



Supporting Partnerships to Assure Ready Kids

Winter 2022 Community Newsletter

Nationwide Children's Hospital: Focusing on Educational Success

Children's Hospitals Today, the award-winning magazine of the Children's Hospital Association, featured the SPARK program of Nationwide Children's Hospital in a September article entitled *Focusing on Educational Success at Home*.

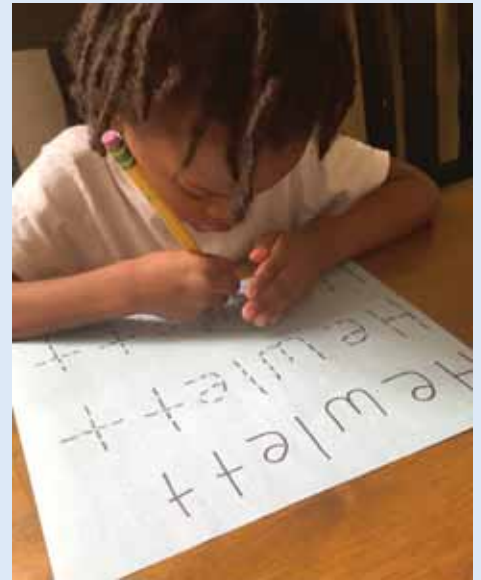
The article focused on the program's flexibility during the pandemic, adapting to virtual lesson delivery (along with home delivery of lesson materials) to ensure families could continue working toward school readiness, even during lockdown.

Concentrating Efforts in the Linden Neighborhood: Another way Nationwide Children's SPARK program is focusing on educational success is by expanding to serve the Linden neighborhood of Columbus.

Linden is a woefully under-resourced area: it has much higher unemployment and crime rates and much lower incomes and educational levels than the rest of the city. But Linden residents are strong, proud, and resilient, and Nationwide Children's is investing heavily in their futures.

As part of the *Healthy Neighborhoods, Healthy Families* initiative, Nationwide is working with a wide range of community partners to improve the lives of Linden residents. Together, the partners are focusing on affordable housing, education, health and wellness, community enrichment and economic development.

The resources the partners are bringing to Linden will greatly enhance SPARK's efforts to ensure children have access to whatever interventions will help them be ready for school, whether they need medical interventions, behavioral health assistance, speech therapy, or a safe place to live.



The article in *Children's Hospitals Today* quoted Sara Bode, MD, primary care pediatrician and medical director of Nationwide Children's Care Connection School-Based Health and Mobile Clinics.

Dr. Bode stated, "Kindergarten readiness is critical. If we keep you physically healthy but you get to school and you're not ready to learn, struggle academically and don't graduate high school, what is your ultimate outcome?"

Pediatricians and health care systems need to focus our attention on education as equally as we do physical health."

Read more at bit.ly/nwspart

Latoya Ford: Champion!

SPARK parent Latoya Ford has been a very active participant in Cleveland's Central Promise Community. This community partnership with the Sisters of Charity Foundation of Cleveland, OhioGuidestone, and Starting Point provides SPARK families with a family strengths coach, access to an early learning navigator, and essential living resources.

Ms. Ford took full advantage of the services offered. While preparing her son mentally, academically and socially for the world he would transition into, this head of household modeled the lessons she taught him by working on herself as well.

The early learning navigator helped her choose the best preschool for her son. Regularly scheduled sessions with the family strengths coach helped her fortify her own mental well-being. When a parent advisory committee was created, Ms. Ford asked to be a member of the SPARK Family Partners team for a full cohort year. She used the resources provided to strengthen her financial literacy and prepare for homeownership. She made a point of attending group events and supporting her peers.

For being an amazing woman, an amazing mother, and an amazing member of her community, Latoya was presented with the *2020 Champion of Central* award. The award honors Central Neighborhood residents and staff who help partnering organizations fulfill their missions and make significant contributions to the vibrancy of the neighborhood.



Latoya Ford received the *2020 Champion of Central* award. She's pictured here with her son, Demetrius.

Ms. Ford said, "I was broken when I got into the SPARK program. My soul was broken, but I knew God.

From the day when I met (our SPARK parent partner) Ms. Funches, I poured everything out. She asked me if I wanted counseling and I said yes, which she got me. I am so thankful. SPARK has changed my life!"

Rocking Readiness in Alliance

SPARK Parent Partner Rockne Flugan has been an absolute blessing to my five-year-old son's development.

Not only has he excelled in the area of reading based on his individual learning plan, but Rockne also introduced him to new areas of interest.

Even as a principal in the Alliance City School District, I was shocked that my preschool child could read words at the first grade level. I wish I could claim the success, but to be honest, my schedule does not allow me to work with him as much as I would like. That was the reason for our family joining SPARK.

With the help of SPARK and Mr. Rock, my son now watches puppet shows and has deepened his love for play dough and arts and crafts!

