

*"It starts at the first contact we have with a patient. ... We want to maximize educational success for all the kids."*

— Dr. Stephanie Weller,  
Children's Clinic medical director

## Why is early screening important?

- If social-emotional problems are identified and addressed early, children are less likely to be placed in special education programs -- and later in life, they're also less likely to experience school failure and unemployment.

- Developmental delays, learning disorders, and behavioral and social-emotional problems are estimated to affect 1 in every 6 children.

- Only 20 to 30 percent of these children are identified as needing help before school begins.

- Intervention prior to kindergarten has huge academic, social, and economic benefits. Studies have shown that children who receive early treatment for developmental delays are more likely to graduate from high school, hold jobs, live independently, and avoid teen pregnancy, delinquency, and violent crime, which results in a savings to society of about \$30,000 to \$100,000 per child.

(Source: Age & Stages Questionnaire, Brookes Publishing)



ALEXA ROGALS/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

**ALWAYS A BOOK:** Every Children's Clinic patient leaves with a book as the non-profit works to build literacy into its wraparound services. Dr. Stephanie Weller, medical director at the clinic, stands in front of the well-stocked book selection at the Lake Street clinic.

# Here's how to make sure your child is ready for kindergarten

So many Oak Park agencies ready to help

By **CASSANDRA WEST**  
Contributing Reporter

The first day of kindergarten is just a few weeks away for many children -- and their parents. Will your child be ready? Before a child enters kindergarten,

parents and health care professionals use developmental screenings which allow early identification of barriers to readiness. Screenings are regular checks, which typically start with the first well-child exam. They also can be useful in connecting families to opportunities and resources that support a

child's development if needed.

Screenings observe whether a child is meeting typical developmental milestones in learning, speaking, playing, behaving and moving. Developmental delays, learning disorders, and behavioral and social-emotional problems are estimated to affect 1 in every 6

children, research shows.

For health providers, kindergarten readiness starts before a child starts school, says Dr. Stephanie Weller, medical health director at the Infant Welfare Society's Children's Clinic in

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## Early childhood resources

### Collaboration for Early Childhood Resource

**Directory:** <http://collab4kids.org/resourcedirectory-2-2/>

### Help and Watch Me Grow

Developmental Milestones for Birth to 5 years: <http://collab4kids.org/watch-and-help-me-grow/>

### Parent Leadership Program with Community Organizing and Family Issues:

<http://collab4kids.org/new-parent-leadership-program/>

### More about the COFI model

Currently covering Self, Family & Community: <http://www.cofionline.org/the-cofi-way/our-model/>

### New Moms

New Moms exists to interrupt the cycle of poverty and create strong families by offering supports to young moms in: stable housing, job training, and parenting skills. 5317 W. Chicago Ave. Chicago, IL 60651 Phone: (773) 252-3253 <https://newmoms.org/>

### Easterseals

Early intervention and family support services  
120 Madison Street  
Oak Park, IL 60302  
(708) 434-2525  
<http://www.easterseals.com/chicago/who-we-are/>

### Wonder Works

#### Children's Museum

Wonder Works is 6,400 square feet of fun, a place of creative play for kids birth to age eight. 6445 W North Ave, Oak Park, IL 60302 (708) 383-4815 <http://www.wonder-works.org/>

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# Collaboration sparks shared urgency for youngest kids

## Making direct connections with Oak Park families

By **CASSANDRA WEST**  
Contributing Reporter

**B**ased inside Oak Park's Village Hall, the Collaboration for Early Childhood is the local champion for high-quality early childhood care and learning experiences.

"We do birth to kindergarten," says Carolyn Newberry Schwartz, executive director. The Collaboration was founded in 2002 as a public/private partnership. It leverages the resources of more than 75 local agencies to promote a community-wide system of high-quality programs and services that focus on the physical, cognitive and social-emotional development during the critical first five years of life.

