaging more than 50% in mental health treatment services, the Mental Health Division of the County Department of Health and Human Services picked up funding for the two promotora positions hired in the initial grant and added an additional promotora position to make the services available countywide.

Representatives of the early childhood system who have participated in community planning meetings subsequent to the 2002 plan, have consistently identified as a major accomplishment the progress made in building infrastructure supports to enhance parents and early childhood professionals' capacity to support young children's social emotional development and address behavioral challenges.

*"That she provided more than one way to deal with and respond to discipline issues. It was great that she gave mom ideas and suggestions while inquiring about what she is already doing."*