Finally, the relationship built between them is what I am most proud of. Mr. Rock is dedicated to the success of my child!

Portia Johnson, SPARK Parent



Grateful for SPARK

Action for Children, an agency that serves Columbus families, asked parents to share how SPARK has helped their family be kindergarten-ready. Wayhu, a SPARK mom, shared her thoughts.

Here are some of the ways SPARK helped us make a smooth transition to kindergarten for Kautsar and our family:



As first-time parents of a school-age kid, we barely knew what to expect when Kautsar enters his kindergarten year.

Apparently, there is a school supply list — quite a long and detailed one, surprisingly — of things that he needs to bring to school. Guess what: most

items, if not all, are already there in the SPARK graduation package! So we don't need to take time and money to shop around the stores to get the items on the list. We are really grateful.

Besides containing the lesson materials, the monthly materials sent to our home also had other materials and suggestions for learning/playing activities that we could try at home with Kautsar. They were helpful, as Kautsar was still adapting to having a 'teacher' other than his parents. He played and learned more openly and comfortably. Kautsar also really loves the board games SPARK gave us (*Snakes and Ladders*, *Don't Break the Ice*, *Yeti in my Spaghetti*, *Sequence*, etc.). They were so effective to keep him away from the screen.

At the beginning of the SPARK program, Kautsar only knew about the alphabet. By the end, he could read a simple sentence. He now enjoys reading books (like Mo Willems' *Piggie* and *Elephant* books) all by himself.

I believe that the SPARK program and the class he attended during the past year contributed to his growth in reading/literacy.

Since we speak Indonesian at home and Kautsar was learning a little English with us, SPARK was helpful to make him learn English and put into practice (speaking with his parent partner) the words that he already knows.

With him attending pre-k, we are now confident that he will do great in kindergarten without needing much assistance in English.



Hamilton County: Partnering for Readiness

For over a decade, the Children's Home of Cincinnati (TCH) has successfully served as the lead agency for SPARK in Cincinnati. Dedicated to promoting the early learning and school readiness, TCH and its key partners have committed resources to ensuring more Cincinnati children start kindergarten ready to learn. These partners include:

- **Santa Maria Community Services**, which conducts home visitation for Price Hill and Westwood families;
- **The University of Cincinnati Department of Communication Sciences and Disorders**, which provides in-home speech and language services for SPARK children with developmental concerns; and
- **Hamilton County Public Library**, which offers in-home library resources for SPARK families.

By focusing on neighborhoods where children's kindergarten readiness scores are below anticipated thresholds, SPARK has been an invaluable resource for preschool children and their families. Cincinnati Public School neighborhoods served include Mt. Airy (Mt. Airy School), Price Hill (Carson School and Rees E. Price Academy), and Fairmount (Roll Hill School).



Because of the pandemic, it is anticipated that young children who are already at risk for poor academic performance will require additional supports.

Toward that end, CoStars by the Children's Home is partnering with three additional schools during the 2021-2022 school year: Rising Stars on Vine, Saylor Park, and Winton Hills Academy.



Bridging Cultural Divides for School Readiness

At a back to school event, I met a family that was excited to hear about SPARK for the first time.



They provided their contact information and were glad to set up their first intake appointment a few days later.

After arriving at the home, I learned that the family is from India and their four-year-old son is learning English as *his third language*. Clearly, SPARK is a great program for them.

I also learned unique aspects of the family's culture. For instance, the home didn't have any tables. With two replaced knees, conducting the lesson on the floor was a slight challenge for me, but the visit went well and I enjoyed a delightful cup of delicious chai tea with them.

Rachel Jackson
Ashland County Parent Partner



Collaborating in Ashland

This past August, Ashland County parent partners participated in a new event for Ashland County School District students and their families. The downtown Ashland Committee and the school administrators grew a fantastic event (which had previously been held in a local elementary school) to include the entire county.

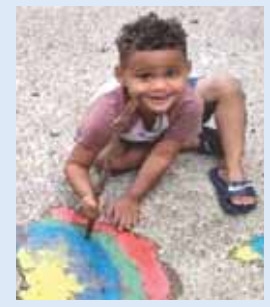


This year's event proved to be a huge success. The streets were closed and lined with booths and activities, school buses, police officers, dunking booths etc. Area agencies were represented, and even hairstylists donated their time, providing more than 230 haircuts for students. At least 1,000 families attended.

SPARK parent partners reached more than 50 families who have four-year-old children and an interest in SPARK: that's more families than the site's capacity will allow, but they continue planning for growth.

Home for Families: Going Above and Beyond

Michele Jones is the SPARK team leader at Home for Families. She relates how the agency has gone above and beyond to serve its families throughout the pandemic:



Home for Families (formerly the Homeless Families Foundation) helped many SPARK families sustain themselves all of last year; we continue to do so. We want families to be able to concentrate on the education of their children and the family's well-being.