The collaboration provides information and support for parents, developmental screening resources, and professional development programs for early childhood providers. For the past 15 years, the collaboration has hosted an annual symposium for educators, caregivers, parents and anyone who works with young children to share with them knowledge and practical skills in promoting positive learning experiences.

"A high-level mission" of the collaboration now is to make sure that families confronting risks such as childhood developmental delays or a parent who is unemployed or dealing with alcohol or mental health care issues get connected to programs that can help them, Schwartz says. The collaboration is also building out home-visiting programs by contracting with three agencies, Easter Seals, Hephzibah and New Moms. All three use Parents as Teachers programs.

More recently, the collaboration

launched in Oak Park and River Forest a parent leadership program in partnership with Community Organizing and Family Issues (COFI), a Chicago-based nonprofit. COFI started in 1995 in Chicago's Logan Square neighborhood to encourage parents -- primarily mothers -- to address their personal goals and dreams and recognize that parenting skills can translate to leadership skills in the larger community.

COFI has been effective in Chicago communities, finding natural leaders to engage other families, Schwartz says. The collaboration plans to hire four to five women as community ambassadors to do outreach. "We really need that parent voice that we're not getting."

Jennifer Little, who coordinates the collaboration's Early Childhood Community Ambassador program, says the idea is to get more parents involved who haven't been participating at traditional Oak Park meetings.

All the parents who took training have children under five, says Little. In the first phase, the Self, Family & Team training covered topics like community visioning, leadership skills and qualities. The current second phase is called community outreach and action.

Throughout the summer, ambassadors will be going door-to-door and attending community events like the Park District of Oak Park's Neighborhood Nights to talk about early learning.

Rochelle Rideau, who ran a home daycare service for 20 years in Bellwood before moving to Oak Park, joined the ambassador program in October. After the training, she felt dreams she once had for herself come alive again, she says on a re-



**ONE-TO-ONE:** Rochelle Rideau connects local parents to the many services available to support young children in Oak Park. (ALEXA ROGALS/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER)

cent morning while sitting in the lobby of First United Church, where an ambassadors meeting is taking place.

She's enthusiastic about the program and sharing early childhood information with people she knows and those she doesn't. Though soft-spoken, she says, "I'm a talker, so it's not hard for me to say, 'Hey, there's a Head Start program.' I know that I can find people, either I know or who know someone who would benefit from early childhood."

### D97 kindergarten faculty survey

District 97's kindergarten faculty recently completed a population level survey (Early Development Instrument) that describes how children are developing before they enter school. The EDI measures a child's ability to meet age-appropriate developmental expectations in physical health, social

competence, emotional maturity, language development, and communication skills.

These results will be presented at a neighborhood level on maps that also show community assets and socioeconomic information. The Collaboration for Early Childhood and District 97 with the support of Erikson Institute are leading this work with a diverse group of community leaders and stakeholders. The project is part of a pilot project initiated by the Erikson institute and funded by a significant grant from the Robert R. McCormick Foundation.

The Collaboration for Early Childhood and the community will use the data to develop action plans to improve the development of young children.

Here is a link to a sample EDI Questionnaire. <https://www.erikson.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Sample-Questionnaire.pdf>

# The role of reading in development

A clinic that dispenses books? That's right. "The other thing we really push here is early child literacy," says Dr. Stephanie Weller of the Children's Clinic, which has several programs that promote "kids learning to read and enjoy reading at an early age."

Experts on early childhood agree that reading is fundamental to success in many aspects of life. They're not necessarily advocating that your child can read a book by age 3 or 4, but it is important for parents to read to their children and to make books available to them.

"The more words a baby hears, the better their verbal skills are going to be," Weller says.

The clinic participates in a program called Reach Out and Read, run by a Boston-based nonprofit organization that gives young children a foundation for success by incorporating books into pediatric care and encouraging families to read aloud together.

So, every patient who visits the clinic leaves with a book, says Denise Gonzalez, behavioral health director. "That's our policy."

The clinic gives out more than 10,000 books a year, according to its communications director Katie



Books available for children and parents at the Children's Clinic.  
(PHOTO BY CASSANDRA WEST)

O'Brien. That's part of providing "holistic care with all of the extra touches," she adds.

For lots of families that visit, the first book they had came from the

clinic, Gonzalez says. "We started their library at home. When we hear that, we know that what we're doing is having an impact."

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Oak Park. "It starts at the first contact we have with a patient, whether as a newborn or the first time we see them for that kindergarten physical. We want to maximize educational success for all the kids."

The clinic starts screenings at the 2-month visit and continues through age 6, "to identify any issues that might interfere with learning -- as early as we can," says Weller. Physicians at the clinic follow the recommendations of the American Academy of Pediatrics in terms of screening and use a system called Ages and Stages Questionnaire. Often referred to as ASQ, it relies on parents as experts to take snapshots that can catch delays and mark milestones.

The Collaboration for Early Childhood, which leverages the resources of local agencies to support children during the critical first five years of life, has made access to screenings a corner-

stone of its work. Through its screening project, it provides support to pediatric and family practice physicians and early childhood education and child care professionals to conduct developmental screenings of all children in their care.

That support takes the form of training and technical assistance to conduct the Ages and Stages Questionnaire, Third Edition (ASQ-3) and Ages and Stages Questionnaire: Social-Emotional (ASQ:SE) developmental screenings.

These screenings can be completed by parents using the ASQ Online database system. They can be done in an early childhood setting, a pediatrician's or family practitioner's office or during a session from home visiting professional, says Shannon Ellison, development screening coordinator for the collaboration.

The collaboration has 30 screening partner sites that include four medical practices and lots of the local family child care providers. Ellison trained them on how to use the ASQ online system and how to interpret the com-

pleted questionnaires. Two community sites, the River Forest Public Library and Wonder Works Children's Museum, also have screening kits -- wi-fi enabled tablets -- that parents can borrow to access the screening questionnaires.

ASQ requires twice-a-year screening and that is what the collaboration recommends, Ellison says. "We don't want to over screen children. And we don't want parents to get so tired of screening that they're not interested in doing it. We want to make sure the results they're getting are meaningful. If screening results indicate a child needs extra experience or practice of what we sometimes call monitoring, then those children might be screened more frequently."

A screening is more formal than monitoring and normally done less often. The ASQ system allows for quick scoring and provides an electronic record of children's development.

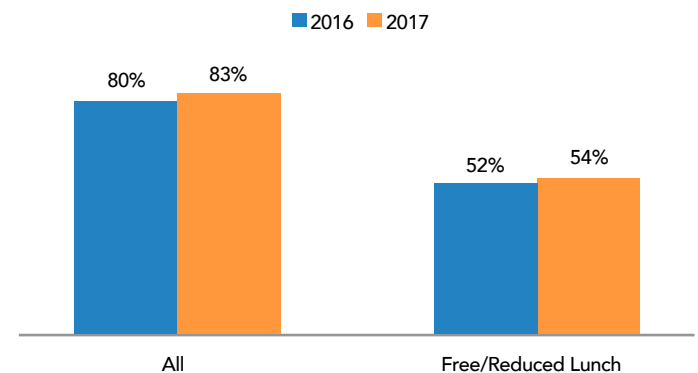
In addition, the collaboration has a developmental screening committee, "a group of professionals who make sure we are paying attention

## Kindergarten Readiness

Overall kindergarten readiness has a number of different components that are addressed and measured: social & emotional (ASQ), physical (hearing & vision), cognitive (KRT) and community context (EDI).