We made it possible for families to pay past and future rent and utility bills, and we distributed food from our food pantry. Holidays were made easier by our donors, who "adopted" our families. All kids in the home received all of the gifts from their wish lists. On Thanksgiving and Easter, we passed out food baskets and gift cards to our families and provided baskets for all the kids in the family (not just the SPARK kid).

SPARK Families: Working Hard

Reaching Out for Readiness Help

This past year, I worked with a family who was in the process of seeking asylum. They enrolled in SPARK to help their preschool-age child develop basic kindergarten readiness skills.

Throughout the school year, the learning advocates found their own confidence and knowledge regarding their child's education, growing in ways they did not anticipate!

As time went on, they were able to see that their child's struggles were not a result of their parenting abilities, but rather a result of their child needing specialized resources and interventions they were unable to provide independently.

By the end of the school year, the parents were able to advocate for their child's needs, and they scheduled appointments with various specialists to determine how they could meet their child's specific needs.

Allison Pawlak, YMCA Columbus Parent Partner

Michael: Steadily Improving

I'm so proud of Michael: he's been improving his spelling and writing a lot!



At first, I noticed he was holding his pencil in a fist hold.

I talked to Michael's mom about ways to help him practice the correct grip, so he can learn to form letters properly.

They have been working so hard in between lessons.

Michael is doing so much better, and he's really proud of himself!

Leslie Campbell, Massillon AHEAD Parent Partner

My Favorite SPARK Lesson

Bunny Cakes is my favorite lesson, There is so much math in this lesson and the kids don't even realize it!

The activities are very engaging. Using the grocery ad to write the pretend list of ingredients for the cake is always fun. Most kids do not understand the concept of measurements, and they come up with some interesting things, like 100 tablespoons of butter. They also love using the measuring cups and bowl to pretend to make a cake.

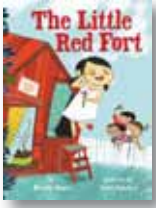
By this point in the program, the kids have progressed enough that you can really see improvement in their writing, problem solving skills, and general comprehension of directions.

Melissa Beebe, Stark County Parent Partner



New SPARK Books Introduced

In an effort to sharpen our focus on equity and increase the diversity families see in SPARK books, some changes have been made to the curriculum.



***The Little Red Fort* by Brenda Maier** (Replaces *The Little Red Hen*): As one reviewer stated, “*The Little Red Hen* gets an appealing girl-power update.” This story preserves the life lessons from *The Little Red Hen* while placing Ruby, a little Latina with a plan, squarely in the driver’s seat. It’s great fun to read, with engaging and energetic illustrations throughout.



***Jabari Jumps* by Gaia Cornwall** (Replaces *Whistle for Willie*): Jabari is a young African-American boy. He’s determined, but he’s also a little scared. His dad is rooting for him and reassuring him the whole time. As SPARK families read, they’ll

be rooting for Jabari too. The story and illustrations perfectly capture a young child’s fear and excitement, and emphasize the difference family bonds can make in helping children learn to become brave.



***On the First Day of Kindergarten* by Tish Rabe** (Replaces *Miss Bindergarten Gets Ready for Kindergarten*): This book is a great introduction to the transition into kindergarten; it shows daily activities in a multicultural kindergarten classroom, and it helps get kids excited about what’s to come and the friends they’re about to meet. It also offers an engaging way to revisit the concept of ordinal numbers (first, second, third, and so on).

The Importance of Representation

Exposure to images and portrayals of numerous cultures, races, and ethnicities is powerful and important for all children.

AS Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop stated, “When children cannot find themselves reflected in the books they read, or when the images they see are distorted, negative or laughable, they learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued in the society of which they are a part.”

For children from minority groups, seeing themselves reflected in literature is empowering and helps them develop a healthy self-concept.

For children from the majority culture, seeing diverse portrayals fosters an empathetic understanding of the wider world.

*Read more at bit.ly/3xpf3

My Favorite SPARK Lesson

I have many favorites for different reasons, but I love *Barnyard Banter* because it’s such a fun and interactive lesson: the animal sounds, keeping the children engaged by looking for Goose on the pages, counting the animals, using the animal matching cards...

The activities help me evaluate the child’s comprehension of the story. I can check their skills with an interlocking puzzle and introduce the concept of sizes with the animal manipulatives. Then, of course, there’s the lacing; they love the lacing! While the child is lacing, the parent can use those positional words like *under*, *through*, and *down* to guide them.

I use the results of these activities to inform future learning plans, because we can evaluate so many skill sets with just this one lesson.

Kelley Moffett, Summit County Parent Partner





EARLY CHILDHOOD
RESOURCE CENTER
ecresourcecenter.org

SPARK is a program of the Early Childhood Resource Center. For more information or to learn how you can bring SPARK to your community, contact SPARK Ohio Director Mary Brady at (877) 691-8521 or mbrady@ecresourcecenter.org

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