**Goal: Children identified through screening as needing assessment or services receive them.**

- 1,806 total screenings in 2016/17 - up 13%
- 1,353 hearing screenings; 60% of those referred for additional assessments received treatment
- 1,411 children received a vision screening at 38 child care and preschool sites, a 7.6% increase from FY 2016
- 0-3 year olds: 22 referred, 20 found eligible for Early Intervention services, 19 received them
- 3-5 year olds: 53 found eligible for D97 services and received them



### Kindergarten Readiness Test - KRT

We rely on the Kindergarten Readiness Test (KRT) for assessing the proficiency of children entering kindergarten. The KRT is administered to incoming kindergarten students over the summer and goes through the third week of school. Comparing one year to the next is difficult due to a number of reasons, but we continue to improve the quality of the data. Our target for improving outcomes is at least a 2% increase in proficiency on the KRT each year.

to children's developments," says Ellison, whose job is also to promote the screening project, increase public awareness and help families get access.

When a screening does indicate a potential concern, providers like the Children's Clinic will work with parents on different activities that can be done at home to make sure their child is where they should be for their age, says Denise Gonzalez, director of behavioral health. If larger concerns arise, Gonzalez says, the clinic helps arrange an

early intervention referral "to make sure someone is working with the child."

When clinic physicians and social workers see a child older than 3 is struggling in certain areas, they will work with parents to have the child evaluated and to develop an Individualized Education Program (IEP).

"We give the child the support they need to catch up," Gonzalez says. "That way, by the time they get into kindergarten, they will have the tools they need."

# Two pros share their passion for a child's first 2,000 days

## The equity gap starts early, very early

By **CASSANDRA WEST**  
Contributing Reporter

**P**reparing your child for kindergarten and beyond starts well before the first day of school.

Because of differences in early childhood environments and experiences, nearly “two-thirds of the achievement gap challenging Oak Park’s schools is in place when children walk through the kindergarten door,” according to the Collaboration for Early Childhood, a public/private partnership that works to improve local early childhood resources.

The first 2,000 days of a child’s life have a huge impact on social, emotional and academic success, says Diana Rosenbrock, an early childhood consultant with the collaboration. The collaboration, in conjunction with more than 70 community partners, assists parents in accessing the resources they need to support early childhood development.

SAY Connect met with Rosenbrock and Cari Christoff, executive director of the Oak Park & River Forest Day Nursery, a collaboration partner, to talk about the importance of early childhood education.

**Q.: Why is early childhood education so important?**

**Diana:** Early childhood is so very important starting from day one because brains are built. They’re not born. The brain is the only organ we’re born with that isn’t fully developed at birth. We have all the brain cells that we will need for the rest of our lives, but they’re not connected. And it is through those early experiences in those first five years that we build the brain. That’s why the early years are so very important. Because without those experiences, those opportunities for the brain to be stimulated and have those brain cells connected, [the brain] doesn’t grow. It actually atrophies.

It’s really important from Day 1 -- from the family to early childhood programming -- that it be a quality environment so that children are nurtured, loved, stimulated. It’s not just about learning the ABCs and 123s. It’s about the social emotional component of the development of the brain along with those academics that everybody is so familiar with.

What you’re doing in those first five years is setting the foundation to build upon. [Experts] say 2,000 days from birth, you’ve got to get it right. That equity gap starts at day one

**Cari:** Here at the Day Nursery, we have from about two-and-a-half till five [years of a child’s life]. So what we’re able to do in that two-and-a-

half years, it seems mind boggling. But it’s actually quite natural. On top of all of those academic skills, we focus on the individual child in helping them to be the best they can be, with those self-help skills. Knowing how to be a member of the community and being an effective member and a participating member and learning empathy and all of those things that without experience, you really can’t be successful in life. How do you know how to tell someone how you feel if you haven’t had that opportunity to learn what that looks like? So we spend a lot of our time in guiding, in giving children the opportunity to explore it. And rather than solving their problems for them, help them to critically think about how they can solve the problem for themselves.

**Q.: The human interaction piece then is so essential in those early years.**

**Diana:** Yes, incredibly powerful but it’s not going to happen on its own. There’s all kinds of research that shows what happens when a child just has a steady diet of a screen and non-interaction. It’s truly sad.

**Cari:** If you think about the swipe. Two-year-olds know how to swipe, but can they hold a pencil? They can listen, but can they articulate? We subscribe to a limit of 30 minutes of screen time per week. That’s it. Because there is so much more to learn that you can’t learn on a screen.

**Q.: What is the magic to getting a child to like reading?**

**Diana:** It’s a long process. It starts at birth. It’s reading to children from Day One. Not only the reading from a book, but the old-fashioned telling of a story is vital. Singing songs, relating words to books, having books in the environment -- consistently, constantly -- that [books] become part of their everyday life.

**Cari:** There’s a very big difference in the type of play. Child-directed play is much more beneficial to a child because they’re guiding the learning. Day Nursery teachers and quality program educators look at every child and how they learn and know that every child learns differently. So it’s the goal of that teacher to provide those opportunities so that every child can learn in their way.

**Diana:** With that, I might add, children aren’t born knowing how to play. They need adults sitting alongside them, modeling, not doing for them, but modeling the play. You have to show them. Play in our society is often looked at as frivolous. It’s not. Play is integral part, whether you’re six months old or 60 years old. Play is important.



**CRITICAL DAYS:** A child’s first 2,000 days are the foundation for life’s success, says Diana Rosenbrock of the Collaboration for Early Childhood. (ALEXA ROGALS/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER)

**Cari:** It’s not about the product. It’s the process.

**Diana:** The key here [at the Day Nursery] is the quality of the programming. Cari and her staff have achieved a gold rating in ExceleRate, which is no small task. ExceleRate (a statewide quality standards system for early learning providers) looks at the teaching and learning, the family and community, the level of interaction with families, the leadership and management of the program and the qualifications of the staff and ongoing professional development. Those things are integral in order to have an environment in which brains can grow and develop. It takes a certain technique of teaching and directing to support the teachers to allow the experiences to happen.

**Q.: Talk a bit about children being able to explore the world around them. That’s important, too, isn’t it?**

**Diana:** Today, I walk in and every teacher is at the door with backpacks on. There’s nothing more natural and wonderful than for a child to get outside and learn.

**Cari:** Two weeks ago they had a community scavenger hunt. We found 20 things within our walkable community that the children photographed what they found. Not only did they explore the community, but they learned to be observant and meet various neighbors we have. They were able to self-direct. There were no parameters.

**Q.: What is your teaching staff?**

**Cari:** All of our teachers are bachelor’s level or higher. Almost 50 percent of our staff is master’s level. And in small organizations such as ours, that’s unheard of. We have teachers who have been here 20 years. And in early children, turnover is one to two years. Ten percent of our staff is male. Diversity for us is multilayered. Not only is it racially, ethnically, it’s financial. We call ourselves a school family. We consider ourselves a collective family.

**Q.: What else should parents look for in early learning providers?**

**Diana:** The obvious is the rating. Also have a list of questions. Ask how do they handle guidance -- a word that we use instead of discipline -- how do they handle that? The nutrition schedule? The amount of time indoors, outdoors? How do they handle nap time? Meal issues? You need to be willing to spend time going to different centers, look at what’s going on. If a center doesn’t allow you to do that, check them off your list. Any program that is upfront and honest with what they’re doing and understands the importance is going to invite you in so you can get a gut feeling as to how your child will interact or not in.

**Cari:** We have a peer coordinator who is the point of contact from the moment a parent calls in to ask questions, Corey Sullivan. He’s amazing. It is really important that families have someone they can connect with. And the first question he asks a family when they walk through the door is: Tell me the one thing you would hope your child gains from an experience here. And he guides their tour based on where they are, rather than data dumping, find out what’s important to them. You as a parent have to find where you feel safe, comfortable and you know your child will get the best benefit.

**Q.: Do you feel that you’re getting children ready for kindergarten or something else?**

**Cari:** What we do here sets the stage for their life. Yes, we are making them ready to tackle what’s coming in kindergarten, but it goes so far beyond that. We have a really good relationship with D97 and we invite a teacher every spring to talk with families about what’s happening next. We want to make that transition as smooth as possible.

Kindergarten ready is so much more than having an intimate knowledge of your letters and your numbers.